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TATIANA SAFONOVA
ISTVÁN SÁNTHA

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BURYATIA: A STUDY
OF FLEXIBLE AND
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ELEMENTS

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Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, PO Box 110351,
06017 Halle/Saale, Phone: +49 (0)345 2927-0, Fax: +49 (0)345 2927-402,
<http://www.eth.mpg.de>, e-mail: workingpaper@eth.mpg.de

Companionship among the Evenki of Eastern Buryatia: a study of flexible and stable cultural elements¹

Tatiana Safonova, István Sántha²

Abstract

During fieldwork among the Evenki of Eastern Buryatia, we experienced many situations of instability, characterised by ever changing mood and absence of commitments. We use the concept of a self-corrective system taken from Gregory Bateson to analyse the flexibility of the Evenki culture. We found that the social organisation of this former hunter society is based on companionship. This form of organisation consists of self-corrective circuits, which give flexibility in every concrete situation, but ensure stability for a long term period. This cybernetic vision gives us the opportunity to deal with such difficult topics as alcohol consumption and aggression in Siberian everyday life. We also study a special pattern of behaviour called *pokazukha* that evolves in response to strangers' expectations and wishes to see the Evenki culture as stable and controllable.

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² Tatiana Safonova, Centre for Independent Social Research, St. Petersburg, Russia, Email: falicat@yandex.ru; István Sántha, Institute of Ethnology at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, Hungary, Email: santha@ethnologia.mta.hu; and Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, Germany, Email: santha@eth.mpg.de

Introduction

The Evenki of Eastern Buryatia never avoided the contact with members of other communities, such as Chinese, Buryats and Russians. This contact has a long history of several centuries of both fighting and peaceful trading. The Evenki are an indigenous hunter community living in the contact zone between steppe and taiga. Tremendous changes took place in the 20th century with the introduction of the Soviet state in Siberia. The Evenki lost their freedom to wander in the taiga and have to work as cattle breeders in *kolkhozes*. Popular Marxist arguments could lead to the assumption that this loss must have changed their social organisation and everyday life, because they were forced to switch from hunting as the main form of occupation to cattle breeding. In this article we examine the results of this crucial change and trace its effects on Evenki everyday life. We argue that the Evenki elaborated a special form of integration into Russian-Buryat society that prevents their assimilation and helps them to maintain their social organisation even without hunting as a dominant social activity. This is quite a complex phenomenon, which has characteristics of a self-corrective system with divergent circuits devoted to communication within the system itself and communication with the outer world. We use the cybernetic concept of schismogenesis of Gregory Bateson to study processes of complementary and symmetrical differentiation (Bateson 1958, Bateson 1972) that by balancing each other out help to keep the system on the edge between processes of assimilation and isolation. Without this mutual balancing these processes would destroy the Evenki community.

As shamanism is perceived to be the core of the Evenki culture (Shirokogoroff 1999), we focus on religious and spiritual events that are adaptations either to outward expectations toward the Evenki community or their innate intentions. We analyse an annual open celebration devoted to praise the spirits of Evenki families, a local ritual devoted to pray for water ordered by the Buryat community, and experiences of high emotional tension connected with bears. In the course of this article we analyse successively the form of the Evenki social organisation that helped them to coordinate their actions and communicate during hunting and other everyday tasks. We recognise this form of organisation as companionship and study its vulnerabilities and means of maintenance. Using Gregory Bateson's theory we analyse such means as self-corrective circuits within the system of companionship. This form of social organisation is incompatible with hierarchical structures and is incomprehensible for strangers such as Buryats, who are more accustomed to patriarchal patterns. That is why this form of interaction is used inside the community and depends on mechanisms of balancing and reduction of disturbances we are going to discuss. Companionship is quite vulnerable in the context of non-Evenki communities and needs to be severely transformed to be useful in interethnic communication. In the case of the religious ritual (open and public) conducted by all Evenki once a year, at which gather not only Evenki, but also relatives with Buryat background, we study the altered form of companionship, which we call *pokazukha*. In Russian this notion means showing off faked reality with the aim to impress strangers. During public events some Evenki are obliged to create an image of the Evenki culture for strangers in such a way that it is not perceived as lively and changing, but to the contrary as stable and made up of constellations of preserved material objects and patterns of behaviour from the past. Their actions play the role of a buffer between the Evenki community, which depends on a constantly changing and flexible companionship, and other societies that use strict and hierarchical forms of organisation, such as kinship or bureaucratic institutions.

The corpus of anthropological studies of Siberia today is a very rich one, but we still could not adopt any of the existing approaches toward Siberian hunters and gatherers. According to our observations, local knowledge of the territory and narratives about experiences in hunting (Kwon 1993, Kwon 1998) are no longer relevant for the Evenki because hunting is not the main occupation anymore³. At the same time, they are not united in any organisation that is somehow opposed to the state or plays the role of a small state (Ssorin-Chaikov 2003) and their ethnic community organisation exists only formally. The kinship system is also not so important for them as a resource for solidarity and organisation (as it is in the case of the Dolgans, Ventsel 2005) since they have preserved their aversion to hierarchy. The observed annual religious ritual makes it obvious for us that religion, shamanism, is also not a force that through unification and formalisation consolidates their community (Halemba 2006). At the same time we have found a lot of commonalities between our material and descriptions by Shirokogoroff gathered in the same region in the beginning of the 20th century (Shirokogoroff 1979, Shirokogoroff 1999).

We spent two months in the field with one Evenki family. We lived with the shaman Orochen Stepanovich and his wife Babushka Masha on their *zaimka*⁴ and did everything we could (though that was not much) to help one of their sons, Stepan, and his wife Olya with household and cattle. The three children of Stepan and Olya, Kolya, a boy of seven, Luba, a girl of six, and Tamara, a girl of three completed the household. The first thing we did together with our Evenki hosts was the trip from the village to the *zaimka* where we planned to do the fieldwork. Our companions were an old couple. They were in a very good mood and we shared their excitement before the trip. After that we experienced a lot of changes in their mood, varying from enthusiasm and happiness (which were connected with travelling) to open hostility and aggression (during sessions of alcohol consumption). We have the strong feeling that all these differences in affective states have a common underlying basis in Evenki culture.

