

The Healing Landscapes of Central and Southeastern Siberia



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Chapter Eight

Public Health and Folk Medicine Among North Baikal Evenkis

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This chapter discusses the creation of public health institutions in the North Baikal region, and the boundary between them and folk healing practices. The field material for the chapter was collected in the Evenki village of Kholodnaia in the Severobaikal'skii district [*raion*] of the Republic of Buriatia. The archival and field research took place over fifteen months from 2007 to 2009. During my fieldwork, I observed that the local population relied on both public health institutions and folk medicine. Moreover, local nurse-practitioners [*fel'dshery*], who are employed in public health institutions, used both scientific and local knowledge in their healing practices. Neither patients nor nurse-practitioners perceived these two domains of medical knowledge as contradictory. They used both in healing practices and daily life. This chapter will explain the use of public and folk medicine in healing, examine the use of local medical knowledge in the post-Soviet period and describe how rare medicinal herbs have become objects of accumulation within the market economy.

In the late Tsarist period (late 19th and early 20th centuries), public medicine was incorporated into the routine of hunters and reindeer herders in the North Baikal region. There was no professional medical help in indigenous administrative districts [*inorodcheskie upravly*] for the majority of the 19th century and people relied mostly on their own skills and knowledge. The first medically trained specialist appeared in the region in 1864 (Anonymous 1939), and he was only an inoculation assistant [*ospennyi uchenik*] who vaccinated North Baikal Evenkis against smallpox. He left the area after only a short time. The first permanent nurse practitioner [*fel'dsher*] came to the region in 1903 (Anon. 1939). These early nurse practitioners also worked as school teachers. A common Evenki surname in Kholodnaia is Lekarevs, derived from the word *lekar'* [doctor]. Hence, people with this surname believe that they are descended from physicians who married Evenki women.

One of the first steps toward the creation of public medicine in the region was made in 1925, when special mobile medical groups from the Russian Society of the Red Cross and the National Commissariat of Public Health [*Narodnyi Komissariat Zdravookhraneniia*] started to work in the region (Shubin 2001:104). During the early Soviet period, regional authorities organized several surveys to collect data on Evenki health: the physicians Perevodchikov (1925), Agrovskii (1926-27) and Ogint (1927) worked with Baunt Evenkis (NARB 247-1-5:49). In 1927, Dr. Agrovskii, a graduate of Saratov's medical institute, was the first physician to work in a newly opened small hospital in Dushkakan serving Evenkis from the Kindigir clan (Shubin 2001:104,105: AMAE RAN 12-1-51).

In the early 1920s, Shamagir Evenkis were registered at clinic №7, located 133 kilometres from Tompa (NARB 247-1-73:26). Initially, their registration was a formality. Not many people visited the clinic because of its remote location. The local population needed permanent medical stations in the settlements. A small medical station with five beds was opened in the Evenki village of Tompa in 1926. However, a nurse-practitioner only visited

the village for one month, in August 1927, and a midwife visited it for only one week in an eight month period (NARB 247-1-73: 26).

An expedition was organized by the Anthropological Institute and the Moscow State Museum of Ethnological Studies [*muzei narodovedeniia*] to study Tunguses [Evenkis] in 1927. The members of the North Baikal module of this expedition were Soviet ethnographers B.A. Kuftin, Ia.Ia. Roginskii and M.G. Levin. They teamed up with Dr. Agrovskii in Nizhneangarsk who helped them find boat transportation to Dushkachan. The initial goal of the expedition was to collect ethnographic artefacts while Dr. Agrovskii vaccinated Evenkis against smallpox. However, he also helped the researchers identify people to interview and arranged for the sale of ethnographic material to the museum. After completing his work in Dushkachan, Dr. Agrovskii moved to Tompa and invited Kuftin to visit this settlement with him. Kuftin's diary describes the boat trip to Tompa, which took several days (AMAE RAN 12-1-51).

