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The Yakut Evens' Culture of Calendar Holidays: Traditions and Modernity (Symbolism of Rituals)

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The article is devoted to the celebration of the ritual of the indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East. The author examines in detail the ritual symbolism of the Even ethno-cultural groups residing in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). In the celebrations and ceremonies Evens manifest the ancient cultures of the people associated with the worship of Mother Nature, Fire, sacred animals.

Keywords: Evens, holidays, rituals, calendar, indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East.

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Ritual holiday activity of indigenous peoples of the North (the Evens in particular) was performed in the most crucial periods of alternations of the seasons: in the periods of nature's birth, bloom, fading away and rebirth. Symbolic features of these turning points were reflected in the meaning of calendar rituals and holidays. The idea of nature's beginning and end, fading away and rebirth, its continuity is common and uniting for rituals and holidays of a full-year cycle.

The Evens' traditional calendar holidays, as well as the ones of the other peoples of the North, were connected with transitional cycles between

warm and cold periods, the end of one cycle and the beginning of another, "aging" and "renewal". "Reflection of time in nature, consecutive change of seasons and celestial bodies' movements ... were perceived as signs of a life process analogous to a human's one and connected with it" (L'vova, Oktiabr'skaia, Sagalaev, Usmanova 1988, p. 45).

Each of these sources is counterbalanced by a period of time with seemingly opposite signs. These are, first of all, morning – evening and spring – autumn. The main characteristic feature of morning and spring as well as of evening and autumn is a change of quality. Spring and morning, autumn and evening are transitional

periods of time. In mythological tradition they are associated with qualitative changes of the world: the world awakes (= comes into being) and falls asleep (= dies). Time when the state of everything alive changes can be called an open time, probability time. Changing weather, sharp temperature fluctuations and other manifestations of instability predetermined a special attitude to spring and autumn months (Ibid., p. 46).

The Evens' calendar rituals and holidays were usually timed to crisis moments of a natural cycle: appearance of vegetation, migration of birds, spring solstice, etc. Natural rhythms such as alterations of the seasons, sunrise and sunset, alterations of the phases of the Moon programmed the society's life activity. Humans actually synchronized their activity with natural rhythms. Moreover, they backed this harmonization with rituals (Ibid., p. 50). A set of the Evens' holidays and rituals, connected with spring and summer awakening of nature, serves a good example of this. It should be noted that such semiotic oppositions as "morning – spring" and certain parameters of mythic time are viewed as the beginning of life. "People's ritual actions and prayers manifested the opening of the closed, spreading out the involute, melting of the frozen" (Ibid., p. 46).

The Evens had a very old tradition to organize clan families' meetings in spring, the period of nature awakening (Alekseev 2003, p. 78). This information is mentioned in I.A. Khudiakov's book, describing that in spring, when reindeer started giving birth to their young reindeer, 'rich' Lamuts, who had large herds of deer, hurried from winter seasonal work to summer places called "chistaia". "Chistaia" was the name of the peak of some rocky river to which several dozens of Lamuts came in summer. "The rich arrived in early March or April while the poor came later. So, a full meeting began in early May. The whole period was a great occasion for Lamuts". I.A.

Khudiakov mentions that the Lamuts had fun, danced, sang songs, and played games. They also told each other "fairy tales with songs, improvised poems in honour of the mountain spirits, the rich and the beauties" (Khudiakov 1969, p. 100).

At that period of time this meeting holiday undoubtedly took a special place in the Evens' life. They prepared for it long before it began. The girls started embroidering aprons (*neleks*), caftan coats (*naimi*) and bonnet-like hats from yellowish smoky or white rovdugas with beads and reindeer neck hair (*chibyna*) in winter and did it by a faint light of a fire. Such annual meeting holidays gave nomadic families, patronymias and numerous clans from different places the opportunity to exchange information and communicate. Thus, they maintained the Evens' common interests, contributed to spiritual solidarity and mutual assistance (Alekseev 2006, p. 157-158).