We stayed at the *zaimka* most of the time with Babushka Masha, who could not leave it independently because of a diseased leg. She was angry, very close to madness and was very different from the person, with whom we travelled. This change in her character was a mystery for us until the moment we realised the importance of the ability to move for the Evenki, to travel and to share work and risks with other people. We also needed a lot of time to recognise that the constant attempts of our hosts to send us somewhere, either to the village or to the weather station or to the nature reserve, were not attempts to dismiss us and exclude us from their everyday life, but on the contrary to show us their way of life, their being on the road whenever possible and their use of any excuse to go somewhere. During most of our fieldwork we rejected the possibility of participating in their mobile way of life in favour of our social anthropological idea that to conduct good fieldwork means to stay with people and not to move from one place to another. We thought that people were living in one place and we tried to do the same, though at first we did not notice that most of the time they were going somewhere and only our *babushka* stayed at home.

³ Owing to the irrelevance of such narratives for the Evenki communities that we studied, we can not apply Willerslev's theoretical approach (2004), although we share his interest in studying intersubjective phenomena.

⁴ A farm, distanced from the village, which can serve as summer or winter camp for cattle breeders.

Flexibility of Companionship and its Schismogenetic Processes

The Evenki try to escape from the *zaimka* whenever it is possible and they create a lot of reasons to go somewhere. They spend a lot of petrol, which is very expensive, for absolutely unreasonable trips to the village or to neighbours. We assume that such mobility is hardly connected with their economic activities, but is the manifestation of their way of life. Actually their trips are only a waste of time and money as they are cattle breeders and have to work in their households. It is important to underline that “traveling is a condition of livelihood” (Ingold 1987: 166) for them not in an economic sense but in an emotional one. They need to travel so as not to become mad like Babushka Masha.

To be on the road as the main and most important activity determines the form of sociality appreciated by the Evenki. Following Thomas Gibson we see this kind of sociality as a special form of companionship.

“The idiom of companionship implies that social actors come together as autonomous agents to pursue a common goal. They are not obligated to cooperate because of some ascribed relationship based on shared kinship substance or shared locality, nor are they obligated to cooperate with specific individuals because of imbalances in previous transactions: companions cannot be in debt to one another. It is shared activity in itself, and amicable sentiments generated by habitual cooperation, which constitute the basis of the relationship. The activities which provided the rationale of the relationship in the first instance become after the time only a means of expressing a deeper sentiment of fellowship and amity.” (Gibson 1985: 392–393)

The Evenki share a great enthusiasm about participating in companionship and at the same time they are very hostile toward any attempt to avoid such a form of sociality. Aggression was one of the most frequent reactions when somebody suspected we were trying to exclude ourselves from the companionship. For example, we had a lot of problems when we used a video camera because recording is incompatible with the participation in the action. Only after some time did we manage to integrate our recording into the Evenki daily life. We started to show our films every evening as if it was a news segment about the events at the *zaimka*. They were very interested in these screenings because then such immobile persons like the *babushka* got a chance to somehow participate in the companionship activities conducted during the day. When our filming became a companionship activity in which everybody could participate, either as actors, or as members of the audience, the recording was not a problem anymore.

Still we could not shoot episodes of great tension and importance, because in these cases we were involved in the action itself and could not avoid it without scandal. For example, we could not record the extinguishing of a forest fire in the neighbourhood of the *zaimka* because we had to help. We could shoot the castration of the calves only because we also participated in the action by assisting and holding the necessary sewing material.

There were a lot of jokes about our future participation in the companionship plans, such as going fishing together or shearing sheep. The jokes revealed our status as companions for them and it was important that we would not stop but participate in the activities until they are completed. For example, after we planted potatoes with Stepan and Olya, the joke was we should come back in the autumn to gather the harvest with them.



Companionship while castrating a calf.

According to Bateson, schismogenesis is “a process of differentiation in the norms of individual behaviour resulting from cumulative interaction between individuals” (Bateson 1958: 175). But this definition does not cover all cases of schismogenesis, which can embrace not only norms but also forms of behaviour and attitudes. This process can take place either among people or between states (for example in the course of arms races) or even between parts of one personality (which leads to schizophrenia). There are two basic forms of schismogenesis: symmetrical and complementary. Symmetrical schismogenesis is characterised by successive changes of the same kind in two parties, which happen as a result of their direct interaction. The most popular example of this process is a contest where one party reacts by reinforcing its attempts in reaction to reinforcements by the other party (in boasting or in arms races, etc.). This escalation, if it is not disturbed by outer effects, leads toward the collapse of relations or even the destruction of the parties. The same end is characteristic for the other type of schismogenesis, the complementary one. Here, changes in parties also escalate in the process of reactions toward mutual changes, but these changes are of the opposite kind. If in symmetrical schismogenesis parties are becoming more and more like one another, in the complementary one they are proceeding in opposite directions. And if one party suppresses the other, the other party answers with a submission of a stronger degree and arouses the stronger interest of the first in suppression. Complementary schismogenesis does not only describe relations of suppression/submission; it includes other cases as well, for example the process of specialisation in modern society, as described by Emile Durkheim in his book about the division of labour, where specialisation of one cohort leads to the specialisation of others, explaining the unfolding complexity of the modern world.

Due to such wide contexts of possible applications of the term schismogenesis, we feel ourselves quite free to apply it to processes that take place between patterns of behaviour leading to the establishment of social organisation. Gregory Bateson’s concept allows us to include perceptions of the wider environment in the analysis of social organisation and thus, has the potential to identify an enormous number of schismogenetic processes. This is very useful when we study such flexible and ever changing social organisations as that of the Evenki, which are focused not on the repro-

duction of stable distinctions (based on gender, age or kin positions) but on the possibility to ensure the flexibility and autonomy of the members to accomplish not only routine but also spontaneous tasks together. This is one of the most important necessities for hunters. In cybernetic theory isolated schismogenetic processes collapse immediately, if they have no side commitments to other schismogenetic processes. In this article we analyse both the schismogenetic processes that constitute companionship and the circuits of self-correction that involve side commitments, which serve to establish balance within the system and thus to prevent its collapse.

