

Sensory Perception of Rock Art in East Siberia and the Far East Soviet Archeological “Discoveries” and Indigenous Evenkis

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Abstract: This article shows how the sensory perception of rock art guided both archeologists’ interpretations as well as indigenous worldviews in Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East. The research is based on the author’s ethnographic fieldwork research among indigenous communities of the Olekma, Chara, Aldan, and Amur, and Vitim river basins in the Sakha Republic, the Amur and Zabaikalskii regions, and the Republic of Buriatia. The article discusses Evenki herders’ and hunters’ interactions with the rock art sites and demonstrates how these sites have served as a source of ritual and cosmological inspiration. Rock art research has also been inseparable from intuitive and embodied experiences for researchers in the field who interact with rock art.

Keywords: archaeology, East Siberia, Far East, history of the Siberian rock art research, indigenous Evenkis, perception of rock art, rituals

Everyone who had ever had a chance to be in places outlined in the monograph knows, what kind of strength, dedication and desire to overcome one’s limitations a person needs just to see these monuments [rock art] since the location of them often are kept in secret in order to avoid evil shamanic spirits.

—A. P. Okladnikov and A. I. Mazin (1976)

The region that embraces the Lena, Olekma, Aldan, and Amur rivers basins has the densest concentration of rock art paintings in Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East. Starting in the eighteenth century, every famous expedition led by imperial explorers with ethnographic, archaeological, geographical, and historical interests of this remote and unexplored region also paid attention to rock art as objects



of “uncovered mystery” (Georgi 1799; Klements 1895: 33; Miller [1750] 1937; Vitashevskii 1897). However, these rock art paintings—made with red ochre on flat surfaces of large and prominent rocks located near rivers—reached their peak of scientific popularity and public fascination during the postwar Soviet times. Indeed, the Soviet state supported many archaeological expeditions searching for and documenting rock art sites in the context of state mega-plans for the industrial development of remote Siberian areas, like hydroelectric plants or river dams. The Soviet archeologist Alexei Okladnikov led an expedition along the Lena River and conducted field research even during the World War II when most academics—including those with doctoral degrees—were mobilized to the front (see Klein 2014: 312). This opportunity to conduct field research during the most turbulent years could be explained by arguing that Soviet officials needed heroes and their fascinating exploits to entertain a devastated postwar society. With extensive state support, rock art became a systematic multidisciplinary academic trend, as well as one of the most enigmatic and romantically charged subjects in Soviet archaeology (see Brandišauskas forthcoming c). A few monumental monographs and dozens of articles dedicated to the rock art research were published and became famous in the Soviet academic world (see Kochmar 1994; Mazin 1986; Okladnikov and Mazin 1976, 1979; Okladnikov and Zaporozhskaia 1959, 1969, 1970, 1972).

Scientific descriptions and publications of certain rock art sites often start with reference to the first scientist(s) or explorer(s), who are praised as the “discoverer(s)” of a rock art site. To be a discoverer of the archeological monument was a prestigious achievement signifying (or representing) of one’s academic success and professionalism. These newly “discovered” rock art sites had been well known to local hunters and villagers for ages. Rock art offerings found and documented by archeologists also confirmed that these sites had been recently tended by local hunters and reindeer herders. Most rock art sites had been well known as significant landscape features and cosmologically significant subjects for local populations for many centuries. Most sites were reached by Soviet scientists with the help of local indigenous people, with their domestic reindeer employed as transport animals for different research expeditions. Since the seventeenth century, almost all Siberian exploration expedition relied heavily on the knowledge of indigenous guides. Many documents report how scientists and indigenous people cooperated in the documentation of rock art sites, but the contemporary indigenous interactions with rock art sites were mainly ignored by archeologists. This was because of the archeologists were

mainly interested in the ancient past of the rock art, while contemporary reindeer herders' beliefs and their offerings left behind were referred to as useless *pozniatiny* (later artifacts).

As my previous ethnographic research in the Republic of Buriatia and Zabaikalskii region shows, such rock art sites have been important sites for both the personal and social life of individuals and local indigenous communities as a whole up to the present time (Brandišauskas 2017).¹ These sites can be seen as being linked to the ideas of animism as well as human interactions with spirits and animals (see Brandišauskas 2011). During my field research in the Republic of Sakha, the Zabaikalskii region, and the Amur region in 2016–2017, I visited various rock art sites and worked with different Evenki hunters and reindeer herders living in the basins of the Chara, Olekma, Tokko, Tiana, and Nyukzha rivers, as well as scientists, administrators, and natural reserve workers based in large villages and cities of different regions.² This ethnographic research, along with archival work, allowed me to understand the temporal and spatial permanency of many ideas and practices linked to the indigenous perception of rock art sites as well as compare it to existing knowledge. My research also shows that contemporary indigenous Evenki reindeer herders and hunters living in remote villages, as well as nomadic taiga camps have been continuously visiting rock art sites with personal aspirations, respect, and offerings (Brandišauskas forthcoming b). Various unpublished reports or publications in small journals, as well as monographs, can still provide us a fragmented view of what ideas local indigenous people had about rock art in Soviet times and how they interacted with rock art sites on a daily basis over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These valuable references of indigenous perceptions taken together with my ethnographic research also allow us to understand some different variations of persisting ideas linked to the sensory perception and use of rock art sites and paintings.

Although Soviet archaeologists strived “to make this old writing talk,” they put little effort into elaborating upon contemporary people's interactions with rock art. They were mainly interested in documenting the rich material remains, such as that found in the cracks of the rock art itself. They interpreted rock art by the ethnographic descriptions of nonexistent rituals published by early ethnographers. At the same time, their findings, processes of documentation, and personal perceptions were also shaped by their sensual experiences. Various hardships related to site exploration and the respect shown to indigenous ontologies often demonstrated by archeologists suggest that sensory experiences

also played an important role in the subjective perceptions of drawings by both archeologists and indigenous people. In this article, by studying the experiences of some prominent Soviet rock art archeologists along with indigenous engagement with rock art sites, I want to show how so-called intuition—or the sensory perception of the rock art—guided archeologists' interpretations as well as indigenous peoples' worldviews. Scientists and indigenous people also left their material imprints on the rock art sites; as active participants into the production of meaning and the modification of rock art, this has shaped how contemporary indigenous people perceive the sentience of many sites of rock art. In such a context, rock art sites can be interpreted as not as something fixed or given, but rather something made and remade over the course of time, depending on the shifting sociopolitical contexts of the involved social actors.

