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The gluttons of eastern Siberia. Spirits, poachers, and cannibals in Evenki perceptions

*Les gloutons de l'Est sibérien. Esprits, braconniers et cannibales dans le système
évenk de représentations*

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Map of the repartition of the Evenki in Russia and China

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Positions of the case studies in the present volume

[click here](#)

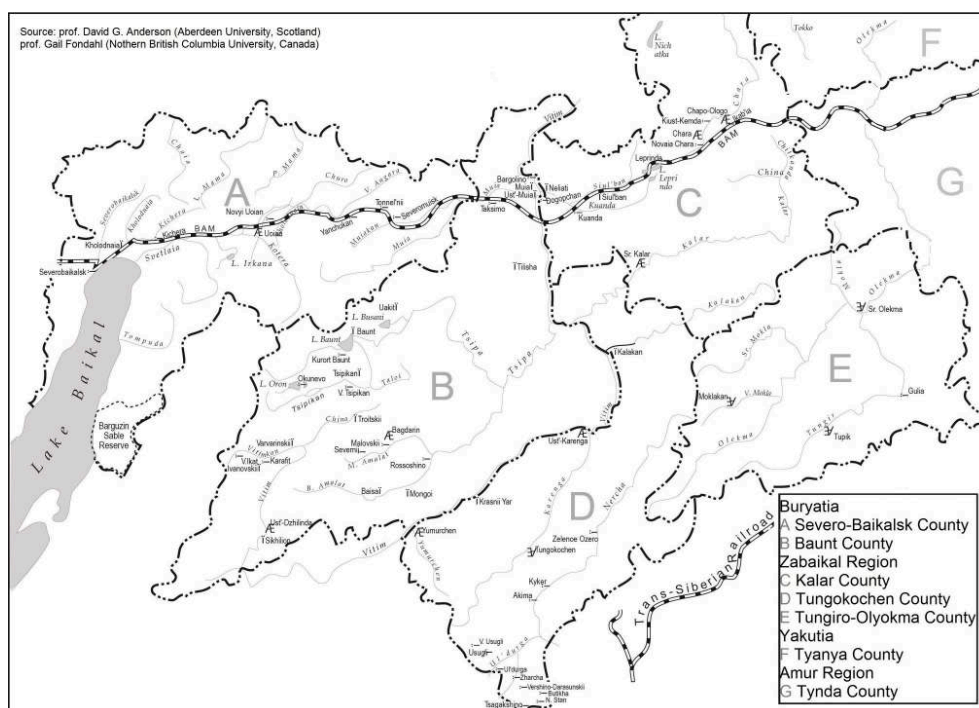
Introduction

- 1 A great number of the tragic events – deaths, drunkenness, and various disabilities – that occurred in Evenki communities in the Zabaikal region during the Soviet period and after the collapse of the Soviet Union left significant marks on the local landscape. The impact of these events affects the current experiences, memories, and land use strategies of indigenous Evenki living in remote villages in the northern part of the region. Today, Evenki hunters and herders believe that many old and vacated reindeer herders' camps, unattended mortuary sites, and places where tragic events occurred are scattered throughout the taiga. These places have become sites where malevolent non-human beings manifest themselves. Therefore, the Evenki of the Zabaikal region link all their current difficulties not only to the unpredictable economic environment, but also to losing memory of their interaction with spirits and ritual places. Just like when the ethnographer Sergei Shirokogoroff conducted his fieldwork among the

Tungus (Evenki) in the Zabaikal and Amur regions, people today believe that various “bad places” continuously demand new victims (Shirokogoroff 1935, pp. 137-138). As a result, these bad (or tragic) places affect the wellbeing of various kin members and the community as a whole.

- 2 Soviet ethnographers documented the continuation of traditional daily ritual practices in the taiga¹. During that period, various beliefs in “master-spirits” (*odzhen*) ruling river watersheds and influencing the lives of humans and animals were continuously being reproduced through daily ritual practices, such as making offerings to fires and at rock art sites, and by storytelling². These stories typically recounted human encounters with various spirits in the taiga (Alekseev N. A. 1975, Zelenin 1929, Gurvich 1977, Mihailov 1987, Petri 1930). During my several months of fieldwork among different Evenki communities in Buryatia and the Zabaikal region, villagers, hunters, and herders talked about their living environment as being infused with malevolent humans and non-human beings³. They referred to these beings as “spirits” (*arenkil*⁴), “monsters” (*mangil*), and “cannibals” (*diptygil*⁵). The various experiences of interactions with these beings (animals, spirits, humans, and monsters) presented in these stories also show how gluttonous beings play a role as important actors, or at least as moral imperatives shaping human subsistence, land use, ritual practices, and worldviews.

Figure 1. Sketch map of my research region in Zabaikal'ia



I reworked the map using some parts and elements from David Anderson and Gail Fondahl sketch maps (with their permissions).

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- 3 In this article, I intend to show how the sociocultural changes that occurred during Soviet times, as well as current post-Soviet economic and social challenges, are creatively reflected and incorporated into Evenki cosmology and morality. Indeed, the various bad beings that existed in Evenki cosmology for centuries are continuously experienced and animated in contemporary storytelling. Today, these narratives link

various tragic events, past policies, personal misbehaviour, and the loss of memory with current Evenki misfortunes. As a result, various malevolent beings can be analysed not only as mythic personages depicting various genres of folklore, but also can be understood as important social actors revealing ruptures in the ethical norms and power relations which now shape the ritual and subsistence of the Evenki. These beings are thought to have the attributes of gluttony, and malevolence: in some cases, they are thought to have been anthropophagi. While references to the cannibalistic features of indigenous peoples were widely employed and distributed by colonial powers, today we can also see how these images are reversibly used to describe coercive state policies that affect the lives of those peoples. These stories and images are used by Evenki as powerful symbolic tools to balance the current displaced field of relations between humans, the landscape, and non-human beings in the context of a challenging economic and social environment.

