

Chapter 5

Milk and Antlers: A System of Partitioned Rights and Multiple Holders of Reindeer in Northern China

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Introduction

In August 1997, during the brief period when the research for this chapter was conducted, the village of Olguya in northern China (Inner Mongolia) hosted a population of approximately five hundred people, most of whom composed the thirty families of reindeer-herding Evenki who once wandered freely across the Russian–Chinese border. These few Evenki (sometimes wrongly referred to in China as ‘Yakut Evenki’ to indicate their Russian origins – not to be confused with the numerous other Evenki groups of China, many of whom inhabit the large Chinese Evenki autonomous region) are the only reindeer-herding people in all of China. Their situation today, heralded as stemming from a socialized market economy, demonstrates a remarkable system whereby different rights in the same reindeer resource are the domains of different ‘holders’. The reindeer remain in the possession and care of the Evenki herding families, whose monopoly of possession of the reindeer resource is maintained by law as part of China’s minority policy. However, the antler crop from these reindeer belongs to the state. Should a herder default on his contract with the state Antler Company and neglect to supply the antler factory in Olguya with antlers, the state can demand assignment of the deer to other herders. This chapter will present a number of interesting cases to highlight the variable strengths and domains of the state and the private reindeer holders under this multiple-management system.¹

Note that I have chosen to abandon the term ‘dual ownership’, which I employed previously (Beach 2003) in an effort to describe this system. The term ‘dual’ might be thought to imply an equal balance between the rights of holder groups, which cannot be assumed or substantiated in this case, while my purpose was simply to indicate the plurality of these groups. The term ‘ownership’ is burdened by variable, contextually

1. An abridged version of this contribution appeared in *Cultural Survival Quarterly* vol. 27, no. 1 (2003). The German sinologist and ethnologist Nentwig, who visited Olguya twice, also provides considerable reflections on the Evenki herders (see Nentwig 2003). For further information on the Evenki see also Nentwig (1989 and 1991).

and culturally sensitive concepts including possession, use, authority and responsibility. This chapter is devoted precisely to deconstructing this loose term. In any given time and place its strict legal meaning might be codified in detail, but nonetheless be of little significance for a description or understanding of daily life. For example, the right of ultimate authority over something, if rarely exercised, can dwindle to symbolic proportion. In using the term 'holders' I wish to indicate those who use, control, or have in possession articles (reindeer) to various degrees and for various purposes, without meaning to rank either the amount or type of their legal authority at the outset. On the contrary, it is my purpose to present empirical information that will give meaning to such terms.

In my stretch of herding experience, with strongest links to the Fennoscandian and Alaskan fields, milk and antlers, as products of *Rangifer tarandus* (reindeer), elicit associations with radically different reindeer management systems. Among the Saami, the milking of reindeer harks back to a period when reindeer were utilized mainly as a living resource. Milking continued throughout the era of *intensive*, so-called 'whole nomadism' characterized by subsistence herding (animals utilized as a 'dead resource', i.e. for meat, too), but faded as the dead resource gained in prominence with increased integration into the market economy. In the Saami case, access to the market brought with it strong pressures for 'herding *extensivity*', that is, with the deer mixed, spread and loosely attended to soon after calving and on into autumn. Except for bursts of marking activity when the deer were temporarily collected under herder control, milking became impractical and petered out with the declining tameness of the herds. Goat milk and later powdered milk compensated.

Antler cropping, on the other hand – the cutting of wet, velvet antler from living deer, usually for the highly lucrative Asian market – integrates well with extensive herding. While not permitted in Fennoscandia, antler cropping is permitted in Alaska as it is also in China. The antlers can be cropped once a year but otherwise the deer are left to roam extensively, where the only herding investment necessary is to keep them from getting swept away by encroaching caribou herds. Without the sizable profits from antler cropping in Alaska, for example, it is doubtful that herding would have persisted there at all, given losses of reindeer stock to the resurgence of the Western Arctic Caribou Herd and the abundant alternative source of deer meat this non-domestic stock has supplied to local communities.

While intensive herd management need not exclude the possibilities of antler cropping, reindeer milking is unexpected in a management system whose production is dominated by market-oriented antler cropping. Yet this is precisely what I encountered in northern China among the Yakut Evenki of Olguya.

My presence there grew out of an exchange between Chinese and Swedish social scientists interested in issues related to reindeer economies, and was sponsored by the Swedish and Chinese Academies of Science. My formal and most accommodating host in China was Professor Hao Shiyuan, Director of the Institute of Nationality Studies in Beijing, who provided me with a combined research assistant and translator in the form of Dr Zhang Ji-jiao. I am indebted also to Mrs Diu, herself an Evenki and administrator of the municipality encompassing Olguya, and Mr Kong, a local scholar of the Olguya Evenki (cf. Kong 1989). Dr Zhang, Mrs Diu and



Map 5.1 Northeast China. Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

Mr Kong were my constant companions and co-detectives in trying to grasp what gradually revealed itself to be a system of partitioned rights and multiple holders of the Olguya reindeer: the milk, or subsistence aspect accruing to the Evenki herding families, the antler crop accruing to government authorities but its profits shared in part with the herders, and the system as a whole rolled into an over-arching policy of support for a small minority people.

