

Gender Distinctions in an Egalitarian Society: The Case of Evenki People of the Baikal Region

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Abstract

In this article we present the case of the Evenki people, Siberian hunter-gatherers that share some traits of egalitarianism with other hunter-gathering people of the world. Using the cybernetic approach, proposed by Gregory Bateson in social anthropology, we describe the circular logic of interaction between genders and study the strategies that Evenki use to solve contradictions between personal autonomy (*manakan*) and dependencies associated with inter-gender relationships. The scope of our interest covers such situations as flirting, conjugal unit establishment, promotion of business contacts with strangers (*andaki* relationships), everyday violence and aggression, as well as ecstatic states. The presented analysis of the episodes of interaction in everyday life shows that Evenki social organization is based on a situational approach to the distinction of genders. The research is based on several fieldworks conducted in the Baikal region (Russia), but the core materials relate to a two-month stay with one Evenki community in spring 2006.

Keywords: Hunter-Gatherers, Egalitarian Ethos, Gender Distinctions, Personal Autonomy, Cybernetic Approach, Contacts with Strangers

Introduction

Human cognition is organized in such a way that one tends to ascribe some characteristics to an isolated object, although in practice these characteristics exist and show themselves only in interaction between the object and other objects. Stone is hard when it resists our attempts to crush it; its hardness is a quality of our relationship and the relationships between it and other objects, or the relationships between its molecular parts. “Language continually asserts by the syntax of subject and predicate that “things” somehow “have” qualities and attributes. A more precise way of talking would insist on the fact that the “things” are produced, are seen as separate from other “things,” and are made “real” by their internal relations and by their behavior in relationship with other things and with the speaker” (Bateson 1988 [1979]:64).

The same problem is with the notion of roles, ethnicities, and stereotypes, which are usually the results of the same ascription of the quality of the relationship to only one particular side of it. The study and experience of gender distinctions are vulnerable to the same mistake of attribution—there are no men and women isolated from each other. The only possible way to be socially recognized as a woman, for example, is to be in social relationships with other men and women. And all the female characters that are shown in the course of such being are the constituent parts of these relationships. To continue this logic, we can assume that differences in gender distinctions observed in various societies are not the results of the production of different types of women and men, but the results of different patterns of organization of the relationships between them. And here we come to the focus of this article, which will be on the way gender is

produced in the frames of egalitarian social organization of modern Siberian hunter-gatherers, in this case the Evenki people. In this chapter we will describe how the relationships between men and women are integrated into the system of egalitarian ethos and will show exactly how different they are from the way gender is produced in hierarchical societies, for example in our own “Western” cultures, such as Russia and Hungary. Returning to the citation from Bateson that we used in the first paragraph, we cannot pretend that the description we present here is neutral, but it is itself the result of an attribution mistake, because everything we have observed and noticed about the system of gender relationships in Evenki society are not qualities that this system has, but are parts of the relationship between this system and us.

The basic hunter-gatherer skills of Evenki ethos are not for establishing, but avoiding hierarchical relationships. (For example, these skills are important for changing the behavior.) There are no such crystal-clear things as egalitarian and hierarchical ethoses, which exist distinctly from each other in practice. But the result of their systematic relationship can be described by the production of such a schematic model. The main claim for carefulness here is in the need to keep in mind the difference between life and model. The relational epistemology of the cybernetic approach, which we use in this chapter, requires us to always keep in mind the distinction between different logical types. The map that we draw here is not the territory that we experienced. The only conceivable way to reduce the possibility of the confusion of information from these different levels is to build one more abstract level on which to describe how the experience of the territory has changed us so that we came to produce this particular map, and how the production of the map will influence our perception of the territory. And then the reader herself/himself has to undertake the same exercise concerning the chain of changes that happens in the course of their own interaction with this text. Ascription of the qualities, familiar or different from own experience, is the process of relationship in which these differences or commonalities exist. And scientific generalizations are inevitably products of such unconscious processes of attribution. This process was described most accurately by Bateson himself in the epilogue to the second edition of his book *Naven*, which he wrote in 1958 (Bateson 1958:280-303).

There are also some features in our description that will look very familiar to Western readers, and this will mean that either the system of organization of relationships among Evenki people shares the patterns with the system in which the reader lives herself/himself, or the reader’s system shares some patterns with the systems of the authors. We suppose that the assumptions are true and could provide us and readers with an incentive to continue the study and comparisons.

The following description is based on our fieldwork experiences among Evenki of the Baikal region. In the text we outline the episodes from the particular period—two months that we lived in one Evenki family in spring 2006—to present congruent materials and save the contextual connections as far as it is possible in the frames of one single article. The outcomes of gender relationships that we observed in the life of this family resonated with our other observations made during subsequent periods of fieldwork among Evenki people of the same region. Because the designation “Evenki people” is artificial (and like all scientific designations has its own rather complex history of development), we use it for identification of people we study with caution, supposing that people living in other regions that are also called Evenki can practically be involved in different systems of relationships and concerned with other forms of presentation of egalitarian and hierarchical elements of their cultures. This trap is unfortunately unavoidable, as every such system is alive, changing, developing, or disintegrating. At the same

time the representation of the system can also be framed differently by different researchers. But these are old confusions that are necessarily part of scientific discourse and have importance for its generation and advancement.

Nadia: The Trajectory of *Patsanka*

When we met Nadia, we had already heard that she was the only Evenki in the region living in the taiga, and that she struggled alone against poachers who tried to enter the nature reserve. Having studied nature reserves, we were amazed that she was the only female ranger we had met, and as such Nadia is an exception. One might speculate whether she is an emancipated woman holding a man's position in a state organization such as a nature reserve, or one of the "Last Evenki" (Ssorin-Chaikov 2003) maintaining the traditional hunter-gatherers' way of life. Her complex biography and position in the Evenki community demonstrate that dichotomies such as female/male or emancipated/traditional do not apply in her case.

