

Küçüküstel, Selcen. 2021. Embracing Landscape. Living with Reindeer and Hunting among Spirits in South Siberia. London, New York: Berghahn Books. 238 pp. Hb.: \$135.00/£100.00. ISBN: 9781800730625.

Book review by

Paul Durrenberger

University Of Iowa And Penn State (U.S.)

In the northernmost parts of Mongolia, on the border with Russia, is the vast Taiga, the boreal forest of conifers and cold, live some two-hundred nomadic Dukha people and their reindeer with whom anthropologist Selcen Küçüküstel lived for about a year between 2012 and 2016 to learn how they relate to the domestic and wild animals among whom they live. She embeds her vivid observations in the long academic discussions of the domestic and the wild and of hunting and foraging people in general. Learning their language gave her ways of thinking distinct from the familiar ones.

Covered in snow for nine months of the year, the taiga is a land of spirits who offer as gifts their animals to those hunters who have not offended them. In return Dukha offer their bodies to feed the animals when they die in their practice of “sky burial” or exposure. Reciprocity is the rule between people and spirits and among people. Successful hunters share their bounty with everyone in the settlement where egalitarian relationships are maintained by the practice of reciprocity. Even the wolves who sometimes prey on reindeer serve the spirits, so people do not blame them for being wolves.

Dukha keep a few tame reindeer for milk, riding and packing but only eat them when they are old or about to die from some other cause. Their main source of meat is the reindeer of the forests. Küçüküstel continually compares this subsistence oriented Dukha with the commercial reindeer herding of Saami of Sweden and other herders and hunters, so her observations are richly contextualized in comparative ethnography of similar folks as well as academic writing about them. She discusses the relationships be-

tween people and their spirited landscape, between people and their tame animals, and between people and the role of hunting.

Having reviewed a history of writing about domestication, Küçküstel concludes that the Dukha conceptual scheme does not match the domestic-wild distinction in any of its senses. Rather, Dukha see themselves as sharing a landscape with reindeer, both the ones they keep close for their use and the ones that live among the spirits of the taiga that they hunt. The reindeer have not been domesticated so much as the people have been “wildernerized”.

To those who live outside it, the Taiga seems a vast empty space, suitable for mining, flooding, industry or preservation as a pristine wilderness area. To cultural systems that define people as apart from nature, such wilderness areas can be kept pure by keeping people out of them. Thus, in 2011, the government of Mongolia declared a ban on hunting in the Taiga as it created a vast national wilderness. This did not immediately take effect, so Küçküstel was able to monitor its implementation and the consequences for Dukha, chiefly the increased consumption of alcohol as a respite from the boredom of not hunting.

She describes in poignant detail the devastating consequences of a Dukha ranger enforcing the hunting ban among his own people resulting in the isolation of his family and hard feelings that were slow to improve. The monthly stipend the government offers to offset the loss of meat hardly compensates hunters for their loss of their experience of their landscape and the solidarity with fellow-hunters on extended hunting trips. Or the women for their loss of female companionship while the men were gone on extended hunting trips.

The book is well written; the stories well told; and is well illustrated with photographs. It is good to know that egalitarian social relations and societies have some place on today's planet.