In this chapter I hope to draw the basic parameters of this system and its course of development. My inability to speak Mandarin or Evenki and the short duration of my visit to Olguya and the surrounding herding camps cannot permit more than a crude outline.

Material was collected from interviews with herders in all four of the main family/clan-based herding camps within Olguya's orbit, ranging as far as 73 km from the settlement and named after the current family head with herding engagement. The campsites moved from place to place in the dense larch and conifer forests, although specific sites were commonly frequented and prepared with tent poles and small wooden corrals. Family members, who alternated work periods or returned to Olguya for supplies, kept the authorities and other family members informed of the herders' whereabouts. A form of cooperation between the herders and the forestry authorities had also developed, whereby the herders watched out for and reported forest fires from their dispersed vantage points. In return they received assistance with transportation and gifts of supplies. The camps were named after the heads of families involved in herding. When I was there in 1997, these camps were called Malisu (formerly Ledimi, after Malisu's deceased husband), Damalla, Gushulan and Galishka. Our visits to the camps were combined with supply runs and minor 'business' meetings between herders and our accompanying forestry or herding administrators. One or more family members eager to visit or return to herding work guided our approach. At times our guides were hard pressed to find the camp, as it had moved since their departure, but they had good ideas of where to look and were helped by markers left for them by the roadside and along the paths. Herding administrators, Antler Company personnel, and other members of the herding families were interviewed back in the main settlement of Olguya. A number of my older informants spoke Russian, and recalled that they had come into contact much earlier with the British anthropologist Ethel John-Lindgren (cf. Lindgren 1930 and 1935).

Recent History

The small Olguya group of reindeer herding Evenki, composed of about four clans, were previously part of a larger Evenki population of hunters moving freely across the Russian-Chinese border. Historically, they practised a form of reindeer herding consistent with the other south-Siberian reindeer groups: small numbers of clan-owned reindeer were milked and used for transport. The deer were highly prized and never slaughtered for meat. Their antlers might be cut in small quantities and sold to Chinese Han merchants in the minor settlements they visited occasionally for supplies. When Russian-Chinese hostilities erupted along the border in the 1960s, this group of Evenki was on Chinese territory. Intent on curtailing their free roaming across the border and settling the families permanently in one locality under a kind of 'production-team model', the Chinese had, in a series of steps, relocated them farther inland from the border, first quartering them in Alonson, then Mangui, and finally building the settlement of Olguya with housing, a school, an antler-processing factory, administration offices, and eventually even a small museum devoted to their history and culture.

Regarding the history of China's policies regulating reindeer herding in the Olguya area, in 1997 residents invariably referred to two milestones: the state appropriation of 1967 and the reform of 1984. Since the reform, some revisions have been made with respect to sizes of salaries or proportions of profit shared by

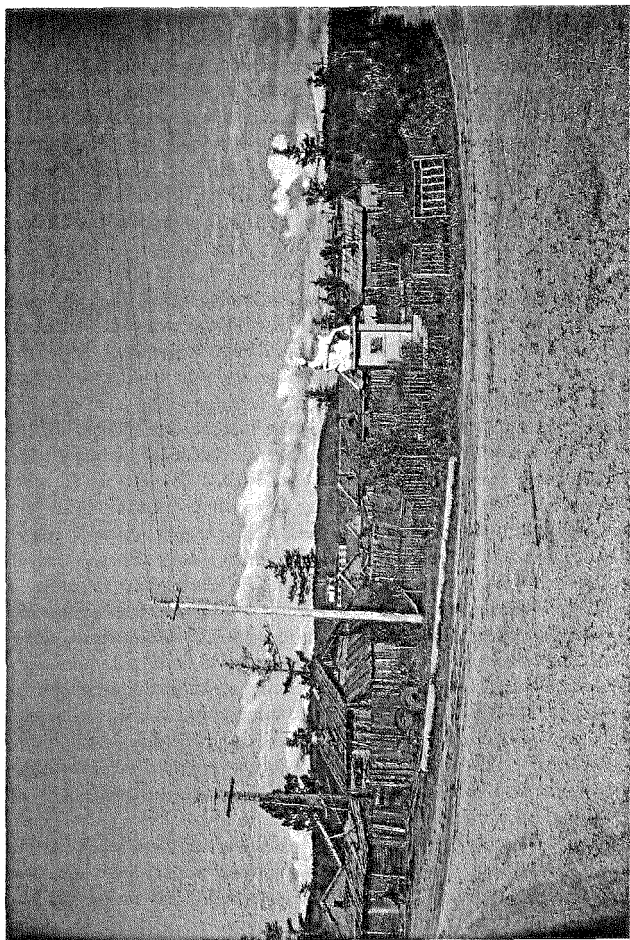


Figure 5.1 Olgya settlement (photograph: H. Beach).

the herders and the state, but the main principles of management in the sense of possession, use, responsibility and control have been continued.

