

Long Night at the Vepsian Museum: The Forest Folk of Northern Russia and The Struggle for Cultural Survival. By Veronica Davidov. University of Toronto Press, 2017, 160 pp.

Notes. Bibliography. Glossary. Index. Illustrations. Maps. \$27.95, paper.

*Anna Varfolomeeva, School of Advanced Studies, Tyumen State University*

a.varfolomeeva@utmn.ru

For Veps, an indigenous people residing in Northwestern Russia, strong connections with homeland (usually expressed through the concept of *jured*—roots) play a vital role in establishing their ethnic identities. In *Long Night at the Vepsian Museum*, Veronica Davidov presents a thorough study of Veps' perceptions of their land and resources, their historical connections with nonhuman spiritual entities, and their current struggles for having their voices heard at the time of transformations. The book is based on Davidov's Fulbright research in Karelia in 2011.

*Long Night at the Vepsian Museum* presents an array of interrelated themes: the insecure position of Veps between Russian and Finnish influences, negotiations with spirits, rapid development of stoneworking industry and its subsequent decline. This complex narrative is interestingly wrapped around the story of Vepsian museum as a symbol of intertwined traditional beliefs and recent changes. The book starts with a symbolic "guided tour" through museum collections and ends with a detailed analysis of the first ever Long Night of Museums in the Vepsian land.

While gradually unfolding the story of the Veps, Davidov keeps returning to the small village museum which encompasses various narratives of their past and present. In the first chapter, *History and Memory*, the author suggests starting with the *longue dureé* of Veps history, just as museum tours begin with local history milestones. Chapter 2, *Vepsian cosmologies*, starts

with referring to the wooden statue of Forest Master placed in front of the Vepsian museum. Davidov discusses Veps' relations with Forest Master, the central figure of local cosmologies (referred to as *Khozyain Lesa* in Russian or as *Mecižand* in Vepsian). Traditionally, Forest Master was perceived as a strong entity with limitless protective or punitive power. Therefore, local trips to the forest become associated with multiple sets of negotiations with this powerful spirit. However, many of the contemporary villagers claim that the Master is nothing more than "folklore of old days" (49), and in some way these traditional beliefs have been partially replaced by new industrial narratives.

These state-promoted mining and logging narratives become the main focus of two subsequent chapters. The title of Chapter 3, *Spruce Eyelashes and Blue Eyes of Lakes*, refers to a popular Soviet song romanticizing the beauty of Karelian nature. In this chapter Davidov focuses on Veps' connections with nature-based economic activities, including mining of two rare decorative stones, gabbro-diabase and raspberry quartzite. Both stones have been used for the decoration of many well-known Russian buildings, including Lenin's Mausoleum in Moscow. Diabase and quartzite still serve as a source of pride and as a marker of local identity. By analyzing "resource biography of Vepsian ancestral territories" (52), Davidov presents an interesting case of an indigenous minority closely connected to industrial development of their territories, and therefore questions the established divide between "traditional" and "modern" elements of indigeneity.

Chapter 4, *The Bad Masters*, focuses on post-Soviet period when stone quarries in Vepsian villages were privatized, and raspberry quartzite extraction almost stopped. As a result, many locals express deep nostalgia for the past when they felt more connected with industry and more supported by state policies: "That was the right way: we worked for the state, and the state provided us with these benefits" (76). Davidov notes that new private managers of the

quarries are sometimes referred to as “Bad Masters” who caused Forest Master to leave the Vepsian land. The author suggests that Veps’ connections with spirits of territory have been modified by industry, but never totally disrupted. This is an interesting conclusion which weaves Veps industrial history into their bonds with sacred landscape.

The final chapter, *The Long Night of Museums*, presents a story of the Museum Night event in Sheltozero village. The chapter follows the museum visitors, children and adults, as they try to solve puzzles and answer questions on Veps’ livelihoods. Using metaphoric language, Davidov creates masterful parallels between the rich past of the museum’s building and its present role as the local center of Vepsian culture: “as [children] rummage around the room, their reflections pass back and forth in the antique mirror... flickering movement next to the stationary men and women in the sepia-toned portraits hanging around it” (87). As we realize, for many of the local women (the author only makes a brief comment on gender representation of museum visitors, but indeed most of Vepsian activists are women) the exhibitions become a way to connect with their “roots”—grandparents long gone or traditions almost forgotten. In this sense, the small Vepsian museum plays a vital community-building role allowing its visitors to create deeper bonds with their ancestors.

Due to a number of themes analyzed on slightly more than a hundred pages, the book leaves an impression of extremely dense and ethnographically rich volume. It is natural that due to limited space some of the themes are discussed only briefly and could possibly be elaborated in the author’s further works. It would be interesting to reflect more on self-representation of Veps as simultaneously “modern” (due to their connection to industries) and “exotic” and even at times “backward”. The vignette on the museum’s modern toilet which is intended for tourists, but not for locals, as “you need a certain culture to be able to use it” (54) illustrates this latter notion well. Due to complex intertwining of narratives, the book may be at times

difficult to navigate, especially for the readers with little background knowledge. Several typographical errors may also hinder navigation: for instance, the same settlement is spelled as Quartzitniy (64) and Kvartiztny (32), and the Vepsian word for “community” is referred to as *sber* (14) instead of *sebr*.

Overall, *Long Night at the Vepsian Museum* represents a solid analysis of Veps “resource biography” which connects landscape, industry and practices of remembering as intertwined local resources. This book would be particularly relevant for anthropology students due to the author’s valuable self-reflections on the nature of fieldwork and “collaborative ethnography” (xvii). It could also be recommended for anyone interested in indigenous studies, minority rights in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia, as well as human-landscape and human-industry relations.