A researcher named Neupokoev worked with Kindigir Evenkis in Dushkachan in the early part of the 20th century during an epidemic of scabies. Women and children, in particular, were so susceptible to the disease that some of their bodies and faces 'were completely covered with scabs' (Neupokoev 1928:10). Evenki patients acknowledged that medical treatment was necessary and took all the medication, prepared by a medical assistant [*lekpom*] from Nizhneangarsk and delivered by Neupokoev. However, Neupokoev's instruction to wash with warm water surprised them (Neupokoev 1928), as the idea of washing their faces and hands with ordinary water was unfamiliar to them (Tugolukov 1969:98-99). He demonstrated to Evenkis what it meant to 'wash' [*umyvatsia*] and gathered them near a brook. It is interesting to note that while the local Evenkis showed scepticism as Neupokoev washed himself with water and green soap, that they were well aware of the healing properties of a hot spring near the eastern shore of Lake Baikal. As a confirmation of this, another early Soviet researcher A. Comaritsyn wrote: 'it would be beneficial for them to spend one or half month on these hot springs because they do not have an opportunity of visiting a hospital' (NARB 247-1-73:26).

According to Neupokoev, the most typical and common illnesses among North Baikal Evenkis were trachoma, rheumatism, malaria, and stomach diseases. Epidemics of typhus, smallpox and dysentery, however, appeared to be the most serious, responsible for an increasing death rate (NARB 247-1-73). Sixty seven Shamagir Evenkis died in 1914 from smallpox, one hundred and twenty people from typhus in 1920 and many children from dysentery in 1923 and 1925 (NARB 247-1-73:15). In 1928, Comaritsyn documented that dysentery, common among Evenkis, mostly occurred during spring and autumn and usually broke out in combination with the common cold. Evenkis from Tompa were also very susceptible to gastrointestinal complaints and rheumatism.

Venereal diseases were absent among North Baikal Evenkis (Neupokoev 1928:10). According to Neupokoev, there was not one case of venereal disease reported by medical assistants in Nizhne- and Verkhne-Angarsk (Kumora), and Evenkis told researchers that they did not have 'the bad' disease [*durnaia bolezni*] (Neupokoev 1928). Nazagaev also documented this in his report (NARB 247-1-18:102-103), where he wrote that venereal diseases were not typical for the population of the *aimak* [district]. Neupokoev (1928:10) also mentioned that tuberculosis was not common among Evenkis in the 1920s. However, this contradicted Nazagaev's report, which stated that there had been many tuberculosis patients, especially among Evenkis (NARB 247-1-18:102-103).

Early Soviet administrators introduced a plan to develop a public health system in the North Baikal area. Plans were made to build special stationary medical stations in all large settlements, despite the lack of medical specialists. Frequently, the first medical assistants

had no special education and did not know how to treat patients well. According to Nazagaev (NARB 247-1-18:102-103), the director of Nizhneangarsk's medical station, Nikulin, 'was not competent in medicine' and 'local people were afraid of visiting him as he regularly gave wrong medicines by mistake.' Two other medical stations opened in Kumora and Goremyka in the mid-1920s but the local residents also did not trust the medical assistants who worked there (NARB 247-1-18) and often preferred to seek alternative medical help from *znakhari* [sorcerers] and *kolduny* [magicians] (NARB 247-1-18). They would invite a shaman, or self-treat illnesses using medicinal herbs (Neupokoev 1928:10). Early in the 20th century, it was said that every Evenki knew how to use medicines prepared from medicinal herbs, minerals or animal parts. Therefore, this type of knowledge was shared by all members of a local community. Consequently, people at that time relied mostly on these alternatives rather than on public medicine.