State Appropriation

In 1967, the Chinese state appropriated approximately a thousand head of reindeer, but it was not until very much later that herding as a major income generator through the development of the antler industry was promoted under state control. State appropriation of the reindeer in this case meant that all of them were bought by the state at 20 yuan/head. However, as they remained in the possession of their previous owners/herders, this forced 'sale' could not be so readily distinguished from a form of development aid, especially since at that time the main family sustenance came from income generated by the hunt. Agriculture was also introduced to the Olguya Evenki after the appropriation of their deer, as only a few family members were required to attend the deer in the surrounding camps. The rest of the families were able to remain in the settlement where the children attended school. However camp life could at times be attractive. A reindeer holder might need and appreciate the help of a family member who would be more than pleased to stay at a relatively well-supplied camp. Under the production-team system all income was to be turned over to the team, who conveyed it to the government, which in turn distributed payment to the producers.

So I queried my informants. If the deer remained in the care of their original owners, and antler production had not yet been sufficiently developed to bring any real profit to the state, what was it that the state 'bought' when it took over the reindeer, and why was this done? The answer, confirmed by all, was simply that it was done for ideological reasons, both because the state believed all property in a socialist system should be held collectively and because it was intent on raising China's minority peoples to a more 'advanced' state of development. The ideological foundation of the Olguya herders' economy should not be underestimated today either, although this foundation has undergone change in relation to the so-called 'socialized market' form. Despite the development of the antler industry in the 1980s, its profits are still nowhere near sufficient to pay for the food, housing, transportation, schooling, medical care and other support given to the Olguya community.

Mr Turong, former head of the Olguya settlement at the time of state appropriation in 1967, recalled that during this appropriation period the herders also got a salary from 'the work team' on an 8-point scale depending on how dutifully or 'hard' they had worked (according to the daily judgment of the work team leader). With 0.7 yuan per point, the maximum possible pay was 5.6 yuan per day. Since the state now 'owned' the deer, any antler cropping performed by the herders was not going to (legally) bring them any individual profits. Nor had the state at first invested in an antler processing plant capable of treating, drying, slicing, packaging and exporting its antler resource. Whatever salary a herder might have made per day had no relation to the number of reindeer in his possession.

Of course it is impossible to evaluate the importance of this point-scaled salary without knowing the purchasing power of the funds at the time, but even this is of no great significance in an economy based to a large extent on aid and subsidies

to goods provided. I was, however, told that it was like a minimum wage – never sufficient to live on alone from purely market purchases without state benefits. Numerous goods such as rice and milk were made cheaper for the Evenki in their village than for the regular population outside.

Reform

In an effort to increase antler profits by inducing private initiative, the state introduced a major reform in 1984. The reindeer were redistributed on paper if not in fact among the approximately twenty herding families, who could use the reindeer for transport and had full control over the subsistence resources provided by the reindeer.² These resources consisted mostly of milk. But the antler crop, which had by 1984 become lucrative, remained under state ownership. A specified household head from each family signed a contract, to be renewed annually, with the newly established Antler Company, agreeing to care for the deer and hand over the entire antler crop to the company. The contract herder was to obtain 30 yuan per reindeer per year and an additional sum for each newborn calf. On rare occasions the slaughter of a deer for its meat and hide might be required. Herders were not expected to go hungry when their hunting proved futile for a longer period; if they were in desperate need of warm clothing, they could slaughter deer for hides. However, as a rule, the alternative less damaging to state interests was to be chosen. For example, deer that were least useful in antler production, or were weak or sickly, were to be slaughtered, and a report was to be filed in all cases, and the slaughter justified.

Each year all those involved in herding work, and most importantly the household reindeer herding contractors, convened with administrators from the Antler Company and the local government in a Herding Council. The Herding Council was a particularly vital institution in the arrangement, as it allowed for the active participation of the herders in management decisions. It is here that herding-related issues were negotiated, for example, the antler profit split, possible payments per head, provision costs, service needs, inheritance issues involving reindeer, applications for new contracts, and reassignment of reindeer to create new herds or to remove deer from a contract holder who was unable to meet the obligations of his contract. If the contractors and the (other) herders did not think that someone was performing their job adequately, or if some form of service was lacking, they could bring this up at the meeting. The local government then considered the recommendations of the council.