Rock Art Archeology: Visuality and Sensory Perception

In the Soviet Academy of Science, rock art research became an important scientific discipline under the research of the most influential and emblematic luminary of Soviet archaeology, Alexei Okladnikov. The Siberian-born Okladnikov was an active field researcher who led archaeological expeditions in different regions of Northern and Southern Asia for almost fifty years. His research expeditions in Siberia covered wide territories of various large river basins such as the Ob, Angara, and Lena, and Kolyma; he covered vast areas of the Altai, Zabaikal'ia, and Iakutiia, some of the islands of the Arctic Ocean, as well as parts of the Far East and Primor'ia as well as the seashores of the Sea of Okhotsk and the Kuril Islands. Okladnikov's scientific interest embraced large-scale academic issues that included extensive excavations of the settlement of ancient societies, comparative research on a wide distribution of different cultural and technological features in Asia, patterns of migration from Asia to America, processes of ethnogenesis as well as the early history and ethnography of indigenous people.

In 1966, when Okladnikov became the head of the Institute of History, Philology and Philosophy at the Novosibirsk branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, he and his students initiated a research school that aimed to discern different stages of humans' cultural evolutions in Siberia, from the Stone Age through the Middle Ages and modern periods. Popular essays published by Okladnikov, which were translated into many different languages of the Soviet Union, represented the

attractive mystery of discovery, scientific intuition and empathic interpretations of rock art, which could reveal the worldviews and passions of ancient people that embodied their thoughts and feelings through rock paintings or carvings (see Okladnikov 1969). The documentation of many rock art sites in the Altai region, Mongolia, the Amur Province, Zabaikalskii Province, Pribaikal'ia, and Angara, as well as Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan was declared by Okladnikov as an opening of a "window to an unknown world" (Russ.: *okno v nevedomyi mir*) (see Derevianko and Medvedev 2008). These artistic expressions of ancient people piqued the attention of Soviet masses and media, and this lasted for several decades. Indeed, Okladnikov was referred to as an extremely successful discoverer of many iconic archaeological objects, including excavations, analysis, and dating of the largest number of rock art sites. For the so-called discovery and reading of rock art sites as archaeological monuments (Russ.: *arkheologicheskie otkroveniia*), Okladnikov was referred to as the authority within academia and was rewarded with public as well as state attention. He received memberships in the scientific academies of different countries and was awarded the highest Soviet awards of the time (i.e., Stalin's Book Award, Star of the Heroes of Socialist's Work).

In the context of the prevalence of the Soviet ideology of evolutionism, Okladnikov's works showed how the so-called primitive people had developed in their social lives, and turned into more complex societies. Departing from extensive field research, he underlined that rock art could be seen as the key to understanding the cultural and historical processes that occurred in the region, starting from the Neolithic. Thereby, he also suggested that rock art could help us to understand the "passions and inner souls of humans" (Okladnikov 1967). Through a careful examination of the rock art informed by personal intuition, Okladnikov claimed that Neolithic rock art embodied a feeling of peace in contrast to the later Bronze Age rock art that represented more dramatic expressions of societies that were already divided into classes (ibid.). Later, according to visual analysis of distinctive painting styles and meanings of the rock art images, also were discerned different typologies of paintings that represented various temporal archaeological periods (see Okladnikov and Mazin 1979). Okladnikov (1969) described that revealing the semantics of these archaeological sites was nothing else but an intellectual venture that could be described by the visual metaphor of "opening a window to the ancient world."³ While trying to convey the secular value and intention of rock art in his popular books, he also inferred the meanings of rock art images based on the

indigenous beliefs in animism in his academic books (see Okladnikov and Zaporozhskaia 1959: 54).

Okladnikov described rock art discoveries in indigenous terms like “hunting.” According to him, rock art was “hunted all over the taiga,” and such a process was based on archeologist’s skills, energy, persistence, and toughness as well as physical strength (see Okladnikov 1969). Even copying rock art paintings entailed extreme risk and required extensive physical strength, as scientists had to build a long wooden ladder made from two or three ladders and climb it to reach the images—or climb directly on the rock cornice—and then make careful copies of each rock painting by using caulking paper, and take measurements and photos while balancing at that height (see Figure 1). This documentation was also performed in a harsh mosquito-filled environment. Furthermore, other colleagues’ archaeologists noticed that Okladnikov’s “hunting” success was also based on his extraordinary luck; they believed that his good intuition allowed him to make such renowned scientific discoveries. Such success was not only about locating new and unknown rock art sites but also discerning the meanings of particular paintings. In Okladnikov’s words, the discovery of a rock art image for the researcher was always an unexpected adventure. As he stated, any repeated visit to the rock art sites “would show him new images,” even if he had already passed the rocks “for the twentieth time” (1969: 23). Similarly, based on the explanations of Evenki hunters, Okladnikov stated that such rock art could be seen when approached at particular times. One had to be alert at just the right moment to see the rock paintings, and it was said that not every archaeologist was able to do this. In some cases, Okladnikov used to spend longer periods among the rocks, just looking at the surfaces and waiting for the moment when paintings would “start evolving from the surface and start to slowly multiply” (1969: 51). As he would notice, “with a light of the shifting sun, some of the paintings used to become brighter and come alive” (1969: 51).