Among ourselves we called Nadia by the Russian word *patsanka*, which means "tomboy," a girl that looks and behaves like a boy without contesting her female identity. Nadia is a heavy smoker, like most Evenki men. When she goes to the village, she drinks vodka like other Evenki. While generally being very calm, she can be very aggressive, like when she confronts poachers. She has a knife and a gun, and uses both as hunting and self-defense instruments. She once cut her brother after he had tried to shame her for having sexual relations with a Russian geologist. Nadia is the middle daughter of an elderly couple—Grandfather Irgichi and Grandmother Katia—and lives two kilometers away from their winter camp at the post (*kordon*) of the nature reserve, situated in the taiga. She has a 15-year-old daughter who lives in the village with Nadia's cousin Vasia. Nadia is not married, but has sexual relations with a colleague, a Buryat man from a nearby village who has a family. She also likes to flirt with strangers and sometimes has romances with men visiting the nature reserve as workers (geologists and scientists from the city). She is rather handsome and attractive in her army-style clothes.

Nadia went with her father to the taiga in her childhood. While at the boarding school she received a male nickname, "Volodia," because she spent so much time with male mates. She rode horses, hunted, and drank. In a way, she was not very different from her female friends; all Evenki girls who had regularly lived in winter camps did the same. However, Nadia retained her habits and tried to enter college to become a sports instructor. She failed (partly because this was a male-dominated profession), became pregnant, and returned to her parents. She worked with a local ranger and became responsible for the part of the nature reserve situated near her parents' winter camp after the ranger's death.

Nadia was not very talkative with us, but shared little stories about her trips and experiences. She always entertained us with something like sweets or cookies, which are rather precious and rare in this rather remote region. She once gave us meat, pretending that it was beef, but we later discovered that it had been game. Her intention to share this meat was inconsistent with her official position as an inspector who had to prevent hunting in the taiga. She performed her hospitality in a very reserved manner, without any expectations of reciprocity.

Nadia had a dog with two puppies and a pregnant cat living in her house. She also had a cow and several horses that were freely let to graze. Her salary allowed her the personal freedom of movement between the taiga, the village, and her *kordon*, and her household was small and simple enough not to hinder her from moving around. Nadia was constantly on the move and

knew the latest news about the conditions of roads and rivers and about events in the village. On her way back from the village she sometimes went to her parents' winter camp, where we saw her drunken, passive, and asocial—unable to speak or hear, only to continue moving.

***Manakan*: The Feeling of Personal Autonomy**

Evenki¹ cherish the feeling of personal autonomy. After they were forced to abandon their hunting lifestyle, they experience this feeling today, paradoxically, through alcohol. For Evenki, the state of intoxication is predominated by the feeling of freedom from, or absence of, commitments to other people.

Nadia once participated in a male ritual performed in accordance with the custom of the local Buryats (during which a sacrifice was made to obtain the right from ancestors to stay in this formerly Evenki land). Other Evenki participants did not comment on the fact that Nadia participated in this male ritual. Intoxicated after the drinking session, Nadia persistently repeated that she was “*manakan*” (“*Bi manakan bihim!*”). In Evenki, *manakan* means being autonomous and self-reliant.

What was she expressing in this manner, and why was she the one who experienced it? These questions will help us to study the dilemmas of interpersonal relations from the Evenki perspective and look at the impact of “gender relationships” on Evenki selves.

The first point to be discussed here is the connection between Nadia's lethargic expression of a *manakan* experience and her image of *patsanka*. Nadia's constant resistance to building close partnerships both in professional and intimate spheres assured her single status. She spent a lot of time in the company of male colleagues and relatives, and could not have kept such a lifestyle if she had been married with children. Working in the forest and picking up her salary at the post office, she seldom saw her supervisors. She formally contacted the main office of the nature reserve twice a day, but usually her messages were incomprehensible due to the poor radio connection. This suited both sides for different reasons.

Nadia's independent position was her own achievement, and she deliberately chose her solitude. She could rightfully be called *manakan*. As far as Nadia embodies the ideal state for an Evenki, she is associated with the old Evenki traditions by strangers and Evenki representatives. This makes her vulnerable to mythologization, like that which affected the minds of Irish bachelors in Scheper-Hughes's description of family myth (1977). Nadia's position as the “Last Evenki” (free from commitments and a settled way of life) becomes acknowledged by others as exceptional, and as such it captures her in a new commitment as representative of a certain idea of the old, traditional Evenki culture that non-Evenki have. This contradiction appears to be a constant challenge for Nadia, and she does everything to avoid contact with people who would associate her status with Evenki culture. For example, she did not go to the annual ritual in which Evenki relatives from the city participated. She was suspicious about us and did not want to become our informant or guide. Nevertheless, she was already a heroine of local Evenki myth; pictures of Nadia riding a horse were exhibited in the main nature reserve office, nearly 70 kilometers away from her *kordon*.

In the context of the local Evenki community, her position aroused no controversy and was generally accepted. Though she maintained a lifestyle very different from that of others, she was not regarded as an exception. She was like others and she was among others, as determined by two rather similar circumstances. First, the *manakan* experience, which is highly valued among Evenki, presupposes that everyone has his or her own way, so that there can be no general

norm and no exception. Second, as far as the *manakan* feeling is part of Evenki reality, everyone who shares a common socialization has the potential to experience it. This means that Nadia's situation was familiar to all Evenki, though they could not experience this state themselves. Every local Evenki, we suppose, has the same wish to avoid commitments and wants to experience a feeling of autonomous lethargy in heavy drinking. Therefore, she was not in any sense exceptional.

