



# Community Report

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**Arctic Domus**

 UNIVERSITY OF  
ABERDEEN

**ANGUS PELHAM BURN**  
NORTHERN RESEARCH AWARD

**LEVERHULME**  
TRUST

**What does it mean to study human-animal relations in places where landscapes are seen as sentient and autonomous persons?**



## **1. Introduction**

### **1.a Why Okinskii Raion?**

The Eastern Saian Mountains have long occupied a special position within the canon of Siberian ethnography. Russian and foreign scholars alike have taken great interest in this region because of its historical cultural multi-dimensionality. Since long before the formation of its current national and international borders, the Altai-Saian region has been a birthplace for multiple cultural innovations that resulted from encounters between diverse groups passing through this intersection of Inner Asian steppe lands with Eurasian Taiga. Archaeologists have come here to seek the roots of Siberian shamanism, claiming the centre of Asia as 'homeland' of a form of proto-shamansim, understood by some as the earliest known form of this ancient practice. Likewise, linguists have frequented the area to reconstruct a proto-Turkic origin for contemporary Turkic languages, and ethnographers and geographers have come here since before the turn of the century to reconstruct what has been considered the world's first successful domestication of reindeer. This community report summarizes in very brief terms the doctoral field work of Alexander Oehler, which builds on these previous studies, while being the first English-language ethnography of contemporary Sojots.

### **1.a.i An Understudied Part of the Eastern Saian Mountains**

South Central Siberia, and even the Eastern Saian Mountains, are a relatively well researched region, having drawn many explorers and scholars over the centuries. However, most of the ethnographers who came focused either on Eastern Tyva, Tofalaria, the Tunka Valley, or on the area around Lake Khovsgol in northern Mongolia. Few scholars ever ventured into what is today the Okinskii Rai'on of the Republic of Buriatiia. Naturalist P.S. Pallas (1772), ethnologist M.A. Castren (1856), geographer G.N. Potanin (1881), ethnographers A.V. Adrianov (1888), turkologist N.F. Katanov (1891), turkologist V.V. Radlov (1893), and ethnographer F. Kon (1899), explorer D. Carruthers (1914), and zoologist Ø. Olsen (1915), all bypassed Oka. Among the few scholar-explorers to visit Oka were German ornithologist G. Radde (1863) and young Russian geographer P.A. Kropotkin (1867), neither of whom produced extensive ethnographic accounts. The first scholar to visit specifically Oka-Sojots was ethnographer Berggard Eduardovich Petri (1884-1937). In 1926 he conducted a survey of Sojot settlements of which survives only a preliminary report. Finally, in 2002, ethnographer Larisa Pavlinskaia wrote the first comprehensive account of contemporary Oka-Sojots in Russian.

### **1.b What is Multi-species Ethnography?**

Much ethnographic attention in the Eastern Saians has been paid to reindeer herding practices. This makes good sense, as hunting with the aid of reindeer as a means of transportation has been one of the most unique characteristics of the region. Scholars such as G.M. Levin and G.M. Vasil'evich (1951), and especially S.I. Vainshtein (1970) have produced highly insightful studies on the origins of reindeer domestication in the area. However, this focus on reindeer often marginalizes the importance of other species to indigenous households of the Eastern Saians. People always relied on multiple species for food, shelter, and transportation; among them being dogs, fish, and horses. Social anthropologists are increasingly interested in the roles that animals play in human societies, and in how the history of humans is interwoven with the animals we share landscapes with, whether these animals belong to the human household or not. The aim of this study was to ask: How do contemporary Sojots approach reindeer, horses, yak, sheep, dogs, fish, and wolves in a landscape that is understood as sacred?

#### **1.b.i Understanding Sojot and Tofa Human-animal Relations**

Contemporary Sojot and Tofa relations to animals of the household and of the taiga emerge from a shared history of mobile hunting, aided by reindeer trained for riding. Both Sojots and Tofas share ancestral ties pointing to Eastern Tyva, and with it to the iconic Saian symbiosis between humans and reindeer. However, according to B.E. Petri (1926), for Sojots the economic importance of reindeer waned around the turn of the century, as more and more Sojot men took Buriat wives. This change was accompanied by Sojot transitions in life style and a shift from reindeer to yak and horse breeding. As new species populate the household, residential preferences, optimal seasonal migrations, and elevation preferences in the landscape changed as well. Although Tofas are reported to have had regular contact with Russian settlers as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the decline in the importance of reindeer in Tofalaria came much later, and for many Tofa hunters reindeer remain an important asset. For Sojots, contemporary

human-animal relations must be understood in relation to species' preferences within the landscape, as well as to the cosmological assumptions held by shamanist, Inner Asian mountain cult, and Buddhist perspectives of landscapes. In Tofalaria this is similar, with the exception of an early Russian Orthodox presence and an absence of Buddhism.