Companionship as a system of actions is a result of the fusion of two schismogenetic processes, symmetrical and complementary schismogenesis. This fusion gives stability to the system and prevents escalation of both symmetrical and complementary processes. Symmetrical differentiation takes place because the Evenki do not admit any hierarchical division or any authoritative position in the joint accomplishment of any task. All people should be involved in the action completely and should not get any preferential treatment. The complexity of your task does not effect your position in the society. If you participate in companionship you are included in the society but you maintain your freedom and autonomy, and are not subordinated to any person. The Evenki do not like any kind of boasting and find it ridiculous and boring. They always make fun of any attempt to boast. To the contrary they like to underline your failures, but with a smile so as not to degrade you. Possible contest and rivalry are prevented by another axis of complementary schismogenesis. In the accomplishment of any joint action the Evenki always try to divide their tasks in accordance to two principles: collecting and distributing (or gathering and wasting). In the framework of any companionship, people always work with one of these principles so that they are complementary to each other and could not compete. In the accomplishment of routine actions in the household the division often takes place on the basis of gender relations. But it is not obligatory and people can easily cross these gender distinctions and accomplish other tasks. We assume that the distinction by gender is used here as an instrument to distribute tasks without negotiation and reflection, which could take some time. Gender distinction in labour is perceived not as coercive but just convenient for everyday tasks. Most of the time women collect things and assemble them, for example they gather dishes before washing, collect wool after shearing sheep or pour fresh milk in one can. Babushka Masha spent most of the time watching the children, animals and people through the window and, generally, “keeping an eye” on things. She was always worried that somebody or something was missing, for example that one of the sheep was left behind by the flock. She also watched over the barn and tried to be frugal with food. Men usually divide things and generosity is very much encouraged in the socialisation of boys. It is mostly the men’s task to kill and butcher the sheep or a cow, to chop firewood and separate cream from milk. The system of division of labour is very flexible and interchangeable; all men can milk cows and all women can chop wood. This flexibility shows that the division of tasks between the genders serves not the establishment of a hierarchy but a horizontal interdependency. This prevents the disintegration of the system as a result of the escalation of symmetrical differentiation. This complementary schismogenesis is of the same kind as the specialisation that does not lead to suppression or subordination but to a mutual interdependence of specialists such as collectors and distributors.

Self-Corrective Circuits that Balance Schismogenetic Processes within Companionship

One of the most important features of complex systems is self-regulation (Bateson and Bateson 1987: 19). It is very difficult to articulate the self-corrective circuits laying at the core of self-regulation, because they are rather intertwined with each other and superimposed. In this section we try to trace some of the circuits that lead to the stabilisation of the system of companionship. There are several such mechanisms determining the autonomy of the members of the companionship and at the same time do not exclude them from interaction with the environment. Flexibility and changes are important parts of companionship that must not consist of stable positions and roles determining the behaviour of the participants. These corrective circuits are similar to constraints that redirect streams of energy inside a system and help to prevent a schismogenetic collapse. Because logic is an instrument depicting lineal relations and not circuitous ones, the following description could seem to be a bit complicated. But we will follow the advice of Gregory Bateson not to be afraid of analysing complex realities using traditional scientific logic and not to avoid such important topics as self-corrective circuits (Bateson and Bateson 1987: 144–143). In the following we address two circuits based on: 1) the introduction of new schismogenetic relations, borrowed from the wider context of relations with the nature, into old schismogenetic processes between people; and 2) the use of new schismogenetic commitments by the introduction of experiences of risk and alcoholic intoxication in situations of companionship.

High Water and Bears: nature as a source of balance

There are moments when, due to external circumstances, the balance between symmetrical and complementary schismogenesis in companionship is endangered. It is a crucial moment because of the rivalry and violence between people or the disintegration of the companionship system. Some dangerous situations support the symmetrical differentiation, for example, people have to do the same job and cannot divide complementary tasks between each other; the possibility of rivalry and quarrel is very high. It can even end up in violence and insults as we witnessed once during a scandal between members of an Evenki family. This critical episode took place when people on their way home from the village were cut off from their houses by high water on the river and had to spend some time waiting for the water to go down. They had a lot of vodka with them to conduct a ritual at the *zaimka*, which was paradoxically connected with a prayer for water from the mountains. It was raining badly and actually there was no lack of water at all. This ritual was ordered by people from the village, and all the vodka had been bought with their money. The Evenki granted the Buryat request so as to integrate the Evenki into the Buryat system of ritual practices and their hierarchical relations with spirits and masters of the land. For the Evenki this ritual was the only possibility to get vodka for free and legitimately spend time not working. This situation was very paradoxical. It was strange to pray for water in a situation when you cannot reach your home because of the high water in the river. This external influence, which led to a paradox, caused the shift toward symmetrical schismogenesis among the Evenki.

The delay because of the high water took several days during which people could not do anything but drink vodka and talk. They stayed as guests at the weather station, which was halfway from the village to the *zaimka*. Everybody suffered from the rivalry and aggression, but they could do nothing to prevent it. We witnessed the interconnection of drinking and aggressive behaviour, which is one of the most direct forms of symmetrical schismogenesis among the Evenki. Being “on the

road” is usually the occasion for the most comfortable and pleasant form of sociability among the Evenki; but now this form of sociability had been disturbed. They needed some form of complementarity and could not find it themselves. For example, they could not articulate the complementary schismogenesis in terms of a kinship hierarchy, because their ethos does not tolerate such hierarchies. This intolerance is an important aspect of being Evenki, serving as a means of resistance to the state and other forms of domination. The only form of complementarity compatible with companionship is the division of labour in the accomplishment of concrete tasks. But the ridiculous character of the imposed task to conduct the ritual disqualified it as a means of achieving balanced symmetrical schismogenesis. The main problem was their inability to cooperate with each other at the moment. They stayed in this state of rivalry to the last drop of vodka, and then it just dispersed as if nothing important had happened.

Nobody worried that the ritual was not conducted properly according to the Buryat standard of complementary relationship with nature. To the contrary the most impressive moments of these several days, which nevertheless could be called a ritual, were connected with the attempts to compete with the nature and not to subordinate to the nature in praying. People stayed autonomous not only from each other but from the nature and from their household. They were drinking, wasting time and words, devoting their strength to cross a dangerous river as if nothing was behind them, no responsibility for anything, even for their own lives, and no subordination even before the nature. It was a strange form of ritual during which ecstasy was experienced not together, but individually and in synchrony. It was somehow not a collective experience of we-being in the Durkheimian sense, but the collective experience of autonomy.

If we look at this event in the wider context we can conclude that it was the reaction to the seduction of complementarity. To save their companionship, people had to resist and incorporate it into the frame of the Buryat form of subordinated sociality, which is strongly based on clan and kinship. Taking vodka from the Buryats and endangering their companionship system by strengthening complementary hierarchical differentiation (after placing themselves in the Buryat hierarchical system between the civilized Buryats and the uncivilized nature), the Evenki had to underline their feeling of autonomy and be violent and aggressive to balance the system. As a result, this ritual was not in any sense a rite de passage, but an attempt to maintain the status quo between symmetrical and complementary schismogenesis. This means that the ritual of ‘High Water’ was the experience of symmetrical schismogenesis, which aim was to counterpoise the complementary schismogenesis stimulated by the external social environment of the group.