Personal Autonomy and Relationships Between Genders

Nadia's participation at male rituals was a common and everyday practice. We think that only we noticed this, and failed to collate it with previous narrative descriptions of the ritual as a secret not to be shared with women. We have already stated that her single status was the condition of her participation in male activities. Thus, we can suppose that female or male roles in the Evenki community could be the result of marriage, and that gender distinction correlates with the labor distinction within this frame.



Figure 1: Nadia with other rangers. Jirga, spring 2006. Photo: T. Safonova, I. Sántha

Looking at the socialization process and at the appearance of Evenki adults, we can also see that gender identification changes throughout life, and at some biographical points it is much more articulated than at others. For example, prior to entering school, children hardly express any difference in behavior. We met a widower with two small children who was doing all the household duties, including milking, cooking, and washing. His male activities, such as fishing and hunting, were possible only when his elder daughter took charge of the household.

The division of labor within marriage changes in time. There is an impression that this division is accumulated over time, beginning with young couples much closer to Nurit Bird-David's description (Bird 1983) of the conjugal units among Nayaka of South India, in which

spouses carry out household tasks together, without specialization as to male or female work. The appearance of young Evenki spouses reflects this equality; their clothing very often looks similar. Elderly couples look different; elderly ladies wear skirts and scarves, and elderly men wear quilted jackets. Young adults wear more practical things, but as labor distinctions develop, they begin to introduce in their appearance elements linked to their specialization. For example, women who fish with their husbands wear rubber shoes, whereas women who do not have the opportunity to wear something more elegant.

The distinction of labor between spouses begins at marriage and escalates when they have children. With the birth of children, spouses do fewer tasks together and their roles as male and female become more articulated. Lena, one of Irgichi's youngest daughters, and her husband, Bair, lived several kilometers from Irgichi's winter camp and presented an example of such a conjugal unit. Lena and Bair were seen everywhere together. They lived on the bank of the main river. For fishing, they needed to put out nets and float in a boat. They did this together and shared the risk of drowning in the fast and dangerous river. The other couple we witnessed, Ivan (the youngest son of Irgichi) and Natasha, had three children and tried to spend all their time together. Grandmother felt sorry for Natasha, who was always very tired from trying to help Ivan in his duties while also performing her own. She was known as a bad cook, as her sister once told us, but that was the price for assisting her husband. Natasha and Ivan worked together all day and looked like two peers, but a split had occurred in their relationship because they avoided doing particular things in the presence of each other. For example, Natasha did not smoke with Ivan, and never took drinking water from the river—that was Ivan's duty. Ivan never milked cows when Natasha was home, though we saw him doing it when she was away. The rationality and the efficacy of the division of labor started to challenge their relationship, which may have ended like that of Grandfather Irgichi and Grandmother Katia. Grandfather and Grandmother were rarely seen together unless they were quarreling, watching TV, taking a trip, or drinking together. Grandfather pretended to be deaf in Grandmother's presence and acted as if he did not hear her orders and remarks. She attacked him for that. They looked like constantly fighting strangers² who had to live under the same roof.

We had the impression that among the Evenki, many people were very eager to participate in new, fresh relationships rather than do something with a permanent partner. Growing division of labor was effective but unpleasant in the context of egalitarian society, and damaging to long-term relationships and communication between spouses, parents, and children. The sharpest conflict we witnessed was the quarrel between Irgichi and his son Ivan, who shared a household but could not talk to each other. They avoided each other's company and nearly turned their boat over when crossing a nearby river. The division of labor between them (the son did demanding, physical jobs, and the father made decisions about the stock) prevented them from communicating and accomplishing any common tasks. They also looked like strangers who did nothing together.

This process of estrangement among intimates and family members, according to our Western interpretation, is an important concept to articulate here, in order to understand the place of so-called strangers in the Evenki community. As far as long-term relations are gradually damaged by accumulated division of labor, only short-term encounters can bring emotional pleasure and satisfaction. This means that Evenki prefer to build relationships with a concrete task in mind—not as a result of (inter-)personal development. If relations have a history, then they are socially problematic, because there is less potential to do things together without distinctions and specializations. If this is so, then our Western concept distinguishing between

close people and strangers is not suitable within the Evenki context. The idea of trust that evolves in the course of a long-term relationship is totally neglected by Evenki. They do not need trust and predictability (as we do) to establish pleasant relationships. On the contrary, they need unpredictability, risk, and the feeling that partners do not know each other very well. This condition of communication is helpful for maintaining the *manakan* feeling. If your partner cannot pretend to know you and to anticipate your actions and thoughts, then you have less commitment to him/her, which is pleasant and important. In these contexts, the success of mutual efforts is very vulnerable and appealing, leaving the participants feeling amazed and satisfied with their success. They split immediately after the job is done to continue their independent trajectories. We previously called these situated partnerships, or companionships (Safonova and Sántha 2007). Roles are commitments, and as such they spoil the ecstasy of spontaneous and unpredictable success. In such situations gender distinctions are not appreciated, and as long as spouses can secure their relationship as the accomplishment of concrete tasks without attribution of male and female roles, they save their love and affection. The same is true of other long-term relationships. Wherever Evenki can, they prefer to involve new people in their undertakings. This strategy also presupposes the constant change of company and place.

From this point of view, Nadia prefers to protect her relationships with other Evenki from the accumulation of commitments and anticipations. She organizes her life to drift from one partnership devoted to the accomplishment of concrete tasks and the resolution of concrete problems to another. According to the Evenki ethos, she chooses a lifestyle that is less effective from the Westerner's perspective but much more pleasant and social in frames of Evenki social organization. Nadia is open to a wide range of possible companionships and does not restrict herself to female roles. From the Evenki point of view, she is much more integrated into the society than the married schoolteacher with several children (the ideal, emancipated, Soviet-type female career). The personal autonomy that Evenki experience as the *manakan* feeling enables them to enter a variety of companionships and short-term partnerships and remain free from long-term relations and roles.