"Reindeer breeders' holiday", celebrated in spring, the period of reindeer's preparation for calving, was one of the Even reindeer-breeders' important calendar holidays. That's why the beginning of a new life is the symbol of the holiday. This annual holiday is still kept by all groups of the Evens. This traditional spring reindeer breeders' holiday "had an expressly ritualized character and was the climax of a yearly life activity cycle and a many-sided manifestation of this people's holiday culture" (Alekseeva 1993, p. 33). The Minsky Evens called the holiday "Meeting with the first young reindeer" and celebrated it in late April or in May (Bokova 2011, p. 32). Playing ancestors' games was the holiday's main event. It is worth while mentioning that a winner of reindeer relays races was given a white she-deer, a symbol of wealth and good fortune (*Prazdniki... 2009*, p. 49).

The Evens, living in tundra zone and fishing mainly, kept their ancient "Holiday of the first fish". It is still celebrated by the Allaikha and Ust-Yana Evens (according to the author's

materials collected in Chokurdakh village of Allaikha Ulus in Respublika Sakha (Yakutia) in 2010). The Magadan Evens call this ritual holiday "*Bakyl'dydiak*" ("meeting"). From time immemorial in late May reindeer breeders agreed upon their meeting in a certain place, usually nearer to a sea. They fished, stored up *yukola* (fish dried in the sun), and agreed upon the preparation of a trade fair holiday. Such holidays implied the elements of song-and-dance art, various ritual performances. People exchanged clan legends, stories and songs at such meeting holidays (*Evenskie obryadovye prazdniki ... 2008*, p. 20). The main event of the holiday is "*Kheide*", an Even round dance, which is akin to "the rhythms of surrounding nature": "an unbearably long, severe winter, a flash-short spring, bright due to the abundance of various grass and flowers but also very short summer, and the nature's gradual dying away in autumn" (*Ibid.*, p. 24). The key symbolic moments of this holiday are making and feeding the fire and a ritual of feeding a fishing net with pieces of fish. Firewood for a ritual fire at the sea-side had to be arranged in a certain order. It should be pointed out no holiday of the peoples of the North was celebrated without a fire, a hearth keeper, a defender from evil spirits. The ritual of feeding a fire as followed by the ritual of feeding a fishing net: a fishing net was "fed" with pieces of fish and then cast into a sea to fish "the First Fish". This ritual was performed for a fishing season to be fortunate (*Ibid.*, p. 24-27).

It's important to be noted that this old holiday is the main one for indigenous peoples of Kamchatka Krai, for the Evens in particular, as fishing is their main trade. The inhabitants of the north of Kamchatka "met the first fish with honour from the earliest times": "it was considered from of old that for the summer to be abounding in fish it is necessary to meet the first fish in a proper manner as the shoals following it could know

that good, kind and hospitable people live in this place" (*Prazdniki... 2009*, p. 23).

"Holiday of the first fish" began in June. According to the custom, a ritual is performed by clan and family aldermen. The main symbolic meaning of this ritual is in the following: ritual actions help to attract fish to northern rivers and make good fishing throughout the whole spring-and-autumn season. The end of a grass rope (*natalatytkin*) was thrown into the water; one of the most respected women took the other end and pulled it as if it were very hard to do it. Then she called for help: "Come here! Help me! There is plenty of fish here! I will not cope with it alone!" Others came to her (even pregnant women came to her as the Kamchatka people believed it favoured both easy childbirth and abundant coming of fish for spawning) and started pulling the rope. The head, bones, fins and tail of the fish caught were separated from meat for the former to remain the entire unit. This backbone was tied with a grass rope and the elder woman pulled it up the stream. Then this fish's skeleton was brought into a living quarters and hung up onto the crossbeam over the hearth. Such is a general description of this ritual (*Ibid.*).