By the early 1990s, the herders had lobbied successfully in the Herding Council to increase their profits by exchanging with the company some of the set payment per reindeer for a cut of the antler profits. The initial arrangement called for 60 per cent of the antler profits to go to the herders, and 40 per cent to the state. From the

2. Various explanations were given for the formula of redistribution. One informant claimed that it was based on 'pre-revolution' family herd sizes, but all others denied this. Most agreed that it was a matter of dividing the existing stock among the existing families, but that some consideration was also given to the relative sizes of these families, the bigger families gaining some more animals.

company's perspective this was also desirable, as it provided each contractor with a real incentive to crop all of their deer. To maintain a high incentive for the herders to guard their animals diligently against predators (commonly hunters interested in stealing reindeer antlers, tails and penises) and to foster herd increase, the state company continued to pay set amounts per deer, now 15 yuan per deer and 40 yuan for each newborn calf. It was up to the contract holder how much of this profit trickled down to family members who had helped with the herding work.

Only those of 'Yakut Evenki' heritage were permitted to hold reindeer as a registered householder with an Antler Company contract. A few non-Evenki who had married into the group and dedicated themselves to the profession were also granted a conditional right to herd reindeer, but they could not become householders with company contracts. There will be occasion to look more closely at such exceptions and the character of these contracts, for they are highly revealing of the system of partitioned rights and multiple holders. The point to acknowledge now is that conditions for the Olguya Evenki in 1997 at least were considered in effect highly subsidized and privileged; their lives were by no means easy, but from the perspective of the Han people in the surrounding countryside, they were thought to be downright pampered. Administrators at all levels were sure to point out to the visiting anthropologist the long list of special benefits accorded the Olguya Evenki in the name of Chinese national minority policies, and indeed their statements were later corroborated by my herding informants. These are the only reindeer herders in China, and I was told that the Chinese government wanted to demonstrate its consideration for this unique livelihood and for this tiny minority people.

Special benefits accorded the Olguya Evenki include prioritized positions of employment in a local timber factory. The factory provides the Antler Company with an annual subsidy of 50,000 yuan, and it is the company that provides food and services to its herders in the field and assistance when it comes to weddings, sickness or burials. The herders are allowed to build fires in the forest for cooking, while others are not. Any Evenki male herder over eighteen years of age is given an extra grant of 36 yuan per month to compensate for uncomfortable working conditions. Herders are able to purchase certain staple provisions at a reduced price. Their purchase of firearms for hunting is highly subsidized by the state. The children of herding families are given free education, 21 yuan per month for ten years of school costs, and a dormitory place should their parents be in the field. The elderly receive geriatric care. As noted, the forestry division pays herders for guarding against forest fires. Each nuclear herding family is provided with 56 square metres of free housing from the state (after 1985, a brick house rather than a wooden one). In sum, the herding families obtained economic support and services from many different levels of government, including the central government, the central committee for ethnic questions, and the administration of the Inner Mongolian province.

Another point that causes Han people to consider the Evenki herders privileged and to seek marriage partners among them is their exemption, as a small ethnic minority dwelling in a remote area, from normal family planning regulations. The usual rule is one child per family in the cities, but two children in the country. For the Olguya Evenki apparently no regulation was enforced at all.

Deer were not earmarked prior to the reform. Thereafter, however, each contractor had their own earmark registered with the company, and the deer were marked according to their contractors. One effect of this change was an increased mobility of family herding units and their deer. Previously, herders in the same camp were usually related, whereas after the reform unrelated friends could join forces and work together with their animals in the same camp. Should conflict arise between contractors in the camp, one or more could simply move with their animals to another camp. In the past, it was unheard of for a herder to move between camps.

Among the Evenki, the contract holders, who were not necessarily those performing the actual herding work, obviously stood to benefit most from the reform. We did encounter herders who were not contractors and who expressed considerable dissatisfaction with their lot. They felt that they were doing most of the work – especially the more strenuous and least desirable jobs (isolated for long periods in the forest) – and that money that trickled down to them from the respective family contractors whose herds they helped to manage was indeed no more than a trickle. Then again, with employment opportunities scarce and camp life relatively well provisioned by the company, these herders found alternatives to be rare and even less attractive. While there seemed to be no general pattern of exploitation of the non-contract herders' labour – as concrete forms and amounts of 'appreciation' vary significantly from family to family – it is quite common for non-contract herders to seek their own contracts. An application is made to the Herding Council, but there is little prospect of a new contract unless the company feels confident that the antlers will still be efficiently cropped and the existing corps of contractors is willing to part with some deer in order to assemble at least a minimal start-up herd for the new contractor candidate. Success as a contractor, however, from the company's perspective is predicated on the contractor's ability to ensure the necessary labour force, usually with reliance on family members. This is rarely possible for a young, unmarried man, and even less so for an unmarried woman.