But the shift in schismogenesis may be caused not only by social but also by natural facts, such as for example a prolonged winter. The annual cycle of household tasks is based on the complementary relation between summer and winter tasks, divided according to the complementary relation between collecting and wasting of things. In the summer people mostly collect and gather and in the winter they waste and share. One of the critical points in this system is the shift from the winter to the summer tasks. This year this shift was very difficult because the winter was too long. Even in the middle of May it snowed. To start collecting things means also to wander to the summer camp, where pastures are open for the cattle. The fields around the winter camp are reserved for haymaking and are closed in the summer period. This year it was very cold and the storage of previously collected food was close to its end. Formally it was time to wander to the summer camp, but the weather was not appropriate. At the same time it was a very good reason to postpone the work and stay in a frame of wasting things. The winter principle of wasting started to predominate

the principle of collecting. It was dangerous for the balance between schismogenesis as it could lead to the disintegration of the system of work. The depletion of the stored goods could endanger the shifting from one regime to another as this act also needs resources.

The absence of authority and centralised coordination, which is incompatible with companionship as a form of work organisation, prevented the quick shift in modes of actions. People needed to find the symmetrical form of shifting. At the same time it was dangerous to establish direct symmetry and contest between households as it could lead to symmetrical schismogenesis. People had to resolve a very difficult task to find the equilibrium between complementarity and symmetry. The Evenki elaborated a successful strategy to resolve the problem using the cause of the problem as a solution. If the system is affected by an external influence it is possible to cancel this effect by applying to the same external influence. The same logic is used in homoeopathy or in healing of snake bites using the poison of the same snake. The Evenki use this method very often. For example, they extinguish a forest fire with a counter fire they set themselves. Or they prefer to be hungry when there is a danger not to find food. The Evenki are more likely to react aggressively toward aggression. We would say that the modern world is so influenced by complementary schismogenetic processes that the Evenki have to prefer symmetrical reactions most of the time to keep their system of actions in balance.

In the situation of shifting to the summer regime of life, the Evenki looked for symmetrical relations with a counterpart connected with the cause of the problem. The latter was also suffering from the prolonged winter and was also struggling to start a regime of action. This counterpart was a bear, at that time waking and suffering from hunger, weakness and cold. Bears are very dangerous at this moment, because they are looking for food everywhere and are not afraid of people. There was no fresh grass, which could be the first food for both bears and cattle. In this way people and bears were competitors, because the bears could try to kill cows or sheep. At least people were speaking about such risks, so as to establish their contention and symmetry with bears. To underline this symmetry, the men behaved the same way as bears, especially when they were drunk. They walked like bears, growled and even shook trees showing their anger. There were a lot of observations circulating between people about the similarity of people and bears. For example, people believe that the body of a bear without fur looks very much like a human body, especially the paws and hands are similar. Sveta, the daughter of Orochen, saw one male bear on the neighbouring hill several times. She called him Dyadya Misha (the way of addressing the good neighbour). People say that bears like to drink alcohol just as humans do. They eat ants and become drunk from the formic acid. People shared stories of coming across such drunken bears. It is believed that they are most aggressive in this state, like the Evenki themselves are.

During one week in the middle of May it was the most popular topic at the *zaimka*, whether somebody had seen a bear. Stepan observed the neighbouring mountains and hills with the binoculars every morning. We were listening attentively to the roars and sounds from the forest at night. The footprints of bears were the most precious and interesting things to find. People were afraid and happy at the same time. Stepan and Olya started to gather the cattle every evening before the cattle went back to the *zaimka* without their assistance. They started to collect things and put the land around the *zaimka* in order. It was an important moment; the figure of the bear as a symmetrical partner helped people to summon their strength and change their pattern of behaviour. In a week, Stepan, the family and all the cattle wandered to the summer camp. At the same time the

bears went up to the mountains for the fresh grass that had started to grow there. The moment of the crisis was over for both bears and people.

Drinking and Aggression: risk taking as a source of balance

Risk taking is very important for the Evenki, as it is one of the most effective ways of switching from complementary schismogenesis to a symmetrical one. In this respect hunting is the basic form of risk taking, but due to Soviet politics towards the Evenki, hunting is very much restricted or even prohibited. The new risk to be caught poaching is not of the kind that can help in the struggle with complementary schismogenesis; to the contrary, it supports the subordinated position of the Evenki. Now the only source of risk in everyday life is drinking, which always ends up with quarrels, aggression and dangerous challenges. We heard numerous stories about people who died in car accidents, fell from bridges or crashed into trees in a drunken state. Several families died in such a way and some children were left orphans after such accidents. Other tragedies include violence between family members. There were several cases of siblings injuring one another with knives. Some of them had to go to jail for several years. Several widowers were guilty of the deaths of their wives. All these dramatic incidents happened during drinking. And still, drinking is not perceived as a problem for the Evenki, partly because it solves the problem of the absence of risk in their sedentary life. Drinking somehow has substituted hunting, although it does not replace the whole complex that challenge and risk occupied in the Evenki culture.

Every time the Evenki drink there is a moment when there is not enough alcohol. Then aggression and rivalry supersede the peaceful state of drunkenness. We suppose that up to that moment drinking for the Evenki is a way of experiencing autonomy, of being *manakan*, as they call it. To feel oneself *manakan* means to be independent and not subordinated to anybody. But there is a crucial double bind complicating the situation. Actually they are not so independent from each other, because in their desire to be *manakan*, they are competing with each other in being drunk. Drunkenness gives the feeling of autonomy and independency because, actually, you lose the ability to cooperate with other people, to speak to them or to accomplish any task together. Alcohol supports the illusion of the absence of complementary schismogenesis between people, but at the same time it causes complementary schismogenesis between the person and alcohol. When the effects of alcohol fade this double bind position becomes obvious. "Various sorts of 'double binds' are generated when A and B perceive the premises of the relationship in different terms" (Bateson 1972: 323–324) of complementary or symmetrical relations. People suffer from the incompatibility of the desired state of autonomy, which they realise through symmetrical relations with each other and their common dependency on alcohol as source of their illusions.

