

BOOK REVIEW

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Book review of *Self-governance and Sami communities: Transitions in early modern natural resource management* by Jesper Larsson and Eva-Lotta Päiviö Sjaunja

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Book details

Larsson, Jesper and Eva-Lotta Päiviö Sjaunja

Self-governance and Sami communities: Transitions in early modern natural resource management

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This truly fascinating book addresses an aspect of the history of reindeer pastoralism, which I find one of the most interesting and important: the transition from the so-called transport reindeer herding to the reindeer pastoralism proper. Unfortunately, the authors of the book do not put their research in a wider context of reindeer herding studies and limit their contextual discussion to works on Saami culture and economy including reindeer pastoralism. In my opinion, it is a pity not because this limited contextualization somehow decreases the quality of the analysis (it does not), but because it hides the whole significance of the results obtained and the conclusions reached. Therefore, it makes sense to start this review by partially filling these lacunae.

Reindeer herding pastoralism is a form of predominantly nomadic pastoralism, which developed directly from a foraging (hunting and fishing) economy rather than from any form of farming economy. This is not to deny that contacts with agriculturalists or nomadic

pastoralists raising animals other than reindeer could influence its development. However, even in those few cases (Saami being one of them) where future reindeer pastoralists did know some form of farming, its spread was rather limited, and its economic role was secondary to hunting and fishing. The development of reindeer pastoralism, therefore, had two principal turning points. The first was related to reindeer domestication (let us leave aside the question on how, if at all, domesticated the modern domestic reindeer is) and to the emergence of the so-called transport reindeer herding. The latter represents a specific economic constellation where reindeer are used for transportation and, sometimes, for milking (as it was in the case of Saami) in an otherwise completely or predominantly foraging economy.

Reindeer herds are small, and animals are not slaughtered for food and skins except in cases of emergency. Most of the food and materials is coming from hunting (including hunting wild reindeer) and fishing, while the reindeer herding products, if they are utilized at all, for example, in the form of reindeer milk among Saami and peoples of southern Siberia, constitute only a dietary supplement. At the same time, reindeer transport allows a

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significant increase of the territory that can be exploited for hunting and fishing, which enables an increase in economic efficiency, particularly in Arctic environments with their low ecological productivity. To put it simply, transport reindeer herders are highly mobile hunters and fishermen rather than pastoralists (Krupnik 1993). The second turning point is the transition from the transport reindeer herding to the reindeer pastoralism proper. It can sound counterintuitive, but the effect of this transition on the culture, society and economy of the groups involved was likely not less pronounced than that of reindeer domestication. Indeed, this transition was not only about starting to kill those animals, which had been previously used only for transport and milking, for food and skins. It also involved a change in the size of herds, migration patterns, norms of land tenure, pasturing techniques (e.g. a transition from “trust” to “domination” as the basic mode of relation to reindeer in terms of Tim Ingold (1988)), social organization, relations to outsiders, etc. In the history of reindeer pastoralism, these two turning points are separated by a gap of approximately 1000 years. Furthermore, there are numerous examples of aboriginal societies—mainly in the southern and central Siberia (e.g. Tofu (Melnikova 1994; Donahoe 2012; Stépanoff 2012), Todzhu-Tyva (Donahoe 2006; Donahoe 2012), many groups of Evenki (Mertens 2016; Davydov 2017; Stépanoff et al. 2017)), but also in the Arctic (e.g. Yukaghir (Tugolukov 1979), Nganasan (Popov 1948), most groups of Khanty and Mansi (Stépanoff et al. 2017))—where the second turn never happened and the transport reindeer herding rather than the reindeer pastoralism proper persisted until very recently (Bogoraz-Tan 1933). In contrast, there are almost non-existent examples of skipping the transport reindeer herding stage and developing reindeer pastoralism in a society, where (semi) domesticated reindeer have not been used previously.