Early explorers attempted to produce photos of the rock art; however, the main documentation of such rock art was the production of freehand sketches from visual observations of the rock art sites at a distance (Vitashevskii 1897; see also Tugolukov 1963). Later, Okladnikov worked with his wife, professional painter Valentina Zaporozhskaia, who copied different rock art images by using special caulking paper. Often such rock art was overdrawn with chalk so that it could be better seen through the paper. That is how Okladnikov (1976: 4) noted that there were often many images on the same flat area of the rock, and these images had not been copied and interpreted accurately. The

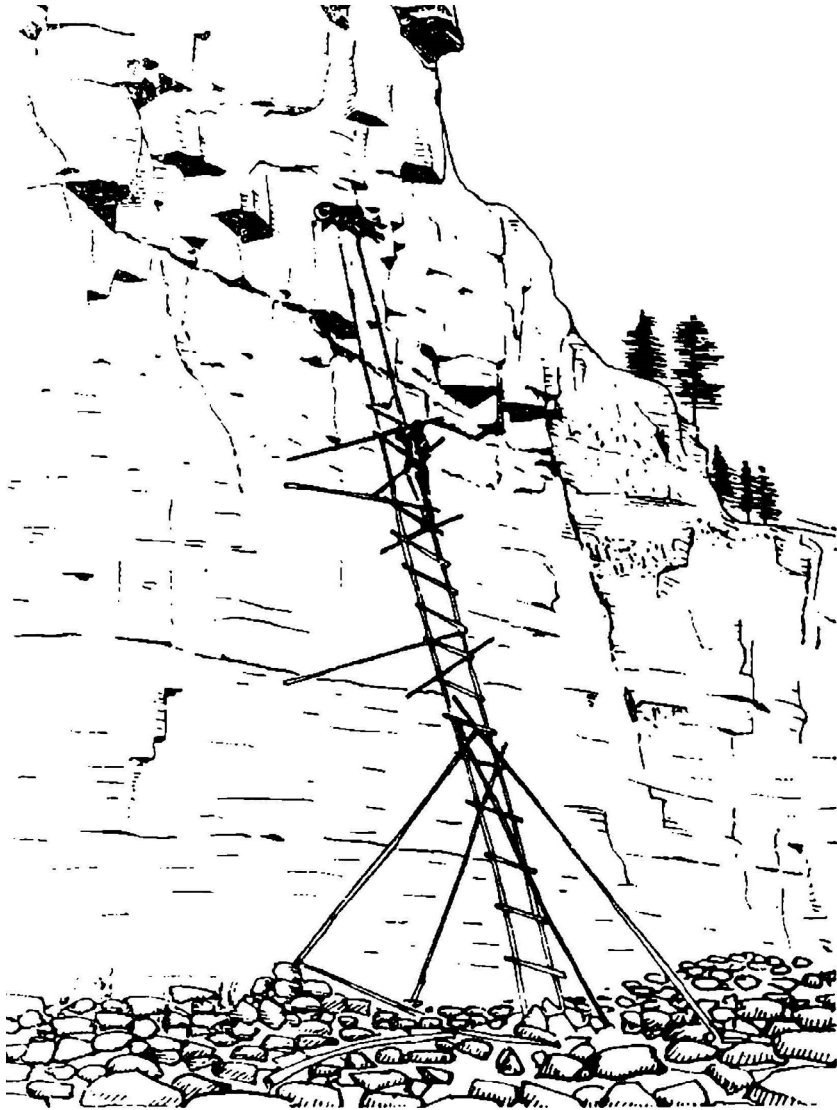


Figure 1. Copying rock art near the Tokko River with caulking paper. Okladnikov and Mazin (1976: 47).

archeologist Nikolai Kochmar (1994: 134) outlined the same critique, pointing to visual interpretations and representations found in the works of Okladnikov and Mazin. Kochmar used to wash off the chalk remains left by his predecessors and use caulking paper, trying to make accurate copies. Only in some cases did he use a red pencil to shape rims that were washed out with water after copying. He noticed that this method allowed him to identify completely different images. Hence, instead of seeing a domesticated bull, he identified bison, and was thereby able to provide a different dating for the site. Similarly, a human standing with a bow depicted by Vitashevskii (1897) was interpreted by Kochmar as a human with hands raised in praying (see also Okladnikov and Mazin 1976: 144).

Kochmar (1994: 24) also stated that some of the rock art found by his predecessor archeologist Nikita Arkhipov seems to be a visual misunderstanding, as Kochmar could not find it two years later. Kochmar believed that it was impossible that hard rock could flake. He scrupulously documented the rock art of Iakutiia and providing sketched representations depicting the geography, botany, geological features, and other characteristics of locations surrounding the rock art. However, his representations and even depictions of locations were also subjective.⁴ Any documentation is an interpretation of reality, as it is also based on the process of selection; thereby, rock art paintings were differently perceived, copied, and interpreted by different scientists. Such a variety of perceptions can be explained by the distance from which one sees an image, as well as the changing levels of daylight, seasonality, weather as well as the researcher's emotions. During the history of rock art, some of the new images were added to ancient ones and, in some cases, new images were found intersecting with old ones, thereby providing even wider grounds for viewers' misinterpretations. Some rock art sites contain paintings accomplished in different historical periods. In some cases, rock art sites, for example, Suruktaakh Khaia on the Markha and Tokko rivers in southern Iakutiia, contain indigenous drawings and writing from Neolithic until the Middle Ages, but also writing and landmarks by people of the nineteenth and twentieth century and even more recent writings. Such writing can include visiting tourists' initials alongside the year of the visit, as well as short phrases such as "this place was visited by Tatars."