Soviet and post-Soviet environment of domination

- 4 During the early Soviet repressions of indigenous people's economic and religious practices in the 1930s and 1940s, several Evenki ritual specialists, alleged shamans, and prominent reindeer herders were arrested, tortured, and imprisoned. Domestic reindeer herds owned by nomadic Evenki were confiscated, while their owners were pressed to lead a sedentary life in newly established state-built villages. Many Evenki were employed as herders and hunters on collective farms and faced rapid, often unpredictable, and seemingly chaotic changes in their economic and social environment. The development of the mining and military industry in the region also caused many environmental challenges for indigenous communities that relied on the taiga for their subsistence. These subsistence modes included nomadic or seminomadic activities such as hunting of large game animals, herding small herds of privately owned reindeer, fishing, and the gathering of berries, plants, and minerals. Hence, the large-scale forest fires that changed the taiga significantly also made Evenki economic activities more dangerous and unpredictable. Furthermore, the region became a place for the relocation of huge numbers of deportees. These people were of different nationalities, as they came from various republics in the Soviet Union. The deportees were forced to work on state projects such as the famous Baikal Amur Railroad (BAM) and this, of course, led to many human deaths.
- 5 After the collapse of the (Soviet) centralised economic system, hunters and herders privatised herds and organised clan enterprises in order to find their own ways of accommodating to life in the taiga. As in the early Soviet years, the collapse of the state-funded system also brought various challenges linked to the shifting economic environment, as well as to overhunting and the plundering of taiga territories by outsiders. Indeed, most former collective farm workers had no other option but to relocate from remote villages to cities or, if they remained in their villages, to become involved in the hunting of game and fur animals. Most men and some women rushed to the taiga, searching for everything valuable that could be sold, exchanged, or used for food or medicine⁶. Villagers living in remote areas started to compete among themselves for hunting or reindeer herding grounds as well as for different opportunities for subsistence. Such competition also embraced native and non-native people, hunters, and entrepreneurs and led to chronic conflict between groups; even

people working for the state started to fight among themselves. These conflicts could turn into violent skirmishes as well as establish the curse known as “black activities” (Ru. *chernota*). These activities were thought to “spoil” (Ru. *naportit*) hunting luck and bring misfortune to other competing hunters. Indeed, during my fieldwork in the northern villages of the Zabaikal region and Buryatia in 2004-2015, local people would stress that such curses (Ru. *porcha*) and the malevolent eye (Ru. *zglaz*) had become very widespread practices that caused health and economic problems⁷.

- 6 The tension between hunters rose even higher when officials involved in the administration, forestry, militia/police, and military started to use all-terrain vehicles belonging to the public for poaching. Many hunting techniques employed by such hunters were illegal, damaged animals, and were locally referred to as “poaching” (Ru. *brakonerstvo*). Such poaching is described by Evenki hunters as linked to the person’s enormous gluttony (Ru. *zhadnost*) for meat because such hunters killed “anything that can move in the taiga”. For Zabaikal Evenki, poachers are those who waste animals, kill without limit, and without the ability to consume all they kill: they do not attempt to find wounded animals or transport their kills from barely accessible places, often leaving meat spoiled. The Evenki say that poachers often omit “taiga rules” that had been respected in the region even during the Soviet years. These well-known rules include hunters’ respect and exchange relations with animals and spirits as well as adopting a careful approach toward harvesting and skinning animals or treating their remains. Today, the Evenki believe that such practices prevent other people from hunting successfully and destroy the balance in the taiga. Furthermore, such poaching is referred to as “sinful” (*ngelome*) and therefore dangerous since spirits might punish them by seeking revenge⁸.
- 7 For the Evenki of the Zabaikal region, various bad beings can be met anywhere in the taiga and can take the shape of a human or an animal. They can threaten someone in dreams, cause physical and psychological damage, or even kill a person. They are thought to influence hunting and herding success, health, and well-being. When talking about malevolent beings, Zabaikal Evenki describe not only tragic events that occurred in the remote past, but also link them to their present life and extraordinary experiences in the taiga. Indeed, these narratives invoke awareness of potential threats.
- 8 Shirokogoroff, while working in the area in 1917, stated that the relevance of these malevolent spirits (*arenkil*) was minor, though they could cause mischief (Shirokogoroff 1935, p. 121). The current appearance of cannibalistic or monstrous features among various beings and the increase in the importance of malevolent spirits (*arenkil*), as well as their connection to tragic events and places, symbolises how the contemporary socioeconomic environment is experienced as unpredictable and even dangerous for Evenki. Although Shirokogoroff described Tungus rituals as a “shamanic art to control spirits”, he also stressed that every hunter must know the simplest methods of “managing” spirits and avoiding their harmful influence (*ibid.*, p. 187, 207). Similarly, the ethnographer Maksimova also noted that most Sym River Evenki hunters and herders living in the past knew simple rules for tricking such malevolent spirits (Maksimova 1994, p. 102). During my fieldwork, I found that the knowledge of how to properly interact with spirits inhabiting the landscape and secure wellbeing had become deficient; therefore, it was highly valued knowledge.

- 9 Today, with the privatisation of reindeer herds and the use of hunting areas formerly owned by Soviet collective farms, the Evenki aim to reconfirm their relations with the landscape and the sentient beings that inhabit it (see Fondahl in this volume). They reuse old ritual places or establish new ones (Anderson 2012). Primarily, they aim to calm forgotten and untamed local spirits as well as receive their support when dealing with current misfortunes or disabilities. Alexandra Lavrillier, who carried out extensive fieldwork among the Evenki of the Amur region and southern Yakutia, similarly noticed that the local Evenki communities of the Amur region explain their poor economic conditions by their failure to honour their spirits (Lavrillier 2003, p. 103). Similarly, Buyandelgeriyn noted that the Buryat of Mongolia attribute their current misfortunes to spirits which have returned to take revenge for the abandonment of ritual practice s(Buyandelgeriyn 2007). Hence, by talking about spirits, locating them in the landscape, and contacting them through rituals, the Evenki aim to re-master taiga territories and their own destinies in an unpredictable socioeconomic environment.