This holiday has its local peculiarities. Thus, the ritual of the first fish is somewhat different for the inhabitants of the eastern and western coasts of Kamchatka. For example, in Tigil'sky District this ritual is performed the following way: "*chirus*"-devices are put into the river for the first fish to be trapped. The fish is dressed and its head is cut. A head is tied with gills, guts, roe with the help of fresh leaves and grass. This is done very carefully for no roe to be squashed or fall onto the ground. They start pulling a wicker garland up-stream and cry in the Koryak language: "Wow! A plenty of fish, too much fish is here!" Or they made an original grass rope, wove a fish's head and gills as well as a bear's hair into it. Several men pulled the rope up-stream. They cried at that: "So much

fish has been caught that it is falling out a fishing net!” After that they left a rope, symbolizing a fishing net full of fish, in the water, having fixed it ashore by a heavy stone. At that very day they cooked fish soup and ate it to their heart’s content (Ibid., p. 24).

This ritual is slightly different in Olyutorsky District. Here they boiled the first fish they caught, separated meat from bones, pounded this meat with the leaves of purple willow and dwarf birch, and spread this pasty mass on a fish’s mouth. While spreading they cried like sea-gulls. After the ritual actions were over the bones were left ashore, the flesh was eaten. From this moment on eating fish was allowed (Ibid.).

Ritual attributes (a grass rope, etc.) and words that are used to call the fortune for future fishing and thus shape the people’s future wellbeing have a symbolic meaning in the ceremonies of “the Holiday of the first fish”. We guess the aim of these rituals is to propitiate and thank the spirit of a rivers’ master for the latter to send much fish to people.

With this regard it is interesting to mention the Evens’ spring and autumn sacrifices to the patron spirits and the spirits of a river’s and a territory’s masters, etc. In the past the Evens offered sacrifices to the spirits of a river’s and a territory’s masters while moving on in spring and autumn: at that time they slaughtered sacrificial reindeer, fed a fire, and sprinkled the earth with blood. Addressing to the masters’ spirits with the spells of good wishes, they asked them for protection of people and domestic animals from diseases, evil spirits, preying animals; good weather without natural disasters; health, prosperity, family’s wellbeing, etc. Such sacrifices were the Evens’ important ritual moments as they believed their family, social and household wellbeing depended on the patron spirits’ will. The main aim of these sacrifices as well as other calendar ceremonies and holidays of these people had always been to

ensure the Evens’ prosperous life, their peaceful coexistence among the patron spirits (according to the author’s materials collected in Sebian-Kiuel’ village of Kobiaiskii Ulus in Respublika Sakha (Yakutia) in 2005 and in Chokurdakh village of Allaikha Ulus in Respublika Sakha (Yakutia) in 2010).

It should be noted that the peoples of the North and Siberia performed their sacrificial offerings in spring and autumn mainly. According to T.I. Petrova, the Siberian Evens arranged their tribal praying to the water spirit (*temun*) in late September. In their prayers to the water spirit they asked for the fortune in fishing in the course of the following year; in their prayers to *sewesels* they asked for health (both to themselves and women and children), as well as for luck in fishing and hunting (Petrova 1937, p. 106). Aan Darkhan (the earth master’s spirit) was given sacrificial offering every spring by the Yakuts, for example. They did this for her being gracious to them. The Yakuts made koumiss, went to a large old tree (preferably to the birch) growing at a main road or on a burial mound. That tree was wound round with a rope from a horse’s mane, decorated with tiny calf muzzles and buckets from upper birch bark, bundles of hair from a horse’s mane. A festive meal was arranged under the tree. An elder man stood his face to the tree for the latter to be on the eastern side from him and called for the earth master’s spirit. At that he sprinkled the tree with koumiss and *sora* and asked for the earth master’s spirit’s blessing. This ceremony could be performed by any house-owner (Alekseev 1975, p. 76).

