

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10710-5 - Nomads of South Siberia: The Pastoral Economies of Tuva
Sevyan Vainshtein

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

by Caroline Humphrey

There are few, if any, detailed first-hand accounts of Inner Asian pastoralism readily available to Western readers. We have, it is true, the works of generations of orientalists, historians, and travellers. Some more directly anthropological studies have been made on the basis of published materials and the accounts of Mongolian refugees,¹ and an increasing literature is beginning to appear as a result of fieldwork carried out by ethnographers in the 1960s and 70s.² But of its nature, the body of available literature is patchy in coverage and uneven in quality. The valuable materials published in the Mongolian People's Republic are unfortunately difficult to obtain and require knowledge of Mongolian. Vainshtein's book is therefore unique in this field. Its great merits are its systematic coverage of its subject, its awareness of sociological problems combined with historical depth, and its range of comparison of nomadic pastoral systems in the area.

Tuva presents, in fact, a paradigm of Central and North Asian pastoral economies. The great remoteness of Tuva – it is a group of high valleys at the headwaters of the Yenisei, cut off on all sides by mountains from the surrounding territories of Siberia and North-west Mongolia – has kept its peoples obscured from outside scrutiny until very recently. But a series of field studies by Soviet ethnographers working to some extent independently of one another has made it clear that in Tuva the three most important traditional economic systems of Inner Asia meet together.

The relatively small area of the upper Yenisei basin is highly differentiated ecologically and supports (a) a reindeer-herding and hunting economy in the mountainous forest zones, (b) a small-scale cattle- and horse-herding and hunting economy in the high forest and meadow zone, and (c) a fully fledged complex steppe pastoralism with five or more different kinds of herd in the dry upland steppes of the south and east. What is significant about this is that each of these types is found among sections of other Inner Asian societies with varied and different linguistic, cultural, and political features. The reindeer-herding and hunting type, for example, occurs among the Turkic-speaking Tofalars of the northern slopes of the Sayan Mountains, the Mongol-speaking Darkhats of the Lake Khövsgöl region, and, in a slightly different form, the Evenki who have a Tungusic language and are scattered throughout the vast area of Central Siberia. At

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10710-5 - Nomads of South Siberia: The Pastoral Economies of Tuva
Sevyan Vainshtein

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Editor's introduction*

the same time, other sections of the Evenki have the cattle- and horse-herding and hunting type of economy, as do some of the Buryats, and different groups of Mongols are complex steppe pastoralists. In other words, what Vainshtein's book demonstrates is a separation of economy from ethnicity (i.e. linguistic, cultural, and to some extent even political features) in the entire Inner Asian region. The thesis gains immeasurably from Vainshtein's painstaking archaeological and historical research, since he is able to show that particular regions in Tuva, for example, the upland forest-meadow zone, have had consistently specific economies over two thousand years, despite the ethnic and political changes brought about by migration and conquest in that time.

The interest of Vainshtein's book therefore lies not only in his accurate description of the different pastoral techniques, which are set out systematically for the first time here, but also in the theoretical questions which it raises. Vainshtein himself does not discuss these explicitly, since his book is more a presentation of the data in as correct as possible a way than a sustained argument. Nevertheless, his conclusions touch upon several extremely important theories of Asian pastoral society and economy, and I attempt to point out these implications later in this introduction. (I should point out that the introduction has not been written in collaboration with Vainshtein and represents my interpretation only of his work.)

An important reason for the translation of this book is its unique source material for this region of the Soviet Union. Vainshtein has been able to use two kinds of data, numerical census materials as well as extended field experience, which are rare in combination for that country. Readers may notice that he refers comparatively infrequently to his own field experience in the text, preferring to quote from earlier officials and travellers. One of the reasons for this may be that, since his own work was conducted in the Soviet period, and his book is about the "traditional" economic systems, he hesitates to use data obtained in the present to talk about the past. But whatever the reasons, he has in fact spent long periods since the early 1950s in Tuva, with frequent revisits. This is why we may take it that when he refers without critical comment to a published or archival source this does not imply ignorance of the facts on his own part, but rather reflects a considered judgement that this information is correct.

