

Traditional Birth Rituals Among Even Women, 19th and 20th Centuries: Past and Present

SARDANA A. ALEXEYEVA

The Northern Review #22 (Winter 2000): 93-94.

In this article I will attempt to recreate the system of traditional birth rituals that occurred among the Even people in the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as the religious conceptions connected with them. I will attempt to retrace their transformation within the course of historical development of society.

To this day in ethnographical literature, there has been no special work done that describes the cycle of birth customs and rituals among the Even. You can find some information on birth rituals, the beliefs, and prohibitions connected with childbirth, in works by the following experts on the North: Ya. I. Lindenau, I. S. Gurvich, I. A. Khudyakov, M. G. Levin, S. I. Nikolaev, U. A. Tugolukov, U. G. Popova, A. A. Alexeyev, A. A. Sirina, etc.

This article, making up, to a certain extent, a deficiency in this problem, is written on the basis of materials collected by author during field work conducted from 1996-1998 during research expeditions to the territory of the Lamunkhinskie Even. This group occupies the north-western Verkhoynskiye region of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) in north-eastern Siberia, Russia.

The traditional birth rites of the Even of the region investigated by us can be said to consist of several structural components:

1. Pre-birth rituals, which involve prohibitions and beliefs connected with pregnancy;
2. Birth rituals, which are executed immediately during the birth, such as feeding a life spirit—a ritual called “Muhon,” branding the sacred reindeer “Kujai” in honour of women in childbirth; and
3. Post-birth rituals, which include those such as seeing off the goddess “Ajyhyt,” who is the patron of child-bearing, as well as the ritual for cleansing the mother and her child with the smoke of *ledum*.

With pregnancy, the life of an Even woman would become strictly regulated, having a number of definite rules and prohibitions, a cycle of rituals, each of which bears a magic character and has the ability to promote a successful birth. With respect to such magic, protective prohibitions were relevant. These include

- a “code” of food prohibitions. Breaching such prohibitions could affect the mental abilities of a child; and
- prohibitions connected with the idea that breaching certain other prohibitions would inevitably lead to undesirable results.

According to the world outlook of the Even, childbirth is a gift from God or the creator, who is called *hovki* in the Even language. God is imagined as an old man, who gives the gift of reproduction to all people, animals and plants. As a material embodiment of this gift was a placenta, serving as connecting link between a child and its protectors, who are heavenly deities. According to information received from our informants, the placenta and the umbilical cord of the child were put in *golomo*—a special construction made of poles. It is likely that this ritual originated from the idea that all that humans take from nature must be returned to it.

The main purpose for this complex of birth rituals consists of the pro-

tection of the child from bad spirits and thus, the preservation of life and health of a new-born child. Birth rituals and actions reflected traditional conceptions of the Even people, which also had a religious context. It was based on the animistic ideas of the Even; that is, a form of worship of natural spirits, including the spirits of fire (or hearth), of hunting, and of ancestors.

Nowadays, traditional birth rites have been transformed in many respects and some of the magic rules and methods involved in childbirth have been forgotten. The period of childbirth has completely lost its traditional character, since births now take place in special maternity hospitals. It is important to note, however, that the customs and rituals associated with the pre-birth cycle remain stable.

In this article, I have tried to recreate the system of traditional rituals and customs of the Even during the XIX century, and its subsequent transformation in the course of society's 'progress' during the past hundred years. The study of traditional rituals and customs is, undoubtedly, of particular scientific importance. We must all know and remember our part in history and society. There is no future without a past and opening the veil of secrecy of the past is, indeed, shedding light on the way to the future.

Sardana A. Alexeyeva is affiliated with the Yakutsk Scientific Center, Russian Academy of Sciences, Siberian Branch.