

---

# Walking Mind: The Pattern that Connects Evenki Land, Companionship and Person

*Tatiana Safonova & István Sántha*

## Abstract

Anthropological investigation proposes tools to study the routines and the cultural patterns on which everyday life is based. The presented ethnographic account aims to study such a routine practice as walking, which is differently performed in various cultures. This interest was predetermined by the initial goal of studying scientific expeditions as situations of cultural contact between natives, who walked with scientists and worked as guides. The fieldwork showed that walking is not only deeply embedded in the physical habitus of people, but also rests upon their social organization, epistemology and most essential cognitive schemes that predetermine the way people are involved in the environment.

The remote areas where the Evenki live have always been prime targets for various expeditions. The role of indigenous hunter as a guide for Russian expedition members became so widespread that it was given an icon in the image of Dersu Uzala in the writings of Vladimir Arsenyev. This image was virtually the only positive one attributing an equal role to indigenous people, who can live in and pass securely through the taiga and possess complex knowledge about the environment. The expedition as an enterprise turned out to be very important for the Evenki who supplied the geological groups with food, assistance and transport. We are not going to describe in depth the history of the expedition culture that evolved in these regions and made the accomplishment of different tasks in collaboration between Russians and indigenous people possible, since this deserves a special book, but we intend to underline the main consequence of its existence, which is the articulation of the Evenki ability to walk for long distances in a way different from that of the Buryats and the Russians. This character of the Evenki people was also mentioned as a secret quality by Bargai, the Ekhirit Buryat shaman, who became our principal expert in Evenki secrets.

Walking is a relatively new and increasingly popular topic at the moment, and we may in this context recall the book *Ways of Walking. Ethnography and Practice on Foot*, edited by researchers from Aberdeen University (Ingold & Vergunst 2008). The article presented here is a result of collaborative fieldwork that authors conducted in 2006 among the Evenki people in the Baikal region. The initial interest was devoted to the role Evenki people played in the scientific expeditions that were conducted in the region. In the course of the study it turned out that we could not continue our studies without a focus on the accomplishment of walking as a cultural practice. Walking together proved to be a format for interaction and communication between local Evenki and strangers that hired them as guides in the expeditions.

Walking is a practice which reveals several levels of cultural diversity, because the technique of walking, routes and rhythms of movements could be traits that are not shared by different cultures. What this means is that the mutual accomplishment of walking is a situation of cultural contact; people who walk together are communicating with each other and coordinating mutual actions and decisions. In doing so, they need to overcome differences in socialization. For example, for Bargai, the Evenki way of walking was a mystery, because for Buryats the ability to walk is less important than the ability to stand. An Evenki child is accepted as an individual when he or she is able to walk alone, whereas for the Buryats a child becomes a human when he or she is able to stand upright. This difference in the starting point of the socialization process crucially affects the way people walk. The Buryats prefer to ride and whenever possible try to reach their destination using transport. One of our neighbours, Bair, who was a Buryat, rode a horse or bicycle when he went to the village. This was an exception in the area, where the local Evenki did not even have bicycles and preferred to travel on foot. Even if they started out by car they always managed to find reasons for conducting part of the trip on foot. In comparison to the Buryats, whose footsteps could easily be heard, the Evenki are light-footed. Bargai shared his amusement with us about how the Evenki managed to cover enormous distances without showing any signs of tiredness, and even when they had a horse they were always walking beside the animal, which was used only to carry

baggage burdens. The Buryats by contrast, tried to travel on horseback until the very last moment, and even attempted to ride in the taiga when hunting. Even their footwear was different. For the Buryats it was important to have heavy shoes that keep legs warm and protect them. The Evenki sometimes made their own shoes, which were relatively light and flexible and allowed direct surface contact to the ground. They even took several pairs of shoes with them, with every pair specially designed for different surfaces and soils.

The difference in walking was obvious for Bargai, but he did not manage to learn how the Evenki walked, although he had spent a lot of time with them when he was young and they taught him how to hunt during the hard times of hunger. The Evenki taught him explicitly using explanatory words and advice, which they never did with their own children, saying that if they were born Evenki they had to know everything in advance. This difference in attitude of being much more explicit and open towards a stranger, practically secured the Evenki way of walking from being learned by Bargai, who was not in the position of an apprentice, but just the observer, who had no clues for transforming narratives into practice. Bargai could only be amazed but failed to learn the Evenki way of walking.