Until the early 1930s, North Baikal Evenkis frequently invited a shaman to heal diseased people. For example, in 1927, B.A. Kuftin, Ia.Ia. Roginskii and M.G. Levin observed two shamanistic rituals performed by Aleksei Aeul'ev and Annushka, known as *Briukhataia Starukha* ['Potbellied Old Woman'] (AMAE RAN 12-1-38, 39, 40, 51, 52). Kuftin also documented that people invited Aleksei Aeul'ev to heal a woman with a nervous disorder (AMAE RAN 12-1-51:46). Generally, shamanism is associated with the knowledge of how to use 'traditional medicines' and it is often taken for granted that they possess a wide knowledge of medicinal herbs. However, in Kholodnaia, local people respected them for their ability to heal through the use of power [*sila*] without the use of medicines. Pana Lekareva stressed that shamans did not usually work with herbs or other medicines; rather they used their own power and healed through communication with spirits. This was unique to shamans and, according to Pana Lekareva, the scale of the healing effect depended on a shaman's *sila*. Arkadii Lekarev told me that Aleksei Aeul'ev, who did some rituals and was sometimes invited to Dushkachan in order to heal people, was a 'weak' [*slabyi*] shaman. In contrast, according to Kholodnaia villagers as well as the records of Neupokoev (1926, 1928) and Kuftin (AMAE RAN 12-1-38, 39), Annushka was considered to be a 'Big Shaman' [*Bol'shoi Shaman*]. Neupokoev wrote that North Baikal Evenkis considered this old woman to be their main shaman (Neupokoev 1926:29). Neupokoev visited Annushka in 1925 and saw her shamanic clothes in her *iurta* [conical mobile lodge]. He describes a leather mask, a leather dress decorated with ribbons, beads, bells and pieces made from iron and tin. He also saw a drum [*buben*], bunches of reindeer and bear teeth and bones hanging nearby. Finally, there was a wooden stick with an iron trident on the end (Neupokoev 1926:29). Shamans employed these objects as mediators of their power in healing. Some shamanic objects have now become exhibits in school museums, however people still respect them as the 'embodiment of shamanic power' and perceive them as dangerous objects.

The Soviet authorities argued against 'old religious traditions and shamanistic beliefs.' Consequently, early Soviet public propaganda was extremely anti-religious, and shamanistic rituals were perceived by the Soviet authorities as a resistance to the political regime. The 1930s was a period of persecution and oppression of shamans in the North Baikal region, with many Siberian shamans being denounced as 'enemies of the people' [*vragi naroda*], 'exploitative conjurers' and 'psychologically deranged individuals' (Vitebsky 2005:231). Shamans were 'deprived of the vote, kicked out of meetings, stripped of their regalia and exiled' (Slezkine 1994:227). The elders from Kholodnaia remember that the last shaman was imprisoned in the early 1930s.

What I have observed in the region is that people believe not only in shamanic power but also in the ability of *znakhari* [sorcerers] to heal people. *Znakhari* existed among the

Russian population in the region before the Revolution of 1917 and even though Soviet authorities imprisoned 'anti-Soviet elements' such as shamans in the 1930s, *znakhari* continued to heal people afterward. For instance, in the 1950s a *znakharka* named Tkacheva treated people in the village of Kumora, trying to heal villagers from tuberculosis, nervous twitches, toothaches and gastric diseases (Koroleva 1950). The local authorities were aware of the existence and activity of *znakhari* but did not punish them. In fact, *znakhari* also heal people in contemporary Kumora and have been known to use their help in treating styes.

Although public medicine had become widely available for villagers during the Soviet period, there was no permanent medical help available to semi-nomadic reindeer herders, who continued to use local knowledge and folk medicine. According to Pana Leka-reva, North Baikal Evenkis were taught medicinal herbs and special methods of healing from their childhood. For instance, Evenkis treated headaches using rounded birch sticks (Neupokoev 1928:10). However, folk medicine was not always successful, so Evenkis willingly accepted treatment from medical assistants and physicians who worked in the region. The elders in Kholodnaia still remember one of the first medical professionals, a Russian named Anna Fedorovna Komaritsyna. She worked as a nurse practitioner [*fel'dsher*] in Kholodnaia for more than 40 years and people called her 'The Evenki Doctor.'



Figure 8.1. *Ilanda*. *Nomama Lake*, August 2009.

Thus, historically, local people combined three main ways of treatment: folk medicine using local knowledge of medicinal plants, minerals and animal parts, healing by the 'power' of shamans and *znakhari*, and visiting medical assistants and physicians. The elders in Kholodnaia stressed that the system of public medicine introduced by the authorities benefitted the people, as medical treatment was free. However, the price of medicine soared after the collapse of the Soviet Union, forcing people back to relying mainly on folk medicine.