Malevolent spirits (*arenkil*): contemporary cosmologies and places

- 10 For the Evenki, various historical tragedies like epidemics, the overhunting of their living territory and fights among different Evenki clans have often been seen as connected to the activities of malevolent beings, shamans, or spirits (see Anisimov 1963). Contemporary and Soviet ethnographers also widely documented the persistence of storytelling about dangerous beings among Evenki living in various regions of Siberia. These beings can be referred to as *arenkil*, *molkosh*, *melkun*, *bugadyl*, *main*, and *mekachony* among different groups of Evenki (see Simonova 2013, pp. 259-274, Vorobëv 2013, pp. 46-47, Alehin 2000, Maksimova 1994, p. 102, Simonov 1983, p. 104, Vasilevich, 1969, p. 222). Ethnographers mention that these malevolent spirits are abundant at the sites of tragic events, mortuary places, and abandoned dwellings; however, they can be met anywhere in the taiga and even in villages.
- 11 Today, as in the past, the Evenki of the Zabaikal region experience the contemporary taiga as full of angry and bad beings (*arenki* singular; *arenkil* plural) which significantly influence the success of subsistence activities and personal wellbeing⁹. In Shirokogoroff's work, we also find that a terminology and hierarchy of spirits based on their role could not be clearly established, since the essence of various spirits can be seen as ambiguous, and therefore they can be both malevolent and benevolent (Shirokogoroff 1935, pp. 138-165). According to him, an *arenki* is the soul of a hunter or a herder who did not reach the world of the dead because a sudden or accidental death befell him or because their souls were not escorted there through the proper ritual means (*ibid.*, pp. 137-138¹⁰). These souls had to stay in the world of living beings and were malevolent. It was believed that *arenkil* can be powerful enough to be the "masters" of certain mountains or small region (*ibid.*, p. 139).
- 12 *Arenkil* wandered around the taiga and, as Shirokogoroff (1935, pp. 149-150) wrote, along "roads": they entered and exited different "placings"¹¹ either independently or after being invited or enticed by humans. Any geographical location, tree, animal, human, artefact, or part of an organ could become a "placing" for the spirit (*ibid.*, pp. 149-150, 160). The *arenkil* could influence a human mind, cause serious illness, or lead hunters or hunted animals astray (*ibid.*, pp. 139-140). Their activities encompassed

small mischiefs like misleading humans in the forest, laying false tracks, frightening hunters and herders by making lights in the darkness or spooky noises.

The *arenkil* have no body. They are very numerous in the forest and marshes. However, sometimes they penetrate the store houses erected near the wigwams. They stay in rotten hollow trees, sometimes even in living trees. When the Tungus cut down such a tree, they may hear screams of *onoï* - i.e. "painful" from these spirits. Such an accident is sufficient for causing a serious illness with a fatal outcome - the people lose their minds and die. [...] As a rule, they are numerous near graves. The *arenki* may be seen in the form of light, usually bluish or reddish, also sometimes moving, but when people approach them they move farther away. They whistle. They produce an echo. Generally speaking, they are mischievous. [...] They are always hungry for their food [and] they depend upon the people's generosity (*ibid.*).

- 13 If in the past *arenkil* were known as ambivalent spirits, today *arenkil* are often described and known by Evenki as always hungry, wishing to consume human souls or reduce the "living energies" (*musun*) and "luck" (*kutu*) of humans. If one encounters this kind of spirit, then he or she may become ill or die. The Evenki believe that the risk of encountering such spirits unexpectedly has increased since various rituals of respect were neglected for half a century during the Soviet era. Therefore, these beings are not simply mischievous, but can potentially be very dangerous. As a prominent reindeer herder once declared: "all through the taiga, spirits started to act with violence (Ru. *duhi budorazhut po taezhnym debriam*)". Contemporary Evenki avoid many places marked by recent social conflicts such as drunken rivalry and tragic deaths caused by homicide, car accidents, and drowning, associating these "bad places" with the activities of *arenkil*. During sable hunting season in the winter of 2004-2005, the Evenki hunter Aleksei Aruneev and I stopped to smoke a cigarette on our road passing a pine-covered hill on the western banks of the Levyi Kotomchik River. Aleksei pointed toward a hill he called "Pine Tree Hill" (Ru. *Sosnovaia Sopka*) and said that it is a very unlucky (Ru. *nefartovaia*) place that should be avoided. Usually he used to smoke cigarettes while walking on foot, but on this rare occasion he stopped there. He told me that his brother once injured his ankle when he did not stop there to show proper respect. Aleksei also said that he never crosses the river to visit that hill, although sable and musk deer abound there. He decided to abandon the site saying, it is "really bad to go there" (Ru. *stram poiti tuda*). In the past, Aleksei never had any hunting luck there, though he tried to appease the local spirits many times by feeding them (Ru. *nosil ugoshchenie*). His brother, Iura Aruneev, also told me about several tragic and spooky incidents that occurred in the area of that hill. Several years ago, a spirit caused great distress for him when he decided to camp near the hill. The *arenki* made his dogs and reindeer go crazy, and he could hear voices and a domestic reindeer herd passing the place. Finally, during a drunken skirmish one visiting relative was stabbed with a knife by a reindeer herder in that place. The old father of the dead person even tried to set fire to the forested hill in order to kill the spirit. However, according to inhabitants of the area, the spirit is still active.
- 14 Some reindeer herders visited a female Tungus shaman, Olga Ulzueva in the Aga Buryat Autonomous County, who told them to look for the remnants of an old mortuary site that was presumed to be located near the hill. Evenki reindeer herders and hunters believe that an Evenki shaman was buried there and his soul causes continuous trouble for those who camp or move around. The reindeer herder Nikolai and his mother Olga regularly used to sprinkle tea in the direction of this place even when camping at some

distance in order to calm these evil spirits. They hoped to locate a scaffold and then establish positive relations with the place so that they could use the area for reindeer herding and hunting. Indeed, they had a lack of good reindeer pastures and wanted to reuse the river basin for reindeer grazing and hunting. Shirokogoroff (1935, p. 87) described how some Tungus felt that a certain place should be avoided for a short period of time until other Tungus reported that they felt nothing. If a spirit's activity was not noticed, "the original safety of the place is restored" (*ibid.*). Tungokochen reindeer herders and hunters did not manage to establish good relations with a local spirit for decades and thus were forced to leave the area.