It is known that the Evens offered their sacrifices to numerous spirits of the territory’s masters. Spirits of the masters of the territories where people grazed reindeer, hunted, and fished were especially revered. Sacrificial offerings were not small presents. Even reindeer were offered as sacrifices. A reindeer was slaughtered

before sunrise, hung up on the poles above the ground with its head to the east. After sunset the meat was boiled and eaten. The head, skin and bones were arranged on a sacrificial place during a special ceremony. In certain cases a sacrificial reindeer wasn't eaten. It was hung up or put onto the ground. Nowadays reindeer are seldom offered as sacrifices for the territory's master. These are usually a sable's or any other valuable fur game's skin (Istoriia... 1997, p. 119). The Evens regularly offered sacrifice to the spirit of the river's master: during drifting of ice they threw tea leaves, tobacco into the water for the summer to be good and the river to be generous. V.D. Lebedev and V.I. Tsinius recorded a spell to the river in Yakutia. The spell is pronounced while pouring water into a she-deer's milk. It runs: "The spirit, the eminent master of my well-renowned river... We would be extremely happy if you let at least one little young fish in our fish trap from your free walking wealth" (Ibid.). The spirits of the earth's masters could be sacrificed with the things not used any more by this or that reason. According to the Evens, responding to the questions, they still had hunting bows at the beginning of the 30-s but they were "put onto the ground", "left" (that is offered to the spirits of the earth's masters as sacrifices) after firearms were enough. Taking food that had fallen onto the ground is imposed a ban on as the Evens regard it as already "eaten" by the earth's master. According to Ia. I. Lindenau, the Evens used to offer dogs as sacrifices and eat dogs' meat during sacrifice ceremonies. This was influenced by the Koryak religion with its widespread custom to sacrifice dogs (Ibid., p. 120). Nowadays this custom is not observed by the Evens at all.

The customs of sacrificial offerings to various spirits of the territory's masters are still kept at present. For example, in spring, when the ice has broken up on the river the Momsky Evens treat the spirits of the river with reindeer's

milk. They pour out three spoonfuls of milk into the water (the spoons (*kopenge*) are made from a bighorn sheep's horn). While pouring the milk, they are whispering or mentally wishing the river to be clean and abundant with fish (Bokova 2011, p. 28). The tundra Evens have a custom of feeding the Indigirka river (*Indigir Upe*) either in spring or in early summer. For this they put fare (pancakes with butter, tea, etc.) on the riverside (according to the author's materials collected in Chokurdakh village of Allaikha Ulus in Respublika Sakha (Yakutia) in 2010). At this period they also observe the custom of "feeding the Mother Tundra". According to our respondents, this custom is essential: in case the Evens kill a reindeer they sacrifice its blood, a piece of heart, kidneys or either a piece of tongue or marrow (Ibid.).

It should be noted that a cycle of the Evens' spring-and-summer holidays started with the meeting of relatives in May. It lasted till the end of summer solstice. It was finished with the main calendar "*Evinek*" (or "*hebd'ek*") holiday, the New Sun and the New Year holiday held at night of June 21 (Alekseev 2003, p. 78). The Momsky Evens call this traditional holiday "A young reindeer's birth" and celebrate it in the middle of June when the first young reindeer are born (Bokova 2011, p. 32). As for the tundra Evens (the Allaikha Evens in particular), they observe this holiday called "The tundra blossoming" ("*Tuur chulbyrgyn-neche 'iiche*") every June (according to the author's materials collected in Chokurdakh village of Allaikha Ulus in Respublika Sakha (Yakutia) in 2010).

The traditional Even New Year holiday (as well as other ritual holidays) starts with special rituals and ceremonies of the adoration of the spirits of the fire, spirits of nature, spirits of the territory, spirits of the river, etc. *Khirchegen* wishing spells are actively used during these holidays (according to the author's materials

collected in Sebian-Kiuel' village of Kobiaiskii Ulus in Respublika Sakha (Yakutia) in 2005 and in Chokurdakh village of Allaikha Ulus in Respublika Sakha (Yakutia) in 2010). This holiday is worth dwelling upon in more details as it is the main one in a yearly cycle of the Even people. Moreover, it has still continued to our days.

