

INTRODUCTION



Russian anthropologist Larissa Pavlinskaia's (2002) book *Kochevniki Golubykh Gor* (Nomads of the Blue Mountains) was the first-ever comprehensive ethnography of Soiot society. She accomplished what anthropologist and archaeologist Bernhard E. Petri (see Sirina 2003) may have wished to do in the later 1920s had he not died prematurely. Pavlinskaia produced an ethnography in the truest sense, abiding by the outline of other Soviet and post-Soviet ethnographers. But her work is ethnographic not only in its more or less Malinowskian form but also because at its core lies the concerted effort of retracing—even constructing and re-defining with and for the people—what may be the Soiot ethnos. Pavlinskaia does this carefully and meticulously, and her work has been foundational for Soiot political activism of the early post-Soviet period.

My own work has departed significantly from this classical model of ethnography. On the one hand, it is perhaps too early to produce another comprehensive account of Soiot life. On the other hand, my departure from the classic paradigm follows other developments in our discipline. As anthropologist Tobias Rees (2018) points out in his book, *After Ethnos*, other concepts of fieldwork have emerged since the late 1990s. One of them has been a shift in focus from “difference in space” (i.e., comparing lifeways between places) to “difference in time.” The latter follows the transformation of experiences, recurring events, consumables, labor practices, concepts, or microbes through time, ever asking: what is different, what is new? (Rees 2018: 80). Without losing interest in the meaning of Soiot identity, I have sought to ask what is wild, what is tame?

FROM THE CANADIAN ARCTIC TO SIBERIA

One of the most memorable sights for any visitor to the Canadian Western Arctic are its massive caribou herds. Peary, Dolphin, and Union caribou populate Canada's Arctic Archipelago, as well as much of its High Arctic mainland, while tall-standing Northern Mountain and Boreal woodland caribou are found further to the south. The largest population are barren-ground caribou. Like a silver-grey carpet, they flow elegantly over hills and across shallow waters as they migrate between wintering and summering grounds. Fluctuating in herd size, and divided into genetically and geographically distinct populations, these *Rangifer tarandus* are known by their calving sites to which they migrate long-distance each year. During their migrations, they pass through Inuvialuit, Sahtú, Gwich'in, and Tłı̨chǫ lands. For each of these North American Indigenous peoples, caribou have been an essential component for nutrition, shelter, clothing, and cultural identity.

While living in the Mackenzie Delta town of Inuvik, an Arctic Canadian community that is home to Inuvialuit (Inuit) and Gwich'in (First Nations) in the Northwest Territories, I frequently visited my neighbor and local meat seller, Lloyd Binder. Binder's soup cuts, which he kept in several freezer chests outside his home, tasted much like caribou. In actuality, however, they came from reindeer belonging to Canada's last private, open-range reindeer herd. These reindeer belong to the common species *Rangifer tarandus*, which is known as caribou in North America and as reindeer in Eurasia. Yet locals of the northern Northwest Territories clearly differentiated between the activities of "hunting caribou" and "herding reindeer." Both animal types share common tundra grounds in the summer, and it was not uncommon to hear complaints about subsistence hunters who had "mistaken" a reindeer for a caribou. In terms of taste, Indigenous elders seemed to prefer caribou over reindeer, even though both types belong to the same species. In a way, elders' taste preferences may have reflected the significant differences in allele frequencies known to exist between caribou and reindeer populations in the Western Arctic, differences that suggest limited gene flow between the two populations (Cronin et al. 2003). As an outsider newcomer, I was naturally intrigued to learn about the origins of Binder's reindeer in a land crawling with caribou.

Fortunately, the history of North American reindeer breeding is quite well recorded. I soon learned the need for reindeer meat had first arisen among Alaskan Inuit who had suffered a sharp decline in caribou herds, largely due to overexploitation by European and American commercial whaling crews in the mid-nineteenth century (Treude 1975: 121). A similar trend was affecting Canadian Inuit in the Western Arctic where alterations in caribou migratory routes had further exacerbated the situation brought about by the whalers (Conaty and Binder 2003: 9). In Alaska, Presbyterian missionary and US

General Agent for Education Dr. Sheldon Jackson is said to have first imported “semi-domestic” reindeer from Chukotka in an attempt to alleviate the shortage in caribou (Miller 1935: 21; North 1991: 6). As part of Alaska’s aim for Inuit to transition from caribou hunting to a more stable and predictable reindeer breeder’s way of life, a total of 1,280 reindeer were purchased between 1891 and 1902, primarily from communities in Chukotka (Treude 1975: 121). To enhance the resilience of these animals, 254 of them were of the tall-standing Tungus breed purchased separately at Okhotsk in 1901 (North 1991: 8).

By 1925, some 350,000 reindeer belonging to 110 herds could be seen roaming the north Alaskan coast (North 1991: 8). The evident success of this US experiment convinced the Canadian government to follow suit, making their own purchase of reindeer in Alaska. The Canadians invited experienced Sámi herders from Scandinavia to train Inuit in reindeer breeding techniques. In 1935, after the famous “five-year trek” from Alaska, 2,370 reindeer arrived in the Mackenzie Delta (Treude 1975: 121). Although a significant number of Mackenzie Delta Inuit would spend the next quarter century herding reindeer along the Beaufort Sea, the pastoral practice fell into decline by the late 1960s. By the mid-1970s, the remnant herd had gone through several private hands—Binder’s ownership being the most recent. As a descendant of two intermarried herding families—the Sámi Pulk family of Norway and the Inuvialuit Binder family—his ownership is testimony to a regional heritage rooted in Sápmi, the Fennoscandian homeland of Sámi, and by extension in Far Eastern Siberia from where the Tungus breed of reindeer had originally come.

