

ICAS Panel on “**History, Environment, and Cultural Resources in Northern Asia**”
to be held at ICAS 11 in Leiden, The Netherlands, 18 July 2019, <https://icas.asia/>
Program: <https://www.eventscribe.com/2019/ICAS11/agenda.asp?pfp=FullSchedule>

Venue for general meeting on Wednesday 17 July 14:45-16:30, Lipsius Building, room 3.08
Venue for the two panels on Thursday 18 July 09:00-13:00, Lipsius Building, room 0.11

Abstract:

Northern Asia has hardly been the subject of concern at ICAS meetings during the first twenty years of its existence. This despite the fact that sociocultural studies of past and present societies in the region have been undertaken by Russian, German, Scandinavian, Hungarian, Chinese, Japanese, American, and other scholars at least since the eighteenth century, when ethnography developed as a systematic program. The ambivalent position of Russia, Siberia, and Mongolia between Europe and Asia, sharing elements of both continents, has led to a neglect in Western scholarship. Northern Asia is the largest but the least populated subregion of Asia, which has been inscribed with many discourses and narratives through time. The vast space stretching from the Ural Mountains to the Pacific Ocean suggested emptiness and alterity in a way few other regions had. The vision of this mythical domain faded when the Soviets took power in the early 20th century. Within a few decades the industrial expansion of the Soviet economic system accelerated in such a manner that the traditional hunting grounds and reindeer pastures of the North had become landscapes of major natural resource extraction projects. While political regimes during the Tsarist and Soviet periods have hardly facilitated scholarly research, these restrictions have been lifted in the post-Soviet period and much research has been undertaken since the 1990s. Aiming to fill the gap between Asian studies in general and Northern Asia in particular, this panel proposes to bring these fields into contact by focussing on the interrelations between history, the environment, and cultural resources of the region in a *longue durée* framework. We invite scholars to reflect on the use of the region’s deep ethnographic record in order to study human-environment interactions in Northern Asia, Mongolia, and other circumpolar regions from a historical perspective.

Convenors:

Dr. Tobias Holzlehner, Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology, Halle (Saale)
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Dr. Han F. Vermeulen, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle (Saale)
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Programme of Thursday, 18 July 2019

Northern Asia Part I: Historical Approaches – Chair Tobias Holzlehner, 09:00-10:45

Historical Data on Languages in Witsen’s *Noord en Oost Tartarye* and Comparison with Present-Day Endangered Languages

Tjeerd de Graaf, Mercator Centre, Fryske Akademy, Leeuwarden, The Netherlands
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From Geography to Ethnography in Eighteenth-Century Northern Asia

Han F. Vermeulen, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle (Saale), Germany,
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Russian Academic Expansion in the Far East: Richard Maack's Expedition to the Amur River (1855-56)

Indrek Jääts, University of Tartu, Estonia E-mail: ijaats@gmail.com

The Unmixing of Peoples in the Russian Far East: Colonialism, Environment, and Empire, 1860-1940

Sergey Glebov, Smith College and Amherst College, USA, E-mail: sglebov@smith.edu

Northern Asia Part II: Contemporary Studies – Chair Han Vermeulen, 11:15-13:00

Environmentalism, Cultural Resilience and Submerged Societies in Northern Eurasia

David Anderson, Aberdeen University, UK, E-mail: david.anderson@abdn.ac.uk

Hunters and Traders in a Fluid World: Continuity and Change in a North Asian Borderland

Tobias Holzlehner, Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology, MLU Halle-Wittenberg, Halle (Saale), E-mail: tobias.holzlehner@ethnologie.uni-halle.de

Oil, Deer, and Film: Traditional Ethnocultural Communities in the Russian North

Elena Golovneva, Institute for Arts and Humanities, Ural Federal University, Ekaterinburg, Russian Federation, E-mail: golovneva.elena@gmail.com

Presentation of *Oil Field*. Documentary film (2012). 20 min. HD 16:9. English subtitles, made by Ivan Golovnev, Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography

(Kunstkamera), St. Petersburg, Russian Federation, E-mail: golovnev.ivan@gmail.com

New Debates on the Mongolian Revolution of 1921: History as a Political Resource

Irina Morozova, University of Regensburg, Germany, E-mail:

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General Discussion

Northern Asia Part I: Historical Approaches – Chair Tobias Holzlehner, 09:00-10:45

Historical Data on Languages in Witsen's *Noord en Oost Tartarye* and Comparison with Present-Day Endangered Languages

Tjeerd de Graaf, Mercator Centre, Fryske Akademy, Leeuwarden, The Netherlands

The Witsen Project aims at an investigation of the minor peoples of Eurasia, their history, culture and language. It gets its inspiration from the book *Noord en Oost Tartarije* by the Amsterdam mayor Nicolaas Witsen, who collected data on the physical appearance of the country, its fauna and flora and, in particular, on the inhabitants and their languages. In 2010, a Russian translation of the book has been published. The language material consists of word lists, short texts, specific writing systems and other data. In 2015, a digital version of the book has been published together with the Russian translation. As a follow-up a team of scholars in the Netherlands has prepared a separate volume devoted to the study of all language samples in Witsen's *NOT*, titled *The Fascination with Inner-Eurasian Languages in the 17th Century*, in which the following languages are represented: Georgian, Kabard-Cherkes, Ossete, Crimean-Tatar, Kalmyk, Mordva, Mari, Komi-Zyryan, Mansi, Khanty, Nenets, Enets, Nganasan, Mongol, Dagur, Yakut, Evenki, Even, Manchu, Yukagir, Korean, Chinese, Tangut, Persian and Uyghur. In the paper I discuss a number of new contributions by scholars who are familiar with the related languages and compare the material in the book with the present situation of endangered languages in the area.

From Geography to Ethnography in Eighteenth-Century Northern Asia

Han F. Vermeulen, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle (Saale), Germany

The anthropology of Northern Asia is often said to begin with Witsen's *Noord en Oost Tartarye* (1692, 2nd ed. 1705). Describing "countries and peoples" in Siberia, the Far East and Central Asia the book also dealt with the Crimea, Caucasus, China, Japan, etc. Based on over 700 sources, incl. travel accounts, correspondence and data from Tatar, Greek, Persian, Chinese and Russian informants, the book included many facts about Asia's uncharted northern and eastern parts. However, Witsen had only visited the European parts of Russia and saw his book as a contribution to geography ("Géographie Tartarique"). Three decades later, his book was still used but *in situ* research had greater priority. During the Second Kamchatka Expedition (1733-43) G.F. Müller developed Siberia's history, geography *and* ethnography. Apart from visiting all regional centres, interviewing specialists, collecting materials and designing methods in the field, Müller instructed his assistants to describe all Siberian peoples and collect their material culture for the St. Petersburg *Kunstkamera*. Explorers like Steller, Pallas, Georgi, Lepekhin adopted Müller's program for a systematic ethnography. Research expeditions led to a descriptive and comparative study of peoples (*Völker, narody*) emanating from the field of history. This paper focuses on how ethnography gained a prominent place alongside geography.

Russian Academic Expansion in the Far East: Richard Maack's Expedition to the Amur River (1855-56)

Indrek Jääts, University of Tartu, Estonia

China, weakened by the Opium Wars, was forced to give up the left bank of the Amur River to Russia under the treaty of Aigun (1858). The Russian expansion was largely an initiative of Nikolai Muraviev, governor general of East Siberia, and backed by military force. However,

the Russian side felt that it needed some moral justification as well. Christianity, progress and civilization were the keywords then dominant among European (incl. Russian) intellectuals and politicians. China was considered a backward Asian empire and its moral right to administer its neglected periphery was doubted. The fact that China's northern periphery was almost *terra incognita* for contemporary European scientists served as an example of its underdevelopment. Scholarly exploration of a region still unknown to the European public meant glory for the country and gave a sort of moral right to the ensuing occupation. Richard Maack's journey to the Amur River valley in 1855-1856 was such an expedition. The paper focuses on its historical background and its reception both in Russia and Europe. Special attention is given to Maack's relations with native peoples and Chinese provincial authorities. His book *Puteshestvie na Amur* (Travels to the Amur, 1859) serves as the main source.