Contemporary medical assistants are especially respected in the villages. Today, two Evenki women work in Kholodnaia in a first-aid post, which has two medicine cabinets located in a separate building. However, the doctors prescribe traditional 'Evenki medicines' to their patients along with 'official' medication, and healing using medicinal herbs continues to be relied upon widely in Kholodnaia. Tugolukov (1969:97) wrote that Evenkis knew how to heal fever, heart and skin diseases using folk medicine, and they prepared most of their remedies from plants. Local medical assistants frequently recommend a flowering plant known as *ianda* (*Gentiana algida*) as a medicine for many diseases and infections. It is a rather rare herb and only several villagers know where it grows. The medical assistants usually keep it on hand (Fig. 8.1).

During my fieldwork, I was surprised by the popularity of this herb in the village. Most people considered *ianda* to be the most effective and valuable medicine for all diseases. Today, it is the most frequently used and most valuable medicinal herb in Kholodnaia. For example, Pana Lekareva said the elders told her that *ianda* 'could heal any disease; except torn entrails' [*vse vylechit, tol'ko otorvannye kishki ne mozhets' soedinit*]. Reindeer herders in a central base near the Nomama River told me that a hunter used it to cure appendicitis; he was two days' walk from the village and unable to get first aid when he felt a strong pain in the right part of his belly. Luckily, he had *ianda* in his winter log house [*zimov'e*] so he prepared a tea from it, which he drank until he felt much better and was able to move to the village. *Ianda* is brewed and drunk for fever, sore throats, chronic tuberculosis or prophylaxis, and consumed to normalize blood pressure. However, it does not suit everybody. Some people with high blood pressure prefer not to drink it because it can increase blood pressure. Nevertheless, it is considered to be especially useful for children and the elderly. For instance, a reindeer herder named Leonid Tulbukonov remembers that as a child his grandmother prepared a tincture [*nastoika*] of this herb and gave him a spoonful almost every day; he still remembers the bitter taste. His parents would also drink this tincture.

Arkadii Lekarev stated that *ianda* is 'the main Evenki medicine' [*osnovnoe lekarstvo Evenkov*], adding that *ianda* in the Evenki language means 'the best medicinal herb' [*samaia khoroshaia trava, lekarstvennaia*]; however, Pana Lekareva translated *ianda* generically as a 'mountainous herb.'

According to Tugolukov (1969:98), Evenkis know how to treat not only themselves, but also their reindeer. People who previously worked in the *kolkhoz* [collective farm] as reindeer herders said they used to give *ianda* to young reindeer to drink, and reindeer herders from Kholodnaia treated weak reindeer using ground *ianda*.

People often learn about medicinal herbs by watching which plants the animals eat and where. For example, people saw that moose like to eat *ianda*, and Pana Lekareva said that diseased dogs also treat themselves with this plant. Another example is *Cladonia rangiferina* [Rus. *iagel'*] collected from the trees and used to ease pain in the stomach; local people say that moose and Manchurian deer treat themselves the same way in winter. Thus, local residents conclude that if a plant helps treat animals, logically the same medicine could be useful for humans.

Leonid's father and uncle worked at a reindeer farm that was a separate *kolkhoz* unit; it was called 'a nomadic reindeer farm' because its location changed from year to year. They used the valleys of the Gasan-Diakit, Niurundukan, Chaia, Tyia and Andoka Rivers—all locations where *ianda* could be found. Thus, Leonid Tulbukonov's relatives knew the location of the plant, and supplied their relatives in the village with medicinal plants, minerals and animal parts. People who work at 'Oron' and 'Uluki' reindeer farms today still usually supply their relatives with various medicines. For instance, Leonid Tulbukonov usually visits the village twice a year, and brings *ianda* in the autumn to his relatives who live there. People may share medicinal herbs and other medicines with their neighbours as well as relatives, and form part of a culture of reciprocity in the village. When people receive *ianda* from their neighbours, they may give them other medicinal herbs or animal fats in exchange and as a sign of respect. Pana Lekareva remembers that hunters and reindeer herders shared *ianda* with the elders. She added that if anyone asked *Iandikan bishin?* [Ev.: 'Do you have a little *ianda* on hand?'], Evenkis always shared it with them. Some people may have surpluses of herbs which they sell to other villagers or to customers in the district [raion] centre, Nizhneangarsk.