Following these considerations about relationships between genders, it is interesting to return to the scene during the performance of the male ritual when Nadia repeated, in drunken lethargy, that she was *manakan*. During this drinking session, men and women were not differentiated, as usually happens when women and men drink together. People did not react to sexual provocations and did not split into those who became easily drunk (usually women) and those who control the situation and use it according to their interests (usually men, to start the seduction). The participants of this session were drinking without such distinctions in mind, and the mutual relationship between weak and strong consciousnesses did not develop. All participants were involved in a rather different configuration in which gender played no role at all. They were partners in the companionship that was devoted to the accomplishment of one concrete and particular task—to drink all the bottles of vodka that the Buryats had supplied for the ritual. There was no other frame that could be associated with the participants' intentions. Nadia's expression of *manakan* came about through intoxication and individual experience, not through provocation. And none of the participants regarded it as a sexual provocation or a communicative gesture. Nobody was interested in such gestures because the focus was on the bottles and not on individuals. People even told stories to fill the pauses usually filled by food between rounds of drinking. These narratives were relevant not for their content but for the rhythm and coordination of collective drinking. The participants' main goal was to drink no less than the others, and synchronously with them. This competition was balanced so that no one

could pretend to be a winner—the ideal social form for Evenki. Drinking as a concrete situation in which everybody is a winner and is *manakan* is very pleasant for Evenki, while the vodka lasts. Nadia, as a participant in this activity, contributed to the common experience of individuality shared between genders. But when this stabilized competition between non-gendered individuals was over and the task completed, Nadia switched to another regime in which she was a flirtatious woman.

The observations presented can be interpreted in a rather unexpected way. As far as Nadia's ability to conceal her female identity and the ability of her partners not to articulate her female identity in the frames of common drinking are the conditions for the collective action that provides the experience of Evenki individuality, the possibility of gender distinction appears as a threat to the situational cohesion and integrity of the Evenki community. We have already described how the division of labor between spouses and the differentiation between male and female jobs led to the collapse of communication between partners. The same processes endanger all companionships in which men and women are involved.

***Patsanka* and Social Integration of the Evenki Community**

Patsanka is not a *role* for Nadia, as she is not expected to maintain a tomboyish appearance and is quite free to change her look whenever she wishes. However, this appearance is connected with her feeling of *manakan* and the personal autonomy she has maintained throughout her life. Other Evenki women who feel *manakan*, either as a result of intoxication or as a sign of freedom from concrete personal commitments, also look *patsanka* at these times. This appearance is connected to a witty gaze and cunning hooligan's laughter and tricks. But if it is not a role, then what is it that is so much cherished, and so much concentrated in Nadia? To an outsider she looks different from the others, like Big Men and Great Men appear to be outstanding to the researchers of Melanesia (Strathern and Godelier 1991). This parallel makes us think that *patsanka* is a result of indigenous reflection and analysis of the relationships that bind the society. Nadia is different because she accumulates the traits that are typical and important for everyone, and this makes her different from the Evenki perspective. She never pretends to be different, only independent, like others. She drinks, smokes, laughs, flirts, and shouts threats when she feels able to express her autonomy in the same way as others. Because she has evaded the establishment of long-term partnerships, she is open to the wider variety of short and fresh new relationships, which do not threaten the loss of her autonomy. Nadia is a person who can form a companionship with everybody, and as a result, she is different. This difference is pleasant for others and highly appreciated, especially when coordination is needed.

Risky situations and emergencies demand cooperation and consolidation. For Westerners, this means somebody has to take control and responsibility for others' actions. But this position is impossible for the Evenki community because no one can tolerate commands from observers. The observer who does not participate is excluded from Evenki communication, and he or she will cause anger and irritation because his/her dominant position will disturb the people involved in the situation. Besides, such a position is difficult to maintain in critical situations. There is always a threat that the commanding person will pretend to secure his/her authoritative position afterwards, which means that the success of the situation would be attributed to the actions of one concrete person and not to the contributing participants. There can be a division between tasks, but not between levels of organization. Evenki people use this cooperative strategy, which is different from the Western directive one and does not suppose a division between the

observing coordinator and the executors of his/her directions.

The Evenki strategy does not rely on verbal communication, but it is ostensive so that messages and actions are not separated from each other. Here we can describe the critical moment when a forest fire came very close to Irgichi's winter camp. A strong wind drove the fire toward the winter camp. It was impossible to stop it by simply trampling the dry grass, which could have helped during calm weather. A complex and rather elaborate strategy was needed to organize a contrary fire that could drive it to the river in the opposite direction. There was no time to think; people simply did their tasks. People like Nadia became coordinators without saying anything. Nadia had experience working in collaboration with everyone on the winter camp. She switched from one kind of common execution of a task to another. By drifting from one companionship to another one, she was a connector between people. She was not an observer and did not show any sign of authority in the moment, but her actions and movements between different jobs were coordinating the whole process. She was present when the contrary fire was started, participated in extinguishing the fire at the other side, and appeared at the place of the contrary fire and controlled its direction. Then she was in other places where bushes started to smoke. She had embodied knowledge of which jobs should be initiated with which people, and integrated everyone without direct commands. After the fire was extinguished, everyone had a short rest and went on with their business. Nadia also returned to her *kordon* without anyone's acknowledgment of her outstanding role. From a long-term perspective, she deserved the unpretending sympathy of others that would help her to maintain her personal autonomy, rather than concrete appreciation for this specific coordinating role.

