

published in *Landscape & Culture in Northern Eurasia*, ed. Peter Jordan, Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2011. Pp. 297-314.

SIBERIAN LANDSCAPES IN KET TRADITIONAL CULTURE

Edward J. Vajda

**Western Washington University and Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary
Anthropology, Leipzig**

The Ket people and their linguistic relatives – the Yugh, Kott, Assan, Arin, and Pumpokol – are the earliest ethnically identifiable inhabitants across much of the upper and middle watershed of the Yenisei River. The Ket, who number today no more than 1,200, are the only one of these peoples to survive as an ethnic group. Living in Russian-style villages with only remnants of their traditional culture and in imminent danger of losing their language, they often go unnoticed by the outside world. Central Siberia now is populated chiefly by Russians, who live alongside several small Turkic, Tungusic, and Samoyedic minorities – the neighbors of the Ket in pre-Russian Siberia. Though not the first and certainly not the largest native group to occupy the taiga forests along the Yenisei or its major tributaries, it is the Ket who have imparted to the region much of its underlying ethno-geographic flavor. Subtle echoes of their traditional culture have left an indelible imprint on wide expanses of territory stretching from the Altai-Sayan Mountains downriver along the Yenisei past the Arctic Circle. This vast and rich, yet isolated and often inhospitable, space cannot be fully comprehended unless viewed through the multifaceted prism of the original Ket worldview.

The Ket were the last group of hunter-gatherers to survive the spread of pastoral peoples across landlocked northern Asia, only abandoning their mobile lifestyle during the forced Soviet collectivization campaign of the early 1930s. Before sedentarization, other West Siberian peoples – the Khanty, Nenets, Selkup, and Evenki – ranged through the forests with their herds of reindeer. The Ket, though prolific wanderers as well, led a different type of nomadic existence. They raised no animals for food and subsisted entirely on hunting, fishing, and the gathering of wild plants. Until some Ket groups adopted reindeer from their Selkup neighbors in the early 20th century, the only domesticate was the dog. As food extractors rather than food producers, their economic cycle closely mirrored the turn of the sub-arctic seasons. The phases of their age-old economy are even memorialized in the traditional Ket names for months of the year (Alekseenko 1967:38-39). Most contemporary river names in the area where Yeniseic-speaking peoples once lived have transparent Ket etymologies. These hydronyms were apparently adapted by the late-coming Turkic or Samoyedic groups and finally by the

Russians (Dul'zon 1962). But river names are only small portion of the Ket cultural legacy across today's Siberian landscape.

