

# Northern Peoples: Traditions and Customs Among the Even

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*The Northern Review* #22 (Winter 2000): 89-92.

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In this article, traditions and customs of the Even people of Yakutia and their significance in the life of northern people are discussed. According to the country-wide census of 1989, there were 9,216 Evens in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). At present, this numerically small nation is facing the threat of disappearance. There is a danger that their entire cultural heritage, which has taken many centuries to accumulate in the North, will be lost. In the North, a human being is a tiny grain in vast spaces. Here, each life requires a special approach, and that is why kindness, honesty, and decency have become a standard and are very much appreciated.

In this article, the following sources have been used: materials from our family archive, recorded by E. V. Edushkin; research works (kept in the archives of the Institute of Language, Literature and History of the Russian Academy of Sciences); and personal observations of the author. This allowed the author to discuss Even culture in the context of human interaction with nature and to discover the mechanisms of such interactions, which serve as evidence that natural principles lie at the heart of their traditional culture. Climate, history, and geographic isolation of the Evens have left an imprint on their culture.

Treatment of nature and all living substances is based on an ideology formed in the Even understanding during the period characterized by shamanism and even in the pre-shaman era. This religious ideology implies a close and trusting relationship between humans and nature. We must note that, from 17th-19th centuries, the Even had been “officially” converted to the Russian Orthodox faith, though in reality people were still pagan, praying to their own gods and spirits.

Since ancient times, the Even have been nomadic reindeer breeders. Reindeer for them were not only a source of life, but were friends and assistants. Reindeer guaranteed survival and continuation of human life in the difficult conditions of the North. That is why, among Evens, wealth was measured by the number of reindeer that they had. These animals were the foundation of the life for northern peoples. Only with reindeer was a family able to roam from place to place, travels that were undertaken to hunt for meat and fur in the winter and to fish in the summer. The success of northern people’s activities would depend on complying with ethical standards that regulated the relationships of humans and nature.

Regular hunting sites and reindeer herding routes were considered to be home for the Even. Thus, people would treat and “feed” fires made in these locations. Such places were *ynyn tuur* (meaning “motherland-home”). To show respect, Even people would give the spirit of fire presents such as colourful pieces of cloth or pieces of fur from different animals. They would hang the pieces on the trees as if to establish a relationship. Northerners respected and worshipped all living substances around them, incorporating the entire tundra. According to northern beliefs, all of nature—land, air, water, mountains, pastures, the entire tundra with all its flora and fauna and invisible creatures—was a living substance that was always close and affected human life according to the attitude of the person. In this way, the ecological relationship

between humans and nature worked. The Even never criticized natural phenomena such as blizzards, snow, rain, heat, or cold northern winds. It was considered that, in nature, there is some kind of a balance between good and bad weather conditions, and that the weather in the future depends, first of all, on human behaviour—how well he or she observes traditions and customs and conforms to ethical standards between people and the natural environment.

The Even believed that some villages had their own area spirits. For example, residents of the Olenekskiy region (called *uluus*) in Yakutia have hunting customs that confirm the fact. The customs were recorded by I. S. Gurvich in 1945 during his expedition to that region. In such cases, the inhabitants think that each area has an invisible master-spirit for humans. A sudden fright in a reindeer herd was often explained as resulting from the close presence of the master. People living in Olenekskiy region, as well as the remaining Even of Yakutia, tried to cajole local spirits by letting several reindeer live in those cases where an entire herd of wild reindeer was caught. If rule was not abided by, it was believed that the spirit could be offended and that, as a result, hunting would no longer be successful in the area. In the archive materials of N.K. Antonov, one can find descriptions of the customs that take place in places where master-spirits of a given area live, such as birds on trees. For this reason, the Even would hang their oblations on such trees, asking for the land in the area to be fruitful for its inhabitants. In the traditional view of a northerner, area spirits were part of the universe, of the middle world, and lived in the same neighbourhood as humans. They were sort of invisible guards and controlled how well people kept to the ethical standards.