Neither Bargai, nor we ourselves were able to acquire this embodied knowledge. Only after we repeatedly watched the video recording that we made quite casually with Orochen walking in front of us through the taiga during one of our trips together, did we begin to notice some features of the particular Evenki way of walking. Orochen went through an animal pathway as if he was moving in a tube with thorny bushes as walls. He was carrying a stick on which he leaned. He took this stick in his right arm, but changed hands when some branches of the bush prevented him from going further. Then he took his stick in his left hand, and used his right hand to break the branches. The sound of this cracking was rather rhythmical and synchronised with his footsteps, which we could not hear as they were rather light. There were two images that we caught after watching this tape. One is that he was marking the path with these half broken branches he left behind. We supposed that these marks will be useful in winter, when the snow will cover the path, and only such marks above the snow surface will show where the narrow path is. Orochen

314 *Tatiana Safonova & István Sántha*

himself told us that it is very important to clear pathways, because this is the basis for future hunting luck. He only commented that animals also preferred to use clear pathways, and if there were any such available then there would be plenty of prey. The other point was the importance of keeping balance. Orochen was moving through the taiga in the same way as if he was floating on a boat with a stick that helped not only in pushing forwards but also in keeping balance. When Orochen was crashing through the branches he was also balancing himself, as his leap was counterbalanced by the inertia of branches. At these moments he had four points of support as if he had not two but four legs.

Orochen was moving smoothly, and this smoothness was achieved because he kept his balance all the time and coordinated his movements in such a way that all his muscles were involved. This kind of walking was reminiscent of the now popular Nordic walking technique using sticks, although in Orochen's case the walk was even more balanced and light. We should not forget that Orochen was already 70 years old, but his movements had not lost any of this lightness. He wore high rubber shoes through which he could feel the surface on which he walked. When we had to leave the forest and walk along the old BAM road, which was covered with stones lending it a pressed and rough surface, Orochen was obviously suffering and tried not to walk on the road, but at its side, closer to the bushes and grass. Feeling the pathway with his feet was very important, because this sense freed his eyes. Orochen never looked down to his feet, but at the surroundings, and mostly the distanced ones. That helped him not to grow tired of the ever changing information of the moving objects close by, but to deal with the concrete objects at a distance, which did not change as quickly. That helped him never to lose the sense of destination and feeling of where he was. When we once asked him if there had ever been cases where Evenki got lost in the taiga, Orochen only laughed. Even if drunk, Evenki could never get lost in the taiga, unless they were suffering from mental problems caused by an injury. This ability to always find your way was not even the result of sound knowledge of the territory, but the way of walking itself. Two young Evenki were hired the summer before our arrival by a party of geologists as guides and horse keepers. These two people showed the way

and helped to navigate in the taiga forest that was a considerable distance away from the place where they lived. The Russian geologists were satisfied and paid them a good sum of money for their services, they hired them because they were sure that the Evenki had known the territory from their childhood. As we found out these two boys had never been there before, and entered the territory with the geologists for the first time in their lives. But their skill in finding the way and never losing their attention and involvement with the surroundings while walking worked quite well as an alternative to elaborate knowledge of the land. The Russian geologists did not even notice this 'cheating'.

To explain why the Evenki never lose their way in the forest we must examine their social organization. To be lost means at least to miss your destination and to fail to reconstruct the coordinates. Emotionally this results in a state of fear and not knowing where you are. All these experiences become ever more painful if the quality of knowing and being sure are important for you to feel comfortable and even feeling yourself human. In an egalitarian society, along with the rather schematic existence of social distinctions and roles, which are not supported by the internalized strict rules of conduct, even such routine activities as walking are not shaped by pre-existing routes and purposes. When Evenki people walk somewhere they can easily change their destination or even have no aim at all and walk just for fun or curiosity to see what is there. The absence of a prescribed route in practice means that the path is made by walking that people will walk and with every next step they will change their path according to the changing circumstances. You can never know in advance where you will go. As a result of this active involvement in the process of route making losing your way is scarcely possible, as there is no place for mistakes when pre-conceptions are in contrast with the reality. Evenki never lose their way because they never lose their involvement in the process of walking and they do not have a prescribed purpose. Walking for the Evenki is an activity that is very concentrated on the moment, in which there is no place for other thoughts than those that are connected with the road. Walking with Evenki is a very pleasant experience, because these are the moments when they tell stories about places and the forest, when they share everything with you and when they feel themselves fully interested in the situation.