In 1997, the number of contract herding households in Olguya was twenty-two, while the herders numbered thirty-four. It should not be assumed, however, that all twelve non-contract herders necessarily sought their own contracts. Some were not enamoured of a lifelong herding career. Nor should it be assumed that the entire herding labour force consisted of only thirty-four herders. Other family members, even children on school breaks, might spend time helping in the camp sporadically. From the contractor's perspective, fielding the necessary labour force and keeping the workers satisfied with limited means could be quite problematic. Apparently the antler cropping effort, although prepared in cooperation with the contractors, was not itself performed by the latter or their families alone; for this there were too many deer and too few herders. Rather, this was a task performed in conjunction with the company's hired hands, and it was the company that organized and paid for their transportation and upkeep throughout the job. Cropping must be done at a certain time for best quality, so that the work period of about a month is intense if all the deer are to be cropped.³

3. The deer antlers are cropped with handsaws.

An interesting method for a contractor to show 'appreciation' of herding labour, I learned, might be for the contractor to permit a temporary herd hand to cut a secondary crop of antlers from some of the deer. Not infrequently a reindeer will generate a secondary antler growth after the first cropping, and while it is usually small and deformed, this growth can still bring a profit. However, I discovered that the company strictly prohibits secondary cropping. Not only should all antler material belong to the company, but the company even outlaws secondary cropping for its own sake; it is thought to injure the deer and possibly impair antler growth in the following season.

It is worth noting that with improved professional processing and marketing of the antler crop, profits from this business grew considerably. As reindeer antler began to bring higher prices, however, the concomitant instances of poaching caused losses to both herders and the company, and the need to keep reindeer under strict control and surveillance rapidly increased. Herding informants spoke with extreme indignation about the all-too-common occurrence of discovering the bodies of deer killed for no other reason than to cut off the tail and the penis for sale as inducers of sexual potency.⁴ The deer also had to be protected from falling victim to traps put out by hunters without the intention of harming them, but deadly to them nonetheless. Constant intensive management of such prized and vulnerable reindeer property is costly and demands a high labour investment. It also leads to a high degree of tameness. During the bare-ground period the smoke from smouldering fires made by the herders afforded their deer relief from insects. With the deer gathered 'in the hand', the continuation of traditional regular milking of select cows was an easy matter and added substantially to family food rations. The deer were so tame that fencing was used in some of the camps – not to keep the deer enclosed but to keep them outside the family tents.

In effect, neither state appropriation nor the ensuing reform succeeded in removing the deer from clan possession and subsistence use. Unfortunately there is to my knowledge no detailed ethnographic account of traditional clan rights and forms of internal reindeer distribution among this group of Evenki. Hence the contemporary situation can hardly be compared with the past on a point-by-point basis. Yet although Chinese state authorities had little concern for a smooth continuity with the past, neither were they devoted to upsetting aspects of it for no purpose. The herders emphasized repeatedly that with only minor exceptions the deer had not been redistributed, and (from the deer's perspective at least) had enjoyed the same daily herding routines. Even as the state grew interested in taking possession of the antler crop, it saw no reason to quash clan or family relations to the deer if ideological and economic goals could still be met. Both the state and the herders alike saw great benefit in the reorganization of rights and responsibilities occasioned by the reform. Now herders were motivated to work diligently

4. It was quite common to find in Chinese homes the penis from any of a variety of reindeer species in a glass jar immersed in alcohol and herbs. Consumption of only a small amount of this alcohol is thought to increase male sexual potency. My informants were grieved to learn that in Sweden the penises from the thousands of reindeer slaughtered annually are discarded. A reindeer tail, used for similar purposes, could bring as much as 300 yuan.



Figure 5.2 Reindeer camp (photograph: H. Beach).

for the antler crop. Most importantly, whereas in the past if reindeer disappeared, herders were far less inclined to bother looking for them; now after the reform, such a loss held a greater and quite major private component for a family and would elicit a search and better guarding in the future. Should a clan or family prove unable to provide the necessary householders and contractors or labour force to take responsibility for the welfare of their allotted deer, deliberations in the Herding Council with representatives from the company and the administration as well as all the contractors could lead to the deer being reassigned. Then again, should a clan or family produce members eager and able to become contract herders and in need of employment, the same council might be called upon to consider an adjustment of distribution. Hence the interests of the two main holder entities, the families and the state Antler Company, are negotiated. It is here, in the midst of these deliberations and the relevant justifications for various deer distributions that one can most readily discern what I have termed the system of partitioned rights and multiple holders.

The reform of 1984 (far more than later revisions) brought with it the most radical changes and improvements in the lives of the herders. With the establishment of the Antler Company and the local Forest Factory to provide money and infrastructure to the herding enterprise, living conditions for the herding families were enhanced. Movement between the settlement of Olguya and the camps, which would previously have taken a week by reindeer transport, became fast and easy by company motor vehicle. With settlement, money, and access to outside supply lines, the Evenki economy became enmeshed in that of the market. Salaries, a share in the antler profits, and numerous benefits to herders and their families put the Olguya Evenki in an enviable position.