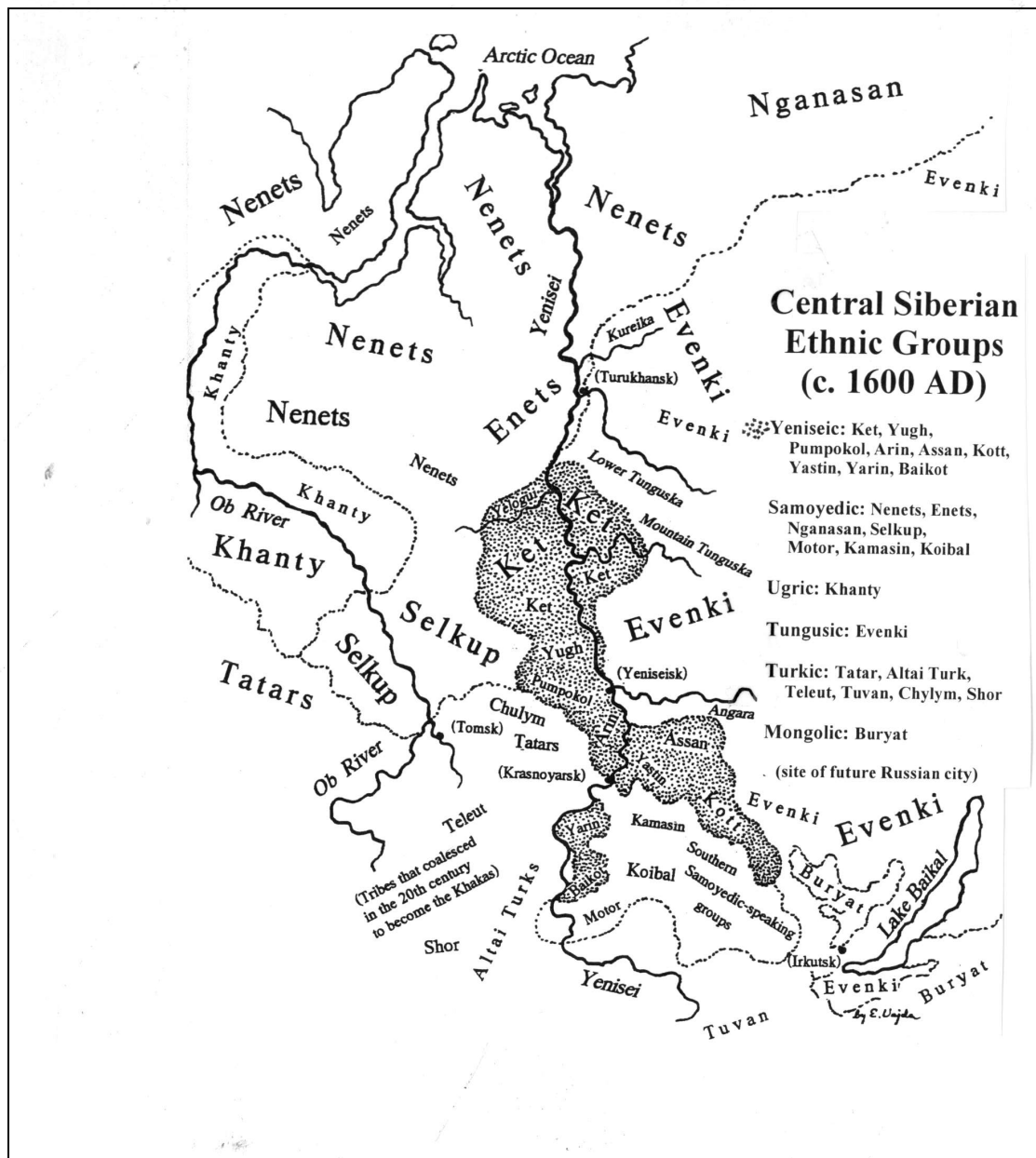


Figure 1. Native ethnic groups of central Siberia, c. 1600 AD

Underpinning the diverse facets of traditional Ket conceptualizations of central Siberian geography is a multiple analogy involving horizontal north-to-south space, vertical space, horizontal east-to-west space, the river in contrast to the forest, and even the procession of past, present, and future time. Because the Ket oriented themselves along the north-south axis of the Yenisei, the north represented downriver and the south upriver. The upriver south was a source of positive energy, goodwill, and economic benefits, as was the sky itself. The downriver north was a realm of cold, ill will, and death that merged with conceptions of the underworld. The east, the point of the rising sun, was likewise a source of life, whereas the west, where the sun disappeared, was associated with extinguishment of life. The river's edge was a source of summer bounty,

while the forest - the setting for the group's more austere winter hunting treks - was a place of comparative danger and lack. Time itself was conceptualized as an ever-repeating cycle of birth and rebirth in which the future - unseen though predictable - existed behind the present, ever repeating the past. Superimposed on these conceptions of space and time was the personal geography of Ket family and ethnic space.

As is typical of many peoples, the Ket regarded the sky as a sacred realm and considered the mysterious underworld to be an abode of the dead. Both sky and underworld contained seven layers. Between these stood the tangible world inhabited by humans, which the Ket referred to as *ilbang*, or ordinary earth, as opposed to the extraordinary realms of the heavens and the underworld. The earth itself was believed to float upon a vast sea, with seven seas surrounding its perimeter on all sides. The underworld was a mysterious place, only fuzzily conceptualized. Among the Ket, a kind of medicine man called the *bangos* professed a special connection with the earth and its nether regions. The mole and the bat, thought to be among the underworld's few living denizens, were his helpers, as were the myriad *ilbangdeng*, or earth spirits, whom the *bangos* alone could perceive and harness. Conversely, Ket shamans (*senang*) possessed a special connection with the sky and with certain birds. The sky itself was the abode of *Es*, the all-powerful male creator deity, who tended to keep aloof from humans on earth. It was assumed that the sky contained rivers and lakes and mountains mirroring those of the earth. The stars and planets were regarded as the roots of heavenly trees. In Ket graphic design, black was the color associated with the land, whereas red symbolized the sky (Ivanov and Toporov 1997). Domestic dogs or reindeer sacrificed to the earth had dark fur, while those sacrificed to the sky were white.

The Ket believed that the polar star was anchored to the earth in the precise vicinity of where they camped and roamed by a sort of cosmic umbilical cord. Humans too were believed to have developed their navels from a similar connection with the earth. Legend has it that the first humans created by *Es* were not subject to death. When one man became old and tired and lost consciousness, *Es* sent down his son to instruct the Ket to place the body on a platform raised above the ground and leave it undisturbed until it revived. The son mixed everything up and told the people to bury the body in the ground. As punishment, *Es* turned his son into the first dog, doomed ever after to serve humans and eat the scraps they left behind. As for the people, they began to die and return to the earth. Ket sky burials, on raised wooden platforms, came to be reserved for shamans, while most people were simply buried in the ground. Dead newborns were laid to rest inside a cavity in a tree trunk or stump. Burial grounds were traditionally set inland, away from campsites.

The Ket had seven souls, unlike animals, who had only one. The seventh human soul was immortal and thought to return in the body of a child born soon after the person's death. This endless process of reincarnation continued humanity, linking underworld with earth in a temporal-geographic union symbolized by the person's navel. The navel and umbilical cord were symbolic of the connection between mortal humans or animals and Mother Earth. When a person died, the oldest woman in the family group stripped the leather cords from the deceased's clothing, reserving them for incorporation into clothing made for the next child born. These strips of reindeer hide symbolized the umbilical connection between the body and its earthly life force, or *ulvej*, thought to be immortal.