The 1931 census data used by Vainshtein has a unique interest, since at that time Tuva was not yet a part of the Soviet Union, and the local economy was still to all intents and purposes "traditional"; but at the same time governmental interest in accurate knowledge of all aspects of the economy was at a premium. In order to understand how this came about we need to consider the recent political history of Tuva.

Until 1911 the province of Tuva, also known as Tannu-Tuva, the Uryanghai country, or Tangno-Uryanghai, was part of the Outer Mon-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10710-5 - Nomads of South Siberia: The Pastoral Economies of Tuva
Sevyan Vainshtein

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Editor's introduction*

golian administration of the Ch'ing (Manchu) empire whose capital was in Peking. By 1912 Mongolia had declared her independence from China, but her real autonomy was limited by the interest which her neighbours, China and Russia, had in the country. A three-power conference in Kyakhtha in 1915 affirmed the autonomy of Mongolia, which included Tuva, but it was to remain in the Chinese sphere of influence. Meanwhile, however, Russia had increasing political and mercantile interest in Mongolia. By 1918 both Mongolia and Tuva were involuntarily brought into the civil war still raging over the Siberian frontiers, since detachments of both White and Red armies frequently crossed the borders. For a short time the government of Mongolia passed rapidly from hand to hand as a confusing succession of armies – White detachments, Chinese war-lord troops, Buryat pan-Mongolian nationalists, and Mongolian and Russian revolutionary armies – fought for supremacy. In 1921 separate revolutionary governments under Soviet influence were set up in both Mongolia and Tuva, and in 1922 the Tuvian People's Revolutionary Party was created. Tuva's existence as a separate state, the Tuvian People's Republic, lasted until 1944. There is evidence that Mongolia wished to re-establish sovereignty over Tuva during the early 1920s³ but this was not to be. The period until 1944 is termed "the people's democracy" in the official histories to distinguish it from the succeeding "Soviet" period. While certain measures were taken against "feudal" and "capitalist" elements in this period, the Tuvian government was not able to carry out any far-reaching economic or social reconstruction.⁴ Thus there was the anomalous situation of a revolutionary government in power but little in the way of a revolution. So, to all intents and purposes, the 1931 census, which incidentally was exceptionally detailed as to occupations and household and livestock property, reflected the "traditional" pre-Soviet situation of the domestic economy in Tuva.

One of the most eminent historians and ethnographers of Tuva, L. P. Potapov, wrote about the "period of people's democracy":

The building of socialism... was hindered by a series of serious obstacles and was to take a long time, even with the continuous help of the Soviet Union and under her protection from outside threats. The economy of Tuva at that time was still developing on the basis of the old extensive, and technically-backward methods of nomadic pastoralism. Further development of the economy was held up by the complete absence of industry, of any mechanised transport, or improved means of communication... It should not be forgotten that Tuva suffered from a lack of qualified, or even simply literate, people either in the economy or in the cultural sphere, since literacy and education in the Republic were at the very beginning stages. The peculiar geographical isolation of Tuva, her distance from the industrial and cultural centres of neighbouring states, and also the relatively small size of her population, made the difficulties standing in her way even more severe.⁵

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10710-5 - Nomads of South Siberia: The Pastoral Economies of Tuva
Sevyan Vainshtein

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Editor's introduction*

By the early 1950s reconstruction of the Tuvinian economy was under way, and important and irrevocable changes in the way of life – settlement of nomads, collectivisation, introduction of large-scale agriculture, creation of urban centres, universal education – were being carried out. Tuva is now transformed, and when the older generation disappears it is no exaggeration to say that nothing of the old way of life will remain in either the practice or the memories of the people, since even those odd artefacts or customs which do survive will be utterly changed in their relation to life as a whole.

Vainshtein's study, which uses the 1931 census and materials obtained from informants in the period of change from the early 1950s onwards, is therefore of considerable historical importance. This combination of numerical and field data is not available for any other part of Soviet Asia with regard to the pre-Soviet way of life; and as for Mongolia the census materials are almost certainly neither so detailed nor so accurate for the pre-collectivisation period. Maiskii's study *Sovremennaya Mongoliya* [Contemporary Mongolia] published in 1921, and based largely on his own research, is still the most comprehensive account of the pre-revolutionary economy of the Mongols.