However, these developments also had a downside. In fact, some non-Evenki argued that the 'overly pampered position' of those in the Olguya settlement even proved detrimental to the Evenki themselves. Problems of alcohol and violence in the settlement and out in the camps stemmed, it was claimed, from policies that ensured privileged treatment and priority employment despite poor performance. Many youngsters came to be locked in a situation whereby their only hope of employment was within the limited domain of the herding/company structure. Herders grew prone to alleviating weeks of isolated and sometimes solitary surveillance of the reindeer in the forest with overconsumption of alcohol. Before, alcohol consumption was strictly regulated. After the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), however, the regulations were relaxed, while the growing road network facilitated the spread of alcohol everywhere. Paradoxically, alcohol was at times considered to be one of the 'perks' of the herding profession and was brought to the camps, often in large quantities, as a gift. Some of my informants considered alcohol-related problems and violence to be prime reasons for what they claimed to be a decline in the Olguya Evenki population.

The assertion that affirmative policies for minority groups bring with them debilitating addictions to artificial social subsidies can be heard regularly and not without substantiating evidence. Yet, if the ill effects of affirmative policies are to be overcome by the elimination of such policies, then the injustices they were originally designed to counteract will appear all the more blatant and could well result in conditions more debilitating still. There appears to be no easy formula or degree of affirmative policies

that would stand free of critique for being either too great or too small. Distinctions between right and privilege, and between compensation and subsidy, become blurred (cf. Beach 2004). It is not my purpose to pass judgment on the value of these affirmative policies, but the invocation of them in local debate in support of or in opposition to the conditions for the Yakut Evenki illuminates their social situation.

In 1990 (some informants claimed it was 1992 or even 1995) a revision of the formula for antler profit distribution was enacted, which increased the herders' share with the company from a 60/40 to a 70/30 per cent split. At the same time the regular salary for the herders was scratched entirely. This was considered part of a national policy trend towards a so-called 'socialized market' economy, whereby the means of production would remain in collective state hands, but profits for the workers would depend on their individual initiative and capacity to work.

For the year 1997, I was informed that approximately 350 kg of antler had been produced, that the price obtained by the company varied from 800 to 1,000 yuan per kg, and that therefore the company had earned about 350,000 yuan from the antler crop that year. The previous year had yielded earnings of about 280,000 yuan. This meant that 70 per cent of these sums would be 245,000 yuan and 196,000 yuan respectively, to be divided among twenty-two contractors. These contractors (household heads for families of various sizes) hold in fact different numbers of reindeer, the variability of which was initially influenced by some consideration of family size, but has since been subject to the vicissitudes of fortune and the increase of good care. However, if we average out these herd-size differences, the average antler-based income would be about 9,000–11,000 yuan per contractor per year (or about 1,000 USD) – a substantial income in this context.

Negotiations of Management

When I asked how the council would deal with a case in which a family could no longer care properly for the deer in its charge, I was told that relatives, most likely the children in the case of a deceased or disabled contractor, would take over the contract. It was for them, the heirs, to decide, but only one of them, usually the eldest, could be the contractor. The deer could be split among the siblings, but only one of them could hold the contract. Apparently it is most common upon marriage and the start of a new nuclear family to apply for a separate family contract, and even then it is the general rule that all members of the same extended family adhere to one contract held by the family head. Hence a single camp composed of a number of smaller nuclear family units might still have only one contractor. Then again, it might have a number of different contractors if some of these smaller family units belonged to different extended families.

Given this basic background we can proceed to examine some actual cases illustrative of this system of partitioned rights and multiple holders.

Case 1: Gushulan

The Gushulan camp was one of the four main camps of the Olgya herders in 1997 during my visit, although it was composed of only one small family, an Evenki

woman and her Han husband, Mr Gushulan. Both had children from previous marriages. Mrs Gushulan had studied through the senior middle school, worked at a nursery school, then the timber factory and later a clothing factory before taking up reindeer herding. She had learnt to herd from her parents and other relatives during her childhood in the mountains, but did not start herding deer of her own until she had married someone who was eager to help her. The opportunity to acquire deer arose when her mother died and there was no other heir to look after them. She stated that they were family property and more important to her than regular employment. She was also intent on keeping them in the family. However, because Mr Gushulan was not Evenki, he could not be a contractor;⁵ instead she held the contract, but Mr Gushulan did most of the work with the deer. They had no children together, and since Mrs Gushulan had a daughter from a previous marriage, it was this daughter who would rightfully inherit the deer. Nevertheless, as it was also the internal affair of each family as to how they distributed their wealth, the Gushulans gave a good deal of their reindeer earnings to Mr Gushulan's brothers. Were Mrs Gushulan to die, I was informed that it would be up to her relatives and not the company to decide who should inherit her deer. With her family's blessing, Mr Gushulan might be permitted to take over herding the deer (i.e. use them for milk, obtain certain forms of herder support, and most probably be given compensation by the family contractor for his labour), but he would not hold ultimate control over the distribution of any aspect of their partitioned rights as property. The family could however reassign the deer to someone else as it pleased (assuming the company had no cause for concern about a diminished antler crop).