Both were renewed and reinvigorated through the earth in the cycle of dying and rebirth. The earth was the source of both life and death for all living beings.

The cosmic connection between underworld, earth, and sky was also conceptualized in the form of a giant tree. Images of this World Tree appear on the backboard of a woman's snow sled (cf. Figure 2). Trees in general were regarded as powerful forces. In the Ket language, tree words belong to the masculine noun class, usually reserved for positive, useful, or powerful objects as well as for male humans and animals (Vajda 2004). Trees were anthropomorphized to some degree and even thought to possess their own language. The crown of branches was the 'head'. The thinner bark on the south-facing side was referred to as the tree's 'stomach', while the opposite, north-facing bark was called the 'back'. Trees that grew on higher land, such as the Siberian pine (*Pinus sibirica*, commonly referred to as 'cedar'), the larch, and the white birch were the most revered. The alder or aspen, as trees that grew in low swampy areas, were thought to be closer to the underworld and associated with negative forces. Alderwood was called 'blood wood' and an alder branch could be used to disperse evil spirits when entering an abandoned dwelling. The most beloved and most useful tree was the birch. Its wood and bark, which cannot become waterlogged, provided covering for the *qu*'s, a type of conical summer tent constructed on a frame of poles. A young birch was cut and stood near the tent as an offering tree upon which were placed scraps of cloth and other small sacrifices. After the camp was broken, this tree was carefully laid away from areas where it might be trampled. Birch branches provided a favorite perch for benevolent spirits. Evil spirits preferred to nestle in spruce and fir (Anuchin 1914: 18). Pinewood (i.e., cedar wood) provided all of the shaman's wooden attributes as well as most images of the *allel*, or Ket family guardian spirit doll. These dolls were usually about 6 inches long and clothed in scraps of cloth or fur, with beads for decorations. *Allels* were carved out of living trees so they would be 'alive'. "Cedar" wood was also used for coffin planks. In certain key rituals, trees were even transformed into spirits and other beings.

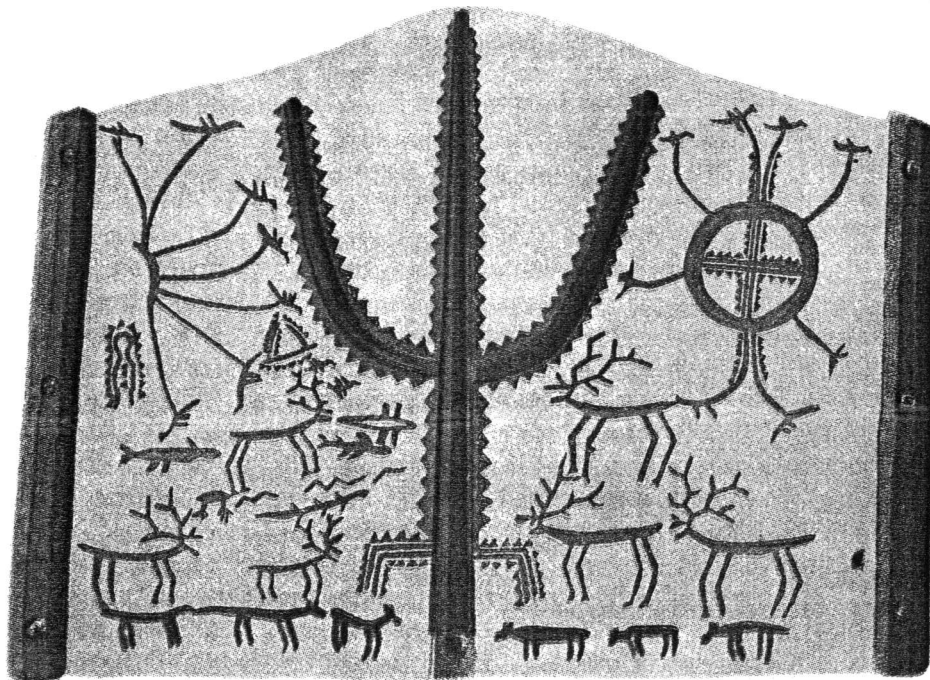


Figure 2. World Tree design on backboard of woman's sled

An ancient larch growing on high ground near a river was typically chosen as a place for the *holai*, or ancestor veneration site. Preparing this site required fashioning numerous pillars with conical anthropomorphic heads, called *dosn*. These were regarded as children of the *holai*, and were leaned against the living larch trunk (cf. Figure 3). The *holai* ancestor spirit itself was carved in the form of a face into the growing wood of the larch that formed the center of the site. Because its spirit was thought to inhabit the mouth of a river, the *holai* site with its *dosn* normally occupied a hill nearby. Offerings of food were brought by successive generations to such a hill and spread before the roots of the larch. *Holai* sites tended to be located at a distance from the summer encampments and were off limits for hunting. The *holai* sites of other clans were off limits entirely, especially to women, lest they be spirited away as brides for the *dosn*. Similarly, before some important undertaking, *Allel* dolls were ceremonially given food and drink by the women in a family to gain their advice or protection. These objects, invested with cosmic power, watched over the family or clan and protected it from the ill will of alien spirits. Kept in a safe place away from the eyes of strangers, these dolls were carefully preserved from loss or wear. New clothing and footwear was fashioned for them periodically, and any damage to them was thought to bring down misfortune onto the family they guarded. *Allels* were handed down over the generations to each family's youngest son or newly carved by an older son beginning a family.