This uncomfortable moment helps to switch their mood to rivalry and violent contest with each other and with the whole world. There are a good number of studies sharing the premise that attitudes towards aggression are quite different in different cultures (for example Harrison 1989). The Western view that aggression is a natural state for people and society needs a form of regulation such as a state, is inapplicable to societies not based on hierarchy as a form of integration. The Evenki are not afraid of violence, though it is not less painful for them. Aggression is not a form of suppression or struggle for power. It plays a different role, close to the role of war play rituals in some societies (Roscoe 1996: 662–663). The difference is that here aggression does not aim to enforce solidarity against strangers or an enemy, which is close to the collective experience of society

in the Durkheimian sense. It is not a state of anomie but another form of social integration. Aggression and violence are connected with behaviour in “good company” (Dweyer and Minnegal 1995), which is spontaneous and flexible. “Violence co-exists with good company; a threat to the latter might elicit the former” (ibid: 26). We conclude that this connection between violence and good company is the same kind of relation we witnessed between Evenki companionship and risk. Drinking alcohol is a form of such a companionship in frames in which risks are desired. These risks are important to balance the whole system of action because it prevents complementary schismogenesis. When people go hunting or drinking they decide with whom to go based on the possibility of symmetrical relations with possible partners. The most important thing is the possibility to share risks in such a way that all companions take risks and do not try to avoid them. This assumption is important to achieve trust in a partner and is a constituent part of companionship (Ingold 1999: 399–410).

After the sedentarisation of the Evenki, when they were forced to become cattle breeders like the neighbouring Buryats, and after most of the surrounding forest was closed as a nature reserve, the Evenki lost hunting as the main form of occupation. After that, complementary schismogenesis threatens the possibility of companionship, which is the main form of sociality for the Evenki. We assume that if the Evenki had not found any form of adaptation to the changes and failed to preserve their companionship relations, their community would have disintegrated and there would be no Evenki culture today. Alcohol became the stabiliser of the Evenki culture and showed its chemical qualities in metaphorical ways in the process of cultural contact between Evenki and other peoples.

Aggression is a symmetrical process that takes place mostly between people disposed to complementary schismogenesis. Most incidents happen between siblings of different ages, children and parents, husbands and wives. Aggression is often pointed toward sober people, and it is a challenge not only for the drunken aggressor but as well for the sober counterpart. One of the most important rules is to keep the incident in frames of symmetrical schismogenesis and not to switch to complementary schismogenesis. It could be very dangerous for the sober partners because drunken ones are not controlling their aggression and behave like mad bears. The Evenki say that it is important not to be scared by a bear or a drunken hooligan, and it is best to behave as if you just do not notice anything. The fear cancels the positive effects of the incident; it strengthens complementarity. It was not easy for us to get accustomed to such scenes of aggression and only after some time did we learn to behave properly. The main strategy was to avoid communication with drunken persons, to find some reason to go outside. For example, Orochen once went off with spade as if he was going to clear drains when his drunken son Stepan came from the village late in the evening. Babushka Masha who had no possibility to go off was watching television demonstrating that she was too deeply involved in the broadcast to notice anything else. We developed our strategy of avoiding conflicts by taking a walk through the forest along the river in the evening when our hosts came from the village.

The day after an incident is peaceful and quiet. The drunken person shows some shame about the previous events, but at the same time there is a great relief. Once Stepan told us that we all are people and our relations of symmetry were emphasised. The day after drinking is the day when people heat the bath-house and after bathing start a new cycle of household work. This peaceful routine lasts until the next drinking session, when they become bored and tired of their work. The day after

drinking is a starting point of renewed household companionship between family members; the drinking and aggression of the previous day turns to provide an effect of refreshment.

Christina Toren found the inverse form of the same mechanism in relations between husbands and wives in Fiji. She showed that drinking sessions and family violence help to switch symmetrical relations to complementary ones, which are more appreciated by the community. From this point of view, violence supports love and family (Toren 1999). We have witnessed that violence and drinking help to switch from complementary to symmetrical schismogenesis. After the incidents between Stepan and Olya there was a revival of love between them. After such incidents, they would spend the whole day together, sharing all tasks. This means that the Evenki family needs such moments of crisis to support their companionship relations in frames of the new occupation in cattle breeding (after the loss of the possibility to hunt and wander on long distances).

“Our Hooligans”⁵: socialisation in companionship

Looking at the dynamics of relations between family members, we proceed toward a very important topic, the socialisation of children. This process is an essential part of culture, as socialisation is not a stage of preparation to become a member of the community in the future, but a form of being a member. Following Christina Toren we would agree that,

“the systematic study of *how* children constitute the categories in whose terms adults represent what they know of the world can be extraordinary revealing. It can give an anthropologist access to what children know; that is, to at least a partial understanding of what adults – who are becoming to their children and their children’s children what their own parents and grandparents were to them – know without knowing, or know and attempt to deny.” (italics in the original, Toren 2001: 170)

We are less interested in categories and more in behaviour patterns. This focus will help us to see how the Evenki integrate their children into their companionships; not as their relatives but as equal companions. Relations between parents and children are complementary and the Evenki have to reduce the dangers of complementary schismogenesis. Children have to learn very early that the most appreciated form of interaction with other people is companionship; all other relations are restricted to the possible minimum. For example, the process of child healing is very formal, as it seemed to us, who were brought up in societies where healing is a very important part of relations between parents and children.

At the time, we were at the *zaimka*, Olya went to Ulan-Ude, the capital of Buryatia, with her seven year old son Kolya, to get a special hearing aid for him, because he is deaf. It was an obligatory measure dictated by the local medical organisation. Olya was very happy to get away from the *zaimka* for several weeks and make a journey to the big city. After coming back, nobody was really interested in the devices and nobody insisted that Kolya wear them. Kolya himself disliked the hearing aids. The adults found it better not to force him. It was much more important for the Evenki that Kolya become an Evenki than that he hear, if hearing would disturb his ability to participate in companionship. The ability to speak is important only in the context of division of tasks in frames of companionship and coordination of work. Kolya was very communicative in these matters, as he was able to point and to show enough information. Oral narrative is more a prerogative of the shaman, and is more oriented towards and provided for strangers. News and jokes are important,

⁵ *Nasha huligana* – the Russian expression used by the Evenki toward their children.

and all other forms of speech are called *bazar*, purposeless, irritating sounds. We assume that such an attitude towards speech is a strategy to prevent oral commands, expressions of a dominant position incompatible with symmetrical relations.