- 15 Quite a number of Tungokochen village hunters (Zabaikal region) have stories of encounters with *arenkil* in the taiga and even in villages. People say that these beings can talk to people, ask for cigarettes or food, tease dogs, steal various items, make people disoriented, and even drive humans and animals insane. Evenki say that *arenkil* are hungry for human flesh (especially the liver) and attack humans who refuse to share with other beings. Encountering *arenkil* in a dream is considered a bad sign that signals you are likely to become ill, or worse. Therefore, people say that a person without the support of master-spirits is extremely vulnerable to such malevolent spirits.
- 16 The elder hunter Gilton Aruneev told the story of how he encountered a lake and where he could hear a girl singing whenever he visited it. As he found out later, this place was well known to the elders as a place where a family of herders died from disease. By telling this story, he also warned younger hunters to beware the spirits. The elders say that one of the reasons why people constantly encounter *arenkil* in the taiga might be a punishment or revenge sent by a master-spirit. A "master-spirit" (*odzhen*) is in charge of different animals and river basins, helping control the balance there. To maintain luck and wellbeing, it is said that people leave offerings or smudge plant (*senkire*) when camping or subsisting in different taiga places. Therefore, some elders say that they always fear camping in little-known places. During my stay with Ust' Karenga and Tungokochen hunters, I observed that all of them avoided old campsites and started their fires some distance from old fireplaces, even when they stayed for just a few hours. The reindeer herder Oleg Taskerov from Ust'- Karenga village (Zabaikal region) once refused to spend the night in a camp that had been established by his deceased uncle. He said that he did not want to be troubled by an *arenki* since it could inflict a disease upon him, his family, or even his herd. Hunters and herders believe that old campsites hold *omi*, a word that can be translated as "soul". They also add that such places possess the "energy" (Ru. *energiia*) of past incidents and thus influence people's present-day luck. Such experiences indeed shape the way herders organise their camps with regards to acquiring luck and avoiding misfortune. Shirokogoroff (1935, p. 88) noted that the Tungus explained their choice of a campsite in a similar way by saying, "this is a good place, there are no bad spirits around". An elder hunter from Tungokochen village (Zabaikal region), Olga Zhumaneeva, believes that one should not be afraid of *arenkil* since they never appear to humans without reason. Nevertheless, Olga never stayed in log houses because, as she said, she wants to avoid meeting an *arenki*. People believe that *arenkil* visit the person before s/he is taken to the "world of the dead", referred to as *buny*.
- 17 One must establish good relations with the local master-spirit in order to be able to use old paths. Old paths are traversed by *arenkil*, and camping near them should be avoided

(see Basharov 2003, p. 9, Lavrillier 2011). *Arenkil* are likely to approach people who camp at “crossroads”. The *arenkil* might make a fog descend on people to lead them astray. It is said that even experienced hunters start walking in circles (Ru. *kruzhit'*) due to the influence of malevolent spirits. The term *kruzhit'* is used in this context to refer to people who have lost their minds and perform dangerous and illogical activities because of an unsuccessful interaction with a master-spirit or an encounter with an *arenki*. Nikolai Aruneev always used to leave offerings at different places associated with spirits when transporting his supplies by truck to the remote camps. Once Nikolai asked a driver to stop at every river and mountain pass on the way. Constant walking in the taiga, leaving tracks on paths, and ritual performances are elements of a person's subtle interaction with the spirits of various places. At the same time, successful interaction with spirits and the long-term experience of luck creates a sense of belonging to a place (Brandišauskas 2012).

- 18 Constant misfortunes, illness, or long-term loss of luck may be signs of a curse from malevolent spirits. A “sinful person” (*ngelomel*) who violated taiga laws and was involved in poaching is thought to lack the support of the master-spirits and therefore is highly vulnerable to malevolent attacks. The Evenki say that if a person ignores taiga ethics, then *arenkil* can easily affect his/her health and cause his/her death. Any kind of sin may provoke an aggressive reaction from the “spirits” of the deceased that wander in the taiga. A rock cliff located near Usugli village (Zabaikal region) was famous for driving people to jump from its ledge to their deaths. In a similar vein, the anthropologist Olga Ulturgasheva (2012, p. 44) described the vernacular notion of an “open body” – referring to a weak connection between the soul and the body (this was in reference to the Manchu-speaking Evenki, but is probably present among all Evenki). Many Evenki hunters and their relatives refer to different cases of how spirits caused disabilities and death to people and even whole families for violating taiga laws. Local spirits often intervene in order to drive hunters away from certain places by attacking them in dreams, sending a bear in their path or making strange noises that drive the hunter crazy or hurt him. A person once frightened by a spirit or a bear may lose his luck, his health, or even die. Some stories tell of a hunter who was attacked by a spirit who sent reindeer that pushed him out of a river basin and chased him back to the village. In another case, a bear spirit attacked the hunter in dreams and made him mentally ill.

Images of cannibals: state policies, Evenki storytelling and morality

- 19 Folklorists and ethnographers have documented Evenki tales, songs, and stories which depict “cannibals” (*changit*, *mangi*, or *diaptar*) (see Vasilevich 1949, Varlamova 1996, Gabysheva 2012, Varlamov 2011). The earliest description of cannibalism in Siberia comes from a report written in 1685 to the tsar by Duke Shcherbats', who visited the Enisey region. It demonstrates that colonial officials obtained information from the Evenki regarding cannibals called *chulugdy*. The report described how the Tungus (Evenki) witnessed a one-legged, one-eyed, and one-handed human-monster called *chulugdy* that dwelt in large pits. The report provides vivid descriptions of these pits, which smelt so bad that the odour even left “marks on the trees”. The Tungus described not only the monstrous appearance and dress of these so-called “humans”,

but also explained the rituals of reciprocity they enacted dealing with *chulugdy*. Hence, Tungus used to leave offerings consisting of the feathers of woodpeckers and jays, while in exchange they used to find some hunted birds or even brass pots. The colonial official even launched new investigations to search for these reported groups of humans.