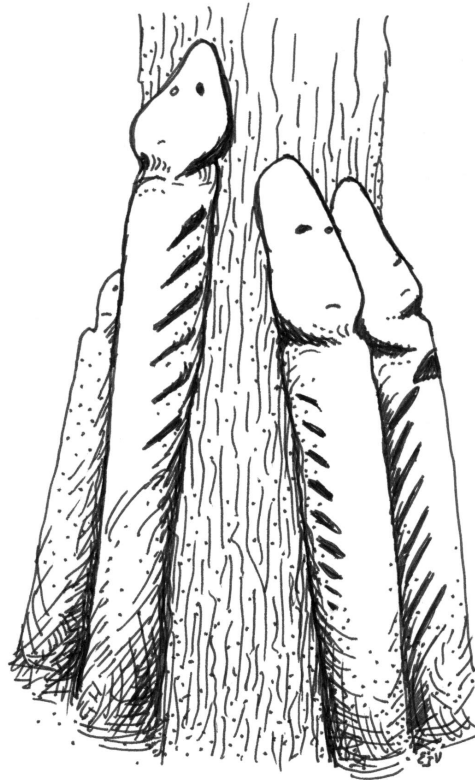


Figure 3. *Holai* tree with *dosn* figures

Other upright objects, such as poles, posts, ships' masts, and pillars likewise belonged to the masculine gender. The upward direction represented the sacred sphere of shamanism. The sky was inhabited by sundry *esdeng* – heavenly spirits capable of coming to the aid of shamans when called. The name of the legendary first shaman, *Doh*,

possibly derives from a homonymous morpheme meaning 'to fly'. In one Ket version of the cosmos, the Milky Way is referred to as *Doh's* trail, *Dohara go't*. Shamans, whose training involved seven stages, each of which lasted three years (Anuchin 1914), were able to fly up into the seven layers of the sky with the assistance of increasingly powerful spirit allies. The Ket also practiced a sort of divination in which a spoon would be thrown into the air and a question asked. If the spoon landed face down, toward the underworld, the answer was negative; if it landed face up, toward the open sky, the answer was positive. Family members used their *Allel* dolls in the same way. The same sort of ritual was also performed using a bear's paw during the Bear Ceremony when the Ket asked the spirit of the slaughtered bear to reveal its former human identity.

Analogically parallel to the vertical axis was an opposition based on the horizontal direction of south to north. Because the Ket had lived so long in the vicinity of the Yenisei River, which flows from the Altai due northward to the Arctic Circle, the direction 'south' was conceptualized as upriver, and 'north' as downriver. The north was a land of darkness, cold, and death. There was no clear division between it and the underworld. The mysterious downriver portion of the Yenisei and the frozen seas beyond it were inhabited by the evil witch *Hosedam*, the former wife of *Es*, who had been thrown down from the sky by *Es* for committing adultery with the moon. At first she lived in the south, where she and her servants, evil spirits called *kyns*, preyed upon the Ket, sending them all manner of misery and devouring their souls. When the great Ket culture hero *Alba* drove her northward, he established the course for the Yenisei in the process by breaking through a narrow place in the hills, the scene of today's Osinov Rapids on the upper course of the Yenisei. The rapids themselves are thought to be the remains of *Alba's* elk and reindeer. The relentless *Alba* pursued *Hosedam* past the mouth of the Yenisei into the frozen seas of the Arctic, where he burned her up. Unfortunately, the smoke and ashes from her spilt blood generated the endless swarms of biting insects that plague the taiga during the brief period of summer heat. Analogous myths exist among native peoples of the Pacific Northwest of North America. Unfortunately, *Hosedam* herself regenerated and remains in the north to send afflictions upriver to the Ket in their taiga home. One Ket myth identifies the Milky Way as the path left by *Alba* in his pursuit of *Hosedam*. Another tells that *Alba* dripped blood on his journey south from *Hosedam* to the land of the Ket. From each drop of blood grew a red lily. The absence of this plant farther south is explained by the fact that the Ket staunched *Alba's* wounds as soon as he entered their territory.