It is very difficult to identify whether Nadia's lethargic experience of *manakan* is related to her gender. It seems that drunkenness gives the illusion that such distinctions as male/female do not matter, that the self is so autonomous that it is free from any kind of identity that presupposes relationships with others (Strathern 1988). This sounds like an asylum, or isolation, which in Western society can hardly be associated with pleasure. We think that for Evenki, this state of consciousness has emotional potential because it is incorporated into their lifestyle, which presupposes such periods of solitude. For Evenki, *manakan* means the ability to live alone without losing the ability to participate in occasional companionships. This solitude is very social: it is framed by the constant possibility to establish contacts with others. In this sense, Nadia feels *manakan*, and this feeling is not gendered—it is equally shared by other Evenki men and women. And, like others, she can always establish new, gendered relationships. She can behave like a flirtatious woman when she wants to. Her autonomy is endangered by her only addiction—the feeling of freedom and of *manakan*.

Vodka, which produces this feeling, determines the main paradox in Evenki life. Evenki are involved in strong and addictive relationships with the substance that provides the feeling of freedom and the absence of commitments. Alcohol becomes the way to experience *manakan*, and Nadia, like other Evenki, is not free from the contexts in which alcohol plays a crucial role. For example, she must behave like a woman when she is expected to do so by the males who supply her with vodka. She is not free from them and has to establish relationships on a gender scale. These situations are different from the spontaneous companionships so appreciated in the Evenki community. This paradox splits the Evenki self between the experience of freedom and the addiction to it. It could also be integrated into the Evenki way of life to overcome other paradoxes generated by the introduction of new relationships into the Evenki community (for example, it could be useful in balancing the autonomies of spouses who abandon nomadic hunting in favor of settled cattle breeding).

The Endangered Autonomy of the Conjugal Unit

According to our observations, Evenki social organization shares a great deal with other hunter-gatherers, for example the Nayaka of South India described by Nurit Bird-David (Bird 1983). In her PhD thesis, Bird-David argued that two main elements operated in social organization: an individual and a conjugal unit. These are constantly floating between each other and never establishing a stable relationship, retaining their autonomy. According to Bird-David, a conjugal unit, though consisting of two people, constitutes a single unit, in the frame of which spouses share everything (and spend all of their time together) equally. Our observations among Evenki also supported such social organization in which children, until the age of seven (before school), live with their parents and are part of the conjugal units. After the age of seven and until approximately 20 (the age when they start building their own conjugal unit) they are single, drifting persons without strong attachments to other conjugal units. Nadia's status could be compared to that of such drifting individuals. Nadia's dilemmas are connected with her individual strategy, and her feeling of personal autonomy. Here we seek to analyze the complexities that endanger the autonomy of the conjugal unit and, as a result, its integrity. We argue that the influence of the outer world, especially the social environment of hierarchical societies, tears the conjugal unit apart through gender distinction, particularly in frames of labor differentiation and behavior in foreign contexts.

Labor differentiation happens as a result of the growth of the household and cattle stock (we discussed this problem elsewhere; see Safonova and Sántha 2007). But because this differentiation is inconsistent with the Evenki ethos of avoiding long-term interdependencies that contest individual autonomy, economic rationality is always destroyed by the logic of emotional patterns. Evenki cannot accumulate and manage wealth, partly because this requires the transformation of the conjugal unit into a family enterprise with differentiated roles and duties. In encounters with outsiders, behavioral patterns also tend to demonstrate differentiation between genders; for example, drinking alcohol in the village (the place where Buryats or Russians live) is accompanied by differentiation between male aggressive behavior and female flirting. This distinction will become the subject for our analysis below. There are several questions that interest us, especially why this differentiation happens in encounters with outsiders and how it influences relationships among Evenki.

The survival of the Evenki conjugal unit may seem surprising, considering that it faces two disintegrating forces. If it faces only one force, such as the need to keep a large household and stock of cattle, then it splits into two individual persons who cannot do anything together, like Grandfather Irgichi and Grandmother Katia. But if from time to time the spouses rid themselves of their household obligations and become involved in outer-world contexts, such as searching for alcohol, then they can secure the integrity of their conjugal unit. What could be seen as irresponsibility from the Western point of view is a way for Evenki to maintain their social relationships and mutual love and affection, the feelings on which the conjugal unit is based. Switching from hard work in cattle breeding to hard drinking and back (all of these spheres are dominated by external—either Buryat or Russian—cultural patterns) helps them to maintain moments of unity. When new circuits are started, Evenki are very enthusiastic and comfortable. These moments are full of novelty and fresh potential for possible companionships independent of distinctions such as gender. The moment of crisis in terms of one circuit becomes the initial point for other circuits. For example, when spouses are too tired and bored by their

monotonous farm work, they go drinking in the village and stay until they lose the sense of fun and adventure, and return home to start a new cycle of housework.

Drinking in the village balances working on the farm and vice versa. The differentiation between aggression and flirting reflects the division of labor between genders in the household. These distinctions are not consciously recognized, but emotionally experienced as uncomfortable and imposed by others. They start when the task of finding vodka becomes a source of competition between spouses. Evenki culture can be described as a poverty culture (Scheper-Hughes 1992; Turnbull 1972), with no accumulation of resources and with absence of solidarity in situations when scarce supplies are to be distributed. When people search for something rare and important like alcohol or gasoline, they prefer to behave as individuals to avoid sharing. It is important that people know that others do the same, to prevent any sense of guilt or shame. People are organized not by commonly shared ethics or morale but by the synchronism of their strategies and individual efforts. In other words, they are united not by the knowledge that they do the same things based on specific rules, but by the feeling that they do this because of similar interests. This kind of understanding does not need verbal expression, but is based on individualistic competition. For example, we witnessed this synchronized awareness when we traveled by car with Grandmother Katia and Grandfather Irgichi from the village to the winter camp. We had a bottle of vodka that we opened just at the end of the village. We had an accident, and all the men went to fix the problem and change the tire. Grandmother Katia immediately proposed to Tatiana that they drink the vodka together. When the women went to the bridge and the men tried to cross the river by car, Grandfather Irgichi proposed to István that they drink the vodka. They initiated the same acts secretly from each other, but were both in the same frame of logic; Grandmother Katia was very suspicious about what the men were doing while she was on the bridge.