- 20 From the 18th century, an image of cannibals developed as a state-produced image that served to establish a hierarchical relationship between the state and the Evenki analogous to the difference between “civilised” and “savage”. In early documents revealing discourses of colonial history, it was quite common for Russian colonial officials present in different northern regions to refer to indigenous people as cannibals. Art Leete provides early accounts of cannibalism among the indigenous peoples (Ob-Ugrian and Nenets) in the northern areas of Russia during the 18th and 19th centuries (Leete 2005). Hence, this example is widely used in many reports through the old ethnonym “Samoyed” (i.e. self-eaters) that in Russian etymology refers to the practice of cannibalism among this indigenous group of reindeer herders (*ibid.*). However, some early explorers agreed that these images were misleading and far from the truth. Nevertheless, the idea of indigenous people practising cannibalism became widespread. Alekseev (quoted in Leete 2005, p. 244) mentioned that his informants confirmed the fact that cannibalism was a practice present among northern peoples (see Alekseev M. P. 1932, pp. 128-129). Such attributions of cannibalistic features to the indigenous peoples of Russia continued throughout the 20th century. The ethnographer Ivashchenko (2011, pp. 145-150) reported presumably cannibalistic incidents that occurred at the beginning of the 20th century among the Nanai, living in the far eastern part of Siberia (near the Evenki). Evenki hunters reported that they found hunting camps with a few corpses of Nanai that had been eaten by their own relatives. This story was published in the newspapers of central Russia and reiterated the well-established stereotype of indigenous people in terms of the binary frame of reference mentioned above. Namely, there was the “civilised Russian” and, in symbolic contrast, the “wandering wild people” (Ru. *brodiachie dikari*) (*ibid.*¹²). Ivashchenko also admitted that while there was no evidence of cannibalism among the Nanai of the Amur region, both Nanai and Tungus storytelling traditions (so-called local folklore) confirmed the existence of cannibalism (*ibid.*). Indeed, we can find Nanai stories about malevolent beings known as *mangi*, the souls of people who had committed suicide (*ibid.*). *Mangi* practised cannibalism, including eating bones (*ibid.*). Most colonial powers actively employed these images of indigenous people as cannibals, associating it with immorality and backwardness¹³. These images stressed the superiority of the colonisers and also served as grounds for the exploitation and violent conquest of new territories (see also Conklin 2001, p. 25).
- 21 Such images of indigenous people were reproduced recently as a result of a reported incident of cannibalism that occurred in a remote area of South Yakutia. The main Russian mass media outlets issued TV videos reports and articles that described in detail a group of experienced fishermen who had lost their way in the taiga and ate two of their companions. Four members of the fishing expedition, consisting of two locally born villagers and two others from Central Russia, were lost for three months in the taiga. After a long search, officials unexpectedly found two survivors and traces of anthropophagy. The two fishermen were charged with homicide via cannibalism and received long jail sentences. Local and national newspapers reported on this and

organised discussions and commentaries that identified the actions of these two survivors with vernacular cosmological perceptions. Indeed, local people raised many doubts about how a group consisting of locals, including experienced hunters of Evenki origin, could lose their way in the taiga and spend months “circling around” (Ru. *kruzhit’*) the different log houses (Ru. *zimov’e*). The group walked around the various areas and returned to the log houses to consume food left at storage platforms without moving anywhere further for substantial periods. The fishermen even used to meet hunters and gold miners still continuing to wander in the taiga. First, the tragic event of cannibalism was linked to a well-known “bad place” – the log house where tragic events had occurred in the past. Hence, according to local people, this place attracted this new tragic event. Hunters even stated that the survivors turned into cannibals because they had broken “taiga laws”, such as plundering stored food that was accumulated by other hunters in order to spend the fur-hunting season during the winter in their hunting territories. Cannibalism was here interpreted as a kind of revenge for such misbehaviour¹⁴. Furthermore, the group was accused of having interests other than fishing, perhaps involving illegal gold mining and getting obsessed by gold fever. By describing this entire story in detail, the mass media in Russia added another page to the long history of associating taiga people living in remote villages with “wild people”.

- 22 At the same time, we can see how images of cannibals and monsters have become a tool used by indigenous people to describe their experience of tragic events and policies initiated by the state and state agencies. These stories told by Evenki hunters and herders serve as an important tool to raise awareness of the danger of exploiting and dominating powers. People from Tungokochen, Zelënoe Ozero and Ust’-Karenga villages in the Zabaikal region told me several times about the existence of hungry and dangerous beings that they encountered in the taiga and which looked like humans. In some stories, such human-like beings were also referred to as cannibals called *bamlak* (BAM beings-Baikal Amur Magistral): they were associated with prisoners and workers at industrial sites in the Transbaikal region, such as the Baikal Amur Railroad. For instance, an elder hunter and herder with whom I spent the winter sharing a tent once warned me that, in the taiga, one could meet dangerous and very hungry *bamlak* which can bring serious harm. In the past, plenty of them were met in the taiga. These stories can be linked to the widespread stories told in Siberia about prisoners escaping the gulag, who used to take a colleague to be consumed as food on their long trip through the taiga.
- 23 Similar to *arenkil*, these *bamlak* cannibal beings (in some cases also referred to as *mangi*, *changit*, and *diptygil* in the Zabaikal region) are considered to be extremely dangerous and very hungry beings that are anxious for food and the vital body parts of humans, such as the heart, liver or intestines: they were also noted as being thirsty for blood or one’s strength (*chinen*). In an environment of competition for resources, people believe that, in the context of shortages, this feature of cannibalism can be realised by malevolent, greedy, or vengeful beings such as animals, spirits, and humans (see cannibal shamans in Stépanoff 2009, pp. 283-307).
- 24 Many areas in Siberia are marked by Soviet policies of domination, such as the labour camps, prisons, railroads, or roads built by political and criminal prisoners and deportees sent to Siberia from all over the Soviet Union. The Evenki of different BAM regions say that some of the indigenous villages and roads were constructed right on

human bones. The description of *bamlak* (in other cases called *diptygil*; from *diapta-*, “to eat”) can be seen as an outcome of fusing state repressive policies and existing Evenki cosmologies. Elena Makarova from Ust’ Urkima village (Amur region) said that her parents taught her that the word *diapnadia* (cannibal, glutton) was used to refer to greedy people, such as gold miners, traders, BAM village people, or other resource exploiters in charge of the pollution of rivers. Indeed, most stories about cannibals were collected in Evenki communities that had the strongest interactions with intensive resource exploitation and industrial development (see Gabysheva 2012, pp.100-118). At the same time, the villagers of Tiana recount Evenki fights with cannibal *changit* people not as epic stories, but as historical events that occurred in certain geographical locations still commemorated by hunters and herders, who leave offerings there (*ibid.* pp.100-103). Ulturgasheva (2012, p.14) also reports how the “wandering spirits of the dead” (called *arinkael* by Evens) are associated with the repressive policies of the Soviet Gulag. In this way, beliefs in stories related to malevolent ghosts are symbolically associated with suffering, violence, and the deaths of prisoners. Among Evens, *arinkael* were originally forest spirits (*ibid.*). Today, however, these spirits are present in village buildings, thus transforming perceptions of the location of spirits and affecting present Even experiences of living in the cursed place (*ibid.*).