THE CRADLE OF REINDEER DOMESTICATION

My attempt to trace reindeer domestication back to Siberia was by no means novel. Scholars, scientists, and explorers have been in search of the origins of Eurasian reindeer domestication for well over a century, a journey we will examine more closely in chapter three. My own curiosity in the area lauded as the “cradle of Eurasian reindeer domestication” peaked after reading anthropologist Tim Ingold’s (1980) book, *Hunters, Pastoralists, and Ranchers: Reindeer Economies and Their Transformations*. In this book, Ingold hypothesizes human-reindeer relations started out as predatory (humans hunting reindeer), then became pastoral and protective (humans guarding reindeer from other predators), and finally resumed a predatory character in ranchers who predate on their own herds as much as economically feasible to market meat.

Although Ingold’s main argument in this early work concerns the changing economic relations of hunters, herders, and ranchers, and the transition from one economic model to another, he also touches on the finer details of how such changing relations may be reflected in the nature of reindeer as a species.

This latter part speaks directly to the questions of “what is domestication?” and “at what point can we speak of an animal as having become domesticated?” These questions touch on the beginnings of physical transformations resulting from changes in the relationships between people and other animals.

Having long moved beyond the Marxist economic framework of his earlier work, Ingold turned to the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to advocate for animals as fellow beings-in-the-world (Ingold 2000: 173). For him, this is a world that arises from attention to “movements, sounds and gestures of animals” (2000: 25). In the words of anthropologist David G. Anderson, such a world is best described as a sentient ecology, or “the mutual interrelation of person and place” (2002: 116). This theoretical shift, from quasi autonomous individuals shaping an outside world to agents as co-constituents of their environment, does not detract from Ingold’s original concern with domestication. It does however surrender its urgency with origins to a new emphasis on the perpetual becoming of social relations as part of a “meshwork” of “co-responding lifelines” (Ingold 2011: 63–94, 2017: 14).

In this meshwork, reindeer have been especially elusive when it comes to definitions of domestication, particularly in the archaeological record. Even under conditions of domestic breeding, their morphological traits remain much the same as those of their nondomestic counterparts (Ingold 1974: 523). However, we know that Indigenous breeders in Siberia are well aware of distinct behavioral and phenotypic differences between living wild and tame populations, differences they deliberately maintain through their breeding, and are evident also in each population’s distinct genetic signature (Anderson et al. 2017: 6,799).

On the whole, however, the phenotypic variation between wild and tame reindeer remains minimal enough to ensure domestic reindeer stay as hardy as their cousins in the wild, while not losing their unique behavioral traits. Several Siberian reindeer breeding peoples seem also to lack a unanimous account of the origins of domestication. Instead they will argue “there have been [domestic] reindeer for as long as there have been people” (see Shirokogorov 1966: 29). Of course, this is where the very root argument of this book lies. It does not have to do with reindeer per se, but with the notion that not all forms of domestication must result in tangible morphological changes, nor would domestication result in gradually increasing dependence upon human care. As Ingold (1980: 82) has pointed out so aptly:

Tame animals may be “domestic,” in the sense of their incorporation as members of human households, but need not be morphologically “domesticated.” Conversely, selectively bred animals may run wild, as in emergent ranching systems, while the herds of pastoralists need be neither “domestic” nor “domesticated.” It will not do to refer to such combinations as states

of “semi-domestication,” for the implication that they are in the process of evolution towards “full” domestication is not always warranted.

There needs to be a distinction, then, between definitions of domestication based on deliberately or serendipitously introduced morphological changes, and domestication defined by the maintenance of wild-like qualities in combination with unique behavioral traits. One way these two approaches can be contrasted in southern Siberia is in terms of residence. Intermittent cohabitation with humans allows for extensive periods of absence, which fosters self-reliance in animals. Permanent human care, on the other hand, can result in a species’ greater reliance on the human household, as we see in many farm animals.

At this point it is necessary to distinguish between domestication as an adaptive, evolutionary process and domestication in the sense of the domestic animal. The latter shares a “home,” or *domus*, with humans, the prior is a large-scale process whereby species adapt to changing environments. Of course all animals, whether they live with humans or not, are subject to adaptive, evolutionary processes, but in an Inner Asian context—as we will see—the domestic animal forms an accepted category, even if this category is somewhat more flexible than in most Euro-American models. This flexibility has to do with the fluctuating distance between animals and humans.

Fellow anthropologists Charles Stépanoff et al. (2017) have come to a similar conclusion in their study of “animal autonomy and intermittent coexistences.” Based on extensive ethnographic research on nomadic and semi-nomadic animal husbandry practices in North Asia, including South Siberia, they outline a model of pastoralism in which herders rely on their herds’ abilities to feed and protect themselves. Here the bond between animals and people is enabled by way of a shared landscape in which animals and humans balance their autonomous movements with mutual engagements through patterns of intermittent contact.

