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HEADLINE: Amid the herd, simple humanity

BYLINE: Mark Turin

BODY:

Mark Turin gets an intimate view of people surviving the harshest of climates

Reindeer People: Living with Animals and Spirits in Siberia By Piers Vitebsky HarperCollins, 464pp £ 20.00 and £ 7.99 ISBN 0 00 713362 6 and 713363 4

Piers Vitebsky heads anthropology and Russian northern studies at the Scott Polar Research Institute at Cambridge University. After researching shamanism among the aboriginal Sora of the Indian state of Orissa, Vitebsky turned his attention to the nomadic reindeer herders of the Siberian Arctic, just as the Soviet system was on its last legs and perestroika was making remote reindeer-herding communities accessible to outsiders for the first time since the 1930s. Reindeer People is the story of the Eveny, the community with whom the author lived, travelled and built a lasting relationship of trust. Unlike other ethno-travelogues in circulation, in which the trials and tribulations of the anthropologist grappling with a native culture take centre stage, Vitebsky is charmingly modest about the physical and emotional challenges he endured.

Reindeer are the fundamental organising framework of Eveny society, as they are for many communities of northeastern Siberia. This rapport between human and animal is so central that Vitebsky believes Eveny culture to be "founded on the use of animals as metaphors for relations between humans".

Rather like the anthropologically popular Nuer, who worshipped, wore and ate their cattle, the indigenous peoples of the Russian Arctic have an intense, if asymmetrical, partnership with the reindeer. While the Eveny need their reindeer - in fact in ever greater numbers as the Soviet juggernaut transformed their system of humble nomadism into a giant open-air meat factory - the reindeer do not need their herders. The relationship cannot be called symbiotic: if given an opportunity, all but the most domesticated transport reindeer would run off with a passing wild herd. Vitebsky's vivid description of the autumn reindeer herd, which is controlled "through the selective removal of antlers, the crushing of blood supply to the testicles and the slaughter of weak animals" leaves no question that humanity has the upper hand.

Reindeer People is a narrative of survival, both of the hardy reindeer and of their stoic herders. In a region where winter temperatures regularly fall to -70C, and in a social context where accidents, murder and suicide account for one third of all deaths, the Eveny's survival at the outer extreme of human endurance is extraordinary, as is the author's ability to accompany them and share their lives. In a particularly candid moment, Vitebsky admits his absolute dependence on those he has ostensibly come to study. "It was the first time in my life I had been alone in an environment where I was incapable of surviving on my own." In his capacity as an "embedded" ethnographer, Vitebsky provides the occasional charming aside on the manner by which anthropologists adjust and adapt in the field. In one incident, he describes throwing a capful of vodka into the cooking stove before offering the bottle to his host, a local practice known as "feeding the fire" that is observed in all herder tents. Intrigued, the old host said to the anthropologist: "How interesting! We have that custom, too!"

Despite pockets of resistance to Soviet productivity plans and signs of cultural resilience among the Eveny, the underlying sadness of Vitebsky's commentary is never far away. Reindeer People documents, in meticulous detail, the history of the Eveny's forced adaptation to the Soviet system, which in many cases achieved its stated goals of converting the native northern peoples to a sedentary way of life. The "denomadisation" of women was heralded as a particular communist success, with women and children settling in villages while life on the forested plains became almost entirely the domain of men. This separation of the sexes led to the destruction of nomadic family life. The devastation of the physical livelihood (reindeer) and the undoing of the spiritual health of the community (shamanism) assisted in the subjugation of entire communities.

"In the great Soviet project of transforming the consciousness of the Siberian native peoples, the overthrow of the shaman and the devaluation of the reindeer reinforced one another."

The best anthropology of this more classical genre manages to tease out the thread of common humanity between the reader and apparently vastly different peoples from far away. Vitebsky does this masterfully, whether it be through showing the kindness and tolerance extended to him by his Eveny hosts as he learns the ropes or the apparent oddity of Siberian reindeer herders living in tents in subzero temperatures reading Algebra for Beginners. The chapter that documents a period when Vitebsky brought his family to an Eveny reindeer camp is particularly moving. The anthropologist is anxious about the risks of "bringing together people from two separate parts of one's life" for a summer, and perhaps "more concerned with the effect on our hosts than on my family".

An issue that remains unresolved in this elegantly written if lengthy narrative is that of the intended readership. It will be difficult to market Reindeer People as accessible and popular anthropology, in the spirit of Margaret Mead or, more recently, Nigel Barley, because the author devotes so many pages to the economic minutiae of Soviet reindeer production. Nor can the tale be read as a novel. Perhaps Vitebsky has accomplished what many anthropologists aspire to: writing a book for himself as well as for the community with whom he has developed a close relationship. The author talks of returning translated chapters of the book to his friends in Siberia and describes their amused reactions to reading about themselves. This sort of feedback, together with the role reversal of a herder coming to stay with Vitebsky and his family in Cambridge, make for a uniquely unvoyeuristic and candid exploration of the relationships between an anthropologist and the people whom he starts out studying but comes to love.

Mark Turin is co-director, Digital Himalaya Project, department of social anthropology, Cambridge University.

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