For the Buryats the moments when they do not exactly know the geography of the place and cannot coordinate their knowledge with their practical experience are rather painful. The preconception of the place is usually so strong that if there is no preconceived idea about the place, Buryat people would tend to avoid going there and would express no curiosity about it at all. Evenki people learn from their earliest years not to be frightened and to be interested in and not exclude new possibilities of hazardous situations – for the Evenki exploring new territories is a pleasant experience. The Evenki will prefer to go and have a look just for fun, even when there is absolutely no need to go anywhere. Looking for new places is a wonderful opportunity for experiencing companionship, and as a result it is a widely accepted thing to go somewhere with the intention just to look around. In company or alone, a trip to unknown territory is also a fine experience of *manakan* (which signifies ‘independent’ and ‘alone’ in the Evenki language), because even when together with somebody else, you perceive the place in your own unique way and take your own path.

Once we participated in a ritual, in which the Evenki visited secret places in the forest. There was no obvious organization of movement from one secret place to another. Everybody was walking separately and they finally united at one place, the way hunters meet with their dogs at some moments, only to separate again without a shout or an order being given. The Evenki made their routes ever more difficult and complex. By walking in circles and making different loops they walked with the intention of looking around, thus raising their chances to come across somebody or something. The way the Evenki navigate explicitly shows their social organization, in which individuals each float freely, but are nevertheless eager for encounters and contacts with each other, uniting for a brief moment and then splitting up again to continue their individual free movement.

The emotions experienced are determined by the absence or existence of a concrete purpose for the trip. We have not only once witnessed how excited and happy the Evenki were when they were travelling without a specific purpose and also with risks (i.e. to new places) that could challenge the initial purpose. A broken wheel immediately transforms the situation during a trip, because you have to change your aims and figure out new

ones, for example you need to go to your neighbours to borrow a new wheel and nobody really knows what will emerge from the new situation. Breakdowns, river crossings, drunken encounters and other occurrences, all of these incidents liberate you from the hegemony of the initial purpose, you receive the right to spontaneously change your route and combine different tasks and possible resolutions. All these conditions fill the situation with excitement and joy. In contrast to the predetermined purpose, for example the need to come back from the village to the camp to perform your household duties, spoil the pleasure of the road and prevent total involvement in the travelling itself. Whenever possible the Evenki try to avoid moving under such conditions. For example, they find new reasons to stay in the village, even if they have no real place there and no money to spend. If they finally start on their way, the first coincidental encounter with someone will stop their movement and they will come back to the village accompanying the people they met. If there is no chance to escape from a trip with a predetermined aim, the Evenki look gloomy and keep silent, as if the existence of this concrete purpose prevents them from feeling free and getting pleasure from the trip.

## Walking mind

Following the study by James Leach about the Reite people (Leach 2003), in which he described the coherence between land, kinship and person, we can also look for the same coherence in the Evenki case. The Evenki land is perceived through the possibility of companionship, the unity in social organization of the Evenki people which takes the place of kinship for the Reite. Walking great distances and through hazardous places is a practice which unites people and constitutes situated social bonds. The Evenki are nomads and thus need the rhythm of this unity and alienation, which we previously described as moments of companionship alternating with moments of 'manakan' experiences. The land is the condition and scene of these meetings and separations and is thus part of the social organization itself. Without the Evenki land, which exists on the periphery of hierarchical societies, there is no possibility to conduct the Evenki nomadic

way of life; this means that the Evenki land is part of the Evenki mind, which we can figuratively call a walking mind. This term is taken from Bateson's works and designates the pattern which connects (Bateson 1972). The walking mind is a pattern which connects the Evenki land, Evenki companionship and Evenki people. The nomadic relational self needs space to walk through, the periodic company of others to cooperate with situationally and moments of loneliness and silence when there are no social obligations. Only the Evenki land can provide such conditions of connected isolation in which the Evenki live and which is essential to their perception of themselves.