Really appreciated is the ability of children to observe things and to imitate, without verbal explanations. For example, after the castration of calves conducted by the parents, which the children watched in the enclosure for cattle, they immediately played this scene among themselves. Six year old Luba pretended that she was a calf and Kolya put her on the ground, as the adults had done with a calf a moment ago. This embodiment of knowledge and experience is the main technique of their education and is the manifestation of the phenomena studied by Merleau-Ponty (1964: 117). As spectators of violence based on drinking, children study the rhythm of peace and violence, the structure that prevents complementary differentiation between family members. They also learn not to be afraid of violence and somehow manage it. To avoid violence in symmetrical relations, one should not be scared and not simply avoid violent displays. For example, Evenki children can sleep very deeply during incidents of aggression or they can keep playing while their father is destroying the furniture. Sleep as a way to escape a situation is also described by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson. Analysing Balinese material they described a similar phenomena, sleep because of fear (Bateson and Mead 1942). For example in Bali “children learn to be afraid of the birth, and if they find themselves in the house (...) with a birth, they fall into a deep sleep, and the watching women say, ‘*Takoet, poeles*’, ‘in a fright, asleep’.” (ibid: 39). We would describe the sleep of the Evenki children not as sleep because of fear but sleep not to be afraid. Practically, Evenki parents are not as provocative towards their children as Balinese parents are. By shouting and being violent with children Evenki are not trying to show their authoritative position, but to evoke communication break-down and to exclude their children from situations, in which relations of submission and dominance could evolve.

Violence towards children is the most curious thing to look at because of the contradiction in its nature. The aim is that aggression must find its position in the world of morality, though it should be different from the instrument of establishing a moral order. It is very difficult to distinguish moral actions from the actions motivated by the desire to avoid punishment, because aggression towards children is used as a sanction for their misbehaviour (Blasi 2005). Evenki parents use violence to show their children life as it is. It is part of their life but not an instrument to improve something. We saw several times that Babushka Masha slapped her three years old granddaughter Tamara for some undefined fault. Children are punished without any strict relation to their misbehaviour. There is no system of evaluation of their delinquency, and equal actions could lead to different reactions at different times. As a result, children are always prepared for aggression and they prefer to be the first to show violence whenever it is possible. For example, very often they started to hit us during a game and it was just an expression of their excitement. We assume that the children demonstrate the same violent and peaceful rhythms that they observe in their parents.

For the Evenki it is important that their children do not connect violence with their misbehaviour and as a result change their behaviour so as to avoid it. Violence and aggression are to be experienced as parts of the world and it is not proper to hide this side of life from children. Independent of their gender Evenki children are prepared to be violent and to suffer aggression of others. This attitude towards violence is usual for hunters and is important for the socialisation of both hunters and their dogs (Singer 1978). Dogs play a crucial role in the socialisation of aggression.



Luba, Evenki child, with puppy.

Coming back from a trip to the taiga with Orochen, we found a very nice dog that accompanied us on our way home. Orochen thought that based on her behaviour in the forest she could be a very good hunting partner. It was a good dog and just before this trip his old dog had died. We were happy to share our food and way with her. The other dogs at the *zaimka* were not very happy to see her, but after some growling they resigned. But the next morning we did not find our dog. Stepan told us, he drove her away because she was dangerous to the children. And she was dangerous not because she could be aggressive, but because she did not grow up at the *zaimka*. It is important that children and dogs grow up together and develop the same attitude toward aggression. Dogs are the main target of children's violence and they are important because children have not only to suffer but also to practice aggression. Dogs should also be accustomed to violence as a usual practice and not bite in response. The new dog would bite a child if a child kicked the dog, and it could prevent the child from demonstrating his aggression in the future. Violent actions are something to be learned at the *zaimka*. This observation leads us back to the assumption that violence is not only a natural state of human beings, but also a culturally constructed phenomena and something we learn in our childhood.

Social life from which children are not excluded implies various forms of companionship in which they can participate equally. The most appreciated one is companionship with siblings. Parents do not spend their time in caring for their children; they prefer to let the children on their own, so as not to establish strong complementary relations. Here, like among the Buid,

“children are encouraged to spend most of their time in peer groups, away from adult supervision. These groups include all of the children both sexes in a local community from the age of around five to puberty. Relations within the peer group are governed by the norms of companionship and sharing which govern relations among adults.” (Gibson 1985: 403)

Later the same kind of relation is established among children of the same age in the boarding school, where they live and study most of the year. These ties are more important than the relations with their relatives, even with their parents. The only form of cooperation among children and their

parents are various trips and journeys conducted together. On the road parents are very nice to their children; they give them a role in the companionship, such as guiding the horse or holding some instruments. The children are always very upset when they realise that a trip was conducted without them. On the way children and parents sing songs.

***Pokazukha* as a Pattern of Behaviour with Strangers**

Pokazukha is the most important pattern of behaviour with strangers that children need to acquire during their childhood.⁶ Verbal explanations in general do not play a significant role in the socialisation as we have already shown in the case of Kolya, the deaf son of Stepan and Olya. His grandfather Orochen said that Kolya, like all the hooligans is an excellent observer. And it is true not only of hooligans but all Evenki, as was noticed by Shirokogoroff (1979: 311). Children attentively observe the activities of adults and later, not only immediately, but also retrospectively, they perform these actions not only among themselves, but also for adults. For example, they can do a ritual when parents are too drunk to perform it themselves as it happened during the 'High Water' ritual, described earlier. Orochen and Stepan were so drunk that they could not conduct the ritual themselves. They were lying on the ground and watching the children's imitation of the ritual. They emphasised that Kolya and Bulatka (the other grandchild of Orochen) had not been taught before but learned how to perform the ritual only by observing and imitating the adults. This ritual was important for them as a future possibility to show *pokazukha* for strangers – as described later, – because no sacred knowledge was transmitted, but only patterns of behaviour. Still, the adults pretended that the children already have some esoteric knowledge, the same way as they themselves pretended to have such in conducting rituals in presence of strangers. This strategy to cover the non existing verbal esoteric knowledge of shamanism could be a reaction toward strangers' expectations that the Evenki shamanism contains secrets and verbally articulated knowledge, which strangers, for example social anthropologists, look for very enthusiastically.