### **2. Objectives**

Following an initial review of available ethnographic literature for southern Siberia, it was established that there existed an informational gap for Oka, both historically and presently. Although scholars had barely touched on the depth and breadth of local uses of hunted and herded animal species, existing literature suggested that terms such as 'wild' and 'tame' might not adequately describe the ways in which indigenous residents approached their relations with animals, given their larger underlying cosmological assumptions. The focus of this study thus became three-fold: Firstly, it sought to provide an ethnographic counter-narrative to predominantly archaeological studies on animal domestication, originating largely in the equatorial hemisphere. Secondly, it aimed to study human-animal relations in a context where people viewed landscapes not only as responsive mechanisms, but as entities imbued with autonomous personhood in possession of a subjective point of view. And, thirdly, the study sought to examine human-animal relations in line with the cultural borrowing that has gone on between shamanism, the mountain cult, and the history of Buddhism in Oka.

#### **2.a Motivation, Funding, and Partners**

This study was part of a larger five-year project entitled "Arctic Domus," headed by Professor David G. Anderson at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. The project investigated how people and animals today, and in the past, build sustainable communities around the circumpolar Arctic. The fieldwork conducted in Oka constituted the southernmost research location amongst nine other sites, including Norway, the Iamal Peninsula, North Enisei, and the Zabaikal'e region. Other field sites were located in Alaska, Alberta and the Northwest Territories of Canada, as well as in the Shetland islands of Scotland.

Funding for Arctic Domus came from a grant of the European Research Council (ERC). The project collaborated with many partner universities, among them the University of Oslo and the University of Tromsø (Norway), the University of Alberta and the University of Saskatchewan (Canada), and Irkutsk National Research Technical University (Russia). In Oka, the project was aided by the administration of the Municipal Formation "Okinskii District" of the Republic of Buriatia.

### **3. Methodology and Field Sites**

#### **3.a Ethnography (Field Work)**

Ethnographers of the past and present have used participant observation in combination with open-ended interviews to collect data. In participant observation, the ethnographer observes cultural practices, sometimes by actively taking part in them. Detailed observations are then recorded in field notes, illustrations, and/or photographs and video for later analysis. Ethnographers also conduct interviews with select cultural specialists on topics of their expertise. This study adhered to these ethnographic principles by paying close attention to the daily practices of Oka householders and their interactions with animals, while pursuing informed consent from all key participants. Where possible, the researcher aided in practical tasks (such as horse shoeing and stable cleaning). In order to gain an in-depth understanding of Soiot life ways, the ethnographer visited Soiot Somon during four field work periods (2013: September-November; 2014: January-March, April-July, and September. Extensive archival research in Irkutsk, Ulan-Ude, Kyren, and Orlik was also conducted as part of the first three field work periods.

##### **3.a.i Sorok**

The village of Sorok was chosen as a hub from which to conduct research because of its importance as a centre for Soiot culture. From here it was possible to follow the seasonal herding and hunting activities of over ten transhumant regional households, occurring around their respective summer and winter pastures along Upper Sorok and Tustuk Rivers. In the Sorok area, the researcher paid special attention to yak herding, the breeding and keeping of Mongolian cows and hybrid cattle, as well

as to horse breeding, sheep keeping, the use of dogs, and to fishing techniques. As all of these species regularly encounter predators (with the exception of fish), special attention was paid to local knowledge of wolves. Because reindeer were not being herded in the Sorok area at the time of the study, attention was paid to local memories of the revitalization of reindeer herding in the late 1990s, and a series of abandoned Soviet-era and post-Soviet reindeer camps was visited to better understand the role of reindeer in multi-species households.