The western distinction between mind and body is inappropriate for Evenki people, for whom motion and the ability to move from one place to another is a main trait of a person. Madness is the state when you cannot go or cannot fully participate in walking, and as a result you can be lost. To be lost in practical terms and to be lost mentally are identical, because there is no distinction between thinking and moving. Words that represent thoughts are about experiences of movements, news from the distant place where you have been, stories about the places you are now, which are articulated as long as you experience the place through walking together. Babushka Masha, a woman who had not been able to walk for a long time was perceived as mad and not a whole person. The youngest, Tamara, who was 3 years old and was not yet able to go together with the others and walk for long distances was also perceived as not being a full person. Dogs accompanying their human partners during their trips were persons, because they shared the experience of travel together with the people. And for Orochon it was very important to have such a partner, because he needed the company that his wife Babushka Masha was not able to give him. The bear that lived on the neighbouring hill and which Sveta met several times during the spring we spent on camp, was also a person whom you can meet occasionally. Not the ability to speak and think, not the ability to reciprocate or establish social relationships in their usual sense were the criteria to ascribe to personhood. It was the ability to walk that was important and that divided the world into the animated and the non-animated. From this point of view, Evenki animism is part of their social organization in which individuals

are involved if they can participate in companionship. Walking somewhere together or meeting somebody on the way are the principal and basic companionships that constitute the Evenki community. As a result, all the creatures, even the hunting prey, the bears and dogs are involved as you could meet them on the way or share the experience of walking with them.

The hunting practice which underlies Evenki animism consists primarily of companionship relationships between the hunter and the dog. Their mutual coordination of actions and the possibility of ostensive communication is a condition for mutual recognition as active partners and persons. During the hunt, man and dog are not going together, they split to cross each other's paths and to join when they close in on the prey. It is the dog that chases the prey and involves it in the companionship of the dog and hunter. The dog helps the hunter to involve the animal in chasing, so that the animal which is initially independent from the Evenki starts to coordinate its actions with the man, and finally comes across the hunter. When the animal is not impressed and not scared of the hunter, that is the sign that it is not involved in the situation as a person, it is not a concrete creature with which the hunter and the dog communicate ostensively, but it is simply an element of the surroundings, part of the landscape and a mere representative of its species. The animal that the hunter and his dog cannot involve in communication, that does not recognize the presence of a hunter and does not move is perceived as sacred. Such encounters and the absence of a counter-reaction on the part of the animal prevents the emotional involvement of the hunter and his dog themselves. Bears which commonly refrain from interactions with hunters and show no trace of reaction to the provocations of the hunter and no sign of panic, are believed to be sacred and hunting them is considered dangerous – simply because of this lack of full participation in the situation. Killing is an encounter between man and beast, when both are involved in the situation and compete in showing and securing their own fear and involvement. A SIMILAR position is also articulated among Buryat hunters, who believe that if the animal does not move before the hunter counts to 18, then this creature is an ancestor and to kill it means to kill your own child. As we see here, moving and the ability

320 Tatiana Safonova & István Sántha

to walk alone, to chase and meet somebody are the traits of persons that can potentially interact with each other. This way of hunting is a social practice and the hunter does not lose his human nature as it is very often interpreted in the literature on hunting. Searching for the animal, communication with the dog and with the prey happen according to the same logic as other social events, such as interaction with *andaki* business partners and companionship with members of the conjugal unit etc. There is no marginality or asocial character in the actions of the hunter, who behaves as other Evenki people do and does not need to feel as if he is first losing and then regaining his human condition. This embeddedness of hunting in everyday life is close to the fundamental experience of Evenki walking, which predetermines the way of involvement in the situation.

It is also important to study children's socialization, because the first efforts to participate in others' companionship initiate the process of becoming a social creature and the first steps are the first marks of the potentiality to become one. Evenki people become Evenki before they start school and this explains why their culture is so resistant to assimilation. At the same time, when the Evenki are separated from their land and start to live in towns, where they have no possibility to constantly move from one place to another and experience the rhythms of loneliness and companionship, they immediately lose their identity and fully accept the main elements of the culture in which they have to integrate. The only Evenki who maintain their culture are those who succeed in having several places to stay between which they can circulate all the time, like Andrew when he stays in Ulan-Ude. But of course this style of life is an exception one and you need to be a well-off person to impose such nomadic pathways on the city infrastructure. Walking through the Evenki land and being Evenki is one and the same and it is the main prerequisite for staying with the Evenki if you are an anthropologist with the ambition of carrying out fieldwork among them.