In many of the cases described in this book, the adaptive physical features of animals found in the wild already match the requirements for survival in a mountainous taiga setting, domestic or not. Where species belonging to the human household have no counterpart in the wild—as is the case with dairy cattle—they will be bred to best suit the requirements for survival in an unsheltered environment. In south central Siberia, this may mean interbreeding relatively vulnerable dairy cattle with hardy yak. In either case, what makes a breed a good “domestic” candidate in this northern context is a fine-tuned balance between self-reliance and an ability to respond and relate to people.

By allowing animals to roam freely, finding their own food and defending themselves against predators, stock owners ensure that their animals survive even in remote locations and under hostile circumstances. At the same time,

routine interaction with their animals in commonly shared spaces allows herders to maintain approachability in their animals. This approachability can be described as an animal's ability to recognize and make use of the benefits that come with human encounters while maintaining a degree of autonomy that enables a measure of resistance to human volition. The delicate management of these habituated encounters is perhaps what best describes domestication relationships in southern Siberia.

TOWARD A MULTISPECIES ETHNOGRAPHY

So far I have primarily discussed reindeer. Much of the ethnographic literature depicting Indigenous human-animal relations in mountainous South Siberia emphasizes human-reindeer relations. This does not come as a surprise, especially from the perspective of European explorers who were intrigued by the uniqueness of the Saian style of reindeer breeding, and especially by its tradition of equestrian-like riding. As one reads through the accounts of explorers and researchers of the region, however, one also finds mention of hunters and herders interacting with other species in households and the taiga.

One of the first European visitors to the Eastern Saians was British explorer Douglas Carruthers, who in the summer of 1910, together with fellow explorers John H. Miller and Morgan P. Price, visited Tozhu reindeer herders on Ala-Su River in eastern Tyva. Excited to find wild and domestic reindeer as far south as the northern border of Mongolia, Carruthers presents his Tozhu informants as householders concerned almost exclusively with reindeer breeding. Only in a side note does he mention "wiry horses" being used in a summer hunt or hunting dogs tied down near tents (Carruthers 1914: 226–28). In spite of encountering horsehair fishing nets, the British explorer argues that in most cases "Uriankhai [Tozhu] are no fishermen" (1914: 229). Although his account could be written off as unbalanced travel writing, Carruthers's publication stirred the scholarly community and revived an interest in the origins of reindeer domestication.

One of the people attracted by Carruthers's discovery was Norwegian zoologist Ørjan Olsen. Fueled by a pan-Scandinavian curiosity about the origins of the Sámi way of life, Olsen organized a well-funded expedition to the Eastern Saians in the summer of 1913. In his 1914 travel report, "Til Jeneseis Kilder" (To the Inenisei's sources), he recalls being greeted not by reindeer but by a large group of free-running dogs before reaching the bark-covered conical lodges of a Tozhu summer encampment. Inside the tents, he found horsehair fishing nets waiting to be used in surrounding rivers and lakes, and for transportation, people relied on horses alongside reindeer. In his second and more

focused book, *Los Soyotos* (1921: 72–73) [*Et Primitivt Folk: De Mongolske Rennomader* 1915], Olsen goes on to describe in more detail the fishing nets as well as the technique used by Tozhu to drive fish into them. Unlike Carruthers, Olsen soon realized that Tozhu transhumance depended on orchestrating herding, hunting, and fishing schedules (1921: 121). He even mentions cattle theft (1921: 138), which was common among Tozhu who had settled more to the west and who were holding cows, sheep, and goats (1921: 99). Although it is not his focus, one cannot read Olsen’s work without noticing that early twentieth-century Eastern Saian mountain households incorporated multiple species side by side.

The expeditions of Carruthers and Olsen penetrated a remote and little-explored region of Inner Asia. Some scholars have referred to this area as the “Saian Cross” because it is home to four distinct yet historically related peoples, all of whom share the heritage of a common Saian style of reindeer breeding. The Tozhus of Carruthers’s and Olsen’s accounts still reside in the western part of the Eastern Saians in what is now called the Todzhinskii District of the Republic of Tyva. Their immediate neighbors to the north are the Tofas of Tofalariia in Nizhneudinsk District of Irkutsk Oblast, and to the southeast, they shoulder with the Dukhas who dwell just across the border in the Khövsgöl Aimag in Mongolia. Edged in between their Mongolian and Tofa neighbors, reside the Oka-Soiots of Okinskii District (a district also known simply as “Oka”) in the westernmost part of the Republic of Buriatia.