II

It would perhaps be useful here, before discussing Vainshtein's book itself, to mention briefly the other writings on Tuva available in Western languages. The matter is peculiarly confusing in that the "Tuvinians" were until recently known by a variety of other names: Soyot (the Mongolian form of the plural of Soyan), Mady and Kuchugut; these are all tribal names, of which Soyot became the best known and was extended to all the peoples of the area. The name "Uryanghai" was used mainly for the reindeer-herders whom Vainshtein calls Todjins, or East Tuvinians, but was also used for all Tuvinians in general. The Mongols call the "Tuvinian" reindeer-herders living inside the Mongolian border Tsataan ("reindeer-people").

Under the name Soyot or Sayat the Tuvinians were mentioned in the works of the great eighteenth-century scholars and travellers Pallas⁶ and Georgi,⁷ and their Turkic language was discussed by the Finnish linguist Castren in the 1820s.⁸ The English explorers Atkinson⁹ and Ney Elias¹⁰ passed through Tuva in the mid-nineteenth century, but the only substantial account in English is that of Carruthers, whose book *Unknown Mongolia* published in 1914 gives an interesting account of the Uryanghai.¹¹ Other works are by Olsen and Wilhelm,¹² also writing on the reindeer-people, and a short account of an expedition to Tannu-Tuva in 1926 was published by Bounak.¹³ But the most important sources from the point of view of both range and quality are all in Russian and are mentioned in Vainshtein's bibliography.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10710-5 - Nomads of South Siberia: The Pastoral Economies of Tuva
Sevyan Vainshtein

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Editor's introduction*

III

Vainshtein's book is written with a Marxist orientation in the admittedly limited sense that he sees the natural resources and techniques of production as primary in the nomadic pastoral economy. Most of his book is devoted to a detailed description of the latter. In a sense his study is non-theoretical in that he provides data for a social theory of nomadic pastoralism rather than the theory itself. But he works, of course, with a set of ideas, and at the risk of misinterpreting him I think it useful to discuss them here.

The most important concept which lies behind Vainshtein's work is that of the "economic-cultural type", a theory developed by two Soviet ethnographers, Levin and Cheboksarov, on the basis of earlier suggestions by Tolstov.¹⁴ The theory is an attempt to answer the question: how do we explain the clear differences in economy which exist within one ethnic group defined psychologically and linguistically, and how, on the other hand, can we account for the economic similarities between different ethnic groups, speaking separate languages? According to Levin and Cheboksarov the "economic-cultural type" is: a historically formed complex of economic and cultural features characteristic of social groups at specific levels of development or evolution and living in a given kind of environment. Thus, given a similar geographical environment and the same level of development of productive forces, one "economic-cultural type" can occur among different ethnic groups, widely separated from one another in distance or time. (Since the theory states that the "culture" is determined by the orientation of the economy in a given environment, there is no necessary connection between the "economic-cultural type" and specific cultures in the Western anthropological sense of the term.) For example, Levin and Cheboksarov cite the "economic type" of the "hunters and fishermen of the taiga" which occurred among the eighteenth-century Yukaghirs living in far North-eastern Siberia, among the Udegei and some of the Orochey of the Amur region, and among those sections of the West Siberian Khanty, Mansi and Ket, which did not keep reindeer.

The force of the word "culture" in the theory is the inclusion within each type not only of "material culture" (e.g. characteristic means of transport or hunting equipment) but also of those aspects of social organisation and values which appear to spring directly from the practice of that type of economy. For example, Levin and Cheboksarov conclude that "among the taiga hunters and fishermen, if there is no economic exchange with more developed peoples, there is no economic basis for the emergence of significant differentiation of property; but on the other hand among the reindeer-herders of the taiga the economic base served precisely to concentrate significant numbers of deer in the hands of individual

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10710-5 - Nomads of South Siberia: The Pastoral Economies of Tuva
Sevyan Vainshtein

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Editor's introduction*

owners".¹⁵ In a way, this is like the recent attempt of anthropologists such as Woodburn and others to work out the social and psychological implications of hunting and gathering as the basis of an economy.¹⁶ But the Soviet theory is more specific and has greater content (even though material on demography, human ecology, and types of exchange is worked out with far less sophistication than in the Western studies of the Bushmen or Eskimos, for example); the theory demands the conjunction of three elements: a given type of environment, a specified level of social development seen in historical perspective, and a particular complex of economic practices.