It should be mentioned that the fire is of a paramount importance on traditional holidays. It is the spirit of the fire which goes between people, divine beings and patron spirits. Any traditional holiday of the peoples of the North started with the ceremony of cleansing with a smoky fire, which is still kept. The main symbolic moment of the Even New Year is cleansing with a ledum smoky fire. The ritual is performed only by the family elder, fumigating utensils, dwellings, everybody present at the holiday and thus exorcising evil spirits and driving diseases off (Ibid.). The main symbolic function of this ritual is the following: having performed the cleansing ritual, people meet the first rays of the sun, the first day of the New Year without bad intentions and sins.

According to A.A. Alekseev, a special cleansing ritual of "*Evinek*" holiday started in the evening of June, 21. It was performed by the *Markhas*, the Even shamans. Their task was to cleanse (separate) their fellow tribesmen's souls from various diseases and filthiness. "To appear before the Sun and the Supreme Deity with a clean soul any human had to go through the cleansing ritual. Only in this case *hovki* might get benevolent to him, his family and tribe members. Having performed the cleansing ritual and gathered all the evil and evil spirits, shaman people made a fire, burnt all the evil in it and left" (Alekseev 2003, p. 78).

After the cleansing ritual was over the family elders – *Tegen* – started the ritual of meeting the Sun. They made two ritual fires near each tree under the *delburge*-rope and threw rhododendron there for its smoke to cleanse of

filthiness. "The Sun starts its movement rising from behind the mountains. People look forward to it in deep silence. They start moving with the first sunrays. Humans step over the first ritual fire (*Gulun Togon*) as if they were passing through "a heavenly gate". They stop and turn to the Sun in silence. Then they move again: everybody goes in the direction towards the Sun, turns left and, having walked an arc path, steps over the second fire. Thus, the movement goes on with the Sun's movement" (Ibid., p. 79).

A symbolic meaning of the ritual is in the following: movement to the left, facing the sun, behind the imaginary gate, meant the old year's and the sun's "funeral". Stepping over the second fire in the same direction as the sun's movement symbolizes the transition from the old year to the new one. It is like renewal of life, nature's awakening after a long winter, the New Year's and the New Sun's birth. The sun, ritual fires, trees, *delburge*-rope are assigned various beneficial functions: they are heavenly gates to the Kingdom of Purity. Besides, this moment is a turn in nature, the beginning of counting out a new time when a day becomes shorter (Ibid., p. 80).

The same information can be found in the materials about the Magadan Evens. In the past only a shaman performed the cleansing ritual. For this he made a small family fire and fed it with ledum branches. According to the Evens' beliefs, this plant can drive diseases, evil spirit, and bad thoughts off a human. At a shaman's sign each participant of the holiday jumped over the fire and only after that was considered to be cleansed from physical and mental filthiness and had the right to participate in the following rituals and ceremonies (*Evenskie obryadovye prazdniki...* 2008, p. 9). The cleansing ritual started almost all the Even ceremonies and holidays. It was strictly observed on calendar holidays. In our point of view the idea of spiritual cleansing, renewal,

birth of a new life was the main for all spring-and summer holidays of the Evens.

The key part of the Even calendar holidays is the ritual of feeding a fire. This obligatory tradition takes place at the beginning of the holiday after the cleansing ritual. It should be noted that the ritual of feeding a fire is performed by the Evens not only during holidays but on weekdays as well (according to the author's materials collected in Sebian-Kiuel' village of Kobiaiskii Ulus in Respublika Sakha (Yakutia) in 2005 and in Chokurdakh village of Allaikha Ulus in Respublika Sakha (Yakutia) in 2010).

It's important to mention that the fire cult is closely connected with the worship of the spirits of the nature's masters. As it has been stated above, the fire cult went between people, deities and spirits. The Evens believe that feeding the fire they fed not only the spirits of the fire but also the spirits of the nature's masters and deities. This explains why the ritual of feeding the fire is an essential part of their calendar holidays (Ibid.). E.N. Romanova, a great authority in the field of the Yakuts' holiday culture, gives a well-grounded opinion that "the main ritual of the *Ysyakh* holiday was sprinkling deities and spirits with koumiss through the fire. In the rituals the fire was the means (*kuomeideen*, "a throat") of a sacrificial treatment donation". As the fire was assigned various beneficial functions such as generating, cleansing, curative, etc., sacrificial offerings to deities and spirits were performed only through it (Romanova 1994, p. 102). The Evens had similar beliefs. They also regarded the fire "the means of communication with the spirits of the dead, giving them food" (Ritually... 1994, p. 6).