In recent years a number of anthropologists have produced highly insightful work on human-animal relations with Tozhu, Dukha, and Tofa communities (e.g., Donahoe 2004; Endres 2015; Küçüküstel 2018; Mel’nikova 1994; I. V. Rassadin 2005; Stépanoff 2012). Soiots, by comparison, seem to have been passed over by this renewed attention. This may be in part due their reputation as “the most assimilated” of the four groups to settler ways of life. It may also have to do with the fact that Soiots were not officially recognized as an Indigenous people during the Soviet period, and even after the demise of the Soviet Union, little was known about them. The first ethnographer to write in-depth about Soiots was Larissa Pavlinskaia (2002). In her work she describes Sioiot and Oka-Buriat ways of life, relying in part on the testimony of elders able to recall pre-Soviet experiences and who have since passed away. Her book became an active aid in the official reinstatement of Soiots as a distinct Indigenous people, and it inspired me to base my own doctoral work in an Oka-Sioiot community. The account that follows is based on a first visit to Sioiot communities in 2012, followed by ten months of ethnographic and archival research conducted primarily with the Sioiot community at Uro in 2013 and 2014, as well as subsequent visits to Oka and Tofalariia in the autumn of 2014 and the spring of 2018.

SOIOT HISTORY

The archaeological record for Oka is sparse, and the beginnings of Soiot presence in these mountains is limited to fragmented oral memory and scholarly speculation. Because many residents of Oka are hostile to the idea of disturbing the ground, archaeologists have been limited to surface surveys. Fear of “stealing from the earth” is reflected in a common utterance I overheard many times among Buriats and Soiotics alike. “What is in the ground belongs to Burkhan [the local mountain deity], and nothing good comes from moving it.” In spite of this belief, Soiotics have a long history of encounters with geological exploration. There are stories about Soiot ancestors who, “a hundred years ago,” worked for a foreigner by the name of M. J.-P. Alibert—a French prospector who discovered high quality graphite on Mt. Krestovaia in 1847 (see Radde 1865: 51–61). Having set up camp above the Batagol River, Alibert hired Soiot men and their reindeer from Khonchon River as porters. In later years, Soiot herders and their reindeer were hired to transport countless Soviet geological expeditions. Although an eyesore to many Soiot elders, today’s corporate gold mines employ younger Soiot men, while at the same time moving tons of often contaminated soil and poisoning the fish in a number of streams.

Although Oka has long been known for its rich mineral deposits, the region has been much less at the center of early ethnographic focus. Few explorers of the tsarist period ever ventured directly into the territory, which explains the lack of prerevolutionary depictions of Soiot life. Commissioned to explore the Saian Mountains in 1772, German naturalist Peter Simon Pallas found them inaccessible, and he soon returned to Krasnoiarsk (Henze and Pallas 1967: xii). A survey of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century explorers’ maps and itineraries for south-central Siberia reveals how travel routes repeatedly bypassed Oka on all sides, running instead through eastern Tyva, northern and northwestern Mongolia, Karagassia in the Irkutsk Governorate, and even through the Tunka Valley of Buriatia. Among the few explorers who did travel into Oka were German naturalist Gustav Radde (1863, 1865: 58), and young geographer, later famed Russian anarchist, Piotr Kropotkin (1867). Radde, who had stayed with Alibert at the mine while studying birds in the area, described Soiotics as “nomadic savages” whose lives to him starkly contrasted the cultured ways he had witnessed at the Frenchman’s mine. By the time Kropotkin (1867: n.p.) came through Tustuk Valley, Alibert had already abandoned his mine. Not venturing toward the Khonchon River, where Alibert had hired Soiot porters, Kropotkin encountered only a single Soiot man in a yurt at Batagol. As Kropotkin ventured along the Oka River, he saw Tofa (Karagass) moving along the ridges above Buriat camps. He reasoned that in the past Soiotics would have done likewise. Yet Kropotkin’s actual encounters with local residents were evidently limited to Buriat settlers.

Two decades earlier, in 1848, Finnish scholar Alexander Castren had visited Tofa hunter-herders of Tofalariia who had told him about distant Soiot relatives that had settled in the Tunka Valley. That same year, Castren decided to travel to Tunka, desiring to meet these people for himself. He writes (1856: 396–397):

These [Soiots], according to legend, once lived in the Verkhneudinsk District [Tofalariia] on the Sikir River, but later migrated to Tunka where they split into two branches, of which the one resides in the mountains on rivers Oka, Gagan, Halbi, and Hoshun, while the other [branch] stays in the flatlands of the Buriat Ulus of Bukha-Gorkhon. . . . The Steppe Soiots are nowadays pure Buriats, while the Mountain-Soiots remain in part faithful to the practices of their ancestors. . . . Not long ago Mountain-Soiots are said to have spoken the same Turkic dialect as the Karagass. . . . [b]ut in regard to Samoyed ancestry of Soiots, all memory has disappeared. . . .

As one of few scholar-explorers who encountered Soiots outside of Uriankhai [Tyva], Castren nevertheless failed to venture up the rivers he describes as the homeland of Mountain-Soiots. Thus it seems Castren himself never encountered the men and women who are most likely the ancestors of present day Oka-Soiots.