We are reminded of the issues raised by Leach in his work on the economic and political systems of highland Burma. The problems are the same, even if the conclusions are rather different. Leach observed that cultural classifications in use in highland Burma, such as the category "Kachin" or "Shan", did not coincide with linguistic boundaries; and he noted also that named "ethnic" groups frequently changed cultural identity within as short a period as one hundred years (Jinghpaw became Shan, Nagas became Jinghpaw, etc.). This seems also to have occurred in the Altai-Sayan area. Sometimes this process included a change of language, dress, etc., but it always seemed to involve an alteration of economic, and, in the Burmese case, political orientation. His conclusion is that "Shans" are people who work and organise their political life as Shans do, and that this can only occur given the basic environmental conditions for wet paddy cultivation, as opposed to hill rice farming. His approach is thus sharply contrasted with the idea, "usually accepted as a dogma", that those who speak a particular language form a unique definable unit, and that this group of people has always had a particular culture and a particular history. Leach writes:

The point I want to make is that the territorial location, the relative sophistication, and the main features of the economic organisation of what we now refer to as Shan society are to a large extent determined by the environment. Given the requirements of a wet-rice economy in such a terrain, Shan settlements could hardly turn out to be other than what they are. . . Shan culture today extends in scattered pockets from Assam to Tongking and southwards to Bangkok and Cambodia. The hill peoples who are neighbours to the Shans are astonishingly varied in their culture; the Shans, considering their wide dispersal and their scattered form of settlement, are astonishingly uniform. My argument is that this uniformity of their culture is correlated with a uniformity of Shan political organisation which is in turn largely determined by the special economic facts of the Shan situation.¹⁷

There are thus distinct similarities between Leach's category of "Shan" and an "economic-cultural type", even although the line distinguishing between such categories and ethnicity is not as definite in Leach as it is in the Soviet theory.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10710-5 - Nomads of South Siberia: The Pastoral Economies of Tuva
Sevyan Vainshtein

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Editor's introduction*

It is not difficult to see why this theory should be attractive to Vainshtein, since the Tuvinians have had three clearly distinguishable economic orientations, each of which was identifiable among certain other nomadic pastoralists in Asia. Reindeer-herding of the Tuvinian type is found among the Tofalars, the Kamasins, some of the Darkhats of Mongolia, etc.; the cattle- and horse-herding plus hunting complex is found among certain groups of Buryat, some Western Mongols, some peoples of the Altai, and some Evenki; and the steppe pastoral orientation is widespread among south-eastern Buryats, Khalkha Mongols, Kirghiz, some Kazakhs, Khakass, and even Uzbeks.

There is a question here as to why the idea of “economic-cultural types” should present a problem to Soviet Marxism. Strictly speaking, in Marxist theory, at a given level of the development of productive forces and in a given geographical environment, there should be only one kind of socio-economic formation. The fact that there are the same economic types in different ethnic (cultural) groups does not present a problem. On the contrary it is precisely what one would expect. It is the existence of different cultures which is the unexplained problem, if one is operating with the concepts of modes of production. But in the theory of “economic-cultural types” the inclusion of some elements of culture introduces the suggestion that a given type of economic exploitation in a given environment may have cultural implications – not only those springing from economic operations as such, as already mentioned, but also those apparently unrelated to the economy, for example in language, dress, mythology, etc. Leach’s suggestion on the basis of highland Burma material seems apposite here, i.e. the idea that in such differentiated regions language, dress, etc., may be adopted with the purpose of confirming separateness from other groups.