This parallel and synchronized behavior is very typical for Evenki spouses in the village. We witnessed Ivan (Irgichi's son) and his wife, Natasha, go to the village to drink. Usually, they are always together on the farm, but in the village they were separately searching for different company. They were competing over who could find and drink more. Natasha was much more successful, because as a woman she could find more hospitable company with other women. But Ivan drank longer, coming home three days after Natasha. Natasha was in a very good mood in the village; she was laughing and "flirting," though with no concrete target or intention. Ivan, on the contrary, was very aggressive, acted threateningly, and looked for a scandal or a fight. They did not stay in each other's company in the village, yet they provoked each other, perhaps with the other in mind as a partner in the competition.

It seemed that Natasha and Ivan's relationship was maintained with their synchrony and parallel coordination. It was important to destroy this synchrony to achieve a new cycle of working in the taiga. Natasha and Ivan needed to break their mutual coordination to feel *manakan*, their personal autonomy, instead of the autonomy of their conjugal unit, which they experience every day in the course of shared work. When Ivan came home, he was still very aggressive and quarreled with Natasha; he expected her to be waiting for him with hot soup and tea. The breakdown in communication was so severe that even Grandmother Katia feared this would be the end of the relationship. However, several days later, Ivan and Natasha migrated together to the summer camp and a new circle of seasonal jobs started.

Regarding the expression of aggression and flirting, we searched for examples outside of drinking to understand the context of these emotional experiences. Evenki children expressed a mixture of aggressiveness and flirting toward us, and sometimes we could not clearly distinguish

between the two. There was no gender distinction; girls and boys equally expressed this attitude, which (according to our interpretation as Westerners who clearly distinguish aggression and flirting tenderness) was an intertwined affection and roughness. For example, children treated their dogs with great affection, and simultaneously beat them heavily. The main scheme incorporating these emotions was a game we called “catching and holding.” Children played with their dogs by catching and holding them in their hands. Then, depending on the reactions of their prey, they struggled fiercely against the dogs’ attempts to get away, or tenderly held them close. The problem with the game was that children needed a new focus to forget the dog and let it go away. It was fun for the children to simply catch the dog, but holding it was full of ambivalence—between the happiness of possession and the need to lose it in order to create new excitement. As we have observed, this scheme and the emotional ambivalence were incorporated into nearly all the interpersonal interactions between children, adults, and dogs. We also suppose that aggression and flirting are parts of the same phenomenon and the signs of the second stage of the game, when partners feel the need to destroy the relationship to have the opportunity to start a new one. All the emotions we witnessed in the village were part of the same play, involving adults in social interactions of “catching and holding” with people from the village.

Natasha and Ivan experienced the same circle of emotions as are seen in this game. But if children experience this ambivalence fully, without gender differentiation, then why were Ivan and Natasha so dramatically different in their expression? Children’s emotions depend on the reactions of their play partners. This observation leads us to the problem of the position of outsiders—or strangers, as we call them. As far as strangers (Buryats and Russians) are involved in the process of aggression and flirting, and as these emotions are mostly addressed to strangers with whom Evenki men and women drink, the strangers’ reactions define whether Evenki behave aggressively or tenderly. These reactions depend not on the gender distinction of Evenki but on the gender distinctions that exist within the strangers’ societies. Russians and Buryats would expect men rather than women to be aggressive. A Buryat woman once told us it is very important not to be afraid of Evenki men, or show fear of their aggressive behavior, as this would only support their anger. Instead she suggested seeing this as a kind of play. Resistance arouses anger and aggressiveness in Evenki men. In contrast, Evenki women are treated kindly and without suspicion of being dangerous and demanding. This leads to a tender reaction from Evenki women.

The presence of a person with a background different from the Evenki could affect the dynamics of the occasion by generating and supporting gender distinctions that otherwise would not appear in Evenki interactions. For example, Natasha and Ivan needed external help to shear the sheep. The only person free at that moment was the wife of Ivan’s cousin, Oksana. Oksana is a Buryat woman, and because among Buryats shearing of sheep is acknowledged as women’s work exclusively, Ivan was excluded from the task and Nadia was called to help. Natasha, Oksana, and Nadia worked together and behaved as they would in the village. They laughed, smoked, and chatted. It became a women’s occasion, although Natasha said that she would otherwise cut sheep with other people, regardless of their sex. Thus, we can assume that this gender distinction becomes relevant among Evenki only in the presence of strangers. Likewise, the history of cultural contacts between Evenki and outsiders is a history of gender distinction. This assumption allows us to study the historical material on *andaki* partnerships (trading contacts with Russians, Buryats, or Chinese), which we are going to do in the next section. We discuss them not so much from an economic perspective but rather with a focus on inter- and cross-gender interactions.

Gender Distinctions and *Andaki* Relationships

The works of Ethel John Lindgren contain the most detailed and expressive descriptions of *andaki*—“trading partners,” in the Evenki language (Lindgren 1936). Lindgren conducted her work in Manchuria in 1929, 1931, and 1932, before the Japanese invasion. She reported that trading partnerships were established mainly between Evenki hunters and Russian Cossacks who had escaped from the Communists to the Chinese frontier. Lindgren’s thesis was never published, though she defended it at Cambridge when Gregory Bateson (Bateson 1958) was there, and when Shirokogoroff’s works on Evenki had already been published. Her methodological perspective was close to that of Bateson (Lindgren 1938), who was not popular at the time, which is partially why her works were neglected in favor of Shirokogoroff’s functionalist monographs (e.g., Shirokogoroff 1929). She was also one of the first feminist researchers in this field, devoting most of her time to women, especially one female Evenki shaman named Olia.