The first scholar to conduct work specifically with Oka-Soiots, albeit just after the revolution, was Swiss-born Russian anthropologist and archaeologist Bernhard Eduardovich Petri (1884–1937). Based at the University of Irkutsk, Petri amassed both archaeological and ethnographic data for several indigenous peoples of southern Siberia, including Tofas. In 1926, he ventured into Oka for the first time. Together with his colleagues, and in the service of the Soviet Northern Committee (Rus. *komitet severa*), he visited all known Soiot settlements while conducting a systematic demographic medical survey (Petri 1927a: 12–20). With the exception of a “preliminary” report (Petri 1927a), all detailed results, including his personal archives, are believed lost. His preliminary report provides a glimpse into the locations of Soiot households, their composition, and stock ratios in the mid to late 1920s prior to complete collectivization by the Soviet state. Given the lack of prerevolutionary data on Soiots, historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists have relied on materials from neighboring regions in their efforts to reconstruct earlier Soiot lifeways. In what follows, I will rely on the work of Pavlinskaia (2002: 27–34) who brings together in her work several of the sources speaking to the complicated developments in the demographic composition of the Eastern Saian Mountains.

Near Oka’s regional center, located on the Zhombolok River, there is an archaeological site that Buriat archaeologist Bair B. Dashibalov dates to between 3000 and 2000 BCE (2000: 4–6). Historian Sevan Vainshtein (1980b: 69, 87) and archaeologist Valeri Chernetsov (1973: 12) were convinced this site

was once inhabited by the easternmost proto-Samoyed tribes belonging to the Finno-Ugrian Samoyed branch of the Uralic language family. But the picture is further complicated by discoveries of Samoyed material culture infused with a series of Tungus features along the central and upper Enisei River. Museologist Natalia Prytkova (1970: 54) and Vainshtein (1980b: 87) interpreted these finds as a blend of early Tungus peoples with Samoyed in-migrants who would have lived here as early as the Neolithic Age. By the Bronze Age (2000 to 1000 BCE), signs of semi-settlement and pastoralism, including cattle, sheep, and horses for meat production appear. Archaeologist Mikhail Kosarev (1991: 22–23) describes yet another wave of Samoyedic peoples populating the Saian Region, this time familiar with pastoralism, at the time of the early Iron Age (1000 BCE to 1000 CE).

A series of toponyms found in both Eastern Tyva and Tofalariia suggest that as the Hun Empire expanded, Ket-speaking people arrived in the Saians (Alekseenko 1980: 129). It would seem that although Samoyeds may have had a stronger presence, Ket and ancient indigenous Tungus populations were present at the same time. Anthropologist Maxim Levin and famous linguist Glafira Vasilevich (1951: 63–87) saw these later populations as introducing the domestication of reindeer to the Tozhu region of eastern Tyva, as well as to Tofalariia and Oka, thus enabling local Samoyed and Tungusic peoples to migrate further into the northern taiga. At the same time, these diverse peoples must have come together to form what linguist Valentin Rassadin (1971: 93–94) saw as a common “southern Samoyedic” language, incorporating both Ket and Evenk (Tungus) elements. In this view, Southern Samoyedic would have served as a foundation for contemporary Tofa and Tozhu languages.

Although pastoralism is likely to have come to the Saians around 500 BCE, it may well have been introduced to Western Tyva as early as 1000 BCE along with the arrival of early Indo-Iranian mobile populations (Pavlinskaia 2002: 30). Turkic peoples of Central Asia, to whom are attributed the ancient rock engravings found along the Oka River, are most likely to have introduced pastoralism to the Saians, their language influencing local speech as early as the second half of the first millennium (Pavlinskaia 2002: 30; V.I. Rassadin 1971: 96). Seventh-century Chinese Tan-Shu texts refer to “Duba” tribes located in Duba, Milige, and Echzhi *aimags* (districts) that likely encompass present-day Tozhu, Tofa, and Oka territories, all part of the Turkic Khanate at the time (Pavlinskaia 2002: 31–32). These Tan-Shu sources speak of Duba as having no calendar, cattle, or agriculture, living in tree bark shelters and possessing large numbers of good horses.

By the eighth century, the Uighur take over the Turkic Khanate from Altai to Manchuria, and after 750 CE central and western Tyva and the Khakass fell to them as well (Bichurin 1950: 355). Not much is said about the residents of the Saians during this time, but their furs appear in Chinese registers via taxes

collected by Uighur rulers (Pavlinkaia 2002: 33). We know from archaeologist Leonid Kyzlasov that by the ninth century mobile tribes from the Saians joined the Khakass in battle against the Uighur, which may confirm that the Saian Mountains were under Uighur taxation (1969: 93). A powerful government, backed by Imperial China, emerged under the Khakass and its envoys gave gifts of Eastern Saian sable and chipmunk to the emperor (Bichurin 1950: 352). By the thirteenth century, the Khakass government weakened and a new Mongolian power rose under Ghengis Khan, which soon included the Saians, the inhabitants of which were now referred to as “forest peoples” along with all other southern Siberians under Mongol rule (Pavlinkaia 2002: 33). Several crushed uprisings mark this period, during which local populations repeatedly withdrew into Mongolia (Kyzlasov 1969: 135–37). For Pavlinkaia (2002: 33), this demographic mobility helps explain why several clan names are shared between Mongolia and the Saians, and why medieval traces of Mongolian are found in the ancestral languages of Tofas and Soiets.

Between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, at the time when the Mongol Empire grew weak, the Saians once again fell under the power of the Khakass. The historical record is silent on the Saians for these two centuries, and Pavlinkaia speculates that the peoples encountered by Russians in the Saians of the seventeenth century were formed precisely during this time (2002: 34). By the seventeenth century, the Turkic influence of the preceding centuries culminated in a language shift for Samoyeds, with Tofalars and Soiets joining the Uighur group of Turkic languages (V. I. Rassadin 1971). Meanwhile, the Saians were subjected to two new powers: the Russians and the Manchurians.