Figure 8.2. A granddaughter of Pana Platonova holds a bundle of *zolotoi koren*.

Medical assistants in Kholodnaia frequently recommend another 'Evenki medicine' to their patients called by its Russian name *zolotoi koren* (*Rhodiola rosea*) (Fig. 8.2). Pana Platonova said Evenkis called it *uildyn*, meaning 'emergent' or 'raised,' while Pana Lekareva said that people previously called this plant *uildyun* and thinks that the name came from an Evenki word *u* that means 'liver' or 'pluck.' She interprets *uildyun* as 'the liver healer.' The dictionary prepared by Vasilevich (1958:433) defines *uildyn* as 'bound,' 'connection,' 'bundle,' and 'bunch.' These definitions make sense when the practice of drying *zolotoi koren* is considered, as people usually cut it into small pieces and connected them like beads.

Pana Lekareva remembers that her grandparents used *zolotoi koren'* for treating flatulence; however, today people drink tea made from the roots of this plant as a medicine for many types of disease [*ot vsego p'iat*]. Local people consider both *ianda* and *zolotoi koren'* to be 'universal' medicines and try to keep a store of them.

Both *ianda* and *zolotoi koren'* grow in mountain valleys located some distance from Kholodnaia, and can be found on the shores of mountain lakes and springs. I have observed people gathering them near the foot of the mountains close to Nomama Lake (Figs. 8.3 and 8.4). Hunters and reindeer herders gather *ianda* here from early August to early September, when it is green; in September both plants become red and the *ianda* loses its sap. According to Arkadii Petrovich Lekarev (the eldest man in Kholodnaia), Evenkis gathered *ianda* while hunting marmots (*Marmota sibirica*).