When talking about the exploration of rock art sites, every rock art researcher tells their own extraordinary stories, often entwined with mysticism. It is not uncommon for members of a research expedition to lose their way trying to reach a rock art site while putting in numerous

attempts searching for it all over a small area. A common explanation is that a master-spirit is protecting the place and does not want people to see the images (see about Mazin in Bolotin and Zabiyaiko 2010: 33). In the summer of 2017, our research expedition, which included archeologists and nature reserve representatives, aimed to reach the upper part of Olekma and explore a rock art site located on the Tas-Mele River that was as-yet-unknown to scientists. During our trips, we were confronted by a line of unexpected events that involved broken boats and other travel complications that invoked stories and memories about spirits guarding certain sites and river basins, requiring offerings and punishing those who refuse to show respect. All members of the expedition agreed that everyone involved in the fieldwork knows how important it is to follow the local taiga ethics. Any local villager can tell you about spirits believed to reside in mountain passes. The offering sites associated with these spirits are located near main roads as well as along winter roads. It is believed that these spirits can request offerings and bother travelers who do not provide them. As many archaeologists have witnessed, excavations of archeological objects are often met with some kind of resistance from the local people due to the fear of the spirits' revenge. Thereby, many archeologists often follow all local rituals and offer alcohol to spirits before or during excavations or research expeditions as they say this must be done "just in case." Sprinkling alcohol as offering for spirits when visiting sentient sites has been a common ritual practice among many Siberian archeologists for decades (Figure 2).

Okladnikov (1967) mentions that when looking at rock art paintings, he would experience feelings of warmth and heartiness. In other cases, he used to feel a sense of anxiety for hunting luck and the ancient hunters' drive for the blood. Hence, by using empathy and intuition, Okladnikov believed that he could identify the inner emotions and intentions of ancient artists. He also believed that such an artistic performance reflected the attempts of the painter to help people "fill life with beauty," "humanistic features," and "nobility." According to Okladnikov, when archaeologists copied drawings of these images, it helped them experience just how difficult it was to create them in the first place; it allowed them to understand firsthand how it required prolonged monotonous work replete with different physical and emotional tensions and was often performed without rest.

According to the rock art archaeologists Ekaterina and Mariana Devlet, "intuition never misled A. P. Okladnikov. Similar to L. D. Landau in physics, Okladnikov generated ideas without much care for strict argumentation, system and methods that were used to prove it



Figure 2. Scientists and zapovednik rangers observe rock art near the Olekma River. Photograph by the author.

and almost every time he was right” (2011: 59). Hence, Devlet and Devlet believe that most ideas based on Okladnikov’s intuition were later developed and proven by his students. Similarly, the rock art archeologist Kochmar also noticed that Okladnikov’s semantic interpretation and dating in most cases were founded only on intuition, yet this helped “to model a full spiritual worldview of ancient dwellers of Lena region” (1994: 20). A Yakutsk-based archaeologist Anatolii Alekseev also explained to us during fieldwork that one can use empathy to find out where ancient humans would likely choose to locate a camping place or leave their artistic expressions or offerings (see Arkhipov 1971). In Okladnikov’s book we notice the author’s surprise when the Evenki guides took his expedition to the Sali rock art site, which is located in a visually and emotionally unimpressive and somewhat spooky place that did not contain open and spectacular views of fields, and was not located near campsites where people would spend long periods of time (see Okladnikov and Zaporozhskaia 1970: 42–43).⁵

Among researchers, Mazin was also known to have special abilities that allowed him to search successfully for rock art and offering sites when working together with indigenous Evenkis in remote areas of Siberia. He was also reputed as a “bear hunter” (Russ.: *medvezhatnik*) and a “real taiga person” (Russ.: *taezhnik*), as he was able to spend long

periods traveling around by boat, camping, and eating subsistence food. Most often research trips meant traveling in inflatable boats, crossing over falls, and wading through large rivers; this meant being challenged by unexpected river and weather fluctuations and encountering wild animals and spending nights in canvas tents. As his colleagues remember, “the taiga was a world that he could understand; he was always close to it.” His colleagues also believed that he was almost indigenous himself, as had apparently spent his younger years working as a reindeer herder somewhere in the Amur region. Mazin’s students remember that the Evenkis he worked with used to approach him as “one of them” and showed great respect to him, as he was even reputed to have some shamanic powers (Bolotin and Zabyiako 2010). Mazin did not deny such an image and even supported them when interacting with Evenkis as well as his students.⁶ Some members of his expeditions also remember that many Evenkis used to ask Mazin to select puppies, as he referred himself as having “a good hand” or as “a shaman of dogs” (cited in Bolotin Zabyiako 2010: 28–29). Colleagues thus thought that such extraordinary knowledge was used to help Mazin to access Evenki worldviews about spirits, life and death, as well as collect various ritual artifacts for the museum. Furthermore, Mazin often used to correct his informants’ (even shamans’) cosmological interpretations, as he believed that he knew almost everything about Evenki reindeer herding and shamanism. In the 1960s, Mazin had gotten the chance to work with many still-practicing shamans in the Amur region. However, at the end of his life in 2008 some of his published ethnographic works were marked by overgeneralized interpretations without much ethnographic proof, and the only basis of was that “life-long generated intuition.”⁷

Many discoveries of rock art sites in Soviet times relied on the knowledge of indigenous hunters and guides. At the same time, both archaeologists and ethnographers were more interested in employing early ethnographic descriptions of the extinct rituals of indigenous people when interpreting the rock art sites through contemporary indigenous experiences. Archaeologists also regarded ritual performances at such sites as events of the past that no longer existed, as was probably expected from the vantage point of Soviet ideologists. A good example can be found in Mazin (1986: 129), wherein he describes how his Evenki guide Trofim Pavlov told him a story about a rock art site that was powerful in the past, but “does not work” (Russ.: *ne deistvuet*) in the present. This trope was also found in other ethnographic articles dedicated to rock art sites (for Dzheltulak rock art, see also Tugolukov

1963: 85). The statement that the sacred site is not powerful anymore has often been repeated by my informants as it was a “safe answer” for the indigenous people to choose to say to the person representing formal institutions. This kind of answer was probably developed in the context of religion suppression that also resulted in violent persecutions of shamans and Evenki public ritual practices. Indeed, Evenki hunters and herders avoid talking about spirits and ritual experiences, believing that it might bring misfortune or an unexpected spirit’s attention.