##### **3.a.ii Alygdzher**

In September of 2014 Alexander Oehler returned, together with Canadian archaeologist Dr. Milek, Dutch palynologist Dr. Kamerling, and Finish palynologist Dr. Kuoppamaa, to chart abandoned reindeer camps on Sorok River and along Lake Ilch'ir. Later that month, the team, along with Russian geographer Dr. Klovov visited the Tofa community of Alygdzher to document a reindeer camp that was still in use, for sake of comparison. During this trip, the team were able to retrace Tofa-Soiot cultural exchanges of the recent past, particularly the events of the Tofalar reindeer herd that was sold to the Sorok Kolkhoz in the late 1990s. As well, through ethnographic interviews, Dr. Oehler and Dr. Klovov were able to record recent changes in Tofa reindeer herding and breeding techniques. These findings are useful to better understand how contemporary Soiot reindeer herding on Onot River has come to differ from more rapidly changing approaches to herding in Tofalaria. The data also helps us better contextualize other herding styles from Mongolia to eastern Tyva.

##### **3.b Ethnohistory (Archives)**

Many of the abandoned reindeer herding sites in Oka are exceedingly difficult to locate. Earlier explorers and scholars left us only with approximate descriptive locators, and following the abandonment of such sites, many of them are now overgrown with vegetation. While changes in the soil composition can lead to vegetational anomalies, suggesting the historical presence of reindeer corrals, many sites are best located through a combination of living memory, ethnohistorical research from the literature and from archives, and

soil science. Thus, Dr. Oehler reviewed available archival records for reindeer breeding and local hunting activities for pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods, consulting archives of Kyzyl, Irkutsk, Ulan-Ude, Kyren, and Orlik.

### **3.b.i Irkutsk**

In January of 2013, Dr. Oehler conducted research at the State Archives of Irkutsk Oblast' (Gosudarstvennyy Arkhiv Irkutskoy Oblasti, GAIO) in Irkutsk. The goal was to locate documentation on pre-Soviet hunting, trapping, and fur trade records. As Prof. L. Pavlinskaia had previously established, historical records for Soiot economic activities of this period are extremely sparse, if not non-existent. A series of useful documents describing 19<sup>th</sup> century pre-revolutionary implementation of state policies regarding the activities of Mongolian lamas in Buriatia were reviewed. Although not directly related to Soiot human-animal relations, these documents contribute to our understanding of the expansion of Buddhism into southern Siberia, a development that directly affected the lives of Oka residents.

### **3.b.ii Ulan-Ude**

In February 2013, further pre- and post-revolutionary documents were reviewed in the State Archives of the Republic of Buriatia (Natsional'nyy Arkhiv Respubliki Buriatiia, GARB). As well, the State Library of the Republic of Buriatia, the library of the East Siberia State University of Technology and Management, and the library of the Buriat Scientific Centre of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences were consulted for available literature on Soiot history and ethnography. In all cases, sources regarding religious expansion and conversion – both for Christianity and Buddhism – were reviewed, as well as materials speaking to human-animal relations in the Pre-Saian and Saian regions. In the case of post-revolutionary archival documents, useful materials regarding hunting dogs in the Pre-Baikal region, and the use and dissemination of wolf poison in Oka, were reviewed.

### **3.b.iii Kyren and Orlik**

The month of March 2013 was spent between the archives at Kyren in the Tunka

Valley and Orlik in Oka. Here the primary goal was to locate documentation on hunting and reindeer herding practices under the the kolkhoz system, as well as documentation attesting to the official removal of all domestic reindeer from Okinskii Rai'on in 1963. Although extensive materials were reviewed on themes of post-revolutionary hunting and trapping in the region, the original documentation regarding the liquidation of reindeer could not be found. However, important information was secured regarding the fluctuation of domestic reindeer herds in Oka, including approximate locations for their camps by kolkhoz.

## **4. Findings**

The findings of this study have been organized into three thematic areas: Section one is entitled “Perspectives,” and it discusses how transhumant Soiot households of Oka operate. It problematizes conventional definitions of animal domestication on the basis of observed human-animal relations in Oka, suggesting a more fluid approach to concepts such as 'wild' and 'tame.' This is based on observations made with animals belonging to contemporary Soiot households. The section also examines the history and emergence of Buddhism in the Eastern Saians, discussing its influence on how people have perceived sentience in animals and in landscape features. The second section is entitled “Proximity,” focusing on human-dog and human-reindeer relations in Oka and Tofalaria. The final section is entitled “Materiality,” and it looks at the material culture of horse keeping and wolf hunting.