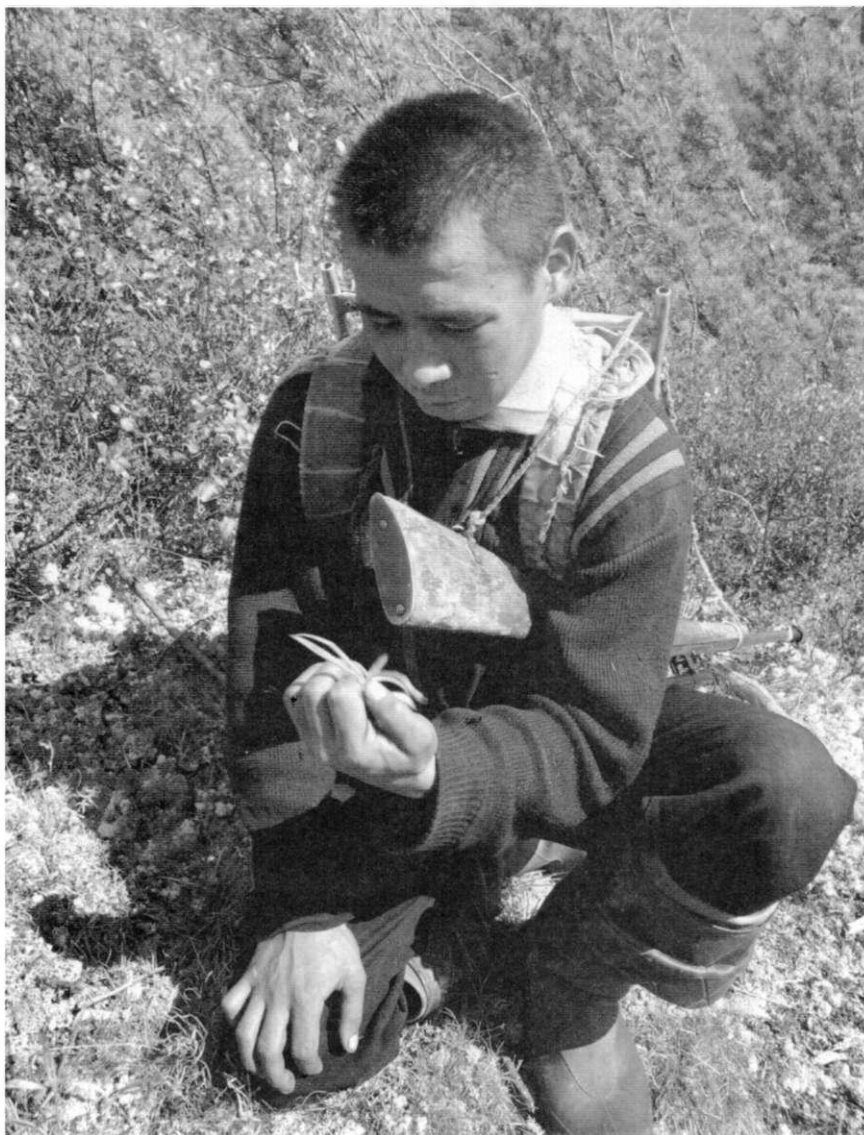


Figure 8.3. Valerii Filimonov with 'the Evenki medicine' (*ianda*).
Nomama Lake, August 2009.



Figure 8.4. Zolotoi koren' (*Rhodiola rosea*). Nomama Lake, September 2009.

The gathering of medicinal plants at Nomama usually involves the preparation of food, a knife [Ev. *kato*], matches and a special Evenki frame backpack [Ev. *poniaga*]. They usually take tea [Ev. *chaimi*], bread [Ev. *kolobo*] and sugar, which are carefully packed in a bag together with the knife and matches, and attached to a *poniaga*. Valerii Filimonov said that his *poniaga* brings him luck [*fartovaia*] in gathering herbs, believing that it helps him to find *ianda*. People also usually take a rifle and cartridges with them to ward off bears [Ev. *amikan*] and to be able to shoot a moose or a Manchurian deer (Fig. 8.5).

Reindeer herders and hunters gather medicinal herbs either collectively or individually. They usually leave early in the morning and it takes about forty minutes to get from the central base of the *obshchina* 'Uluki' to Nomama Lake. This lake is four kilometers long and *ianda* can be found near the water on the opposite shore, as well as along the edges of mountain springs. The shores of the lake are swampy, and so the preference is to travel to the other side by boat. It usually takes an hour and a half to get to the places where *ianda* can be found, but if it's very windy it may take up to three hours to get to the opposite shore. *Ianda* grows only in particular places, which people keep secret, and it is extremely difficult for people traveling to the lake for the first time to find it. It is interesting that I did not observe anyone leaving specific items in return for the plants, however at each site a campfire was made and the plant-hunters fed a piece of bread or bread with paté to the fire. They said that if they had had vodka they would have fed it that instead. *Ianda* is a perennial plant and the older plants have distinctive blooms. Other plants in the area look very similar to it and newcomers often mistake these for the *ianda*. However, *ianda* has a specific bitter taste that the other plants do not. In August 2009, I took part in several trips for gathering medicinal plants. The first time I saw *ianda*, I wasn't sure whether it was the correct plant; Valerii Filimonov tasted it and confirmed that it was *ianda* because of the

bitter taste. He added: 'There are some plants that look like *ianda*; however, they are not bitter at all.' Therefore, people usually taste the plants in order to determine whether they are the correct ones.



Figure 8.5. *Valerii Filimonov binding a pack with ianda to his 'lucky' poniaga. Nomama Lake, September 2009.*

The hunters and reindeer herders from the *obshchina* 'Uluki' usually gather these medicinal herbs at the head of the Nomama River as well as on the shores of the lake. The whole plant can be used as a medicine, but Kholodnaia villagers gather only the roots, digging them out using a knife or their fingers, and leave stems with leaves. It is much easier to dig out roots growing on moss-covered hummocks than those growing in the ground.

Gathering *ianda* and *zolotoi koren'* may take several hours; usually both plants are collected on the same trip, but sometimes people will collect only one or the other. People are careful never to take too much of these herbs; they obey the rule of the local environmental ethics and leave some plants for the future. Similar 'voluntary limits' exist in hunting (Sirina 2008:130). Hunters follow certain 'limits on the harvesting of animals, even if they are not codified in such an explicit manner as the wildlife management agencies prefer' (Anderson 2000b:126). Similarly, those who gather medicinal plants never take more than they actually need. Telling funny stories about greedy gatherers serves as a mechanism of social control (Ventsel 2005:269-299).