Indigenous Views: Sensory Perception and Rituality

It is a common feature that many rock art sites are located in the most spectacular and often economically significant geographic locations, such as the banks of large and small rivers or confluences of the rivers rich in fish or within a decent distance to salt licks that attract large game animals, with dry campsites located nearby. As ancient campsites show, rock art sites can also be linked to humans’ subsistence for longer periods in a given area. Some parts of rivers with visible rock art remained important for long periods of time, as they were not only a source of fish for the local population but also served as migration routes for hunted animals crossing the river (see Kochmar 1994: 101). Rivers were also important routes for humans moving in the mountainous taiga region, in summer by birch bark boat and in winter when one can travel easily on flat ice by skis or sleds on the frozen river. Such red ochre rock art paintings were accomplished on flat surfaces of prominent rocks, often at some height; this way they could be easily seen and observed from a distance and from different positions, which were used to give both the rock and the area more significance. These rocks often have a spectacular size or shape or feature grotto or cave (Figure 3). In the context of natural surroundings, such rocks often have monumental and exceptional features.⁸ Various painted figures and signs are usually displayed on highly visible flat areas under a cornice, grotto, or even above the entrance to a cave. Hence, a grotto, hanging rocks or stones, and cornices were supposed to protect such paintings from the influence of inclement weather, thus making them more permanent.

Such rock art also captured people’s attention, as such sites or small rivers located next to these sites had their own related linguistic markers: Onion or Anian (Evenki: “beautiful ones,” “decoration”), Dukuvuchi (Evenki: “writing one”) and Suruktaakh Khaia (Sakha:



Figure 3. The Onen rock art site, known by scientists as the Middle Niukzha River rock art site, located in the northern part of Amur region. Photograph by the author.

“beautiful writing”), Oiiulaakh (Sakha: “painting”), Kadarichi (Evenki: “rocky”), Delavun (Evenki: “stony”). As in the past, contemporary Evenkis tend to associate the rock art site first with a dwelling and presence of “spirit” or “master-spirit” (Evenki: *odzhen*) that has an influence over the whole river basin or hunting territory as well as having an influence on the procreation of animals and people (see Brandišauskas 2017: 3–7). In published reports, we can also find out how indigenous Evenkis and Sakhas link rock art to a manifestation of a “master of place” (see Arbatskii 1978), or an “evil spirit” (Sakha: *abaahy*) (see Stefanovich 1895), or master-spirit (Sakha: *abasaa, abasy*) and the “spirit of rock” (Sakha: *khaia ichchite*) (see Vitashevskii 1897).

For the archeologist Savvin (1939), local elders living near the Markha River told him that the rock art site of Suruktaakh Khaia appeared in ancient times, at the time of the creation of sky and land when human beings were just beginning to exist. Thereby, such a “mighty spirit” inhabited a spectacular rock and started to show off their paintings. Such a spirit could even appear to humans in the shape of a woman-spirit or as a “man-master” of the river basin or as a “master-spirit” in charge of providing animals, like Baai-Baianaai (Sakha). Some Evenkis and Sakhas believe that these paintings were made by

“powerful humans” such as shamans for their ritual performance, or by other ancestors (Arbatskii 1978; Zabiyaiko, Mazin, Kobyzov 2002; see Ksenofontov 1927 on the Sakha epic tradition). The tropes of both spirits and shamans persisted during my fieldwork among the hunters and herders of Zabaikalskii region, Buriatiia, southern Yakutiia, and the Amur region.

Among many indigenous people, it is a common belief associated with rock art that such a “spirit” inhabiting the rock can produce new paintings as well as hide the old ones. Thereby, paintings are seen as being in the constant process of change: it can suddenly appear and disappear for the one observing it (Vitashevskii 1897: 287). The Tungus (Evenkis) of the Maia River area believed that paintings could disappear for some periods and appear again very brightly or vividly, as the masters of the rock could decide to refresh an old painting or display a new one (Vasil’ev 1930). These elders could explain how some of the old paintings have disappeared or became less visible. Elders of the Kindigyr clan stated to the geologist Kiakshto (1931: 29–30) that the number of paintings in the Sredniaia Nyukzha rock art had increased just recently. Similarly, the Tungus guide of the expedition led by the explorer Vitashevskii (1898) explained to him that some of the rock art paintings of the Krestiakh River had been produced by spirits in the last year, while others had disappeared by the time of their visit.

As local people told the archeologist Savvin (1939), paintings of rock art on the Suruktaakh Khaia of the Markha River constantly shifted; thus, new paintings could change the old ones. Hence, they also noticed that recent appearing of a picture of moose on the rock surface also resulted in the rapid procreation of these animals in the region. Local hunters also believed that if a person walking by the Suruktaakh Khaia rock was shown a moose, then he would kill a moose, if it was a fox then he would catch a fox, while the appearance of a cross could also mean his impending death (see also Okladnikov and Zaporozhskaia 1972: 79). Generations of hunters in Zabaikalskii region and Buriatiia also believed that rock art does not show up every time and can hide from people. Thereby, a photo camera does not always capture the images because of the magic of these paintings. As Savvin (1939) noticed, such strong beliefs in spirits inspired local enthusiasts to remove some paintings from the rock art from Suruktaakh Khaia site for the sake of experiment and see if their master-spirit would make drawings again. Savvin also noticed that many rock art sites were destroyed by enthusiasts of Soviet atheist or antireligious ideology in order to combat the indigenous beliefs in the magic of rock paintings. Furthermore, local people

living nearby also tried to collect the rock art paintings believing that such “magic medicine” might help to cure different diseases. Thereby, Savvin believed that some of the images were heavily damaged or even disappeared entirely.

Various offerings left in cracks and crevices of rock were preserved for long periods and could be seen by everyone who comes to the site and the offerings served to the new generations of hunters and herders as signs for powerfulness of the site. Many rock art sites encountered by a hunter, reindeer herder or explorer during the entire twentieth century contained or still contain visible, valuable material objects left as offerings, with nearby trees decorated with colorful rags also left as offerings. Hence, before finding paintings, the geologist Gaiduk (1915: 104–106) noticed a great number of cloth rags left on the trees standing near the Oiiulaakh river rock art sites in the Olekma River basin. According to him, such rock was actively visited by local people as it was located on the route to hunting grounds. In his report, the geologist Vladimir Frolov (1967) also describes decorations of rags as well as bullets and buttons found near the rock art site of Olekma River.