When the children go to school in the age of six or seven they have already been taught to conduct *pokazukha*. Their first experiences are usually connected with the activities in the House of Culture (*Dom Kul'tury*) led by the Evenki intelligentsia, the most skilful performers of *pokazukha* in the village (for example in showing strangers the 'real' way of Evenki life). Luba, being six, has already visited the village and participated as a singer in the public events of the House of Culture. These occasions became her first personal experiences of being a representative of the Evenki culture. Later, when she moved to the village to study in the preparatory courses before school, we could witness the fascinating role that school plays. Before, Luba spoke only a local Buryat dialect at home, but surprisingly, she turned very quickly to the Russian language after living only several weeks in the village. Her behaviour changed extremely, like her appearance and manners. Before, she was a little hooligan from a *zaimka*, and now she was a well-bred girl. She played this role with joy and enthusiasm. At the same time she established her first own companionship relations with other children of the same age but not from her family and she enjoyed these relations, which seemed much more interesting and important for her than her previous life at the *zaimka* with her

⁶ Firstly, adults teach their children to identify strangers, for example showing them that most Russian men have a beard. Secondly, they teach the children to be afraid of strangers. Being afraid is important for being suspicious and not to feel freely in the presence of strangers, but maintain watchfulness and attentiveness. At the same time, Evenki children are not afraid of violence and aggression and not afraid of stranger's aggression, but are taught to play with them in their interest and to be afraid of deception.

family. She told us that her new friends are all hooligans like she herself. We can see that the school is the place where Evenki children practice themselves both in companionship and in *pokazukha*.

In those days in the village Luba started her career as a future representative of the Evenki culture among strangers, and to some extent she herself became a stranger for her family. Kolya, as a deaf child, was condemned to stay at the *zaimka* and lead his life as a real Evenki, not engaged in the contacts with strangers. He was already characterised as a real Evenki, who is not afraid of cold and hunger and is an excellent observer and violent hooligan. He had good chances to become one of the ‘last Evenki’, like his aunt Sveta and grandfather Orochen, figures Ssorin-Chaikov called an “icon of authenticity” (Ssorin-Chaikov 2003: 168). We argue that in presenting themselves as independent figures (*manakan*), these persons are at the same time the most dependent and unautonomous figures who suffer from a weak position and are only occasionally respected by other members. The restricted family resources give only elder children opportunities to move to towns and cities and get an education. To support them, the parents have to work hard on farms and involve younger children completely in the work. Later such younger children inherit the household and become keepers of the family’s territory. Younger children connect all their life plans with the local territory; they accumulate the traditional knowledge about it and personal experience of it.

We can see that the members of the Evenki community have three main patterns of behaviour toward strangers. Most Evenki are indifferent toward strangers, such as Russian or Buryat bureaucrats. They try to avoid communication with them and escape business contacts, which in their previous experience would inescapably reduce their autonomy and oblige them to subordinate. Some of the local residents could not avoid contacts; most of them are designated as ‘last Evenki’ that present their culture for strangers. The shaman and his daughter who works as an inspector at the local nature reserve, have to present themselves as such ‘last Evenki’. We witnessed how flippantly they take it and try to use their positions for profit. They always laugh at strangers immediately after the situation of communication. The position of those who go to the cities and tie their careers with state cultural projects is more problematic. Russian and Buryat environments became predominant for them and they cannot maintain an emotional distance and make jokes about their patrons. These persons have to come back to their villages to take part in public events and to organise the presentation of these events for the outer world. Their activities are designated as the creation of *pokazukha* by their local relatives, who are very sarcastic about their efforts. The latter are chosen to play *pokazukha* for strangers so that other members of the Evenki community may avoid it. These city residents became the Evenki intelligentsia and in their pretension to be important and very serious they cannot further participate in the companionship. This leads to conflicts because their relatives exclude them from interaction and prevent all their attempts to introduce hierarchical relations.

The reunion of an Evenki community is pleasant and scandalous at the same time. During our fieldwork a reunion happened in the beginning of the summer at the annual ritual devoted to the celebration of Evenki family spirits. Relations between different members at such events are problematic and can lead to open conflicts. Sometimes it is important even to exclude some persons from the annual meeting, so that it does not end in quarrels.

Here we present the description of an annual public ritual devoted to the spirits of different local Evenki groups, during which most members of the Evenki community were present. Local Evenki need their relatives from the cities because they play the role of a buffer for the community. But the

seriousness and importance with which the Evenki intelligentsia is doing *pokazukha* excludes them from companionships with their local relatives. Their seriousness and self-assurance are essential for a successful *pokazukha* with strangers, but cannot be accepted by the locals. The most interesting aspect here is how they succeed in avoiding communication with each other, together in one place and at one time. The ritual was planned on a sunny day at the beginning of June.

The local Evenki gathered in the village and started toward the sacred place located some distance from one of the Evenki *zaimka*. To reach this place they had to ride on a tractor to the river Barguzin. They choose the most dangerous route without a bridge, but with the exciting adventure of a river crossing on boats. They already drank vodka before the trip and were continuing drinking during the trip. Twenty men and women in a very good mood were waiting for their turn to get to the other bank of the river. It was real companionship as they all were together on the road and had to share different tasks: several men were ferrymen and all the others were passengers who had to be unafraid and sit still in the boat so as not to turn it over. The Barguzin was very turbulent and it was a really risky entertainment that made great fun for everybody. One could get the impression that this was the main thing why people gathered – to have fun in companionship with each other. There was even gossip that the ritual was already finished and people could travel back.

Representatives of the Evenki intelligentsia came from Ulan-Ude, the capital of Buryatia, with a team of professional cameramen to make a film about the annual ritual for TV in Ulan-Ude. Devoting all their attention and time to the filming they stayed separate from other members until the end of the ritual. They were fully engaged in organising the *pokazukha* for the camera during the whole ritual and asked Orochen as the 'last Evenki shaman' occasionally to assist them. Orochen came by foot and boat alone from his far off *zaimka* and was very serious and confident, which was very untypical for him. The station between the village and the sacred place was a *zaimka*, where Orochen together with other local Evenki drank tea with bread. The Evenki from the city started to record the *pokazukha*. They asked an old woman to sing an Evenki song in front of the camera and she did it with a picturesque landscape of snow-covered mountains in the background. Orochen performed then the first part of the ritual with help from other local 'last Evenki'. There was no strict canon on how to conduct the ritual; all acts were performed spontaneously but in a very serious manner.