The south, in great contrast to the north, was a place of warmth and plenty. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Ket still retained ancient memories of being driven northward by fiercer tribes and having to adapt to their present sub-arctic climate (Anuchin 1914: 5). The benevolent goddess *Tomam* resides in some unidentified mountainous land (perhaps the Altai-Sayan?) located south of where the Ket now live. Embodying the south as one of the four corners of the world, *Tomam* brings forth the wild spring thunder that signals the coming of warm weather. Every spring she stands atop her mountains and shakes her feathery cape. The fuzz that falls from her sleeves and cape becomes the migratory geese and ducks that rescue the Ket from starvation in late spring. She also sends swans, one of the most sacred shamanistic birds, as well as loons, another bird associated with shamanistic power that is taboo to kill. Certain insects, such

as the dragonfly, another powerful shamanistic totem, are also thought to be associated with *Tomam's* actions.

The geographic opposition between east and west was similarly configured in terms of a positive and negative pole. The east was the direction of the rising sun, the direction of life, whereas the west was associated with darkness and death. In a Ket encampment, tents were erected with the most prominent member's dwelling standing closest to the east. The tent opening faced west, since the western side through which everyone entered was regarded as the profane side of the tent. The back inner portion, reserved for adult males, was the cleanest, most sacred area. Snow sleds normally were parked facing east. A sled parked facing west signaled that its owner had died. A kettle tipped toward the west symbolized death. A red sunset was thought to be a harbinger for a deterioration of the next day's weather, a manifestation of *Deles*, spirit of the blood-red sky. Together with the north and the underground spaces, the west represented yet another image of death and the underworld. The low-lying forests on the western side of the Yenisei were thought to be infested with *lytis*, evil spirits of the dead sometimes regarded as servants of *Hosedam*. It was also the abode of *Bissimdes*, the eldest son of *Es* who had failed to heed his father's warnings and froze to death in the swampy lowlands. There he dwells still, sending storms, warfare, and all manner of ill will to the Ket from that direction. *Bissimdes* was also thought to send storms, so that the color red, which symbolized both blood and the sunset, were linked in this way. The role of *Bissimdes* in the west and *Hosedam* in the north therefore overlapped. *Hosedam* was also known as *tygilam*, or 'Downriver Mother'. Along the Yenisei, the notions 'downriver' and 'north' were basically synonymous.

The east, like the upriver south, had no such negative connotations. After the Bear Ceremony, in which a bear was ritually slaughtered and eaten to propitiate success in the hunt, the bear's bones and certain organs were secreted in a cavity of a tree facing east, as it was believed this direction fostered reincarnation of the bear's spirit. Bones of animals killed for food on the hunt were likewise placed on the east side of trees in the hope of facilitating their abundant reappearance during the next hunting season. When a Ket woman gave birth, the midwife would take from the tent in an eastward direction a birchbark box containing the afterbirth, tying it to the eastern side of a pine (i.e., "cedar") tree. The positioning of this box facing the eastern exposure was designed to invoke the life-giving properties of this direction. The box also contained a miniature bow fashioned from willow twigs and designed to protect the infant from evil spirits. Clockwise motion also played a positive role in many rituals, during which the participants moved in an east to west motion.

Along the axis of the Yenisei, the eastern shore was hilly, while the western shore was low and swampy. For this reason, the Ket called the east *tyngbang*, or stony land, and the west *ulbang*, or watery land. Ket culture heroes such as *Alba* and *Olgit* (progenitor of a subdivision of one of the two traditional Ket moieties, or exogamous marriage groups), as well as the three brother warriors *Balna*, *Belegen* and *Toget* were said to have turned into mountainous crags on the eastern side of the Yenisei. The rocky promontory on the western bank of the Yenisei downriver from Vorogovo Village is said to derive from the mythic figure *Syoksa*, who tried to prevent *Alba* from finding the local river-mouth spirit, for which *Alba* killed him. His body became a cliff, still tinged with the red ochre that formed from his spilt blood (Alekseenko 1977:39). It is likely that many more such

myths existed regarding the origins of local natural features, but were simply not recorded. Their ultimate origin may lie in the struggle between the Ket and the earlier taiga groups whom they displaced during their migrations from the south.

The Yenisei and other large rivers were conceptualized as giant trees, with the river mouth equated with the tree's base, or roots. The river was thought to be the mother of all of its tributaries, with the tributary mouth being a spot particularly endowed with spirit power. While diving underwater during her flight north from *Alba*, *Hosedam* was thought to have created many of the islands in the deltas of tributaries emptying into the Yenisei. The Ket gave offerings to placate the spirits of such islands when passing by (Alekseenko 1977:39). Also, as already mentioned, *holai* sites were normally set up near deltas to harness the power of the spirits of the river mouth.

All of these facts linked the east/west, south/north, and up/down dichotomies into one geographic unity. The east, the south, and the sky were the positive poles of their respective axes. The west, the north, and the mysterious dark spaces underground were places associated with cold, death, darkness, and the imprisonment of human souls.