According to the archeologist Nikolai Kochmar (1994), since most rock sites were rich with displayed ancient and contemporary offerings in cracks and crevices, left under the cornice of rocks or in small caves, or on flat surfaces of rocks, these sites could be called by archeologists firstly as cult objects (Russ.: *sviatilishche*).⁹ These offerings included any item associated with hunting and camping (flint arrowheads, bullets, traps, fire tools) as well as valuable personal belongings or carved idols (*shenkens*) as well as pieces of food (Figure 4). In the period of trade between China and Russia, such sites were also decorated with trading items such as bolts of colorful fabric, and visitors also left pendants, medals, beads, coins, porcelain, iron hunting gear as well as bullets. Even rock art sites lacking any observable traces of human attendance sometimes also display washed-out archaeological material from cracks and crevices such as stone arrowheads left as offerings. For local nomadic people, such observations of old offerings left next to rock art sites used to call for leaving one’s own offerings and attending these sites in case of misfortune or illness. By finding rock art and offerings and returning there to leave one’s own offerings and “fetch luck” was one of the ways in which young Evenki reindeer herders learned about the powerfulness of the place.

Because many rock art sites were continuously attended to by generations of reindeer herders and hunters with offerings, one could still see old campsites and fireplaces located near the rock art sites as



Figure 4. Shenken offerings near the Krestiakh River, southern Yakutia. Photograph by the author.

well as other imprints left on the land as well as tent sites, tent poles as well as trees cut down for firewood and building a tent. When traveling by a rock art site, many Evenkis believe that one at least must stop and start a fire, drink tea, and feed the fire or sprinkle it with tea. Often such a stop is planned in advance, and upon arrival at the camp, people take readymade offerings as well as a kettle, tea, sugar, bread, and some stuff to eat close to the site. Only after starting a fire and eating do Evenkis approach rock art sites to observe them and leave some offerings. Hunters and herders also believe that it is important to observe rock art as it might reveal something and say something about the future or even warn one about misfortunes. It can also show an animal presenting itself to the human or opening a way for hunting luck to be realized (Brandišauskas 2017). Indeed, for Evenkis to see an animal in the dream or vision means they have the goodwill of the master-spirits. If one wants to make rock art “write” something to them, then one has to come with good thoughts and intentions as well as respect and offerings. Any valuable item that one has in their pocket, such as cigarettes, matches, patron, buttons, coins, a piece of rag cut from fabric or footwear bindings, as well as candy can be left as offerings. Besides these things, I saw various old items left as offerings such as musket bullets, coins with Russian tsar Nikolai’s II face or Soviet rubles with

Lenin as well as more modern things as plastic lighters, fishing tools, and watches.¹⁰

Offerings are also continuously left in cracks and crevices of rocks, placed on ledges of the rock cliffs or below the rock paintings, or displayed on nearby flat stones or the surfaces of rocks. Some of the rock art sites are known as being rich in offerings; it is believed that such places and the spirits inhabiting it have accumulated lots of power. Thus, the more offerings one leaves, the more power the site generates and the more influence it has on people's activities (Figure 5). As some elders from Ust' Urkima village remember, some powerful (Evenki: *musuchi*) rock art at the Onen River contained piles of different offerings, including bullets, toys, and wooden figures of animals.¹¹ Hence, when visitors (geologists, tourists, archeologists) started to collect or remove these offerings, different groups of Evenkis witnessed that the rock art sites started to become weaker, ceasing to act or even attacking people traveling by the site. For Evenkis, there is a strict law (Evenki: *ode*) forbidding the taking of anything left by other people in the taiga, as taking something from a storage cache as well as an offering site can have a lethal outcome. For those leaving offerings, the master-spirit can be beneficial and present animals to hunters by showing the image of an animal. At the same time, it was believed that a "powerful spirit" can also commit revenge as well as punishment if one refuses to leave offerings or break taiga laws (Okladnikov and Zaporozhskaia 1972: 78 Savvin 1939). At the same time, I witnessed that some hunters would borrow something in the cases of extreme need; however, they would also leave something in exchange.¹² As a hunter, Mikhail Pavlov showed us the Onen River rock art sites located next to the Ust' Urkima village, also pointing out the place where some gold miners were tragically killed in a burned log house located close to the rock art. The gold miners had written their names on the rock art sites, vandalizing them, and local people believe the master-spirit punished them by burning them alive.

In his reports and articles, the student of archaeology Alexandr Arbatskii (1978, 1981, 1982), provided short but valuable ethnographic observations of Evenki beliefs or, as he calls them, "survivals" of religion (Russ.: *perezhitki*) in the Zabaikalskii region. He spent several summers living with the reindeer herding family of Fiodor Zhumaneev in the 1960s and 1970s in the Vitim River basin, during which he had a chance to visit rock art sites together with elders. He states that Evenkis used to leave offerings near the Muishin River rock art site during Soviet and pre-Soviet times, and they used to come to observe paintings since it was believed that such practice used to provide



Figure 5. Evenki hunters from Ust' Urkima village leaving offerings near the Onen rock art site. Photograph by the author.

hunters with luck. As most hunters used to say to Tugolukov (1963), in most cases of such ritual performativity, the game was sent to the hunter by spirits as a reward. As his short article and field report states, visiting hunters usually used to build a fire first at some distance from the rock art site and make tea, which is sprinkled in the direction of the paintings. Then they approach and leave some offerings—usually bullets, cigarettes, coins, candies—and ask for good luck. Only then, while remaining some distance away, they examined the paintings, trying to see what the rock was showing them (Russ.: *chto ona pokazhet*). If one saw a human being, it meant a meeting would occur, whereas seeing an animal meant luck in hunting.¹³