The Unmixing of Peoples in the Russian Far East: Colonialism, Environment, and Empire, 1860-1940

Sergey Glebov, Smith College and Amherst College, USA

This paper explores the main themes in the *longue durée* perspective on the emergence and development of North-Eastern Manchuria, which became the Russian Far East. These themes converge on the relationship between imperial structures, human movement, and the politics of describing and managing populations. As elsewhere in imperial formations, ethnographic description played an important role in the Russian Far East, and the paper will engage with a few military-ethnographic works to shed light on how they mediated between scholarly study of environment and human populations on the one hand and imperial concerns for economic development or security on the other. One example of such ethnographic work was the series of studies by V. K. Arseniev. Uniquely located at the intersection of knowledge about human diversity and imperial governance, Arseniev stretched the late imperial and the Soviet periods and left a mark on the study of people and environment in the Russian Far East. By exploring both Arseniev's scholarly publications and his military and administrative career, the paper thus will take stock of the emergence, development, and end of diversity in the region between 1860 and 1940.

Northern Asia Part II: Contemporary Studies – Chair Han Vermeulen, 11:15-13:00

Environmentalism, Cultural Resilience and Submerged Societies in Northern Eurasia
David Anderson, Aberdeen University, UK

This paper analyses the history of encounters between Western European scholars and “submerged” or “imminent” societies in Northern Eurasia. Standard narratives of cultural evolution articulated since Shrenk and Castren emphasise the transition and migration of ethnolinguistic groups to explain the diversity of peoples and languages across Eurasia. The old narratives are built around the idea of “hearths” or “cultural origin points” and hold the idea that complexity and civilization arise in one place (usually a southern place) and diffuse to the frontiers of Eurasia. Based on anthropological fieldwork in Iamal and Northern Sweden, this paper compares the standard narratives of cultural diffusion to a set of indigenous narratives of alliance and co-existence with underground beings who are thought to co-exist with present-day peoples, influence their daily lives, but remain concealed to emerge potentially at some point in the future. The paper argues that by comparing two ontologically distinct accounts of the *longue durée*, we can get a better understanding of the ideologies underlying scientific-technical accounts and folkloric accounts. The long Western European ethnographic tradition of collecting accounts of submerged societies, be they

archaeological, folkloristic, or biogenetic, is one of several possible ways of theorizing resilience and continuity in Eurasian spaces.

Hunters and Traders in a Fluid World: Continuity and Change in a North Asian Borderland
Tobias Holzlehner, Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology, MLU Halle-Wittenberg, Halle (Saale)

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Russian Empire and the USA extended their reach into the North Pacific. Spearheaded by merchants, fur traders and whalers, each nation tried to profit from the unique resources of the Bering Sea region. State actors, trading elites and local communities were interconnected over time through evolving trade networks and power struggles. Yet, friction of distance and terrain were obstructing factors that created a borderland largely outside of state control. Focusing on the *longue durée* structures of this borderland, the paper explores the intrusive effects of global forces on the native populations of the Bering Strait and their social and economic strategies to mitigate these impacts. At the center of intrusion were the unique resources of the region: whale blubber and baleen, walrus ivory, gold, oil and gas. The paper specifically concentrates on the agency of local brokers and middlemen, by following commodity flows and their spatial allocations in a borderland, investigating how these actors negotiate friendship, commercial contacts and patronage networks across ethnic and national boundaries. Examples of past and present encounters along the Bering Strait shores offer an entrance into the intimate economies of this North Asian borderland.

Oil, Deer, and Film: Traditional Ethnocultural Communities in the Russian North
Elena Golovneva, Institute for Arts and Humanities, Ural Federal University, Ekaterinburg, Russian Federation

This presentation will begin with a screening of the documentary film 'Oil Field' (see below) followed by the paper presentation and a discussion. The paper investigates one type of contemporary visual sources in anthropology – ethnographic films about the indigenous peoples of the Russian North. The authors focus on the documentary film “Oil Field” (2012), depicting the family Piak in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug-Iugra. Focusing on the daily life of a Khanty family, the authors develop a narrative structure in which Vasiliy Piak received an identity and began to command the viewers’ emotions. Particular attention is paid to the visual representation of traditional forms of economy (reindeer herding) in Khanty and Nenets culture, including the relation to nature in the North, and to the interaction of indigenous peoples and oil companies in the Khanty-Mansi district. The paper argues that oil development has become the context of contemporary life for northern minorities. On the one hand, oil companies present an environmental and cultural threat to the indigenous inhabitants; on the other, they bring important elements to life in the North: fuel, food, roads, a system of benefits, etc. For many Khanty the oil companies are an important source of family income. This is perhaps one of the most difficult moments in the life of contemporary northerners, who have already adapted to this tense but mutually advantageous proximity. The paper is co-authored with Ivan Golovnev, Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera).