People do not usually rest until they have gathered enough plants; in fact, to have a rest before completing a task is considered to be bad luck. I was told a comical story about one hunter from Kholodnaia who had started drinking tea just after crossing a tributary of the Nomama River one hundred meters from the main base. People perceive such breaks as undesirable if a hunter wants to return with meat. I argue that the perception of luck in gathering medicinal herbs has many similarities with the perception of luck in hunting. In this sense, local people 'hunt' *ianda*, rather than merely gathering it. When people have gathered enough herbs and are tired, then they usually stop to drink hot tea and have a snack. After drinking tea, people bind a pack with *ianda* to a *poniaga* and move back to the main base. During my fieldwork I often observed how people bound different things to a *poniaga* carefully and in a masterly fashion (Fig. 8.6).

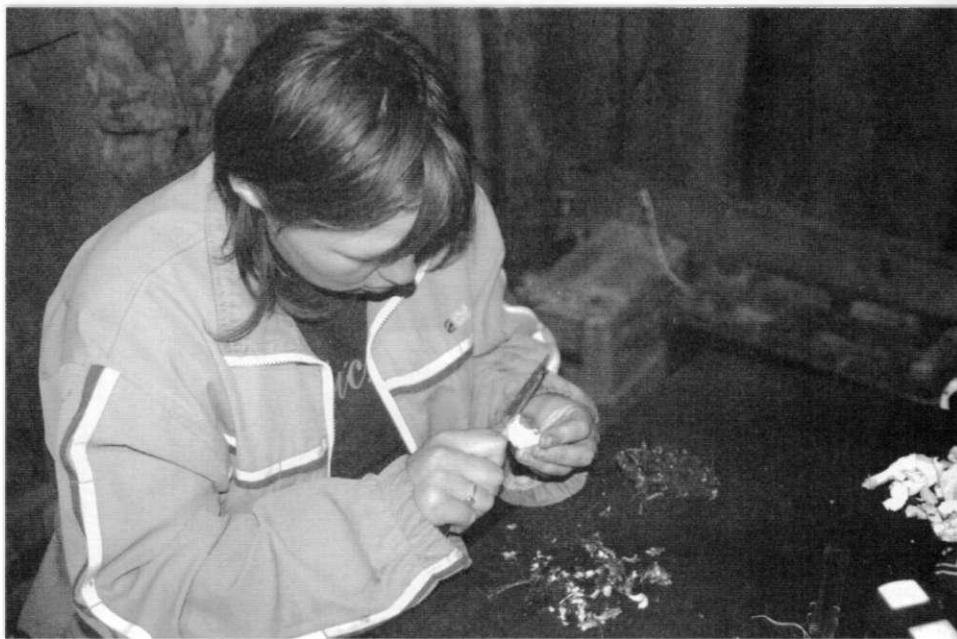


Figure 8.6. *Anastasiia Shangina cleaning zolotoi koren'.
Nomama, September 2009.*

On the return trip, people cross the lake by boat once more, and after beaching it they usually leave a kettle and cups in the boat. The road back to the main base goes downhill, so it usually takes less time than the outward journey. Hence, local people say: “The way back is always shorter!” [*Doroga nazad vseгда koroche!*]. I observed that people usually returned home in the evening when it was getting dark. After their return, they start cleaning the mud from the plants they have gathered using knives, and then sew them together in bunches.

Today, most people dry *ianda* and *zolotoi koren'* for their own consumption. However, the herbs are highly valued and can therefore be sold in times of financial hardship, serving as a reserve resource for many people. Many sell their surplus to other villagers in Nizhne-angarsk and Severobaikal'sk, and some even have a circle of regular clients who purchase medicinal herbs from them (Sirina and Fondahl 2006:20) (Fig. 8.7).

