

**On the Run in Siberia. Rane Willerslev, trans. Coilín ÓhAiseadha. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. xix, 207 pp. Appendices. Notes. Glossary. Gallery of Characters. Illustrations. Photographs. Maps. \$19.95, paper.**  
*Robert Jarvenpa, University at Albany, State University of New York*

Rane Willerslev's book is a compelling blend of personal memoir, fieldwork primer, and high adventure. It is also a vivid ethnographic account of the cultural realities of the Yukaghir people of Siberia. Set in the mid and late 1990s, this book captures the political chaos, corruption, desperate poverty, and Mafia economic order plaguing the Russian Far East after the Soviet collapse.

Willerslev's odyssey began as a young Danish anthropology student who had traveled in northeastern Siberia and helped lead a film crew documenting Yukaghir hunters in the Russian Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). Their territory along the Kolyma River is the coldest inhabited environment on earth, and they are distinctive among indigenous Siberian peoples in pursuing an exclusive hunting-foraging livelihood rather than hunting mixed with reindeer herding.

After his initial exposure, Willerslev returned to northeastern Siberia with a dual mission. On the one hand, he was pursuing doctoral research on Yukaghir religious beliefs. On the other hand, along with a colleague, Uffe Refslund Christensen, he launched the Danish-Yukaghir Fur Project. This ambitious project, modeled on cooperative enterprises in Denmark, was intended to provide Yukaghir sable hunters with a stake in a collectively-owned business and an alternative to selling their product to Sakhabult. The latter was a state fur trading corporation which monopolized trade in the region and perpetuated a familiar pattern in Russian history of exploiting indigenous fur hunters. Indeed, it is Willerslev's idealistic but beleaguered fur project, more than his doctoral research per se, which provides the narrative tension for this book.

Initially, Willerslev's plan for helping the Yukaghirs appeared to be on track. He had the support of Kolya Shalugin, an important political leader of the Yukaghirs, who traveled to Copenhagen for familiarization with the Danish fur auctions. However, things began to unravel quickly when Willerslev's colleague, Christensen, returned to Yakutia only to be confronted by the manager of Sakhabult, who openly opposed the Danish fur project while hypocritically disparaging the Yukaghirs' business acumen. When Christensen eventually made his way to the Yukaghir village of Nelemnoye and on to a remote hunter's camp, it became apparent that powerful agents beyond Sakhabult were arrayed against the Danes. Amidst such pressures, Kolya Shalugin turned to a life of heavy drinking, was hospitalized, and ultimately was fired from his position as manager of the Yukaghirs' trading collective or commune. The Danish project seemed dead in its tracks. The first three chapters of this book effectively impart a growing atmosphere of menace as Willerslev struggles to decipher the murky political situation

in Yakutia and the forces closing in on him. This is informative reading for any anthropologist embarking for the field, and certainly for those involved in applied work.

Willerslev returned to Nelemnoye several years later with the aim of continuing his doctoral research on Yukaghir spiritual culture. To his surprise, however, Slava Shadrin, the new director of the local trading collective, was eager to revive the Danish-Yukaghir Fur Project. Despite grave doubts, Willerslev and his partner Chistensen moved ahead with the project, borrowing money to make advance payments to hunters for their sable furs with a promise of a 50 percent bonus after the sale of their pelts at auction. This put Willerslev and friends in direct, and politically dangerous, competition with Sakhabult for furs. Short on the minimum quantity needed at auction, they made a perilous journey to the Sakha village of Aralakh where they were received with much distrust and hostility. Ultimately, a downward spiral of events led to the arrest of Shadrin, the confiscation of the Danish project's furs, and the looming arrest of Willerslev by police.

*On the Run in Siberia* is an apt title for this book. Chapters 4-8 chronicle Willerslev's desperate efforts to evade authorities by fleeing to a remote, unoccupied hunting camp on the Omulkeva River. Here he endured several months of privation and near starvation in the depth of winter before being rescued by Yukaghir friends who harbored him in their camps until spring. Eventually he was reunited with the released Slava Shadrin, only to learn of the ultimate demise of the Danish-Yukaghir Fur Project, caught in a byzantine struggle for power between the Yukaghirs, Sakhabult, the Yakutian state, and the Kremlin. Fortunately for Willerslev, the warrant for his arrest was lifted. Remarkably, during his time as a fugitive from authorities, he seemed to blossom as an anthropologist. The central chapters of the book are filled with insightful observations about Yukaghir hunting strategies and their intimate association with the sacred and the spiritual. His discussion of *ayibii*, the Yukaghir soul or "shadow," and its role in lovemaking with spirits which release an animal to be sacrificed to the hunter, challenges conventional views of hunting as an expression of violence. Because Willerslev was an active participant and not simply a passive observer in the hunting activities he documented, his interpretations are compelling.

The last chapters of the book, 9-12, deal with Willerslev's return to the village of Nelemnoye and his eventual departure from the field. Among other entanglements, he found himself beset with a curse from a woman with whom he had a brief affair. Yet, the curse itself deepened his understanding of Yukaghir religion and shamanistic practice and strengthened his relationships with certain Yukaghir elders.

While the rollercoaster drama of Willerslev's hardships and enlightenment in Yukaghir country forms the backbone of this book, the chapters are interwoven with incisive discussions of Russian fur trade history, the Soviet gulag system, the condition of post-Soviet Siberian cities, and Sakha (Yakut)-Yukaghir relations, among others issues. This information provides useful context for understanding the cultural landscape, and the often bewildering situations, which confronted the author. Willerslev also makes some useful cross-cultural comparisons and

generalizations regarding the nature of knowledge, power, shamanism and reincarnation, although these points are usually buried in footnotes rather than made explicit in the text.

*On the Run in Siberia* is a powerful, reflexive ethnography. It evokes the youthful idealism and sense of adventure which drew many of us to anthropology. It is also a riveting page-turner. Anyone interested in the circumpolar world, post-Soviet Siberia, hunting economies, and the daunting complexities of ethnographic fieldwork will be richly rewarded by Rane Willerslev's work.