We once attended a ceremony, where grown ups were so drunk that they were unable and unwilling to perform the ritual. The state of *manakan* they experienced was sufficient to feel the sacred moment. But as the effects of the alcohol wore off, there was a need to do something together and a walk to the sacred place with the children turned out to be this

common activity that somehow involved all of the participants. Kolya who was 6 years old took the initiative. Holding his grandfather's hand, he led him to the sacred place. For Orochon and Stepan it was very important to emphasize that Kolya had never before been in this place and that he showed the direction to the sacred place by intuition. They said that as he was born Evenki, he knew everything in advance and did not need instructions what to do and where to go. This appeared to be rather impressive, as Kolya was walking with some assurance carrying his little stick the same way as his grandfather held his. This walk was rather interesting, as all the participants, exhausted after several days of drinking, proceeded in the direction given by Kolya, but all people kept to their own individual pathways. Although Orochon said that Kolya knew the place, but had never been there before, the whole party was moving more or less simultaneously, and we could not see if they were following Kolya or whether Kolya was simply coordinating his movements to the tendencies of the others. It all seemed rather as if a puppy was walking in front of Sveta. It did not matter whether Kolya knew the way or not, whether he had been there before or discovered the place by intuition. Quite possibly there was no concrete sacred place, we could never be sure. But at some point the whole party climbed a rather picturesque rock, which provided a panoramic view of the taiga. That was a sacred place, where they conducted a ritual, again led by Kolya. To our minds, it was important to state that Kolya knew the place in advance not so much to introduce magic into the situation, but more as a matter of forestalling any attempts to teach Kolya directly where to go. For the Evenki it is very important not to give express directions and orders to their children, and thus to keep their attention fixed constantly on the movements of the others, so they would learn how to see where people go, instead of asking them. These were the elements of ostensive communication, which was important for Evenki coordination within the framework of companionship.

Alcohol affects the state of mind, which makes it possible to use it to investigate the cultural differences in ideas of the self. For the Buryat people drinking is an essentially dangerous and ambiguous activity, because it threatens self-control, which is acknowledged as the basis for acceptable

322 *Tatiana Safonova & István Sántha*

behaviour. And there is a distinction between Russian and Buryat alcoholic drinks, which are believed to change the self differently. While Russian vodka deprives a man of clear thinking and coordinated movements, the traditional Buryat *togonoi* (alcohol distilled from fermented cow's milk) leaves Buryat minds clear, but one loses the ability to stand up straight. In these states the Buryats prefer riding horses to walking. Alcohol, as we see, obscures Buryat minds as if they are no longer human beings when they are drunk. People drink in situations where they seek to hide from the responsibility of their own deeds. When drunk they are free of commitments and faults, because they are not full people. For the Evenki alcohol also plays an alibi role, but the excuse it provides is of a quite different kind. Alcohol, its availability or even its absence is a good reason for Evenki to ignore their household duties and start a trip in searching for it. Alcohol is like a trophy that must be found and drunk. The state of drunkenness is not a state in which the human mind is lost or changed, on the contrary it is a state in which the Evenki can feel themselves as full persons. This means they can look for risks, go somewhere without having a concrete purpose and look for occasional contacts and encounters. Drunkenness does not affect their ability to find their way in the forest, cross the river on a boat or drive a car through the night. The last moment of drunkenness is experienced as being *manakan*, which is associated with switching from one companionship to another. This switching is part of the Evenki mind itself and shows the rhythmic nature of their social organization, which balances loneliness with potential openness to multiple companionships and concrete involvement in the companionship.

Walking from one place to another, searching for these involvements, is part of the whole process, which brings us back to the problem of the cohesion that exists between the Evenki land and Evenki selves. Places between which the Evenki wander are not those spots on the map to which social activities are *prescribed, but are situations or events that provoke and intensify the circuits of companionship and manakan experiences*. Keeping this suggestion in mind, we see the real challenge involved in attempting to describe the Evenki land with the help of an ordinary map which imposes points and symbols on the continuous space or landscape. But if we inverse the main premises of map making in accordance with the logic of Evenki

*Walking Mind: The Pattern that Connects Evenki Land, Companionship and Person* 323

social organization, then we can try to construct the depiction of the Evenki land, which will also grasp some important traits of the Evenki mind. This task is easier than it looks at first sight, however, because the streams of Evenki pathways that cover the Evenki land (showing how the Evenki walk from one place to the other) are analogous to the changes (*manakan* experiences) from one companionship to another. Mapping of the Evenki land with an Evenki social organization in mind could help us to find other such analogies between places and social interactions.

## References

- Bateson, Gregory (1972), *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*, San Francisco: Chandler.
- Ingold, Tim and Vergunst, Jo (2008), *Ways of Walking. Ethnography and Practice on Foot*, Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Leach, James (2003), *Creative Land: Place and Procreation on the Rai Coast of Papua New Guinea*, Oxford / New York: Berghahn.