On the eve of the holiday women cook ritual food for feeding the spirit of the fire, the spirits of the territory's masters as well as the participants of the holiday. The ritual food is usually fat and fatty meat (according

to the author's materials collected in Sebian-Kiuel' village of Kobiaiskii Ulus in Respublika Sakha (Yakutia) in 2005 and in Chokurdakh village of Allaikha Ulus in Respublika Sakha (Yakutia) in 2010), which also have a symbolic meaning. It is worth while mentioning that it is *imdon* (suet, animal and bird fat, etc.) that was considered not only the most nourishing food but also especially pleasing to the fire, a carrier of sacrifices, from the earliest times (Aleksseev 2003, p. 81). All the present at the calendar holidays are treated very well (according to the author's materials collected in Sebian-Kiuel' village of Kobiaiskii Ulus in Respublika Sakha (Yakutia) in 2005 and in Chokurdakh village of Allaikha Ulus in Respublika Sakha (Yakutia) in 2010). It is noteworthy that this moment is also of a symbolic meaning: it is believed that the richer the treatment is the fewer troubles the year brings. Every holiday participant should get his / her share of treatment for the whole family's good life from this rich ritual food.

It is considered to be interesting that the ritual of feeding the territory spirits is also performed during the Even calendar holidays. For example, the tundra Evens perform the ritual of "feeding Mother Tundra". According to our respondents, this ritual is essential (if a reindeer is killed, its blood, a piece of heart, kidneys or a piece of tongue or marrow are offered as sacrifices). The ritual of "gaining the spirits' favour" takes place. For this *delburge*, many-coloured shreds, are hung on purple willows and *khirgechen*, wishing spells, are pronounced in honour of especially worshiped spirits of the masters of fire, territory, river, etc. (according to the author's materials collected in Chokurdakh village of Allaikha Ulus in Respublika Sakha (Yakutia) in 2010).

According to its semantics *khirgechen* in the Even language (derived from *khirge* – 1) to say one's prayers, ask (God) for happiness, luck; 2) to cast a spell over smb., bewitch smb.) is fully

synonymic to the Yakut *algys* which, according to E.K. Pekarskii, means “blessing, wishing the good, glorification, benevolence, praise as well as spell, praying, initiation” (Pavlova 2001, p. 60).

It is noteworthy that during such rituals and *khirgechen* wishing spells “the borders of a ritual space were outlined visually for them to obviously separate people’s own real world from a sacral-and-mythological one” (Ibid., p. 68). The Evens believed that the gate to the upper world were open on solstice days, two young larch trees were threshold to it, *delburge* (a rope with bundles of *noielde*’s, a sacred reindeer’s, under-neck hair tightened between these larch trees) was a horizon line drawing a borderline between the worlds (Alekseev 2006, p. 154). The main function of both these rituals and *khirgechen* wishing spells was to go between especially worshiped spirits.

The tundra Evens always observe the ritual of “feeding the Mother river” Indigirka (*Indigir Upe*) during their calendar holidays. They put their treatments (pancakes with butter, tea, etc.) on the bank of the river (according to the author’s materials collected in Chokurdakh village of Allaikha Ulus in Respublika Sakha (Yakutia) in 2010). It should be mentioned that according to the Evens’ popular belief the nature (earth, air, water, forests, lakes, valleys, or, in other words, the tundra with its flora and fauna) is a living but invisible substance which is inseparable from them and constantly influences people’s lives that largely depends on every person’s attitude to it. Such was an interrelationship between nature and a human. The Evens called it “*En’en tuur*” meaning “mother-earth-motherland”. To show their respect to it humans give it presents in the form of many-coloured rags or pieces of different coats of a reindeer’s or a young reindeer’s skin. They hang these on the trees. By doing so they intended to set ties of relationship. That’s why people respected and worshiped everything alive around them (Belianskaia 1996, p. 45). This is