### **4.a. Perspectives**

The concept of perspective has been discussed at great length in anthropological circles. One of the most prominent approaches to the topic of how one's point of view can alter one's life experience comes from the Amazon region of South America. Anthropologists have used the term “Amerindian Perspectivism” to describe an indigenous view of living beings that does not distinguish between humans and animals on the basis of a cardinal difference between our culture and their nature, but instead suggests a multi-naturalism in which all living beings share a common culture, but are separated from

each other by way of their physical nature. This philosophical outlook does not apply to the residents of Oka. However, Soiot households are also based on an inversion, or expansion, of perspectives: As residents in a sacred landscape, Soiot households mirror the households of landscape Spirit Masters, and their households' herds mirror the herds that are known to belong to the spirits of the mountainous taiga. Both spirit-owned and human-owned 'herds' share a common landscape.

#### **4.a.i Perspectival Expansion**

In many western conceptions of domestication, tame animals have become dependent upon human care, and their resultant physiology is a witness to human demand and control. Such animals no longer hold the perspective of a 'wild' animal. They no longer are able to recognize or reap the potential benefits of a landscape outside the controlled human household. In the case of reindeer, yak, and horses of Oka this is not the case. In most years, all three species roam more or less freely, and are able to fend for themselves without human intervention. What brings humans and animals together is not utter dependence of the one upon the other, but a nuanced combination of a mutual recognition of benefits derived from the presence of the other, as well as a persistent human effort to corral and breed animals selectively. Consequently, it can be argued that Soiot herders deliberately select for 'wild' traits in 'domestic' stock, thereby expanding their animals' perspective to ensure they will survive away from human community and care.

#### **4.a.ii Spirit Masters**

The cosmological foundations underlying many of the practices and understandings relating to contemporary human-animal relations in Oka have deep and complicated roots. As much as Soiot ethnic identity can be explained as the result of a dynamic encounter between multiple clans coming from diverse regions, so also the religious practices and beliefs upheld by current residents reflect more than one origin. Unquestionably, Soiot shamanic beliefs long predate the presence of Mongolian and Tibetan Buddhism in Oka. However, it is often difficult to isolate Soiot shamanism in its present form from other forms of Buriat and Mongolian

shamanism, as well as from the influence of the ... mountain cult that has been practiced by many Oka-Buriat settlers. Although the Oka variant of Buddhism has been adapted to accommodate the specificity of the Eastern Saian Mountain region and its herding and hunting residents, there remain clear differences in how these cosmologies articulate the concept of domestication. This is made especially evident in how the 'domestication' of landscape Spirit Masters by itinerant Buddhist lamas of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is viewed by local practitioners.

#### **4.b Proximity**

How close are humans and animals to each other in time and space, and what determines the frequency and longevity of their encounters? In its third section, this research was concerned with questions regarding human-animal collaboration and how this fluctuated over time, especially seasonally. To record the ways in which people related to animals of human household at different times of the year, the researcher focused on the social lives of watch and hunting dogs as well as on interactions between humans and horses. Both species undergo regular changes in the proximity and intensity of their relationship with human members of the household. While dogs are intensely attended to during the hunting season in the fall months, they can become much less important during the summer months. Horses, on the other hand, live in their own 'families,' and only a select number of them are recruited for summer time riding, while the majority remain free roaming.

#### **4.b.i Working with Dogs**

Taking notes on hunters and their dogs, it became evident that in selecting hunting dogs, the most sought after traits were self initiative and fearlessness. These two qualities were followed only by an animal's ability to collaborate as part of a multi-species hunting team. Consisting of humans and dogs, and sometimes also of horses or reindeer, hunting teams relied on effective communication between the perspectives of each team member. In successful cases, teams aligned their diverse intentions under one human master, jointly profiting from the multiplicity of sensorial skills contributed by each

species. By drawing on each other's body-specific perceptual capacities, such as heightened sense of smell, superior eyesight, body size, or stature, dogs and humans skillfully eliminated the gaps each encountered in their own perception of sequences in the landscape. This became especially evident when in pursuit of sable. By making the most of another's sensory advantages, members of a hunting team benefitted from each others proximity.