A new border divided the two empires following the Treaty of Kiakhta (1727). It ran through the southern flanks of the Saian Mountains, and was lined with border sentry posts (Rus. *karauly*), two of which were located in Oka—one at the mouth of the Zhombolok River and the other at Narin-Kholoiskii in Gargan (Sharastepanov 2008: 9). The Mongolian-speaking Buriat settlers who came to staff these sentry posts quickly established themselves among indigenous Sioit Turkic speakers and eventually pushed for a second language shift in the local population—this time from Turkic-Sioit to Mongolian-Buriat. As Pavlinkaia (2002: 34) points out, it is likely that this shift of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries progressed so rapidly because of the preexisting linguistic and cultural similarities Soiets shared with Mongolia since the thirteenth century.

Local historian Dashi Sharastepanov (2008: 6–8) describes contemporary Oka-Buriats as the descendants of clans and subclans who had come from the Tunka and Alar’ regions. Sent to staff the new border sentry posts, they encountered Soiets belonging to Khaasut, Irkit, and Onkhot clans. We know from historian Bair Dugarov (1983: 97) that these three unrelated clans were at the time living in the mountainous taiga of the upper Oka River. The Khaasut

clan is thought to have arrived in Oka first. According to a Sorok elder, the late Dezhida Dambaevich Sonopov, this clan descended from a man by the name of Khurul dai, who had come to Oka from eastern Tyva some eleven generations ago (ca. 360 years). Together with his Uriankhai wife, he had settled near Lake Il'chir, following a disagreement with his relatives in Tyva (Dugarov 1983: 97–98). The Irkit clan emigrated more recently from the village of Zhemchug in Tunka, also settling in the area around Lake Il'chir. Based on the genealogy of Darma Khontoevich Khusaev (b. 1888) of Engorboi in Tunka, Dugarov (1983: 98) establishes that they had come from the shores of Lake Khubsugul to settle in the Tunka Valley before moving into Oka. Finally, the Onkhot clan is said to have originated from among the Bulagats of Prebaikalia at a later time (Sharastepanov 2008: 7). This kaleidoscopic vision of Oka-Soiot origins, in conjunction with subsequent intermarriages between Soiets and Buriat settlers, provides us with some background to contemporary Soiot identity in Oka.

LIFE AT URO

When I first arrived in Oka, I was met by Badma Khorluevich Dondokov, a well-respected Soiot elder in his sixties, working as the representative for indigenous minorities at the regional administration in Orlik. At our first meeting, he was sitting behind his desk on the first floor of the administration building, dressed in a black suit with polished black shoes. In spite of his official attire, it soon became clear that as a hunter and herder, Badma much preferred to be in the forest. Hearing of my hopes to find a Soiot herding family that might take me in for a year of fieldwork, he immediately organized a van and driver to take us around Oka to visit with various families and to see his youngest brother Baianbata at Uro.

Uro is one of many winter pastures (Rus. *zimniki*) strategically positioned among a series of connected valleys and mountain ridges, forming part of a larger transhumant landscape, similar to those found in the European Alps with dairy cattle or the South Asian Himalaya with its yak herds. Uro is a seasonal home to several extended families who herd their stock here from late August until early May. Like all other Uro residents, Baianbara left the valley each year between June and August to migrate his household and stock to his summer pasture (Rus. *letnik*) at higher elevation. Located 1,550 meters above sea level, Uro lies just below its corresponding summer pastures on the Tustuk River, located at 1,700 meters—a long day's hike from the winter pastures. The difference in elevation is sufficient to reduce insects pestering stock, and it allows yak to easily reach pastures at elevations of 2,000 to 2,500 meters.

In August, before the animals are allowed to return to their winter pastures, families come to harvest hay patches around their winter homes in Uro, as well

as in a number of inherited spots scattered around other valleys. Once the hay is safely stacked and fenced away, cattle and sheep are returned to Uro. Because families spend a greater number of months at their winter pastures each year, and because warmer summer months require fewer comforts, the winter locations serve as the primary residence for most families. This is evident in slightly more substantial homes, coupled with greater storage capacity for seasonal items. Neither summer nor winter locations had any municipal services during my stay, although Uro was connected to the village of Sorok with a power line, allowing more or less reliable electricity for television sets, light bulbs, mobile phone chargers, milk separators, and a small number of other electrical devices.

On our tour of Oka, I was able to make contact with a number of herding families, but nowhere did the fit seem as ideal as at Uro, where Baianbata (b. 1970) kindly invited me to stay with him, beginning the following autumn. It served him well to have someone at the cabin, since his family had moved to the village for their children's education. Although Baianbata shared much work with his neighboring elder brother Borzhon (b. 1966), it was difficult to be away from his wife and children while herding his yak in the hills near Uro. On a visit to their home in Sorok, his wife, Beligte, told me how she missed having Baianbata by her side. Yet, not only did the children need an education and someone to look after them in the village, Beligte had also taken the job of running the local post office, which came with a government salary that greatly helped make ends meet. In spite of Baianbata's unwillingness to let go of his yak herd for a more settled life, it was not difficult to see Beligte's affection for this man, whom she revered for "maintaining such a strong herd of yak all by himself." Beligte clearly recognized her husband as the master (Rus. *khoziain*) of their household, but given his quiet and reserved manner, I never saw Baianbata assert himself over her in any way.