But even for Marxists there seems to be an almost instinctive need to classify people by ethnic-cultural criteria (quite apart from the political need to do so), and this is perhaps why the theory of “economic-cultural types” seems to present an intriguing problem. Accordingly, the theory of “economic-cultural types” implies its converse, the idea of ethnic territories (called “historical-ethnographic areas” by Levin and Cheboksarov). This theory again has three elements: a given territory, a particular time in history (since ethnic units are not necessarily very stable), and a defined “culture” brought into being by inter-connections between social groups over a long period of time.¹⁸ Vainshtein does not use this theory in his book, perhaps because it is internally unsatisfactory: the idea of “culture” is never defined clearly in the paper. But it may also be because it is in fact difficult to establish “the Tuvinians” as an ethnic group on grounds of “culture” alone, however this is defined. Even linguistically they are a doubtful category, since outside people such as the Tofalars speak Turkic dialects closely related to Tuvinian, while the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10710-5 - Nomads of South Siberia: The Pastoral Economies of Tuva
Sevyan Vainshtein

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Editor's introduction*

inhabitants of the well-populated Erzín region of Tuva speak Mongolian:

The Mongolian feudal lords and colonisers of the Ch'ing Dynasty kept their accounts and conducted all relations with the Tuvínians in Mongolian, and this led to their language – which was also energetically spread by the lamas – gradually ousting Tuvínian. This can be felt even in the present day. In some places, for example Naryn, the older and even the middle generation speak in Mongolian, although the Tuvínian language is beginning to be established, mainly through the younger generation.¹⁹

Even from the genealogical point of view “the Tuvínians” are hardly separate from neighbouring peoples, since clans with identical names and apparently related by kinship are found among the Tuvínians, the Tofalars, Teleut, Kumandins, Tubalars, etc., scattered throughout the Altai–Sayán region.

Vainshtein may have been influenced in his concept of Tuvínian ethnicity by the idea of “ethnos”, currently much discussed in Soviet ethnography.²⁰ An ethnos is ethnicity which is persistent through time despite changes in mode of production, and it is defined by a set of variables which have different significance in each case; but it is always separate from a unit established on economic or political criteria alone. Vainshtein gives continuous contact and interaction, common territory, similar type and level of economic development, and interrelated dialects as the factors which made Tuva an “integrated cultural whole”. It seems apparent to me, however, that the politico-administrative divisions were also of great importance for the Tuvínians, especially the tightly organised military–fiscal system of the Ch'ing, which excluded the Tofalars, for example.

The main point here is that Vainshtein's criteria for establishing the Tuvínians as an ethnic group are quite distinct from those which define the various “economic types”. In this book he is more interested in the latter than in theories of ethnicity; the advantage of his method is that he can investigate the working, the limitations, and the possibilities for evolution of specific economic forms without having to tie them to cross-cutting ethnic traditions.

IV

Before discussing Vainshtein's conclusions I should mention the development of the typological approach which he uses in the chapter on reindeer-herding. This is probably the section of the book which will appear most strange, even old-fashioned, to Western readers. A large part of the chapter is devoted to tracing the origins of reindeer-herding in Eurasia. It is a long time since the mainstream of Western anthropology has been directed towards the investigation of the origins of social or economic institutions; for many anthropologists the very idea has an

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10710-5 - Nomads of South Siberia: The Pastoral Economies of Tuva
Sevyan Vainshtein

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Editor's introduction*

almost disreputable ring to it. But given the wealth of historical documentation and archaeological material from North Asia this is an absurd attitude. In part the Western misunderstanding of Soviet attempts to discover “origins” may be due to the lack in the English language of an adequate translation of the idea *proiskhozhdenie*, which is usually rendered as “origins” but also means “descent”, “lineage”, “extraction”.

In effect, what Vainshtein does is to take the phenomena of reindeer-herding all over Eurasia and divide them into “types” according to complexes of functions (such as the use of deer for riding, for sledge- or cart-haulage, for pack-carrying, for milking, etc.), and associated techniques (the deer-decoy, the herding with dogs, etc.). He then attempts to reconstruct the genealogical tree, as it were, which links these types, using archaeological, historical, and ethnographic evidence. The “origin” has no more significance than any other part of the developmental scheme.