This shows that an understanding of both turns, their casual factors and mechanisms, is necessary to understand the formation and development of reindeer pastoralism. At the same time, the turns are very unequally studied. Tons of literature has been published on reindeer domestication. What is more important, this literature is truly interdisciplinary: archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, zoologists and specialists in genetics have each made important contributions to it. In comparison with this interdisciplinary effort, studies of the transition to reindeer pastoralism proper can be said to hardly exist at all: several dozen publications in different languages, most of them speculating about the reasons for the transition in particular cases without any attempt to describe the process of the transition in details. This is particularly strange because the transition happened quite recently:

the first true reindeer pastoralist economies emerged in the seventeenth century among Saami and Chukchee, in the westernmost and the easternmost parts of the Eurasian Arctic. Over the eighteenth century, the waves of transition to reindeer pastoralism spread from these two centres eastwards (to Nenets and Komi) and westwards (to Arctic Evens and Evenkis) before meeting each other in the early nineteenth century in the Taimyr Peninsula and lower Yenisei (Krupnik 1993). This huge economic and cultural change occurred just in front of the eyes of colonial administrations (the transition among Chukchee, who were not completely subjugated by the time, represents an exception), and therefore, one can expect it to leave a lot of documental traces.

The significance of the book by Jesper Larsson and Eva-Lotta Päiviö Sjaunja consists in the fact that it offers a reconstruction of one case of transformation from the transport reindeer herding to nomadic pastoralism and that a scope and detail of this reconstruction exceed anything I have either seen published in English; furthermore, I do not know anything comparable being published in Russian either (unfortunately, I do not speak any of Nordic countries’ languages and cannot discuss about them). Indeed, the authors do not limit themselves to tracing changes in reindeer herding only. Instead, they trace changes across the whole complex of traditional economic branches, including fishing, hunting, berry and other plant picking and handicrafts, trying to relate these to the changes in reindeer herding, trade, taxation and land use rights. In my opinion, this is exactly what we need to understand the transition to reindeer pastoralism in terms of its causes, mechanisms and effects. The reconstruction performed is particularly interesting and valuable because it refers to the seventeenth to the early eighteenth century Lule Saami, which is one of the first cases of transition to reindeer pastoralism in the world.

The reconstruction offered is based on the rather unique sources: documents of the local court, which at the time was run by representatives of the local people, but minutes and decisions were written down by a specially appointed Swedish administrator. After hearing the statements from the parties involved, the judges made decisions based on the local tradition and common understanding of the situation and its implications. In other words, this source represents the changing views of the local aboriginal people on how the use of natural resources through fishing, hunting, berry picking and reindeer pasturing should be organized, as well as how it actually was organized. Unfortunately, nothing comparable to this source exists for the absolute majority of other groups of reindeer pastoralists: we cannot help seeing their history through the eyes of colonial administrators and scholarly visitors, who had, of course, their own

agendas and often missed details of extreme importance for a reconstruction of the kind performed in the book. Of course, the sources used in the book under review have their own limitations: court cases by definition reflect conflict, situations where something went wrong and the actors involved could not themselves reach a common decision on how to rectify it. The “normal state of affairs” in the corresponding period—something we are mostly interested in—has to be concluded from the way the “wrong” situation is judged and settled. However, uncontroversial such a conclusion can seem, it is still a modern conclusion of a researcher rather than something the local people of the past had said. However, even with this reservation, the sources used in the book have important advantages in comparison with the “standard” sources—taxation books, Cossack reports, occasional visitors’ accounts—that a historian of reindeer pastoralism usually has in her/his disposal. Of course, the authors of the book also make use of these “standard” sources in addition to the court cases.

The book consists of 9 chapters divided into 3 parts. The first four chapters represent the necessary introduction to the research. After stating the aims, tasks and reasons for their research (chapter 1), the authors proceed to the theoretical foundations of their research (chapter 2). They briefly summarize the development of Saami studies, then touch on the common-pool resources (CPR) management studies and the studies of nomadic pastoralist property regimes, which are closely related to them. After that, the authors identify two analytic frameworks: the institutional analysis and development (IAD) framework as developed by Elinor Ostrom and her group and the socio-ecological systems (SES) framework to be used in their study. In my opinion, the role of these analytical frameworks in the analysis made in the rest of the book is controversial. On the one hand, the reliance on the IAD framework strongly focused the authors’ attention on changing rules and institutions, and this focus was quite justified, taking into account the specifics of their source of reconstruction. On the other hand, I have a feeling that what the authors finally managed to reconstruct was not only—and even not so much—the institutional changes and/or the change of rules, but rather the change of economic practices guided by and effecting a change on the rules and institutions. It is this result of the analysis that I find particularly valuable and fascinating. Having said this, anyone interested in institutional change is going to find a lot of interesting reconstructions in the book as well. As for the SES framework, I do not quite see which role it played in the analysis performed in the book. The authors say that they “saw it more as a categorization that helped us structure our thinking about indigenous self-governance” (p. 31). Well, I am not sure I understand

this completely, but as far as the results are good, I am quite ready to accept this explanation. The introductory part finishes with two background chapters. One of them (chapter 3) provides background information on the Lule Saami, their social organization (*siida* structure) and the role and practices of court (and, therefore, the quality of court cases as sources). The article finishes with an overview of the sources. The other chapter (chapter 4) provides information on trade, taxation and population size. This information is important for the authors, because, in their analysis, these factors play the role of causing the change they trace.