how an ecological relationship between a human and nature was set. The Evens never scolded natural phenomena: snowstorm, heavy snow, rain, heat, cold winds. It was thought that there is a certain balance between good and bad natural phenomena; the weather in future first and foremost depends on humans’ behaviour, the way they keep customs and traditions, follow ethic norms between people, a human and the nature (Belianskaia 2004, p. 50).

After all the rituals and ceremonies those who are present at the holiday are engaged in *heed’e* ritual dance. The origin of *heed’e* round dance is “directly connected with the ritual of meeting the sun as this ancient round dance starts and goes on in the direction of the sun’s movement” (Alekseev 2006, p. 150). The name of the Even traditional *heed’e* dance is translated as “Meeting the sun”. The dance is devoted to meeting the sun after a long, severe winter. “Rejoicing, joy, aspiration for the light and the sun are shown in this dance” (Lukina 1989, p. 129). A circle of the *heed’e* dance and its development symbolize people’s rising to the blue sky (*chuulbania n’amnal tandula*) together with the sun. This was the way the humans demonstrated their unity with mighty natural phenomena, as this was the way of their understanding of primeval harmony in a human’s relations with the world around (Alekseev 2006, p. 155). In former times the *heed’e* dance lasted for three days: while one dancers had a rest the other danced for the dance not to stop (Evenskie obryadovye prazdniki... 2008, p. 13).

Thus, a traditional calendar New Year holiday held in June is the Evens’ main holiday. It is noteworthy that this period is considered to be an “open” period of time as it is the beginning of the New Year. Young trees and a *delburge* rope are ritual attributes of the holiday. They symbolize “the entrance” into “a new world”, “the beginning” (the beginning of a new time, a new cycle of nature and a year).

June (*dilgos ilaani*) was literally the month of the sun, water and new greenery, the month when the bark peels off the trees, the month of nature awakening and renewal. This month signifies the beginning of the summer season and the Even ancient New Year (Alekseev 2006, p. 149-150). According to the Evens' beliefs, the doors to the upper world opened on summer solstice days (Ibid., p. 154). As it has been mentioned above, ritual attributes play a major symbolic role on the main calendar holiday. Before the holiday two ritual fires were made near holy trees on a ceremonial field. A *delburge* rope was fixed between the trees. Many-coloured shreds of cloth or (in former times) a holy reindeer's hair from the under neck part of the body were tied to the rope. Their number was equal to the number of the ceremony participants. The Evens believed that these two trees and a *delburge* symbolized the gate into the heaven (*Aan kuuialan n'oori urko*), exit to the heavenly beings' country. This holy gate was open for human beings only on the 22, 23, 24 of June, the summer solstice days (Alekseev 2003, p. 79).

Thus, two young larch trees served a threshold to the upper world. A *delburge* rope with the bundles of *noielde* holy reindeer's hair from the under neck part of the body, fixed between the larch trees, signified a horizon line, drawing the borderline between the worlds. "It is there, on the horizon, where a new day was born. The sun also rose there and then set after its long way in the sky. Ancestors' land, the land of the dead, was also there. It was characteristic to the peoples of Siberia and the Far East. According to the Evens' beliefs, as they sing in their "*D'eheriie*" song, a human's soul could get to the country of "happiness, abundance and common bliss" only these days" (Alekseev 2006, p. 154-155).