A fourth extremely important geographic conceptualization concerned the opposition between river water and the inland forest. The Ket world was thought to float on an enormous sea and be surrounded by seven seas. These expanses of water were associated with the underworld or with *Hosedam*, who was thought to live at the place where the Yenisei emptied into the frozen sea. But bodies of fresh water on the land, particularly rivers, were familiar places of plenty and benevolence. In the Ket language, the adverb *igda* means both 'down to the river's edge' as well as 'downriver' and 'downhill', while *at* means 'into the forest' as well as 'upriver' and 'uphill'. The riverbank, in particular, was a zone of life-giving support, while the forest interior was more forbidding, though likewise vital during the winter months when the water was thickly frozen over. The Ket traditionally passed the warmer months near rivers and the winter months hunting upland in the forest. The positive image of the river vis-à-vis the forest was later partly erased by the increasing need for the Ket to meet the demands of the Russian *yasak*, or fur tax, by going deep into the taiga to hunt fur-bearing animals. Originally, the Ket were a riverine folk, or at least a major component of their ethnicity appears to have been. The river as a destination was therefore highly positive. Encampments near the riverbank were set up in a way analogous to those established on an east/west axis. The most prominent member of the camp pitched tent closest to the water, with less senior members occupying places increasingly more inland. Rivers were envisioned as feminine beings that could be counted on to yield bountiful life in the form of edible fish. It was forbidden to throw garbage into the water. One Ket folktale tells of a woman who carelessly tossed rotting fish heads into a river, only to have the offended river stop yielding up its fish. The rivers themselves, like the earth, were regarded as feminine beings and offerings of tea, tobacco, food or coins were made to them. Spring flooding often exposed the tusks of woolly mammoths. The Ket, apparently preserving no recollection of these beasts from real-life prehistory, regarded the bones and tusks as having been left by a huge underground tunneling creature, the *tel*, who was thought to have gouged out the deep bends in the rivers. The *tel* was regarded as a denizen of the underworld.

During the year, the Ket nomadized between summer encampments alongside rivers or lakes to winter hunting trails deep in the taiga. This age-old cycle was originally

motivated by the need to congregate near fish runs in the warm season and to hunt big game and fur-bearing animals inland during the winter. It acquired more significance after the Russians imposed the *yasak*, or fur tax, which increased the need to go on inland hunting trips. Abandoning the river required the removal of fishing weirs and boats from the water before it froze. Low-lying areas connecting two bodies of water were used as boat hauling trails, or *kapket*, with a notch cut into a nearby tree to mark the spot where such a trail began (Donner 1933:57). Every family group had its own hunting trail, or *kang*. Krejnovich (1969a:35) lists 22 such trails extending into the forest from the lower reaches of the Mountain Tunguska River alone. These trails were recognized simply from distinctive features in the adjacent natural scenery, such as hills or small bodies of water. According to Donner (1933:58), the Ket never used signs to mark their hunting trails of the type put up by the Evenki.

The departure of the family group in the fall from their riverine camp into the forest required an important ritual called “Feeding the Old Woman of the Road” (Krejnovich 1969b). This event reveals much about the traditional Ket conceptualization of the opposition between river and forest. The arrival of cold weather was a general time of foreboding for the Ket. The freezing up of the waterways deprived them of easy access to fish. The ‘departure’ of the sun into a more southerly trajectory across the sky coincided with the migration southward back to *Tomam* of most game birds and shamanistic totem birds. Changes in the seasons necessitated the group to remove fishing weirs and boats from the river, break camp, and move inland into the forest. As a safeguard against the difficult journey ahead, the shaman ceremonially ‘caught’ all the souls of clan members in a net, anchoring them at the riverside. It was thought they would remain safely fixed in the square openings of the net until the Ket returned to the riverbank during the next spring. The forest was believed to be filled with servants or daughters of *Hosedam*, sent forth to hinder the fall migration into the forest. To placate these malevolent beings, the Ket performed a ritual that involved fashioning an anthropomorphic figure called *kangro* out of a fir tree. The crown was lopped off and the upper portion of the remaining trunk carved into a pointed head on which a crude face was gouged. Two parallel branches were left for the arms, with two for the legs. This image was set up in the snow in the vicinity of the fourth encampment inland from the river’s edge. The Ket then proceeded to ‘feed’ it with a type of gruel made from the last remnants from the summer store of food. Though the image was not treated with particular respect, its ‘feeding’ was intended to placate the evil spirit into leaving the Ket in peace during their winter peregrinations through the forest. Traveling along some of the “big roads”, or longer hunting trails (*kang*), required establishing over a dozen successive encampments (*ytaq*), most lasting for about three days (Krejnovich 1969a). During this migration, the family’s progress was measured in terms of the amount of time it took the group to move during a single day. That distance was referred to as *itang*, or ‘day-drag’, a concept conveyed in Russian by the word *argish*. Hunting trails were used by the same family group over many years.

During the spring, the Ket re-emerged from their winter hunting trails to congregate once more near the river’s edge, waiting for the ice to fully break and be carried away downstream by the spring flood. There they performed ritual supplications to *Tomam* for warmth and the return of the migratory birds, though detail about these traditional actions seems to have gone unrecorded. The local *holai* were invoked to speed

the breakup of the river's ice. The *dosn*, or *holai* children (cf. Fig. 2 above), were thought to swim invisibly under the ice and split it from below with their pointed heads (Alekseenko 1977:34). Offerings of cloth, ribbons, or coins were placed upon them to facilitate this assistance.