During his visits to Sorok, Baianbata would help their fifteen-year-old daughter, Andama, with her homework, while his five-year-old daughter, Balma, would sit on his lap or lay beside him watching television. Andama milked the family's two dairy cows and assisted her mother in all other household tasks, ranging from baking bread to cooking supper and cleaning house. Her ten-year-old brother, Dugdan, would be allowed to play with his friends after school, but before long, he too would be called in to complete his chores, which included hauling water, chopping wood, making fire, or peeling potatoes. At Uro, and also at the summer pasture, children learned by watching and participating in their parents' tasks. Boys learned how to drive yak, round up and saddle horses, cut hay, butcher stock, and hunt for game with dogs. In their free time, they fished in local streams and shared their catch with their families. Daughters joined their mothers and elder sisters in milking cows, shearing sheep, knitting with sheep and yak wool, cooking, processing dairy products, and cleaning and preparing intestines after a slaughter.



Illustration 0.1. Borzhon and Ranzhur’s home at Uro. Photograph by the author.

The winter pastures at the center of the valley at Uro were divided between two intermarried clans. One of the two clans was headed by Badma Khorluevich Dondokov, the elder who had invited me to the community. In his absence, he was represented by his younger brother Borzhon and wife Ranzhur (b. 1963). The couple shared a house with their son Buinto (b. 1990), daughter Balma (b. 1989), and Balma’s two-year-old daughter. Borzhon’s adoptive son, Regbi (b. 1984), his wife Norzhima, and their two children lived next door in a newly completed cabin of their own making. Baianbata and I lived in an older house just past Borzhon’s winter stables. To the south, across a small stream called Urda-Uro, their youngest brother Vandan (b. 1974) with his wife Ochigma (b. 1980) and their five children resided in the middle of the valley. The Dondokov brothers and their wives frequently visited each other and collaborated on various projects.

The second clan was headed by Aunty Vera (b. 1965), whose husband had passed away, but whose son Tseden (b. 1986) was handling most of his late father’s responsibilities. Vera was the sister of Ranzhur, Borzhon’s wife, and she lived in one house with her unmarried sons Dagba and Tseden, as well as their disabled sister, Masha. Across the pasture from their house lived Iumzhap (b. 1974) with his wife Tserigma (b. 1983) and their three boys, aged five to nine. A stone’s throw to the west lived Tsydyp (b. 1977) with his wife

Dagzama (b. 1981) and their two boys, aged five and ten. Although members of both clans would visit each other, the majority of interhousehold collaboration occurred within rather than between clans. Larger tasks, such as construction projects, stock inoculations, and log preparation were usually accomplished with the help of members from within one's own clan.

The collaborative relationship within each clan could also be seen in the herds each household held. Any given horse group, or yak or sheep herd, was likely to be comprised of animals belonging to other members of the clan. Some of their owners held jobs in the village, lived in Orlik, or had moved to the capital city of Ulan-Ude. If one inherited a herd, it did not mean that one became sole owner of all its head. More likely one became a steward of many animals, some of which belonged to members of the wider clan. Clan members living in the city could come to pick up their riding horses at Uro to go hunting in autumn, and often all the sheep and horses of one clan were held together during the summer. Because of the free-roaming nature of yak herds and horse groups, much of the conversation during visits between households was concerned with the location of animals in the landscape.

At Uro, households were centered on a main residence, usually a log cabin or wooden house with a brick-built stove used for cooking, baking, and heating located in the center. Thin boarded walls or curtains divided the living space into quarters for parents, children, and other kin, each sharing a section of the rear hearth wall for warmth. The cooking side of the hearth would open up to a kitchen space where all meals were prepared and bread baked. A lean-to, or separate front room, served as storage space for hunting and herding equipment and as a meat cellar in winter. A boarded outhouse and log cabin-style wash house were located twenty to thirty meters from each residence. Wash houses had a steel stove on which to heat water for the family's weekly bath and laundry session for which water would be hauled from the river in buckets suspended from a wooden yoke. Firewood was brought from neat stacks of up to twenty cubic meters of ready-chopped larch, prepared by the family in April, harvested from government allotted sections in the forest.

Wooden corrals were built adjacent to or immediately onto log-style stables with grass sod roofs, housing sheep and cattle during the coldest months of the year. Many corrals consisted of two or more rectangular or round forcing pens for the sorting of horses and cattle, usually with an attached milking pen. A straight single-file chute connected corrals for biannual stock inoculations. Sheep pens were positioned in view of residence windows to protect against wolves and they were movable to prevent foot rot. The harvestable pasture surrounding the compound sometimes had a wooden fence around it. Most summer compounds were similar in design, although families usually shared a single room without dividers, and their stoves were not as sophisticated.