Case 2: A Non-Evenki Contractor

I learned of an exception to the rule that only Evenkis can become contractors. This was the case of a man of Russian ethnic origin, who had been permitted to become a contractor on the vague grounds that he had once been married to an Evenki woman. But how could he become a contractor if Mr Gushulan could not, I queried. The explanation given was that no Evenki family member wished to herd the deer that had been put in the care of this Russian man. (Such deer were referred to as 'loose deer'.) Interestingly, after this man had worked as a contractor for many years with these reindeer, one of his ex-wife's heirs decided to take up herding, and the deer were 'given back'. The Russian man lost his contract.

Case 3: Jobless Youth Requests Contract

A jobless Evenki youth who wanted to become a reindeer contractor had his petition supported by the local government council. The head of the Herding Council had gone so far as to exact pledges from family deer holders that each would give the young man some reindeer stock. But when he came to collect the deer, the deer holders were reluctant to hand them over, making him unable to become a

5. The Gushulan herding unit is plagued by other formal restrictions as well. It is only Evenki herding men who are given 36 yuan per month in support. Mrs Gushulan is Evenki but female, and Mr Gushulan is male but non-Evenki.

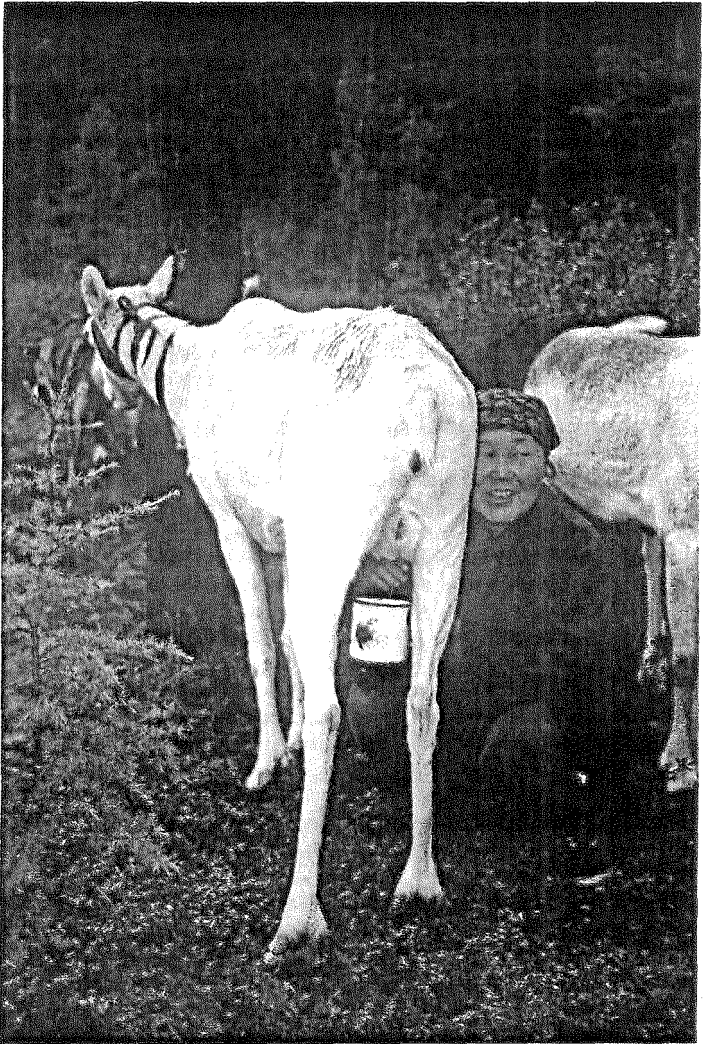


Figure 5.3 Evenki woman milking a reindeer (photograph: H. Beach).

householder. Hence, it seems that while the Herding Council, where state company representatives and local government officials also hold seats, can try to facilitate the installation of new contractors and re-allocations of deer, collective state antler rights cannot interfere with the reindeer-allocation affairs of the families, as long as the deer receive the necessary care and their antlers are cropped.

Case 4: Sale of Deer and Import of Russian Deer

Since the early period of state appropriation, the number of Evenki deer has remained more or less the same. Now that antler profits are considerable, and herding has become a more vital occupation than hunting for the Olguya Evenki, it is understandable that the Herding Council, and especially the Antler Company, wish to increase total reindeer stock. Contract holders were never permitted to kill a deer for food unless it was injured, or there was a grave emergency. Were a deer to be sold by its contract holder, the profit would have to be shared with the Antler Company. The minimum selling price for a deer was 5,000 yuan (prohibitively expensive for most).

