

Shamanic Dress, Reindeer Herding, and the Challenge of Climate Change in Northern Siberia

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Fig. 1 Éven Shaman's Coat, ca. 19th century. Unknown maker, Éven, Siberia. Hide, metal, sinew, hair, and dye, 36 1/4 × 24 3/8 in. (92 × 62 cm). Conserved, 2016. Courtesy the American Museum of Natural History, Division of Anthropology, New York City, 70/5772 A.

This knee-length shaman's coat belongs to the Éven people in northern Siberia (fig. 1). Constructed with *rovduga* (suede leather made from a reindeer hide), it is closely fitted in the sleeves and torso and is a common design for Éven traditional clothing. Tassels hang from the edge of a decorative panel on the bottom. More tassels are located on the front, sides, and back of the coat. Although different

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shaman coats can have different decorations, each shaman's regalia has its own specific meaning, expressed by its owner through its unique attributes. However, the tassels are a required attribute for all. As some researchers argue, tassels represent the roads that shamans use to travel to other worlds.¹

It is widely known that shamanic regalia are a material expression of the traditional worldview of the people who create the regalia and a symbol of the shaman's social role as a mediator between worlds.² Even people believe that the universe is divided into three worlds: upper, middle (where animals, people, trees, and other living things live), and lower. The upper world is a place where the souls of unborn people are placed and deities live, and the lower world (Shadowland) is inhabited by the dead and evil spirits.³ Occupying a special place in the Even traditional worldview, reindeer are perceived as a sacred creation of the sun.⁴ Shamanic magic is believed to help breed the wild and domestic reindeer that Even people depend on for their own well-being. During the celebration of the new year at the summer solstice, a reindeer is sacrificed in honor of *Høvki*, the highest deity. The sun reindeer is then believed to be resurrected from the blood of the sacrificial animal and the countdown of a new year begins.⁵ After the shamanic ritual, a white-colored reindeer (*høbøk*) is chosen to become a sacred animal devoted to the supreme god. Even people believe that a *høbøk* is capable of healing sick people and relieving stress, and has the ability to help with difficult situations.⁶ In the old days, a family's ritual objects—idols dedicated to various spirit protectors—were loaded onto a *høbøk* during migration, making the reindeer “guardians” of the family and clan. It is forbidden to ride on such a shamanic reindeer. Once a *høbøk* has died from natural causes, its carcass is placed on a specially built site (*labaz*).⁷

Even People

Traditionally, the Even live in small familial and tribal groups (up to fifteen families of relatives) that stretch across the vast lands of Siberia. It is the most sustainable way of living in the northern region's conditions, where only a limited number of people can be sustained without breaking the fragile balance with nature. At the start of winter, they divide into even smaller groups (two to three families) for the rational and ecological use of pastures and hunting grounds. In early spring, all related groups gather together to discuss and perform various economic needs. Traditional customs, exchange of goods, marriage arrangements, organized youth entertainment, sports, dancing, and other activities accompany these gatherings.⁸ But those social events are subordinate to the interests of reindeer husbandry. As one of the elders in the Oymyakon ulus, Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), shared with me in 2016:

*Reindeer means life for us: we eat reindeer meat, we sew clothes from reindeer hide, we ride reindeer, and on holidays we arrange reindeer races.*⁹

Reindeer

Rangifer tarandus L. (reindeer) are uniquely adapted to life in the arctic. Deep snow has been a factor in the development of their long legs, which also help them escape from predators by running. Their coats, formed by long hollow hairs, provide excellent heat conservation, allowing these reindeer to have smaller body mass compared to those at lower latitudes. In contrast, thin hair on the legs allows for rapid cooling after running.¹⁰ Wild reindeer live in various natural habitats: tundra, forest, and mountains.¹¹ Forest and mountain reindeer live in small groups (up to fifteen), while tundra reindeer can form huge herds (up to a few thousand individuals).¹² Reindeer have a highly mobile lifestyle. Herds of reindeer migrate year-round because summer and winter pastures are distinctly different from each other.¹³ In fall and winter (starting in November), reindeer move to the forest and tundra areas.¹⁴



Fig. 2. Winter pasture. Photo: Courtesy the author.

In spring (starting in March), reindeer follow the “wave” of new growth of vegetation for as long as possible to eat more green vegetation, which is richest in proteins, vitamins, and salts.¹⁵ In summer, blood-sucking insects influence reindeer behavior and movement. Reindeer usually look for refuge on mountaintops, lakeshores, or ocean beaches where the wind is stronger. However, forage in these places is poor

and reindeer are forced to find better pasture during moments when insects are less of a problem, often at night.¹⁶

Reindeer are most afraid of mosquitoes (moshkara) and gadflies. So, when mosquitoes and gadflies are abundant in the daytime, reindeer stand on the glacier and go feed and drink only at night.¹⁷



Fig. 3. On the glacier. Photo: Alexander Gromov, Yuchugey, Oymyakon ulus, Republic of Sakha (Yakutia).