Then everybody moved to the main sacred place, where the sacrifice was to be conducted. For that purpose every family had a bottle of milk, tee and vodka, and sweets, cookies and cigarettes. All this stuff was to be gathered together, sorted and distributed among the participants after praying. For the prayer they took ribbons that symbolise families, and the women tied them to the branches of the sacred trees decorated with an iron mask of the ancestor shaman and a bell. Shaman Orochen and three of his helpers seemed to have an equal role in the practical accomplishment of preparations and praying. They prayed, offering milk, tee and vodka by spraying it all around. After this performance everybody sat down in friendship groups drinking and eating together. There was the impression of an abundance of offerings; *pokazukha* and companionship were co-existing and did not disturb each other.



Pokazukha in peaceful coexistence with companionship, groups of ‘last Evenki’ in the middle, intelligentsia to the right and other local Evenki in the background.

On the contrary they were somehow in harmony with each other. It was Yermil, the eldest son of Orochen, who would become the next shaman, who told us that because of the film team the ritual is better because the people do not compete in drinking.

The moment of crisis happened when people realised that substituting materials for the companionship and *pokazukha* would soon end. Now they were not sharing vodka freely and their drinking escalated. At the same time the guests became anxious that the local Evenki would spoil the performance of the *pokazukha*, and they tried to organise and suppress people. These efforts led to a controversial result, because the atmosphere was no longer comfortable, but strained; the proximity of an éclat could be felt. Then the film crew ran out of film material, and the motivation to prolong the *pokazukha* was hereby reduced.

The little episode that blew up the situation was an incident between an old woman, Avdotya, and a young single man, Arthur. They both were absolutely drunk when Arthur tried to perform a prayer standing on his knees on the shawl of Avdotya. She was embarrassed by this and appealed to the others. People started to swear at him and Arthur showed his anger and went to the forest, damning them. Members of the intelligentsia were very upset by this incident and tried to minimize its negative effects. They told us to stop our private filming and not to look for Arthur who was wandering around in the forest. They even appealed to Orochen to prohibit us from doing so and tried to discuss with him the incident and its moral evaluation. The idea was to restrict the amount of vodka for the next annual ritual to avoid such uncomfortable and inappropriate situation disturbing the *pokazukha*. At that time the representatives of the Evenki intelligentsia were also very angry and aggressive, like all the others. Orochen was inattentive toward their attempts to force him and behaved as if nothing special had happened. He continued to show the *pokazukha* alone, at the same time starting to identify himself more with the local companions than the guests from the city.

It was clear that the peaceful coexistence of companionship and *pokazukha* was over. The intelligentsia left with the film team to the village with plans to go to the House of Culture and then have

a party at the local spa (*arshan*). Other members stayed at a nearby *zaimka* where they tried to get profit or fun of the situation. Young boys and girls were playing football and Arthur was among them, showing no sign of his previous scandalous behaviour. Elder members were making arrangements with each other about possible future companionships, such as private healing rituals or buying petrol. At the same time, actors in complementary structural positions started to show aggression toward each other, as it always happens during drinking sessions. Men are hostile and violent, prepared to make a scandal about the behaviour of their wives. Women are flirting with other men and showing their indifference towards their husbands. This atmosphere is very fruitful to develop new relations between persons that rarely see each other. For example, one guest from the neighbouring region who was not living in the city asked shaman Orochen to conduct a healing ritual for her relatives, who could not come. Or one of the women tried to flirt with the fieldworker with the intention to later send her daughter to study in Hungary. This type of communication is called *andaki* (Shirokogoroff 1979: 314), flexible relationships of mutual services between Evenki and strangers to conduct some small-scale business (Kwon 1993: 137).

Conclusion

There are two categories that are quite ambivalent. These categories are flexibility and stability; they seem to be opposites, but after some consideration we saw that in our Evenki case they are not. Companionship as a form of social organisation has existed among the Evenki for a very long time; it was already described by Shirokogoroff, though in different terms. This means that it is a very stable organisation which has survived despite many crucial changes. But the flexible form in which it exists makes it difficult to describe it in static terms of structuralist social science. For example, Shirokogoroff devoted many pages to the description of kinship among the Evenki and only one chapter to the relations of companionship (Shirokogoroff 1979). His chapter on companionship looks very different and seems not to be structured; a chaotic explication of observations and facts, which looks so different from the strict and highly structured chapters devoted to kinship. Cybernetic theory and Bateson's notion of schismogenesis give us an opportunity to overcome the problem of modelling such flexible processes as companionship systems of relations and to re-examine the relations between static and flexible features of culture.

The flexibility of companionship increases the chances to adapt to changes in the wider world. That explains why the colonisation of Siberia by Russians and the raise of the Buryat neighbours did not affect crucially the social organisation of the Evenki and they maintain the companionship connected with hunting even in the frames of new tasks and duties. We found that there are specialists obliged to create a static image of the Evenki culture; these people are designated Evenki intelligentsia and do not live in Evenki communities but in cities. They are doing *pokazukha*, which is the creation of a fantasy about how the Evenki could look if stable patterns would dominate in their culture. It is just an image perceived by other Evenki as a joke, but it is appreciated by the bureaucratic institutions of the state, because the stable image of a culture and community gives it the impression of controllability. This readiness of the Evenki to make representations of themselves for other people serves to help prevent conflicts between Evenki (or Tungus, as they were designated by Russians) and neighbouring Russians, Chinese, Buryats and Japanese in Manchuria (Lindgren 1938).

It was our chance as anthropologists to see through these representations and not be seduced to see the Evenki culture through the lens of the Evenki intelligentsia. During the annual ritual we were even perceived by the latter as competitors, and they assumed that our activities were contributing to the creation of stable images consisting of objects from museums and folklore pieces. Our luck was that local residents invited us to be partners in their companionship. We were of some interest to them because we had money and were eager to acquire new skills. We shared everything we could, even hunger and risks with the Evenki, and that gave us the access to the flexible and ever-changing character of their lives. During the whole period of fieldwork we had to be open to the fragility of agreements among the Evenki and still we were astonished by the fact that they managed to do a lot of things together. It was to the end of our first month we started to feel the rhythm of processes that later we recognised as symmetrical and complementary schismogenesis. We understood that if we want to stay there without conflicts and problems we have to find the same rhythm with people and nature. While sharing everyday life with the Evenki we could not refer to some stable roles or order but had to be flexible and free within rather wide limits and be attentive to the episodes of changes, when all participants ended one companionship and started a new one. This training turned out not to be easy, but we were quite satisfied when we realised that we had accumulated a lot of material and precious ethnographic intuition about the Evenki culture. This experience was very close to what Kirsten Hastrup called anthropological epistemology (Hastrup 2005).

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