His conclusion is that reindeer-herding first emerged in the Sayan region (i.e. the general area where the Western and Northern Tuvinians now live), but that the present “Sayan *type*” of deer-herding, with its peculiar constellation of features, emerged only much later under the influence of other kinds of pastoralism.

At first sight it might appear that Vainshtein is merely tracing the diffusion of details, for example of types of saddle, as if they were independent traits travelling on their own, disconnecting from one culture in order to be linked to another – in other words, the very kind of diffusionism already largely rejected by anthropology. But in fact he uses material objects as indicators (*a*) because such items can be traced in the archaeological record, and (*b*) because they are direct indications of economic functions: there is a clear reason why a pack-carrying saddle is different from a riding-saddle. Vainshtein is careful to take into account the whole range of data available for each economic complex in different historical periods. He seems entirely justified in suggesting that reindeer-herding in the Sayan region underwent a radical transformation; the early Samodi system, in which deer were used for meat and later pack-carrying also, was transformed by the invasion of Turkic horse-herdsmen; horse-herding techniques when used for reindeer, i.e. riding and milking, altered the whole strategy of the deer economy, from a rather uncontrolled predatory pastoralism to a controlled and intensive rearing of whole herds. Whether Vainshtein is right or not that there was one origin of reindeer-herding and that it was in the Sayan region, we should nevertheless recognise that he has illuminated some very twilight regions of economic history.

Two important points emerge from this chapter, even if the diffusionist aspect of the argument is ignored. The first is that the simple designation of a productive occupation for a given people, for example reindeer-herding,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10710-5 - Nomads of South Siberia: The Pastoral Economies of Tuva
Sevyan Vainshtein

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Editor's introduction*

sea-fishing, plough agriculture, tells one very little and is not sufficient to specify an "economic-cultural type". This is because each of these occupations could consist of a range of possible practices or functions, only some of which may actually be put into general use by a given population. Nor does the acquaintance with a technical possibility mean that it will be generally used: the early Sayan deer-herders knew that it was possible to ride deer, but this was not a main function of the reindeer economy for them and they had not developed a riding-saddle.

The second point indicates why this is so. It is that, within the complex of *possible* functions of reindeer within an economy, some are, if not incompatible with one another, at least practically and psychologically difficult to combine. Among the Evenki, in places where reindeer were regarded as "living meat" they were not much used as pack-animals, and vice versa.²¹ As Ingold says with regard to the Lapps, the herding of reindeer for meat can be seen as a variation of hunting, with the use of decoy-deer and dogs both derived from hunting experience, and this is in contrast to the reindeer pastoralist emphasis on maintaining and increasing stocks of living deer.²² This very fact indicates the virtual certainty of an evolution of economic functions within the general occupation of reindeer-herding (although it does not specify which function is prior); it also shows the necessity of including some concept of economic values, and of specifying such values, when discussing each of these systems. As Ingold says, "It is difficult to see how capital as hunting expertise realised in the killing of deer can be transformed into capital realised in their accumulation."²³

In the Skolt Lapp area, where deer are valuable for meat, they are not milked, and other hunting is reduced to a minimum; Ingold, citing Paine, sees a development from a hunting to a pastoralist economy of a predatory kind:

The territory, together with its resources, was viewed as the joint property of the group. As long as these resources were perceived to be quite sufficient to maintain the traditional hunting economy they should "be regarded as capital in an economic and extra-economic context". Heuristically, we may suppose that increasing scarcity of wild deer would assign to the deer a strictly economic value over and above that of the territory itself. Thus, if the assignment of economic capital value to deer was the consequence of an abnormally low deer/pasture ratio, the result was an abnormally high deer/pasture ratio as herds grew exponentially. The model for the pastoralist concept of ownership would have derived not from the hunter's ownership of his kill, but from the implicit "ownership" of domesticated deer.²⁴

It is interesting to compare this with Vainshtein's account of the Sayan case. Here it was the increasing use of deer for pack-carrying and haulage that transformed pastoralist values, and the influence of techniques from