- 25 In a similar vein, Simonova (2013, pp. 256-293) reports that among Evenki living in the northern part of Lake Baikal, various malevolent beings have become very active not only in the taiga, but also in villages and abandoned industrial sites. Hence, abandoned places have connections with the idea of how government violence and the devastation of formerly prosperous places consign people to an unstable life. The current difficulties that the Evenki experience in villages are also often attributed to the wrong choice of location made by early Soviet state officials. Evenki (as well as other indigenous peoples) were forcibly moved and settled in places that were well known by them to be “bad places”. Indeed, Tungokochen village (Zabaikal region), known as a dangerous village of black magic and tragic events, has been flooded a few times, causing great damage to villagers. As a result, the villagers believe that they continuously experience threats of potential misfortune just by residing in a village built in a bad place inhabited by malevolent spirits or angry shaman spirits. According to villagers, all visiting shamans from neighbouring Buryats or Evenki say that this place is cursed and that people “spoil” (Ru. *porcha*) nearly every second house. Shamans have performed public rituals several times to cleanse Tungokochen village (Zabaikal region) and create a permanent ritual site that would help to calm spirits. Hence, we see how Evenki and Even memories are localised and infused with experiences of violence from colonial powers that physically and spiritually affected the worlds of humans, non-humans, and the local landscape. Gordillo aptly notes that such “spatialized” memories and experiences are active forces in the production of various monstrous beings and meaningful places (Gordillo 2004, pp. 123-138).
- 26 The folklorists Archakova & Trifonova (2006, p.114) also pointed out that for the Evenki of Amur, various features of the monster identified as *mangi* were analogous to those attributed to Russians: merchants, exploiters, and Cossack soldiers. Cossacks were seen as helpers of these hungry monsters (i.e. the Mangi), since they brought wine to the Evenki in order to weaken them and make use of them (see also Ivashchenko 2011). Alexander King (1999, pp. 57-66) also shows how images of vampire shamans (i.e. *kalaw*) among the Koryaks can be seen as culturally appropriate symbols and metaphors

that could be used to describe current difficulties or refer to people that drain public resources for personal profit. In the stories of the Koryaks, *kalaw* can “prey upon other people, draining their spiritual energy or life force in order to gain extra power or maintain unusual youth and prolong their life¹⁵”. Today, in the pervasive insecure economic environment, local people divide villagers into victims and *kalaw*. They use *kalaw* to refer to “administrators and managers analogous to vampire shamans draining the vestiges of a vital force from a now-dead corpse [Russian economy touched by crisis]” (*ibid.*). Similarly, in their contemporary storytelling Khanty hunters and reindeer herders also employ the mythical image of a large man with an iron stomach and a big cap that is capable of eating everything in his way (see Novikova 2014, p. 182). This new and negative image evolved out of Khanty interactions with oil companies and replaced the former image of bad and dangerous heroes found in traditional folklore (*ibid.*).

- 27 Various stories linked to dangerous beings told in the camps of Evenki reindeer herders and hunters provoke a sense of fear and an awareness of possible dangers. An Evenki elder from Buryatia, Iulia Semirekonova, was among the main informants of the famous Russian folklorist Mihail Voskoboinikov and a storyteller herself. She told me that her clan used to invite an elder from the Zaguneev clan who could narrate an epic (*nimngakan*) for three days. Everyone took part in such storytelling and was involved emotionally; the audience sang songs together with the storyteller. People participated in storytelling events by taking part in the contest related in the story, thereby attracting luck and success. Elders say that some people could even be healed or receive special healing powers by taking part in the narration of an epic. Indeed, when hunters used to tell stories of success in the evenings before hunting, they sought by this means to attract luck¹⁶. Narratives linked to the monster-cannibals usually described skilful humans who escaped from monster-cannibals. Such stories provided the audience with emotional inspiration and implicit suggestions for possible ways of escaping danger. The various ways of escaping danger included creating obstacles for the monster or other ways of misleading or deceiving it¹⁷.
- 28 Furthermore, these stories can teach moral ways of behaving in the world, like such as reciprocating with the other humans, non-humans, and places that one interacts with. A good example of the fusion of fear, morality, and awareness is represented by the Evenki game Channit-Halganchuluk. As the journalist Iurii Klitsenko documented, this game was recently re-enacted and played by the children of Surinda village in Evenkiia (Klitsenko 2009, p. 15). The Channit-Halganchuluk is a one-eyed, one-legged, one-armed monster represented by an Evenki child, dressed up for the occasion. Before the game, the smartest child is chosen to play the most important role, that of the monster-cannibal. The monster has to catch a “caravan” consisting of children and choose any child to be eaten. A dialogue is established between the monster and the individual player that helps to depict what is right or wrong. As Klitsenko (2009) aptly notes, this game helps to make a moral judgement and to identify sinful behaviour, referred to as *ngelomel*. The aim is also to develop awareness in the children regarding the ability to recognise signs that predict future misfortunes; such signs among the Evenki are known as *nengo* (see also Alehin 1998).
- 29 The morals of Evenki stories linked to monsters, ghosts, and cannibals always refer to the violation of normative rules or ethics. People believe that accidental disrespect shown to the spirits and ritual sites (for example, stealing objects from old storage

platforms or mortuary scaffolds) can cause various physical and psychological disabilities. If a person is greedy, does not share with other beings, and does not show respect to animals and their remains, then such a person can potentially die tragically and become an *arenki* himself/herself. Disrespect and greediness linked to hunting and the use of other resources often turn people into victims who lose luck and health or remain troubled by spirits or anxious about something until death.