Documentary film *Oil Field*. (2012). 26 min. HD 16:9. English subtitles
Ivan Golovnev, Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), St. Petersburg, Russian Federation

This film takes viewers to northwestern Siberia, the territory of Beloyrask district in Numto Lake's basin. Here the traditional lifestyle of native peoples still remains but oil production, catering to the needs of civilization, has long been introduced to the area. For some people the territory is their birthplace and habitat, for others it is just an oil field. Made as an ethnographic film, this documentary serves as a research tool for developing contemporary representations of Khanty traditional culture. Starting with daily life on the Pyak family farm, Vasilij a Nenet and Svetlana a Khanty, the film shows how their lives are being transformed by local oil extraction. Using “participatory filmmaking” as a method, the film director portrays the changing of a native landscape and presents the personal commentary of Vasilij Pyak as the film’s main protagonist. After working at a local oil station near Numto, Vasilij returns to his reindeer activities and this experience strengthens his cultural identity. Combining the opportunities of cinematography with ethnographic observation during the years 2009-2011, this film focuses on the motif of a resource-rich territory in northern Russia and emphasizes the need to protect traditional culture on the land of reindeer and oil.

Northern Asia Part III: Centre and Periphery – Chair Tobias Holzlehner, 14:45-16:30

“Back to Traditional Roots” – Mongolian Ways of Overcoming the Past and Constructing the Future

Alevtina Solovyova, Russian State University for the Humanities, Moscow, Russia; High School of Economics, Moscow; University of Tartu, Estonia

This paper looks at contemporary post-socialist Mongolian society, its ways of interpreting the different periods of the past, connected to two “big brothers” (Russia and China), defining the present and constructing images of the future. It includes such questions as the national movement for going “back to traditional roots,” processes of revival and the reinvention of tradition, forming a new national identity and national “brand,” and images of “others” in world politics. In my paper, I focus on the role of folklore and religion in these constructing processes and in everyday life of Mongolian society. Nowadays a significant role in Mongolian individual and public discourses belongs to traditional characters of Mongolian folklore – *lus-savdag*, or nature spirits, who are regarded as the owners and guards of Mongolian land and state. In my paper, I shall analyze several topics and discuss how images of nature spirits as well as plots and rituals connected to them are used in constructing new meanings, statements and concepts, popular in contemporary Mongolian society. My research is based on fieldwork materials collected in the capital, Ulaanbaatar, and different parts of Mongolia during annual expeditions conducted from 2007 till 2018, as well as on Mongolian media sources.

New Debates on the Mongolian Revolution of 1921: History as a Political Resource
Irina Morozova, University of Regensburg, Germany

Post-colonial discourse has changed Western-dominated approaches to socialist revolutions in Asia. Overcoming the view of the “colonizer” and emphasizing vernacular responses to revolutionary ideas have marked the millennium turn. Asian scholar’s approaches to revolution are different from Western concepts: they re-orientate modernist ideas of progress to patterns of power cyclically reproducing themselves. Post-Cold War geopolitics made scholars of Mongolia, studying the revolutionary transformations in the 1910-1920s, focus on the independent *Mongol state*, the attributes of which they find at the start of the 20th century. On the eve of the 1990s, Mongolian historians applied to Soviet archives to rehabilitate Mongolian revolutionary heroes. They re-wrote the history of Mongolian revolution of 1921 in such a way that the present constitutional democracy looks like having historical roots in

the early 20th century. This *Mongolian story* of revolution started to have more political impact, also on Russian and Western historians. The contemporary Mongolian public began to find constitutionalist debate in their society going back to the 1910s. Western scholars, following this trend, get funding by the EU. On the basis of Mongolian and Soviet archival sources, this paper scrutinizes the recent historiography in the context of geopolitics and reform in Mongolia.

General Discussion

Chaired by Tobias Holzlehner and Han Vermeulen

Halle (Saale), submitted 18 October 2018

Accepted by ICAS Organisers 14 December 2018

Revised and updated 8 June 2019