When I was doing long-term ethnographic field research among Evenkis in Tungokochen village, I found out that the whole Evenkis community was aware of the powerful Dukuvuchi rock art site and some hunters were continuously visiting it when on the way to the hunting sites such as natural salt licks (Russ.: *solontsy*, Evenki: *taloi*) that attract wild animals. Children and grandchildren of the extended Aruneev and Dushinov families of reindeer herders had also kept visiting Dukuvuchi continuously up to the present day. Every member of the reindeer herding families could tell his or her own stories about their extraordinary experiences with rock art sites. Hunters of Zabai-kalskii region and Buriatia say that they often feel tension when going there, as they may see signs that predict trouble, misfortune, or even death. Olga Zhumaneeva told me that once, as she was approaching Dukuvuchi, she even saw a burning cross, a sure sign of death—and her relative died soon after. Other hunters told me of how the master-spirits refused to accept them for their sins (Evenki: *ngelomel*), and they found themselves attacked by a hawk, shot at with a rifle or pelted with stones. Others, when approaching, could feel calmness, or on the contrary, a wind that would blow stronger. Hunters and herders say that even animals can feel spirits, as some of them go crazy when approaching the site; dogs bark a lot and chase after invisible things, while reindeer or horses become uncontrollable. The unusual behavior of animals is generally taken as an indicator of the presence of spirits by Evenkis. It is said that even if you are afraid, you must continue to approach the site and bring offerings. You may be lured away from the site by fresh tracks that suddenly appear on the way and induce you to go hunting; that is how the master-spirits test the visitor's intentions. Many hunters describe the feeling they often get when visiting rock art sites as a strong "inflow of energy" (Russ.: *pritok energii*). However, the master-spirit may also meet hunters with a strong gust of wind, and

sometimes people hear voices when approaching the site. It is advisable to refrain from speaking in a loud voice or otherwise polluting a ritual site. It is also dangerous to cut down trees, shoot, quarrel with dogs, horses or reindeer, or hunt before performing the ritual.

Rock art sites can also be seen not only as predicting or providing luck by showing images or sending animals, but also empowering humans for their lives by foretelling the future. The elder Nadia Moronova from Rossoshino village told me about how, as a teenager, she went to the rock art of Dukuvuchi located near Sali River, and she was shown a picture with many children standing in a row. Having later become the mother of nine children, she believes the rock art site empowered her to bear so many offspring.¹⁴ As the elder Ania Semirekonova told me, “if you pray (Russ.: *molitsa*) well, then the rocks always show or give something to you, it is as good to you as your parents and always giving.” In recent years, Dukuvuchi became well known not only to local hunters and herders but also to most inhabitants of the villages of Krasnyi Yar, Yumurchen, Tungokochen, Ust’ Karenga, and even the Tungokochen District center, Usugli. The site started to attract people from large cities or Buryatiia who wished to visit the “most powerful place” in the region. As in the case of the Vitashevskii (1897) and other explorers, Evenkis of Tungokochen believe the paintings were most probably not made by humans, but most likely by spirits or maybe in some cases shamans.

Though some rock art sites are neglected by Evenki communities due to the diminishing of nomadic lifestyles, others have been continuously visited and adorned even during the most disruptive Soviet times (see Brandišauskas forthcoming a). Today, rock art sites are becoming increasingly important in the consciousness of individuals, in local and regional artistic expressions as well as in land use negotiations and conflicts (see Brandišauskas forthcoming b). Rock art sites have been serving as tangible, significant landscape features infused with nonhuman powers, thereby standing as a conduit for teaching taiga ethics or future luck. Hence, in the context of revitalization of indigenous cultures, rock art sites stand as monumental and spatial manifestations and inspirations of indigenous cosmology and animistic worldview. Rock art sites also serves as the place for individual and communal empowerment as well as identity emplaced in the landscape (Brandišauskas forthcoming b). These ongoing social interactions around these sites could be not only “windows to the past” as it was outlined by prominent archeologists but also to the present as well as the future.

Conclusion

Indigenous knowledge as well as wayfinding were important for both access and interpretation of rock art by explorers and scientists. At the same time, little has been revealed about the persistence of meanings and contemporary views and attitudes enacted by communities at these rock art sites. This is especially true for publications during the Soviet times, when the rock art research reached the peak of professionalism, in terms of academic as well as public popularity. First, there was a lack of interest in the interpretations of late and so-called ethnographic artifacts irrelevant to the archeological inquiry. Second, because of Soviet antireligious views, it was hard to ask and write about existing practices and beliefs. Archeologists were mainly interested in revealing the ancient meanings that were encoded in rock art paintings as well as excavating below the rock art paintings when searching for rock art offerings and material traces representing different cultural periods.

Rock art rituals have been enacted by Evenkis in communication with nonhuman beings, giving rise to offerings, predictions, emotions, and sensory experiences as well as moral stories that shape humans' daily practices of subsistence such as hunting and herding. The use and perception of the rock art are inseparable from the active involvement of indigenous Evenkis with a site itself. Rock art drawings displayed on high flat rock surfaces—often under cornices of large and outstanding rocks—were created with the sense of providing monumental and visual importance for the drawings. Hence, the natural environment also plays its role in the creation of a sense of significance around the site and its paintings, in many cases significantly influencing humans' sensory perceptions such as visual and audible effects. Since most of the drawings have been greatly exposed to sunlight, the sun's positions also affected the "appearance or disappearance" of paintings as well as the gradual interpretations of both scientists and local indigenous people.

Different sites still hold easily visible offerings left in cracks, as well as decorated, carved, and marked nearby trees; it is also common to find piles of wooden idols, sometimes also stuck into crevices with the end pointing toward the rock art site. In this way, the offerings create even bigger impressions for the nomadic reindeer herders and hunters passing by. Leaving offerings is part of the continuum of creation of the rock art site, and can be a source of empowerment and inspiration for future generations. It is apparent that rock art should also be researched in the context of indigenous users of these rock art sites, as the nomadic Evenki reindeer herders and hunters as they also modified rock art

sites, adding additional meanings to it. Archeologists also modified these sites by leaving excavation sites, empty cracks, lines of chalk, or red pencil—as well as proposing their own interpretations. Different marks left by archeologists and tourists also gained cosmological and moral meanings for indigenous people. Thereby, rock art sites are not only static archeological monuments or relics of the past; rather, they are alive, powerful, generous, and magical places for the Evenki indigenous people who use it on a daily basis.