- 30 Among the indigenous communities of the Canadian Algonquin language family, images of non-human beings called *windigo* are continuously animated in narratives linked to aggression and cannibalism. *Windigo* are described as gigantic human-like creatures or spirits that wander in the forest and possess a heart of ice (Ferrara & Lanoue 2004, Mermann-Jozwiak 1997, p. 45, Teicher 1960, p. 7). Such beings have the desire to eat human flesh and also display qualities of selfishness “to the point of becoming monstrous” (Mermann-Jozwiak 1997). A human can be transformed into a malevolent spirit or monster through misbehaviour or through possession, witchcraft, and extreme starvation (Podruchny 2004, p. 677, Brightman 1993, p. 170, Ridington 1990, p. 160). For Ridington, the phenomenon of humans turning into cannibalistic monsters known among Algonquians and Athabaskans as *wechuge* is not simple psychosis, but a social sickness that is linked to the influx of strangers and mixing with people who do not know the taboos associated with sacred bundles (Ridington 1976). In other cases, *wechuge* can be associated with strangers who present a threat to social cohesion and can be linked to the disruptive influence of contact with Europeans.
- 31 Similarly, Feit (2004, pp. 92-110) describes how the Canadian Cree associate white men with the *atuush* (a being similar to the *windigo* described above). The *atuush* are cannibal monsters that live in the forest and occasionally capture people for food or to keep as slaves. Today, the metaphor of *atuush* is used among the Cree to describe the moral delinquency of an individual (*ibid.*). Hence, the image of *atuush* is about anti-social behaviours like self-interest, irresponsibility, and the exploitation or commodification of the human relationship with the environment in a context of growing conflicts with Euro-Canadians over various development projects (*ibid.*). According to Feit (2004, p. 123), the *atuush* can be overcome by going into the forest and re-uniting people, spirits, and the environment. Similarly, most Evenki believe that by performing rituals of respect and reciprocity and returning to life in the taiga can calm the forces located in the landscape and even make them act on their behalf in the taiga and in villages.
- 32 Various rituals are performed publicly serve to calm the spirits and maintain the wellbeing of the Evenki community. Reindeer herders and hunters have managed to revive what appeared to be extinct rituals in order to calm forgotten and malevolent spirits and ensure subsistence in various taiga territories. Today, the Evenki living in the taiga strive to visit various ritual sites to conduct rituals intended to calm the spirits affecting their lives (Brandišauskas 2011). The Soviets repressed all Evenki shamans up to the 1960s; however, various monumental ritual sites were still attended by hunters and reindeer herders and were an important source of ritual inspiration, luck, and wellbeing.
- 33 Despite admitting the malevolent nature of a particular spirit, hunters and herders believe that this character can be changed depending on the relations one establishes with it (see also Vaté 2005).

Conclusion

- 34 While various human encounters with bad spirits, monsters, and cannibals are well documented in the ethnography and folklore of the subarctic peoples of northern Canada and Siberia, the cosmological or culturally constructed experiences and reactions of the indigenous peoples themselves remain, for the most part, an unexplored topic (see Carlson 2009). Soviet ethnologists focused mainly on historical explanations, etymology, and the genesis of narratives found in the various folklore and myths they recorded among various groups of Evenki. Despite the wide documentation of stories linked to malevolent spirits and dangerous cannibal beings among Tungus (Evenki, Even) all over Siberia, there is still a dearth of explanations for how these stories were socially perceived, experienced, and employed in daily discourses and practices.
- 35 My aim in this article is to take a first step in analysing the topic of gluttony as represented by various malevolent humans and non-human beings in Siberia from the perspectives of Evenki hunters and herders living in the Zabaikal region and Buryatia. I have tried to show that these beings – non-human as well as human, and referred to as monsters, cannibals, or greedy beings – should be given more attention than is usually given to the epic heroes described in the scientific classifications present in various genres of folklore. These beings can be portrayed as “real persons” in the sense that they help shape contemporary Evenki perceptions of sociality, morality, and ritual life. Hence, malevolent human and non-human beings are not simply imagined, but also feared and avoided. They can be encountered in the taiga, in villages, and in dreams. In the context of an unpredictable environment, these beings embody threats and violence that occurred in the past or recently and which continue to have a negative effect on the present day lives of humans in the area. As early state officials’ reports demonstrate, anthropophagy and marginality were attributed to the indigenous peoples of the Russian North and were part of the complex colonial image constructed by these officials in conjunction with the idea of them being uncultured and backward.
- 36 Evenki strategies of dealing with these spirits involve the reconstruction of the memory of past tragic events. Such memories also include the necessity of being aware of the living landscape, such as neglected camps, storage platforms, mortuary scaffolds, or rock art sites. The Evenki strive to appeal to these spirits through ritual engagement and the creation of reciprocal relations. These interactions with spirits through rituals are an important aspect of the Evenki way of mastering a negative influence and dealing with misfortunes. Indeed, various spirits, monsters, and cannibals are part of Evenki cosmologies and are linked to vernacular ideas of hunting luck, reciprocity, sin, and health. At the same time, these beings are experienced as emplaced phenomenon associated with different humans, monsters, spirits, animals, and landscape features (such as log houses, hills, rocks, lakes, routes, or former labour camps). All these landscape features are infused with bad memories, tragic events, and spooky manifestations. They, as an ensemble, shape the Evenki experience of place. Today, some of these beings have been displaced from the taiga places and re-localised in villages, buildings, or neglected industrial sites or can be met wandering in the taiga. Indeed, such Evenki perceptions of place can be seen as extending from a geographic locale to the wider spatial and temporal field of relations, linking a place with histories

of colonial contact, global forces and markets, governments, and various forms of industrialisation (Gupta & Ferguson 1997, see for Cree of Canada in Feit 2004, p. 94).

- 37 In the daily discourses, various cannibals and malevolent spirits are associated with exploitative, dangerous, and greedy people who act disrespectfully toward animals, spirits, and humans in the taiga. Furthermore, in some cases these beings can be seen as representing the power of the state or those officials in charge of coercive policies that destabilise relations between humans, non-humans, and the landscape. In an environment where widespread accusations of spoilage/curses (Ru. *porcha*) and the evil eye/black magic are frequent and where the competition for various taiga resources is particularly intense, Evenki stories of cannibals stress the importance of the morality and ethics of hunting and sharing and the need for communal cooperation. They also warn of the possible revenge of spirits that may result from misbehaviour and poaching. Narrating and participating in the stories, enable Evenki to assert some predictability over their lives, especially their subsistence practices. It also allows them to promote awareness of potential dangers while teaching appropriate moral behaviour and judgements. These stories can also serve the need to protect one's possessions on storage platforms, taiga resources, domestic animals, and hunting and herding territories.