Hunting customs are interesting because they help us understand the way that northern people think. Indeed, one's proximity to nature, their animal surroundings, continuous observation of life and animal habits has made the typical northerner's view of the world quite specific. Not only would a

northerner not distinguish himself from the animal world, but so too would he associate himself with some animal or bird group. Animals, voluntarily or under the influence of a patron-spirit, would let a hunter kill them, although this spirit would not cease to exist following death.

Just like in cultures of other inhabitants of the Far North, it was considered that success in hunting depended upon compliance with tradition in regards to the deceased animals. One of the main rituals for an Even hunter would be skinning and cutting of the carcass of a wild reindeer or moose. At that time, some precautions must be taken. For instance, blood should not be spilled on the ground, and the skull and tubular bones should be buried in a special way. A detailed description of such rituals can be found in the ethnographic materials of I. S. Gurvich, which concern the population of the Olenyokskiy region of Yakutia. Thus, from first transferring the animal's blood, the hunter would sprinkle it around and say: "Spirit of the world, eat! Spirit of the forest, eat!" These incantations and sprinkling in the directions of all corners of the world were intended, first of all, to show the hunter's respect for the spirits, the patrons of hunting and of the forests, for letting him catch the animal. This was also done to show the hunter's respect for the spirit of the animal that had been taken, with apologies for his actions, since people believed that animals were their elder brothers. The process of cutting up the caribou or moose only took fifteen minutes, even during the coldest of winter's days. At that time, the hunters used special techniques that would enable them to not disturb the environment: they cut only the joints, without breaking anything including the tubular bones of the animal.

The Even who lived in tundra regions had a sacred legend called *davdyndyn gaapamdyn*, which means "success in hunting" and was intended for controlling hunting and ethical standards between hunters. According to this tradition, only one hunter would succeed at a time. And with respect to eli-

minating animosity and envy, people used to say “[t]he Great Patron of hunting granted success only to one of us, but next time another one will succeed.” In such a way relations between hunters were regulated and no negative ambitions were permitted. After this traditional period, very few children of hunting age were taught to be honest in hunting.

The Even had a particular hunting etiquette. For example, birds and animals never were hunted without there being a need. Fledglings were taken from their nests only if in severe famine, and one or two were always left for rearing. In the same way it was forbidden to kill animals, birds, or even rodents, which appeared in order to help humans, having escaped predators or natural disasters. Such beliefs demonstrate how the tundra operated according to the law of mutual help, not only from human to human but also from human to animal. For all who live in the Far North traditions of hunting imply careful treatment of the nature.

The entire life of the Even was connected to the natural environment. Ethical traditions allowed for harmonization of the human/nature relationship. Thus, people were not allowed to burn bird feathers since the birds might smell it and fear people. In the same way, according to the shamanic religious view, it was prohibited to boil meat and fish in the same pot since birds and animals belong to different, absolutely incompatible worlds.

All of the traditions and customs of the Even people of Yakutia that have been mentioned in this paper are fundamentally ecological, with economic considerations in treating towards nature. They reflect some of the half-forgotten totemic beliefs of the nation. A mix of shamanic and pre-shamanic views, elements of which make up a common mixed complex of religious beliefs, is still important and pressing.

Thus, the Even formed an ideology where the power of nature dominated. Northern people felt themselves a part of nature and considered themselves to

be the younger brothers of animals; hence, they lived rationally and adequately. Adapting their economy to local ecological conditions took centuries. The process was accompanied by spiritual development, a widening of the ideology, and the “humanizing” of nature, all of which were expressed through the respect for and worship of nature itself.

Individual people of the Even nation, like all other inhabitants of the Far North, are very reserved and brief. Attention and care is expressed in a quiet, unselfish, almost imperceptible, way. People still believe that not to do good to others is a sin, and it is even a greater sin to reproach somebody for ingratitude. It is customary for indigenous northern hunters to leave food, firewood, and matches in the hunting house where they stayed. In the North, children are granted special gentle and kind care, the love that was extended to children always being of the highest priority. Here, each life is precious, and northerners always tried to help each other in all possible ways. This is why the children are treated with special love and attention. Extreme conditions have formed an integral culture, which aims for the humanitarian ideas of co-existence, mutual help and friendly compassion to all living creatures. Many traditions and customs still exist among the Evens and every northerner who is born and raised in the homeland of his ancestors learns them from childhood.

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