The second part of the book contains the reconstruction itself. This part includes 4 chapters devoted to fishing, hunting, reindeer pastoralism and “other income sources” (picking berries and other plants, cultivation, livestock, hired work [mainly in reindeer herding], trade and transportation). All the chapters follow the same scheme. First, the role and techniques of the corresponding economic activities are described, their spatial organization is reconstructed and the changes in these aspects are discussed. Then, the social organization of the activities is analysed with a particular focus on property rights. Again, particular attention is paid to the changes in this organization over the study period. Particular attention is paid to reindeer husbandry. The authors reconstruct three steps in its transition to reindeer pastoralism and trace their relation to social organization and property rights. Their analysis of the transition from exclusive family rights on pasturelands to treating pasturelands as a common-pool resource with certain practices of managing it is of particular interest and importance. Indeed, the emergence of the open property regime and the corresponding practices of migration and reindeer pasturing seems to be one of the main aspects of pastoralist transition; its traces can easily be found in other reindeer pastoralist systems (for example, among Nenets the transition to pastoralism has definitely caused the crash of the system of clan territories—see, for example, Golovnev 1995; Golovnev and Osherenko 1999). However, the analysis in the book goes far to explain its likely mechanisms and implications.

Finally, the fourth part of the book contains only one chapter, which offers the synthesis of the reconstructions made in the second chapter to provide a description of the transition. The authors choose the change in property rights from private to common and the corresponding change of institutions as the main focus of their analysis, which is quite logical taking into account their analytical framework. However, in my opinion, their analysis goes beyond this focus, which is of course rather important by itself. The analysis offers quite a coherent picture of the change in techniques and relative importance of different

economic activities (fishing, hunting, pastoralism) and the changing practices of combining these activities in households. Although the authors should be praised for their excellent analysis of institutions and property rights, this hidden analysis of practices is, in my opinion, also quite an achievement. Together, they produce a fascinating picture of the pastoralist transition that the historical studies of reindeer pastoralism have been lacking so far.

Of course, the book has some shortcomings. Probably, the most important is its insufficient contextualization in reindeer pastoralism studies. The book is well-grounded in Saami studies, no doubt. But reindeer pastoralism is not limited to Saami, and some aspects of the analysis by the authors would certainly have benefitted greatly from comparison to more eastern reindeer pastoralist systems and their history. Previously such comparisons were hindered by the linguistic barrier: Saami studies existed mainly in Nordic languages, while studies of eastern European and Siberian reindeer pastoralists were predominantly in Russian. Nowadays, however, a lot of publications in English are available in both traditions, and their separations have ceased to make much sense. Thus, the full significance of the book, which I tried to outline at the beginning of my review, becomes obvious if the processes analysed in it are put into context of similar processes in other reindeer pastoralist systems. This brings us to the second point of criticism, which is rather more abstract and, probably, should be better presented as a wish for the future. As I already said at the beginning of my review, the studies of pastoralist transition in the Arctic tend to be regionally and locally focused and, therefore, preoccupied by the local factors and variables. Thus, the authors of the reviewed book state as a matter of fact that the pastoralist transition was caused in their case by the change in taxation and trade. Similarly, the transition among Chukchee (which occurred at the same time as that among the Saami) is usually explained by the rise of warfare caused by the export of firearms and military support by Russians. The pastoralist transition among Nenets is explained by their attempts to avoid Russian control and taxation. I do not wish to criticize any of these explanations, but I cannot fail to notice that the pastoralist transition occurred in a relatively short time (200 years) over a huge territory. Does this fact not point to some common ultimate causes active across this territory, something enabling the proximate causes, such as the taxation system or the warfare inspired by colonizers, to produce the effects they did? If so, should not we try to look beyond the concrete cases to find these factors?

This criticism notwithstanding, the book by Jesper Larsson and Eva-Lotta Päiviö Sjaunja is really fascinating and a definite must-read for anyone interested in

the history of reindeer pastoralism and, maybe, pastoralism in general.

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