In April and May, reindeer cows in small groups (around twenty to forty) move to the calving grounds, where reindeer find suitable conditions for birthing and calves during their first three weeks of life.¹⁸ This plays a critical role in the survival of the wild reindeer population. These sites are usually open areas to avoid predation (wolves live in the forest in the summertime) and are often located on hills with gentle slopes, where snow melts faster than at other sites.¹⁹

Climate Change

Climate change presents a serious threat to the well-being of animals, plants, places, and peoples with the increase of extreme weather events, natural disasters, and other abrupt and irreversible changes in nature.²⁰ While climate change represents a threat to humanity as a whole, Indigenous peoples are among the most vulnerable groups because they often depend heavily on renewable natural resources that are showing the earliest effects of climate change.²¹ In the arctic, environmental and weather-related changes are rampant and unpredictable. Summers are colder and winters are milder. As the permafrost thaws, the land is constantly changing—swelling in some places, collapsing in others. Floods are more frequent, submerging houses and hay-gathering fields. Overall, it is more challenging to care for domestic animals like reindeer.

Climate change is bringing a number of challenges to reindeer husbandry, which include:

1. *An increased number of bloodsucking insects (mosquitoes and gadflies).* Reindeer are attacked by mosquitoes, horseflies, warble flies, black flies, nasal bot flies, and others.²² On rainy days, more bloodsucking insects are found in the valleys. In the mountains, hotter weather also provides comfortable conditions for such insects. As Indigenous people in Oymyakon shared:

*On top of the mountains, summer has become hotter now. It is bad for reindeer because in hot weather there are a lot of mosquitos and gadflies. The reindeer stand on the glacier for a long time, escaping from them, getting tired, lying down on the ice, and getting pneumonia because their summer hair is very short and thin. Last year twelve reindeer in my herd got pneumonia.*²³

Reindeer try to climb higher to the mountains to escape mosquitoes, but another dangerous situation occurs at higher elevations:

*In hot weather, reindeer also can get hoof disease (kopytka) more often, because they climb higher . . . to escape mosquitoes and gadflies. There are winds and fewer insects. However, there are also more sharp rocks. When reindeer [injure] their legs, they get this kopytka disease. Reindeer also can break their legs if they climb too high.*²⁴

Yet another effect of the increasing amount of bloodsucking insects is the presence of additional holes in a reindeer's hide. Therefore, it is more difficult to sew quality clothing.

2. *More bears and wolves.* The increased number of bears and wolves is a great concern to the Even reindeer herders as this event is life-threatening and causes serious economic damage:

*Before there were not so many wolves as now, and we had more reindeer at the same time. It is different now. There are significantly more wolves. Wolves have begun to chase reindeer. They kill reindeer but don't eat them, just leave them behind. It looks like they are playing. This year, in our herd, between forty to sixty reindeer have sore legs. They hurt the soles of their hooves when they run away from wolves.*²⁵

Traditionally Even people didn't hunt for bears because it was against their traditional worldview and beliefs. On the contrary, they tried to coexist with bears in their shared territory. The elders argued that if a bear recognizes a person and his reindeer as a part of the bear's territory and ecosystem, then that bear will not touch you and could even protect you and your reindeer from other bears. Unfortunately, with relatively mild winters due to climate change, the bears have started to give birth to two to three offspring rather than one per season, rapidly increasing their population, which has resulted in an increased competition for territory. This means that the ancient tradition of coexisting with the bear is rapidly diminishing and that it is becoming more dangerous to be in areas of wilderness.

3. *Greater frequency of wet snow.* Due to climate change, the period of time when temperatures are above freezing in Oymyakon has increased. Under such conditions, snow melts and sticks together in large flakes. At night, when the temperature drops well below 32° F (0° C), wet snow freezes and forms a thick layer of ice that prevents horses and reindeer from getting to the grass or moss that grows below.

Abnormal climate change has damaged natural resources and all aspects of traditional livelihoods, including reindeer herding and hunting. Some people have argued that climate change is happening because we forgot how to appreciate the spirits of nature. Indigenous people have stressed that we need to remember and start communicating with the spirits again. This means that shamanic regalia and attributes need to be revived. With this in mind, museums and conservators can provide access to and analysis of historically correct items and help support Indigenous people in their efforts to revive forgotten techniques of making traditional items.

Notes

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¹⁷ Éven, male responder, 24–55, Yuchugey.

¹⁸ Baskin, “Population Dynamics of Reindeer”; Chernyavskii and Mikhail A. Kretchmar, “Wild Reindeer *Rangifer tarandus* (L.) in Chukotka.”

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²⁴ Éven, male responder, 55+, Yuchugey.

²⁵ Éven, male responder, 25–54, Yuchugey.