In this article, I demonstrated how prominent rock art archeologists of East Siberia and the Far East were guided by their sensory perceptions and interpretation of the rock art. Soviet scientists considered rock art as an archeological and artistic monument that could reveal ancient humans' emotions, creative expressions, and anxieties. Archaeological excavations and research also show that ritual interactions with rock art have persisted over the centuries. At the same time, various archaeological interpretations were also produced, focused on scientists' sensory experiences, emotions, and empathic encounters gained through interactions with rock art sites. Scientists and indigenous people not only borrowed some interpretations from each other but also relied on the same experiential knowledge while interacting with actual sites and discovering drawings and meanings. Hence, as many examples show, such rock art research that included searching, discerning, documentation, and interpretation of the rock art was inseparable from embodied experiences of being in the field and in the sentient landscape. Scientific knowledge came to be a result of experiential and sometimes "magic" interactions with a rock art site as well as its natural surroundings. Such scientists' perceptions of the rock art sites share many common features with how indigenous people find, interact, and make meanings from their encountered rock art sites as well. Thereby, long-term fieldwork in the wilderness brought not only indigenous sensibilities to the researchers, but also influenced their beliefs and ways of seeing and being in the world in an "indigenous way," which was a way to legitimate the force of their intuitive interpretations. In other words, such sensory and experiential perception of the rock art enabled archeologists to believe that they were fulfilling their promise to "open the window to the unknown world."

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Notes

1. Anatolii Zabyako and Van Tszian'lin', in their book dedicated to rock art of northeast China, also documented the altars with contemporary offerings as well as pieces of fabric left by Evenkis at the Aniiani River rock art site and a tree with a carved anthropomorphic face (2015: 30–31).

2. This article is based on the author's field research in 2016–2017 in Sakha Republic and Amur region funded by the support of the National Geographic Society grant nr. GEFNE 175-16. The proofreading of the article was funded by Juozas Sidas, Faculty of History, Vilnius University.

3. In some cases, Okladnikov used to develop quite the opposite arguments, probably adjusting to different audiences and changing political climate in the context of the Soviet ideology of atheism.

4. It was a challenge, even working with nature reserve staff, to find some small rock art sites that were documented by Kochmar.

5. In Okladnikov and Zaporozhskaia (1970), the authors noted that both Buryats and Evenkis used the Sali River rock art site for ritual purposes. The authors noticed many offerings such as strips of cloth left on young birch as well as wooden sticks, coins, iron shovels, and small caliber bullets left near the rock art site as well as in rock cracks.

6. All expeditions usually consisted of a leader that was often called the "pioneer" (Russ.: *pervootkryvatel'*) of archeological monuments, as well as a group of students or indigenous guides that used to put in hard work in exploring the rocks and surroundings of the site. They were also responsible for copying or drawing sketches and other post-expedition descriptions of artifacts. Every publication or monograph of leading archeologists was based on the intensive and sometimes exploitative work of students (see Klein 2014: 321).

Hence, archeologists tend to agree many famous findings occur based on the following succession of events: first, it is found by a local herder, then a local official is invited to the site, then the official calls a local scientist or museum worker, and then a known scientist is invited to document the discovery.

7. This was especially true when, at the end of his academic career, Mazin published works suggesting that any decoration such as a fringe, bead, or a stitch of rug (Evenki: *namu*), curb, or bridge as well as a drawn image could be read by the scientists. Hence, he developed a methodology of reading information of diachronic sciences providing different formulas used to count different pieces of decorations linking it to different calendar cycles of activities of subsistence as well as reindeer herding (see Mazin 2005; Mazin and Mazin 2006).

8. Different cracks and caves are often interpreted by Evenkis as pathways of lower world spirits and cosmological beings.

9. The archeologist Kochmar (1994), the last most systematic field researcher of the rock art of Olekma, was the one who collected descriptive visual and geographical data of the rock art, while also documenting rich ethnographic remnants of the sites such as anthropomorphic idols called *shenkens*. *Shenken* is an Evenki word used to refer to luck or a lucky omen (see also Anisimov 1949: 160–194). According to Kochmar, the shenken idols could vary significantly from 3–4 centimeters to 5 centimeters in diameter and measure from 3–4 centimeters to 1.5 meters in length. Some of the rock art sites near the Amga River also contained large idols that could reach 15–20 centimeters in diameter and 2–3.5 meters in length (2002: 54). For Kochmar, such ethnographic data shows how these sites were functioning as cult objects during the Middle Ages up to the present day. These shenkens were mainly produced from young larch trees, clean of branches, with sideways cuts making a stylized anthropomorphic head with or without a neck. Most of the shenkens' heads were burned while the other side was split into two legs (Kochmar 2002: 52).

10. Okladnikov (1943: 35–36) found an ancient fire-starting tool left in the crack of a Suruktakh Khaia rock art site.

11. Kochmar (1994: 220) also found the carving of a wooden animal attached to the pole similar to the one used in the Evenkis' shamanic ceremony at the Oneiu rock art site in the Amga River basin in Yakutiia.

12. Okladnikov's guide, who led the scientist and his wife to Suruktaakh Khaia rock art, also took some bullets from there, promising to return them at the first opportunity (see Okladnikov and Zaporozhskaia 1972: 25).

13. These meanings were reiterated to me, and it was also confirmed by my informant Olga Aruneeva from Tungokochen, that a cross seen in the rock art could mean the death of a relative.

14. For more about the healing features of rocks among Ust' Niukzha village Evenkis, see Zabiako et al. (2012: 184–85).

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