The emphasis was put on the eastern direction as the east (*dopta*) is the beginning of life and light on the Earth and it is the east where

the sun rises and the day begins. These days the God, *hovki* (*Seveki*), was offered sacrificial reindeer. The latter were slaughtered, according to the ritual rules, by suffocation. Their skins were hung on an inclined pole at both ends of which there stood two young larch trees. A sacrificial reindeer's bones were not broken but put on a special platform (*neku*) after a ritual meal. The Old Year and the Sun were believed "to die" on the summer solstice days. Thus a sacrificial reindeer personifies the Old Year and the Sun. A Reindeer-Sun revives from a sacrificial reindeer's blood and a new period of time starts (Alekseev 2003, p. 79). Thus, the meaning of the rituals performed on the Evens' main holiday is the idea of a cyclic renewal of life.

Another calendar holiday of the Even reindeer breeders is "A young reindeer's holiday" held in autumn (in September), the time when the Evens started preparations for a long winter. That day the family gathered together and exchanged good pedigree bucks. At the same time the holiday signified the opening of a hunting season. Professional hunters were seen off. According to A.A. Alekseev, similar holidays were observed by all Tungusic peoples (Alekseev 2006, p. 153). The Minsky Evens called this holiday "A yearling reindeer's holiday" ("*Mulkan khebdeken*"). They celebrated it in August. The holiday participants exchanged 1-2-year-old reindeer (*mulkans*), presented them to their close friends and relatives. To make winter clothes they had to slaughter strapping *enken*, male reindeer born that year, as fur coats, caftans from an *enken*'s skin are very lightweight and warm. On this holiday they treated each other with delicious food and left satisfied till the next year (Bokova 2011, p. 32).

Thus, the system of rituals and ceremonies of the peoples of the North, including the Evens, was connected with natural time cycles. Their main holidays, sacrificial offerings, ceremonies

and rituals were held during the most turning points of alternations of the seasons – the periods of the nature's birth, bloom, fading away and rebirth. The information presented above shows the complexity of the Evens' conceptions of time: the turning points of alternations of the seasons were assigned qualitative features, sacral meanings and symbolic characteristics that were reflected in the content of the Evens' calendar ceremonies and holidays. A common and uniting idea of holidays and ceremonies of a year cycle is the idea of the nature's end and beginning, its fading away and rebirth, its continuity. It is brought to light that spring-and-summer period is the richest in ceremonies. According to the peoples' of the North beliefs, and the Evens' beliefs in particular, spring and summer symbolized the beginning of life, birth, awakening, renewal and rebirth. They were regarded as the most favourable time when "the entrance" to the world of deities and patron spirits "opened". That's why various holidays,

ceremonies, rituals and sacrificial offerings, connected with the people's wellbeing, took place at that time. During such "open" time deities, having heard people's prayers, wishing spells and songs, could grant a child's soul to childless families, give health, luck in seasonal work, wellbeing, happiness. At that period of calendar holidays people became purer, fed the patron spirits and deities, addressed to them with their prayers and wishing spells, offering various sacrifices and performing numerous rituals. Such archaic components as ancient cults of the Mother-nature, the sun and the fire are vividly observed on the Evens' traditional calendar holidays. It should be noted that these cults undoubtedly have ancient roots and still significantly influence the material and spiritual cultures of this people. On the whole, the Evens' traditional culture is a thrifty attitude to nature, close interconnection and harmony with it as well as a special worship and sacralization of nature and its objects.

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**Календарная праздничная культура эвенов Якутии:
традиции и современность
(символика обрядовой деятельности)**

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Статья посвящена празднично-обрядовой деятельности коренных малочисленных народов Севера, Сибири и Дальнего Востока. Автор подробно рассматривает символику обрядовой деятельности эвенской этнокультурной группы, проживающей в Республике Саха (Якутия). В праздниках и обрядах эвенов проявляются древние культуры этого народа, связанные с почитанием Матери-природы, духа-огня, священных животных.

Ключевые слова: эвены, праздники, обряды, календарь, коренные малочисленные народы Севера, Сибири и Дальнего Востока.

Работа выполнена в рамках исследований, финансируемых Красноярским краевым фондом поддержки научной и научно-технической деятельности, а также в рамках тематического плана СФУ по заданию Министерства образования и науки Российской Федерации.