Moreover there was concern that the small and isolated deer population (only about one thousand head) would suffer the ill effects of inbreeding. Therefore, in 1996, with funds granted at a high 'state' level, twenty-nine Russian reindeer were purchased dearly for 600,000 yuan and imported to Olguya. These 'Russian reindeer' belonged to the local government and were kept together under careful observation at a veterinary station not far from the settlement.⁶ The Antler Company was not involved in any way. For mating purposes, thirty Evenki deer were assembled from the different camps and brought to the station. The contract holders of the deer selected for breeding were to be given 2,000 yuan for each deer, but to save money it was decided instead that the contract holders would be compensated with the genetically improved specimens resulting from the breeding effort. The herding holders of the Evenki deer would naturally stand to gain from this infusion of new genes into their reindeer stock, but they did not seem to be major players in any of the decisions related to the breeding programme.

Summary

The livelihood of the Olguya Evenki has been transformed from a hunting base with small-scale herding for milk and transport, to a herding base sustained by market-based antler cropping, supplemented by continued milking and hunting, but dominated by minority policies and accompanying aid initiatives. The state appropriation in 1967 affected the lives of the Evenki to only a minor degree and meant nothing with respect to how the deer were distributed, herded or utilized. It was primarily

6. Their caretakers at the veterinary station were understandably nervous about the security of these expensive Russian imports. Were one of the Russian deer to be lost to a poacher desiring its tail or penis, or killed by a hunter's trap, it would mean the loss of 20,000 yuan as well as its genetic breeding value. The government was loath simply to distribute these valuable newcomers among the camps. Breeding was therefore to be controlled at the station, and later generations to be located among the Evenki herding camps. At least this was the plan in 1997, soon after their arrival.

an exercise of ideological principle. Even the reform of 1984 brought no immediate or necessary change in the actual placement of reindeer in the different clan/family-based camps. The reform, however, did entail the elevation of freely mobile nuclear families to independent holder/contractors; clan ties were not extinguished, but they no longer had an iron hold on the reindeer. Individual householders received their own reindeer earmarks. The reform did promote the careful guarding of the entire herd once the poaching of deer for sexual potency products had increased. It was also this same growing access to the outside and the legal market for such products that led to the establishment of the Antler Company. Services, aid funds, and the sharing of antler-profit funds did indeed bring important changes to the lives of the herding families. Settlement in Olguya was a profound change. Yet, despite all of the changes occasioned by this system of partitioned rights and multiple holders, certain basic forms of reindeer subsistence use, actual herding practice, relations of inheritance and control of reindeer, and herder-to-herder relations of power and authority remained almost unaltered despite being layered with new categorizations.

As indicated by the cases above, what I have called the system of partitioned rights and multiple holders observed in Olguya is far more than a matter of two parties, the private subsistence users and the corporate antler-product manufacturers, vying for resource control and for profit. There is a decided cooperative and mutually dependent aspect encompassing the whole. The entire Olguya community, including the Antler Company, the timber industry, the service infrastructure and administration, is keenly concerned for the well-being of the herders. While the herders milk the deer in one of the oldest traditional forms of subsistence use, they are also highly engaged in and benefactors of a market-oriented antler firm. In fact, the former could never be maintained without the latter.

Postscript

Five years after this research was conducted in Olguya, an article from the *Xinhua News Agency* published on the Internet on 15 March 2002 by ChinaOnline⁷ announced that the township of Aoluguya (Olguya) was soon to be relocated from the mountains to a new settlement built for its Evenki inhabitants at the end of a railroad line in Mangui. This, of course, makes it all the more questionable whether the reindeer herding livelihood can continue in China (Nentwig 2003). Yet, this same Evenki group had previously been hosted temporarily in Mangui before the construction of their accommodation in Olguya, and it is not certain that their form of forest herding cannot survive in the environment afforded in the Mangui area. Then again, it is likely that reindeer herding as it comes to be practised in Mangui, with less isolation accompanied by the probability of increased poaching and the need for stricter guarding of the deer, will move increasingly towards a reindeer-farming model. The subsistence aspect of the dual-ownership system described here is likely to dwindle further. According to the Chinese authorities, the herders will benefit from closer links to modern infrastructure. While this may be so, the tiny group of Chinese reindeer-herding Evenki will surely find it far more difficult to

7. See Cultural Survival Quarterly, Spring 2003, p. 32 for a printed English version.

survive as a socially and culturally distinct entity. In the end, these closer ties may well be the conclusion of their unique story.

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Who Owns The Stock?

Collective and Multiple Property Rights in Animals

Edited by Anatoly M. Khazanov
and Günther Schlee



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