The forest was also the home of the evil witch *Dotetam* and her daughters (sometimes zoomorphized as the great horned owl), which were especially feared after dark. It was also inhabited by the *Qaigus*, or spirit of the uplands (from *qa'i*, 'mountain, hill, uplands'). In some Ket legends, the *Qaigus* is portrayed as a female forest mother. In others, the *Qaigus* is simply the bear – master of all forest animals (Alekseenko 1977:109). Bears were thought to be reincarnations of deceased humans who 'visited' the Ket. When a hunter found a bear and killed it, the Ket believed that it was the bear who had 'offered' to visit the world of humans. No skill was attributed to the hunters. Once a bear's carcass had been procured, the Ket performed an ancient rite called the Bear Ceremony, during which they consumed his flesh in a highly ritualized fashion, 'hosting' the bear as their 'guest' by giving him assorted gifts and asking him various questions. The carcass was ritually butchered by the older men, with bones carefully disarticulated at the joints rather than broken. Strips of fat were removed from the carcass in a specific order, and all of the flesh was cooked and consumed, including the head. The hunter responsible for finding the bear swallowed its two eyes raw. Parts of the skin, including the nose and lips, were attached to leather thongs and worn by participants in the feast. The trachea and lungs were set aside and placed back inside the bear's den. After the feast ended, the bones were taken upland into the forest and placed in the hollow of a tree facing east. This ceremony was performed to invoke the creature's good will toward the winter hunt, since the bear was a vital link between the riverine Ket and their crucial inland hunting grounds. After the ritual had been completed, the Ket were careful to observe the etiquette of returning the bear's bones and major body parts to a special place in the forest. The bones of animals killed during the hunt were left in similar fashion to regenerate on the east side of trees. Fish remains were likewise respectfully returned to the river to placate the *Ulgus* or water spirit.

The water gave life both in the present, real world as well as mythologically. According to Ket legend, the past had seen many floods that cleansed the earth. During each deluge, people and animals survived by clinging to bits of turf floating in the frothy torrent. In the future, another, final flood will resurrect great Ket heroes of the past such as *Doh*, *Alba* and *Balna*. In this way, the future, unseen but destined to repeat the past, was perceived as existing behind the present. The Ket word *ongta* 'in back' refers to the temporal future as well as the spatial notion of behind.

Upon the larger cosmic spatio-temporal design of these vertical and horizontal dichotomies existed a much finer-grained concept of family space. The Ket lived in small family groups that were intimately familiar with every aspect of the territory over which they nomadised in search of food. During midsummer, each family fished in its own area. During winter, nuclear family groups dispersed along their own traditional hunting trails. During the spring and fall, several families related through a male ancestor would merge in preparation for the migrations between the river and the forest. These patriarchal clan gatherings represented but a portion of a larger unit called a moiety, or *hoghotpyl*, the traditional Ket exogamous (i.e., out-marriage) group.

Traditionally, Ket society was divided into two moieties that exchanged marriage partners. One was called *Bogdadeng*, or ‘People of the Fire’, the other *Qengtandeng*, or ‘People of the Large Ski Pole Ring’. Tracks of the latter could be recognized in the snow by the larger imprint left by the ends of their ski poles. Both groups were patrilocal, with women from the opposing moiety inducted as marriage partners. Originally, each moiety had a distinct geographic territory, but already by the 19th century epidemics and encroachment by Russians and other groups led to their geographic mixing. Ultimately this system broke down entirely by the late 20th century, when inter-ethnic marriage came to be prevalent, a trend intensifying even more in recent decades (Krivonogov 2003). The historic *Bogdentsy* near the Yelogui and the *Zemshak* group of the Mountain Tunguska originated from the *Bogdadeng* moiety, while the *Inbak* and *Olgit* downriver along the Yenisei derived from the former *Qengtandeng* (Dolgikh 1960:144; Alekseenko 1970: 167). Even after clans representing the two originally separate marriage groups began to live side-by-side in villages, their social division was reflected in the strict observance of myriad local customs. One could not marry a woman from inside one’s own moiety. It was also the custom to invite members of the opposite moiety to prepare the dead for burial, as one’s own dead relative posed a danger to the whole clan. Shamans felt hindered from calling their spirit helpers while in the vicinity of newly dug graves for fear of unintentionally arousing the spirits of the deceased. Gravesites thus added a special dimension to the local landscape, and were located inland and away from hunting or camping areas. In general, the newly deceased posed a special danger to the members of their own family, clan, or moiety. Even when returning from visiting a sick person, a fire was lit for the visitor to step over for purification.