Lindgren was very sensitive toward gender issues and the procedural development of relationships. She was less involved in the popular kinship studies of those times, and her description of *andaki* partnerships lacks structural modeling. For her contemporaries, her papers were incomprehensible, due to the amount of detail concerning social and emotional aspects. This seemed chaotic and unscientific. Thanks to her materials, we can now reconstruct how *andaki* relationships proceeded and exactly how Russians and Tungus (Evenki) were involved. For example, she wrote that Evenki people not only traded with Russians but could also stay in their homes during their short visits to Russian villages. They named their children after their Russian *andaki*, who sometimes served as godparents. In some cases Russians adopted the Evenki children of their *andaki*. We see that economic activity, which was conducted mainly by Russian and Evenki men, also included women as hostesses and foster mothers. Lindgren describes quite a few examples of inter-ethnic marriage between Russians and Evenki, while Shirokogoroff tended to associate such marriages with *andaki* relationships. Lindgren insisted that Evenki used *andaki* partnerships not as strategies of integration into the outer world but, on the contrary, as a way of avoiding contact with the Chinese, who represented the state in this region. Russian *andaki* were paying taxes to the Chinese on behalf of many Evenki, and helped them to hide unregistered arms. Russians practically acted as patrons, collecting furs and distributing goods necessary for hunting.

Lindgren also wrote that aggression and flirting were common behaviors at *bagjur* (an annual fair), during which major economic transactions were conducted. She suggested that these outbursts of sexuality and anger happened only at such *bagjurs* and were not common in everyday Evenki life. Lindgren said that although Russians organized such *bagjurs*, and that they supplied vodka, they quite rarely were involved in such episodes. Aggressive behavior and sexual provocations happened between Evenki from far-distant places who met each other only at these occasions. Russians acted as observers and suppliers, using the chaos and emotional tension to their benefit. We can assume that at that time the autonomy of Evenki was much stronger and that the gender distinction in emotional expression, which (as we argued above) is a sign of a crisis and a way of resolving controversial situations, happened only at these concrete occasions, and only a few times (i.e., three to four times) per year.



Figure 2: Flirting with the shaman after a ritual. Samahai, spring 2006. Photo: T. Safonova, I. Sántha

Lindgren's materials are unique because they describe a special situation wherein Evenki could escape involvement in hierarchical relationships (or could reduce them to contacts with Russian business partners, avoiding direct contact with bureaucrats or state executives). In this context, *andaki* relationships were instruments for maintaining personal autonomy and did not endanger the egalitarian social organization. For example, vodka was accessible for Evenki only during such rare meetings, and was absent from everyday life. As a result, alcohol addiction was rare and the experience of being *manakan* was not controversial.

The analysis of western Buryat epic materials presented by Roberte Hamayon is also focused on the relationships called *andlyata* (exchange of sisters between equal men without any bridewealth, or *kalym*), a word close to the Evenki *andaki* (Hamayon 1981). She stated that western Buryats were former hunters, and that their social organization was based on the same relationship patterns as those of Evenki. She reconstructed the role of wedding ceremonies, during which people from faraway places gathered. Aggression and flirting were essential parts of these occasions because of the articulation of unresolved controversies such as property or inheritance. Although these categories refer to Buryat cultural patterns, the emotional intensity of such weddings is reminiscent of Lindgren's description of *bagjur*. The analysis conducted by Hamayon presents a very accurate reconstruction of the emotional aspects of hunter-gatherer behavior, reflected in our fieldwork materials.

Shirokogoroff (1929) and Arsenev (2004) conducted expeditions among Evenki prior to the October Revolution. Their missions were only half scientific and strongly connected with the

political interests of the Russian Empire. As a result, they were both interested in the processes of integration of the Evenki into state institutions and the colonization of Siberia, which is why they paid attention to inter-ethnic marriages as mechanisms of Evenki integration and local political and economical balances between Russians and the Chinese. In their interpretation, *andaki* relationships were based on inter-ethnic marriages through which strangers gained the rights and possibility to use Evenki territories. From this perspective, Evenki women acquired the position of intermediaries between Russians, Chinese, and Evenki. *Andaki* relationships, according to Shirokogoroff and Arsenev, were not based on concrete, short-term interests between partners, but rather were structured relations that anticipated Russian or Chinese norms of gender distinction. They both underlined that among the Evenki, strangers could only be single men. The fact that colonization was accomplished by Russian or Chinese men predetermined the construction of a special position for indigenous women. Later, in Soviet times, indigenous (Evenki) women were associated with progress and civilization, and men with conservative and patriarchal customs (Slezkine 1994).

Heonik Kwon worked among Oroch (one of the Manchu-Tungus people, close to Evenki) in the beginning of the 1990s, at a time when the colonization process was completed and most indigenous people had lost their autonomy and the way of life specific to hunter-gatherers in this part of the world (Kwon 1993). Kwon also studied *andaki* relationships, which in his interpretation had taken on quite a new form. Young women were trying to exploit their previously acknowledged position as inter-ethnic marriage partners to move away from their communities. But at the time of Kwon's fieldwork, these women's strategies failed because Russian men working in the neighboring oil bases were no longer interested in establishing long-term relationships with indigenous people. Oroch girls who flirted with those men usually returned to their parents unmarried, and frequently pregnant. The community was split between men as non-prestigious matrimonial partners and women searching for very insecure possibilities to move out. The aggressiveness of Oroch men was a common explanation as to why Oroch women preferred to flirt with Russians. But as far as we can assume on the basis of our own fieldwork, both reactions were part of one process, mutually supporting and enhancing each other.