#### **4.b.ii Living with Reindeer**

To better understand the transition from reindeer to yak in Soiot households, this study took a comparative perspective with Tofalaria. While Soiot households had begun to transition from reindeer to yak as early as the turn of the century, this was not the case in Tofalaria where reindeer remained at the centre of the economy longer. In spite of the decline in the importance of reindeer to Soiot households, both regions maintained state-owned reindeer herds throughout most of the Soviet period. Yet, unlike Tofalaria, Oka experienced a 32-year hiatus in its reindeer industry (1963-1995). During this period much traditional herding knowledge was lost. When the first reindeer were reintroduced to Oka from Tofalaria, Tofa reindeer herders trained young Soiot yak herders in their ancestral herding skills. With the aid of interviews and diaries from the early 1990s, this study examined how Soiot yak herders adjusted to the herding-style and environmental preferences for reindeer. The lessons learned during this period in recent Soiot history helps us better understand some of the underlying difficulties in maintaining yak and reindeer side-by side.

#### **4.c Materiality**

The aim of the third and final section of this study was to look at the communicative possibilities of key material implements in pastoral and hunting households. In the field of domestication studies, material implements, such as lassos, harnesses, saddles, and corrals have been articulated primarily as objects of human domination and control over animals. This study, in contrast, asked how these objects were actually being used not only by humans, but also by animals. Growing from the realization that many local residents took serious the sentience of animals and spirits

perceived in the landscape, to what extent would they read the intentions of animals within their own households, as well as of those belonging to spirit households? Secondly, what were some of the most important material objects most commonly used to communicate with animals? And, finally, how were animals reported to communicate with humans through such implements?

#### **4.c.i Keeping Horses**

In an equine context, the study paid particular attention to the round up of horse groups, corralling techniques, horse shoeing, selective castration, and training methods. Because of the historically competitive role of horses versus reindeer in Soiot and Tofa households, and because of the transference of equine practices to reindeer handling, several parallels between the material cultures pertaining to both species were examined ethnologically. In Tofalaria and in Oka, horses served as an important source of transportation during the summer months, when reindeer were grazing freely at higher grounds. The seasonal transition period between species (especially in Tofalaria where reindeer remain important to the winter hunt) was of particular interest to this study because it involved the use of multiple objects, such as lassos, ropes, special knots, and corrals. Through a detailed analysis of the process of laying down a colt for the first time, for instance, the researcher was able to probe the ways in which an animal was learning to communicate through the ropes that connected it to its owner.

#### **4.c.ii Knowing Wolves**

Although wolves do not form part of Soiot or Tofa households, they were often understood as emissaries belonging to the landscape Master Spirit's household. As such, they were seen as agents of retribution for hunters' failure to maintain reciprocal balance in the landscape. Moreover, wolves were understood as highly intelligent, even cunning, competitive hunters. Known as quick learners, wolves could be seen as pedagogical archetypes, characterized by an ability to accurately predict human and other movement in the landscape, particularly by anticipating the human field of vision. Many accounts of stunning wolf behaviour circulated within and between families about the conduct of

wolves and what herders could learn from it. A prime example of the wolf's ability to 'see through' the schemes of human hunters was the ineffectiveness of wooden trap designs historically used on wolves in Oka and in Tofalaria. Because wolves had come to understand the inherent danger of these human designs, the traps themselves had become ineffective and abandoned.

### **5. Future directions**

For lack of space, the finer details of the findings in this study cannot be outlined in this brief community report. Much more detailed information can be found in Dr. Oehler's English-language dissertation. Even so, each of the three core themes presented here raises a series of new questions for future ethnographic research. In the context of dogs, more data will have to be recorded on communicative processes between various member species belonging to hunting teams. For instance, what are some ways in which dogs and humans signal information about prey movement to each other? What are the power relations between dogs and masters in Oka, and how are wolves known to undermine human-dog relations? Given the difficulties associated with keeping yak and reindeer in tandem, what are the advantages of keeping a 'symbolic' reindeer herd far away from Soiot settlement? If domesticity in a Soiot context is best understood in terms of home-range – as may be the case in horses – then how is home-range best understood for yak-cattle hybrids which form a bridge between 'wild' and 'domestic' species? And finally, what more can we learn about human-wolf interactions in Oka, particularly from a standpoint of unpredictability in landscapes imbued with spirits of their own volition.

### **Contact the Researcher**

Dr. Oehler is currently preparing a detailed English-language book representing the research findings of the project. The book is projected to appear in print in late 2019/20 with Berhahn Books, New York. The English version of Dr. Oehler's dissertation is available for free download at: [www.saiandomus.org](http://www.saiandomus.org)

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