On the contrary, the Bear Ceremony was performed by members of a single moiety, with the women who had married into the group playing a minor role. Each moiety also had its own sacred family *holai* sites, which were dangerous to members of the opposite moiety, especially to the women, who could be seized by the *holai* spirit’s sons, the *dosn*, as marriage partners. Each family group had its own *allel* guardians, passed down through each family’s youngest son, as well as its own *dangols* ancestor spirit images. It was forbidden to give away the family baby cradle or even to give non-family members the dry-rot wood used as absorbent material on the cradle bottom, as this was thought to deprive the group of its fertility. Also, it was forbidden to transfer fire to anyone outside one’s own moiety, a custom that the modern Ket extended to include the offering of matches to strangers. Even into the early 20th century the moiety system regulated who gathered with whom during the collective waterfowl hunts of late spring, the summer weir-fishing season, and the fall gathering before saying farewell to the riverbank. Members of each moiety referred to each other using the special cosanguinal kinship term *be’p*, while members of the opposing moiety were known by the affinal term *qoj*, which also translates as ‘neighbor’. The males in each patriarchal clan also served as military units during incidents of inter-ethnic conflict with non-Ket.

The Ket themselves, divided between two symbiotic marriage groups, were but one of several distinct aboriginal ethnicities living in central Siberia at the time of the coming of the Russian in the early 17th century (cf. Figure 1). The Ket referred to themselves as *kyndeng* ‘people of the light’ or simply as *de’ng* ‘people’. The word *ke’t* is actually the singular form denoting ‘human being’ and probably derives from the word *ky’t*, denoting ‘offspring of a single mother’ – in other words, a blood relative. Other

peoples were *de'ng* 'people' in a broader sense but not in the narrow sense of *kyndeng*. The Ket thus marked out a mental map of ethnic space to accommodate themselves with their diverse pastoral neighbors. The Yugh, a riverine people who spoke a language similar to Ket, were also regarded as a distinct ethnicity. They were assumed to be descendents of non-Ket who originally spoke a completely different language. A famous legend states that the first Ket shaman *Doh*'s son, who had taken the shape of a loon, was killed by the heedless Yugh, who did not understand the words of warning he was shouting down to them. In general, it appears that the Ket originated in the south, migrating north into the Yenisei watershed in response to the Turkic expansions during the middle of the first millennium AD. As the entire Yenisei was populated prior to the arrival of the Ket, they doubtless mixed with other, local ethnicities along the way. Both northern taiga and southern forest-steppe components are traceable in their culture (Nikolaev 1985). Even the pervasive parallelism in Ket culture between south and east, north and west, sky and underworld, and river and forest, may in part derive from a confluence of distinct mythological components that ultimately hail from ethnically separate origins.

The Selkup - the Ket and Yugh neighbors to the southwest - were friendly and often exchanged marriage partners with adjacent Ket groups, becoming in the process part of one or the other moiety. This is revealed in the Ket ethnonym for Selkup, *la'k*, a borrowing of the Selkup word for 'friend'. The Ket neighbors to the north and east were less congenial. The *dyreng* - who were probably south-wandering groups of Forest Enets, though the term is usually translated as 'Yurak', that is, 'Nenets' - were often at war with the Ket. Evenki (*humbang*) were infiltrating Ket lands from east of the Yenisei and tended to be hostile to both the Ket and Selkup. Legendary warrior heroes such as *Balna* and *Olgit* were associated with military exploits against these groups of invaders. Finally, the Russians, or *kysn*, were regarded as outsiders by all of the aboriginal peoples of the north. Ket and Russians regularly met only during the late spring gatherings, when large multi-family groups of Ket congregated near the water's edge. In historic times, this scene became a time for bartering at a general market called a *suglan*, an event linked both to trade and fur taxation, as the collection of *yasak* was linked to river drainage. Russian settlers and officials gradually pushed the Ket away from the best fishing grounds on the Yenisei (*Quk*), as they established towns and trading posts along the riverbank. The Ket persisted as discrete geographic groups the longest near major tributaries such as the Yelogui (*Jelok*) and Mountain Tunguska (*Qo'l*) rivers.

Although some elements of traditional Ket belief about their spiritual and physical connectedness to the taiga along the middle reaches of the Yenisei River has doubtless gone unrecorded, enough is known to lend a basic picture of the ancient Ket conception of landscape. The upriver south was juxtaposed to the inhospitable downriver north. The life-giving east contrasted with the life-taking west. The congenial riverbank was set against the forbidding forest interior. The world of light, where the Ket resided, stood in contrast to both the sky and the underworld - two realms inhabited by beings that only shamans could hope to visit, summon or treat with. Connecting all of these dichotomies into a unified whole was a series of colorful rituals. Some ceremonies treated the bear as a guest returning to the human world. Others placated evil forest spirits before the winter hunt, or welcomed the migratory birds each spring. Still others were designed to venerated the clan's ancestors at key locales overlooking the river.

Finally, although the Ket today now represent a tiny minority within the broad and increasingly multi-ethnic population of Krasnoyarsk District, their geographic names and fragments of their traditional worldview continue to persist. No doubt these remnants will long remain across a vast area of central Siberia – echoes of the age-old Ket hunter-gatherer beliefs and customs from which they sprang.

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