Summarizing the cases described above, we can say that there is a correlation between the level of dependency of Evenki (and also other hunter-gatherers of Siberia) on hierarchical societies and the intensity and frequency of differentiation between aggressive men and flirting women. This gender distinction is a symptom of dependency of Evenki on other cultural patterns. Yet like the women who are not stigmatized for failure in Kwon's description but on the contrary are recognized as autonomous persons, such situated distinctions can also help Evenki to overcome their dependency and mobilize their skills to be, or feel, independent. This is a kind of homeopathy, when the distinction resolves another distinction endangering the egalitarian social organization. Nadia's *manakan* trajectory is close to the strategies of Oroch women. *Manakan* and *andaki* turn out to be different phases of the same process of expression of personal autonomy.

Conclusion

The cybernetic approach gives us the opportunity not only to describe the characteristics of egalitarian social organization (such as the absence of hierarchical social groupings or weakness of authoritative institutions like chieftainship), but also to describe the patterns of its

self-correction. In the frames of this approach, the egalitarian social organization of the society is distinct from other forms of organization not because of its divergent appearance, but because of the specifics of its self-corrective processes. In other words, egalitarian social organization exists differently but does not look different.

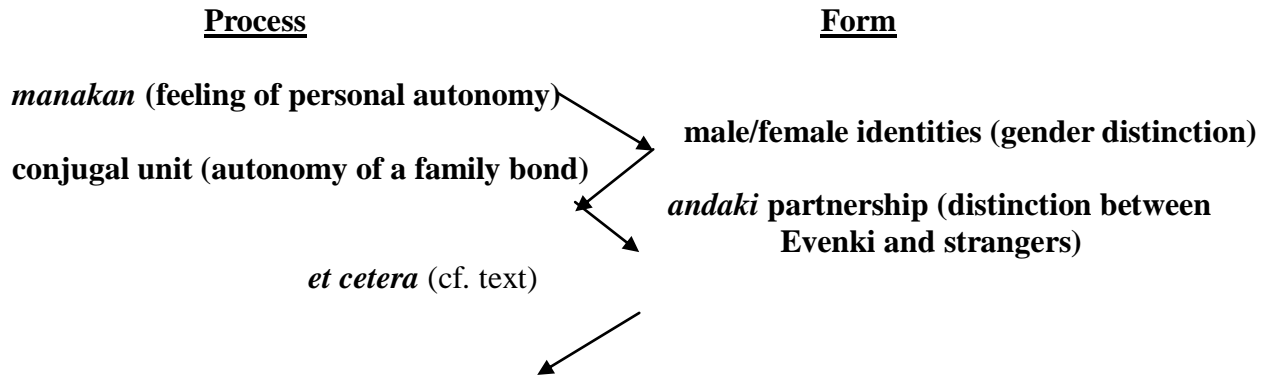


Figure 3: Dialectic between form and process in Evenki social organization

As Gregory Bateson showed, it is possible to describe social events as cybernetic processes as well as in biological terms, and this gives us the opportunity to use such exploratory instruments as *logical typing*. “When we take the notion of logical typing out of the field of abstract logic and start to map real biological [and social] events onto the hierarchies of this paradigm, we shall immediately encounter the fact that in the world of mental and biological systems, the hierarchy is not only a list of classes, classes of classes, and classes of classes of classes but has also become a *zigzag ladder of dialectic between form and process*” (Bateson 1988 [1979]: 211, original emphasis). Self-correction is a quality of the system to turn from a formal and digital way of information transfer to an analog one. Egalitarian social organization as a model shows this quality in practice.

In egalitarian social organization, social distinctions and experience of these distinctions are related to each other and are organized like the zigzag movement from one to the other. If we look at the everyday life of Evenki we will see that hierarchies are rather strongly present in their everyday life (the asymmetrical relations between Evenki and strangers, or between men and women in family lives, etc.), but the experience of these distinctions is mediated by the very impressive state of personal autonomy, which is based on the idea that an individual is free from any distinctions that presuppose relationships with other people. The feeling of personal autonomy, which is experienced as *manakan*, is important for establishing relationships with other people. For example, to be able to go with somebody, a child has to be able to walk without assistance. Nadia’s example shows that the more independent and autonomous you are, the larger is the repertoire of social relationships that you can have with other people. To find a marriage partner with whom you can establish a family, you need to feel yourself free from other obligations, because life in a conjugal unit presupposes that you share all the duties and contexts with your partner equally. Because personal contexts cannot be identical for two persons, the only possibility of such equality in involvement in family life is the ability to deny these contexts and feel yourself free from any other obligations. Gender distinctions once more appear in the context of culture contact with strangers. The structure of *andaki* partnerships, described by many researchers, shows that for Evenki to be able to establish a continuous relationship with non-Evenki, it is important to feel freedom from commitments (for example, to be free to promise things that are not going to happen, to be able to escape from the relationships when they become too demanding, or to lose yourself in alcoholic intoxication so as to not to be responsible for anything). Evenki business partners need to be prepared for such escapism from commitments, because in the frames of egalitarian social organization, only the short-term situational exchanges and distinctions are possible.

There are two important aspects that the model outlined above says about egalitarian social organization. The first is that social distinctions (including gender distinctions) are inevitable and they generate the internal dynamics of self-correction of the system. This means that egalitarian social organization in practice does not have much in common with the idea of primitive communism, in which all people are supposed to be equal all the time. The second point is the interrelation between various kinds of social distinctions. In this chapter we showed how male/female relations are interwoven with the relations between Evenki and other people. The cell in the model that contains “*et cetera*” indicates the potential direction of the research, which can be devoted to the study of the processes that are evolving in the course of inter-ethnic collaboration.

Notes

¹ Here and below we use the ethnonym “Evenki” in the sense explained in the introduction, i.e., we use a necessarily general label for the people with whom we lived and shared experiences during our fieldwork.

² On the notion of “strangers” and Evenki relations to them, see the last third of this article.

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