Tatiana Safonova & István Sántha

*Culture Contact in Evenki Land. A Cybernetic Anthropology of the Baikal Region.*


The French novelist Charles Dantzig said that if life submitted its manuscript to a publisher, it would be turned down. According to him, life has no form and it is the author’s duty to give life an acceptable shape. Of course, anthropologists are not novelists, and the best bet for most of them is to assume that human life has enduring forms or, to use Bateson’s cybernetic language, ‘patterns that connect’, apparently random events observed in an ever-flowing stream of life. Anthropologists must be more or less confident of their ability to reveal these patterns and make them understandable to their readers. Although I remain unconvinced about the cybernetic fate of the universe which underlies the writing of this book, as a theoretical framework, the form it has given to Tatiana Safonova and István Sántha’s monograph is stunning. *Culture Contact in Evenki Land. A Cybernetic Anthropology of the Baikal Region* should leave no anthropologist indifferent; many times while reading the book I found myself arguing with an imagined Tatiana or István and, more often than not, with Gregory Bateson, the master himself. What else could we want from a book?

Who are the Evenki, or more accurately, who are these people who walk along the paths that go through Evenki land and for whom walking (especially in the *taiga*) constitutes a practice that models their *ethos*? To deal with this question, Tatiana Safonova and István Sántha open up a new path, that is the analysis of the emotional dimensions of Evenki social life and clearing of an old road which has not been followed by many: the cybernetic approach to culture contact and the schismogenesis these contacts inevitably prompted.

Evenki land is not only a definite place somewhere in Transbaikalia, but first and foremost ‘the environment in which the Evenki way of being [is] the dominant one’, ‘a landscape adjusted to Evenki ethos’ (p. 136), as the authors put it. There is nothing that Evenki like more than walking in this land, looking for nothing else but to enjoy two broad categories of experience coined as ‘companionship’ and ‘*manakan*’. The former encapsulates a specific form of sociability within which people cooperate on a voluntary basis, sharing a common goal and experiencing the feeling of togetherness it triggers; while the latter subsumes the feeling of personal autonomy understood as a disengagement of any commitment with others, or even more radically as the very possibility of freeing oneself from ‘any identity that presupposes relationships with others’
The taiga offers the perfect setting to balance carefully these two forms of experience: walking alone before meeting someone by chance, enjoying his company and then withdrawing oneself in isolation, getting rid of social obligations. This sequence of events is what makes life worth living for an Evenki. If one looks through the Evenki lens, losing the opportunity to experience that, at least once in a while, is the equivalent of losing one’s culture. In a thought-provoking concluding chapter the authors relate this pattern to animism, egalitarianism, mobility, Evenki personhood and socialisation. Any dynamic equilibrium would be possible between Evenki, Buryat, Chinese, Russian ethoses if this pattern called ‘the walking mind’ were to disappear. Following the Batesonian take on culture contact, a weakening of the ‘walking mind’ would lead to Evenki assimilation or elimination.

The question therefore emerges: how do Evenki people maintain their ethos in the face of the dramatic changes that have been transforming the Evenki lands from the mid-nineteenth century onwards? Each chapter is dedicated to describing a process, or rather a dynamic equilibrium between two or more schismogenetic processes that permit the ‘walking mind’ to endure. This cybernetic tailor-made ethnography takes on board many situations that are usually noticed by anthropologists when they stand in the thick of the fight (if that is not too strong a word) but rarely surface in the final draft of their monographs, for various reasons. We learn about the many ways in which Evenki are specialists in setting up non-communicative interactions with their Russian and Buryat counterparts. Serious drunkenness, aggression and pokhazuka [the performance of an illusionary stable picture of Evenki culture] set the stage for some sort of culture contact devoid of any real communication between the individuals involved. We understand that risk-taking activities are needed to engender companionship and that excessive drinking sessions could be seen as the most effective way of creating risky situations which Evenki no longer encounter in their more sedentary life. Alcohol literally soaks this monograph, as Evenki use it as the stairway to manakan experience of life. One of the most representative chapters of the book draws on three case studies that pin down the relation between Evenki and these ‘perpetual outsiders’, as the authors call the local Chinese. The working hypothesis for this sixth chapter is that the crux of local Chinese ethos is constituted by their attachment to a hard-won material and economic autonomy, and that this precise dimension can fit ‘a special niche within the local ecology of ethoses’ (p. 120). Here, the cybernetical notional apparatus (i.e. ‘frame-switching’) lays the ground for a discussion of the anthropological notion of reciprocity (Mauss and Sahlins) and provides the reader with an historical approach to the shaping of a cultural ethos that