When Uro's residents left for the summer, they did so in staggered fashion to prevent livestock from mingling, as each household set out in direction of their respective summer pastures. Combined, ten of Uro's households owned roughly 465 cattle and yak, 173 horses, 155 sheep, 15 goats, 23 dogs, and 32 chickens. Establishing these figures was not easy, as people considered it improper to speak about the number of stock one owns, especially in relation to yak and hybrids. This may have been considered a kind of superstition. By numbering one's stock, it would be exposed to greater danger in what were already volatile conditions, considering predation and sickness. At the same time, silence about numbers prevented people from comparing each other's property. Additionally, some herders seemed to keep disclosed and undisclosed counts, allowing them to minimize fees arising from mandatory inoculations without which it was illegal to sell meat. A certain number of yaks could thus be hidden in the mountains during a zoo technician's visit. With all disclosed stock inoculated, undisclosed animals could rejoin the heard once the veterinary workers had left.

When all residents returned from the summer pastures in August, many of the school children would be with their families for the hay harvest, causing the valley's population to swell for a short time. Between 2013 and 2014, Uro experienced a low of thirty-three residents and a high of sixty-nine across twelve households. The swell served as a happy reunion after summer migration, which



Illustration 0.2. Moving a horse group to summer pasture. Photograph by the author.

had taken each household in a different direction. In summer, people became part of a different community, a fact everyone seemed to look forward to. While the winter valley was more densely populated, some of the summer pastures rendered households somewhat more isolated. Visits between camps became all the more important with some residents preferring the sociality of their summer residence to that of their winter residence. Summer was generally associated with a better atmosphere, greater joy, and perhaps less strained relations.

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH

The methodology of anthropological fieldwork differs in many ways from other disciplines involving empirical field research. As a qualitative researcher, I was primarily interested in long-term observations of animal-human interactions achieved by way of triangulation. It is one thing to watch someone interact with an animal, and then to write down this observation. Triangulation, by contrast, calls for repeated long-term cross-checking of such observations. To prevent misinterpretation or misrepresentation, the field-worker must interview the participants, which often involves going over previously taken field notes together with them. In some cases, this can be done by recording an interaction on video and watching the footage step-by-step with the actors later on. During this process, further notes of clarification or correction can be made.

At the same time, the anthropologist will be interviewing and observing similar processes in different locations and with different individuals, allowing for a comparative element. This comparative work yields insight into regional variation, while it can also serve as a corrective, identifying initial misunderstanding. Another way of comparison comes through a detailed study of ethnographic literature from neighboring areas. As cultural practices usually come to be shared across neighboring populations, certain continuities will come to the fore. A third research strand takes place in archives: here the field-worker consults every available historical record that links to consultants' accounts, providing yet another context for observed contemporary animal-human practices.

Finally, what makes the ethnographic method such a strong approach is its recursiveness, enabled by a researcher's long-term stay in a community. What is meant by recursion is that similar events are witnessed more than once, often over the course of a whole year (i.e., in different seasons) and in different social contexts. As the field-worker takes note of these events in different contexts, ever more nuances emerge. A new detail helps inform future inquiry, while it also enables the observer to recalibrate past recordings. By deliberately working

in this recursive manner, the ethnographer is able to work out details that would not become evident during a single short-term visit.

As an anthropologist, my work is not that of a trained ethologist or other animal expert. At no point in this book do I aim to make any claims regarding the intentions of animals. As a student of human culture, I aim to relay the perspectives of the people I worked and lived with in regard to the animals with whom they shared their lives. In some cases, I also convey my own experiences and interpretations of animal behavior. But in no case do I aim to explain animal actions from a scientific perspective.

What has set anthropological work apart from many other disciplines involving fieldwork is participant observation. Anthropologists observe the participation of others in activities, but will also participate in many of these activities themselves. Thus the description of events is informed by a kind of immersive technique, which in some cases can amount to apprenticing. For an ethnography of animal-human relations, this is a very important aspect. Field-workers seek not only to learn about animal-human relations but also to experience these connections through their own bodies by engaging with animals and landscapes.

The fieldwork that informs this book relies on these and other classical anthropological methods. In order to live as closely to my collaborators as possible, I lived in the home of Baianbata at Uro for the majority of my fieldwork. This allowed me to share in his life rhythm as a herder, observing and participating in many of his and his brothers' interactions with the animals of their households. It also gave me a base from where to visit other herders in the valley. After establishing rapport, usually by way of a relative's introduction (which included an explanation of who I was and what I was trying to learn), I would offer to help with household chores such as cleaning out stables. As my relationships grew with neighboring households through repeated daytime visits, I would be able to ask more questions to accompany my observations and experiences of daily activities.

During the later part of my fieldwork, I brought my own family into the field. Together with my spouse and our two sons, we were offered a small cabin at Uro that had belonged to Aunty Vera's late parents. By living in this cabin, we effectively joined her extended household. In the following summer, we migrated with Vera's household to one of her son's family's summer pastures on Tustuk River. These arrangements enabled us to live as a nuclear family unit, while being in daily contact with the larger clan to whom belonged the summer shelter in which we stayed for that season. These arrangements enabled us to keep a few chickens of our own, while exchanging meat and milk for canned foods, which we had brought with us. Primarily, however, we paid for our family's accommodation and our meat and milk share through a monthly fee our families had previously agreed on.