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NOTES

1. When documenting the remnants of religious practices among the Evenki of Soviet Buryatia, the Evenki ethnographer Shubin stated that most hunters had ceased to maintain the memory of shamans and were mostly atheists (Shubin 1969, pp. 172-173). However, he also underlined that young people were still 'not free of their belief that the success in subsistence practices still depends on the good will of spirits and they continued to perform traditional rituals' (*ibid.*).
2. In Cincius' Tungus-Manchu dictionary, the Evenki word *odzhen* is translated as "owner" or "master" (Ru. *hoziain*), "ruler" (Ru. *nachal'nik, pravitel'*), and "master-spirit" (Ru. *duh hoziain*) (Cincius 1975, pp. 437-438). Among Turkic speakers, *odzhen* means "mastery" and "power", referring to the quality of places, spirits, and humans (for *eeze* among Altaians, see Halemba 2007, pp. 64-67, for *eze* among Mongols, see Humphrey 1996, pp. 85-86).
3. This research was supported by the Research Council of Lithuania (No. S-MIP-17-4) and by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
4. All italicized words are in Evenki unless otherwise noted.
5. This study is based on my long-term fieldwork among Evenki reindeer herders and hunters in rural areas of the northern parts of East Siberia (villages Usugli, Tungokochen, Ust'-Karenga, Zelenoe Ozero, Krasnyi Yar, and Yumurchen) Zabaikal region, the Republic of Buryatia (Bugunda, Mongoi, Bagdarino, and Rossoshino), the Republic of Yakutia (Tiania and Kindygir), and the Amur region (Ust' Urkima).
6. These trade items include velvet antlers, the paws and gallbladders of bears, the penises of reindeer, and the glands of musk deer.
7. The evil eye (Ru. *zglaz*) is seen as a negative influence on human activities that is passed on unconsciously from a person who has "bad luck" to another. Curses (Ru. *porcha*) are understood by local people as conscious magical attacks against other people with the aim to cause illness. These notions are not unique to the Zabaikal region and exist among many old settler communities in Siberia and northeastern Europe (for the old settlers of Chukotka, see Hakkarainen 2007, for Komi see Il'ina 2008).
8. A prominent reindeer herder told me that a curse sent by villagers often comes to him in the shape of a pack of wolves that preys upon his domestic reindeer.
9. In the comparative Tungus-Manchu language dictionary, the *arenki* can be referred to as a malevolent spirit, devil, monster, or ghost (see Cincius 1975, p. 122). According to Lavrillier (personal communication), *arinkal* can be derived from the Evenki and Even verb root *ari-* (to call, to attract); hence, the Evenki of southern Yakutia and the Amur region and the Even of Kamchatka and northern Yakutia say that these spirits can also call people into the middle of the forest in order to steal their souls.
10. For the similar notion of *zaayan* (wandering souls of the dead), see Hangalov 1958, pp. 482-496, and Hamayon 2006.
11. Shirokogoroff (1919, 1935, pp. 149-150, 190-198) vividly described how some spirits could enter and exit different "placings" (Ru. *vmestilishche*) either at their own volition or by being

invited or enticed by humans to enter certain objects, which were then kept and manipulated for a person's own needs. A "placing" was described as an embodied kind of spirit that also serves the needs of humans. Any geographical location, tree, animal, human, crafted item, or part of an organ can become such a "placing" (*ibid.*).

12. In the tsarist Speranskii code of 1822, the nomadic way of life was seen as backward and Evenki were therefore classified as "wandering Tungus" (Ru. *brodiachii Tungus*) in administrative documents and ethnographic literature. The "wandering Tungus" were described as having no ties to land or understanding of the "mastery of the land" (see in Orlov 1858, p. 180). Their way of life was therefore considered a relic of the past and the state called for an end to nomadism.

13. Similarly, some elders remember how Kalmyk deported to Siberia by Stalin were even introduced to the local population as cannibals (Ivanov 2011, pp. 212-213).

14. A number of Evenki and non-Evenki hunters told me how they were attacked in real life and then in dreams by the cannibal-bear, who was thought to be sent as a revenge for one's misbehavior. Indeed, in Evenki cosmologies, the bear can often be seen as a mediator or a messenger between master-spirits and humans.

15. Similarly, Vasilevich (1969) noted that Evenki shamans could also eat human souls and other spirits during healing rituals in the past.

16. Indeed, through telling different success stories the Evenki aimed to entertain spirits, which might be generous to people and send them luck (see also Zelenin 2004, p. 27, Lavrillier 2008).

17. Folklorists assert that the Evenki and Even tales linked to the *changit* cannibals are widespread not only in the Zabaikal region: instances have also been recorded among the south and north Yakutia, Irkutsk, and Amur Evenki (see Varlamov 2009, 2011, Gabysheva 2012, for Even see also Lavrillier & Matic 2013).

ABSTRACTS

In this article, I intend to show how the sociocultural changes that occurred during the Soviet period as well as current challenges are creatively reflected and incorporated into Evenki cosmology. Various malevolent beings to whom gluttony and, in some cases, anthropophagi have existed in Evenki cosmology for centuries. Today, these beings are continuously encountered in daily life and depicted in contemporary Evenki narrations. While references to the cannibalistic features of indigenous peoples were widely employed by colonial powers, today the Evenki link the influence of malevolent beings with past and current state policies, tragic events, ruptures of ethical norms, the exploitation of resources, and personal misbehaviour. These narrations enable the Evenki to promote awareness of potential dangers and teach other people appropriate moral behaviour and judgements.

Dans cet article, je tente de montrer comment les changements socioculturels survenus pendant la période soviétique ainsi que les défis actuels sont reflétés avec créativité et incorporés dans la cosmogonie des Évenks. Les nombreux êtres malveillants existant depuis des siècles dans la cosmogonie évenke et ayant pour attributs la glotonnerie, et dans certains cas l'anthropophagie, sont continuellement rencontrés dans la vie quotidienne et décrits dans les récits contemporains évenks. Alors que les références au cannibalisme des peuples autochtones ont été largement employées par le pouvoir colonial, aujourd'hui, les Évenks lient l'influence des êtres malveillants aux politiques étatiques passées et présentes, aux événements tragiques et aux

transgressions individuelles des normes éthiques et des règles de conduite. Raconter ou participer à la narration, permet aux Évenks de promouvoir la conscience des dangers potentiels, tout en enseignant les convenances en termes d'attitudes et de jugements moraux.

INDEX

Keywords: Evenki, reindeer herding, hunting, Transbaikal region, Buryatia, narrative, spirits, monsters, cannibalism, morality

Mots-clés: Évenk, élevage du renne, chasse, Transbaïkalie, Bouriatie, récit, esprits, monstres, cannibalisme, moralité

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