The Reindeer People: Living with Animals and Spirits in Siberia, Piers Vitebsky, 2005 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company) 480 pp. + xv, 16 pp. b/w photographs, maps, sketches, index. $28.00 (pb). ISBN 0-618-21188-8.

"The Reindeer People" is the culmination of twenty years of ethnographic research in Siberia focused on the people based at the small Eveny village of Sebyan. I say ‘based at’ because most of Vitebsky's narrative focuses on the people who spend most of their time living in the taiga, herding deer and trying to make a living in the wake of the Soviet collapse. The book is organized in a roughly chronological account of the ethnographer visiting several of the herding brigades of this eastern Siberian village, starting with a visit in August of 1988.

Vitebsky opens the second chapter with a vivid description of his flight to Sebyan and first days in that remote village. This is followed by some useful generalizations on Soviet policies on indigenous Siberians. This elegant tacking back and forth between detailed descriptions of events, people, and impressions with general discussions of government policy, cultural history, and other topics is both engaging and informative. The reader is kept enthralled with the specifics of his adventures while also sketching the broad outlines of the anthropology of Siberian reindeer herders. This chapter also introduces a useful trope of "wild Tungus" (now called Eveny) in the Russian empire through five lines by Pushkin: "My reputation will spread through all of great Russia./ And every living being will cite me in their own tongue./ The proud descendant of the Slav, and the Finn, and the still wild/ Tungus, and the steppe-loving Kalmyk" (p. 46). Vitebsky plays with the trope of the "still wild Tungus" (Eveny) on several levels. They do, indeed, cite Pushkin, but in Russian and not in their own tongue, and the imperial qualities of Pushkin, the Soviet Union, and Russia today are likened to classical empires of Persia and Rome. Eveny experiences of the Soviet and post-Soviet government policies are marked by a tension between assimilation into the cosmopolitan modern project of socialism and subsequently the world capitalist economy on the one hand, and continued participation in social and spiritual relations on the land, herding deer and hunting to make a living.

"Living with Animals and Spirits in Siberia" is exactly what we get in Vitebsky's richly textured descriptions and analysis. His two decades of experience and wide field of social relations provides a generous depth of experience and ample breadth of complementary and contrasting cases. Explicit theory is backgrounded in this book intended for a general audience, which I find refreshing. References to the scholarly literature are provided in endnotes, but the current obsession in Siberian anthropology with ethnicity and identity is not reflected in Vitebsky's narrative, save for a few brief explanations of Soviet policies of most
relevance to people’s daily lives. I find it a relief to find neither ‘ethnicity’ nor ‘identity’ in the index.

My only reservations in recommending this book to everyone are limited to the introduction. Vitebsky seems determined to portray Eveny as the heirs of Bronze Age Pazyryk and other prehistoric reindeer-oriented people. Although he does an excellent job of portraying the real lives of contemporary, living people, I fear that less sophisticated readers may come away with the idea that modern Eveny reindeer herders are ‘still wild’ and their “ancient traditions” (p. 11) are analogous to those of Palaeolithic Europeans during “the Age of Reindeer,” which is “not over” in the Arctic (p. 17). This would be a misinterpretation of Vitebsky, but I fear it may be an easy one to make, and I would not assign the first 40 pages to beginning undergraduates. However, many of the chapters would work well in undergraduate teaching on such topics as shamanism, human-animal relations, death and cosmology, indigenous peoples and empire, or even as a general case of a Siberian people. This is a fun book, and the photographs are well selected to illustrate the narrative. I would not be surprised if it inspired more than one person to take up a career in anthropology.

Vitebsky discussed a draft of the book with the main dramatis personae (his term, pp. xiii–xv), and they were all proud to have their lives (and sometimes deaths) described sympathetically yet critically. Vitebsky has given ethnographers a model with which to answer the postmodern critique. His book keeps the ethnographer (and his perspective) within view without losing sight of the main topic: indigenous people and their lives herding reindeer in eastern Siberia.

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