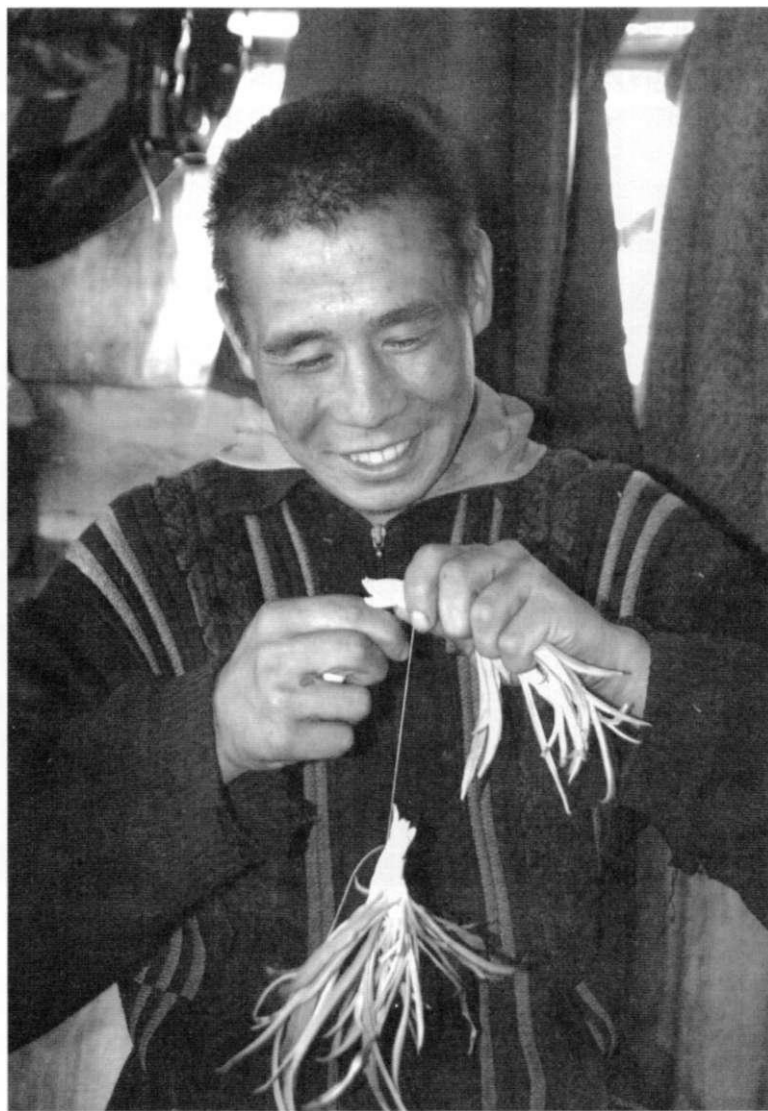


Figure 8.7. Valerii Filimonov makes bunches from *ianda*. Nomama, August 2009.

The elders in Kholodnaia say that people previously gathered medicinal herbs mostly for their own consumption, but now they can be easily converted to money or can be exchanged for food or pure grain spirit. I heard from locals that a physician from Nizhneangarsk recommended this 'old Evenki medicine' to his patients and that he regularly buys some medicinal plants from Kholodnaia villagers for his own use and to sell to his clients. In 2008-2007, one small tuft of *ianda* cost from fifty to one hundred roubles in Kholodnaia. Anastasiia Shangina said that in 2007 she sold small bunches of *ianda* in Nizhneangarsk for one hundred and fifty roubles. This is about the price of one litre of vodka in the local stores, and *ianda* can be easily exchanged for vodka. Thus, Valerii joked when he tied *ianda* up in order to make bunches: "This is one bottle of vodka! This is another one! [Puzyr', eshche puzyr'!]" (Fig. 8.8).

The growing number of immigrants in the region during the late Soviet period created a situation of competitiveness between the local population and the newcomers. Now, they use the same places and compete for resources such as meat, fish, pine nuts, berries and medicinal herbs. In the first part of the 20th century, a similar competition over resources existed for the gathering of berries and nuts. For example, B.E. Petri wrote that the Russians and Evenkis from the Tukur district in the Irkutsk province vied with each other when visiting berry fields, each trying to get there first in order to start gathering early. In addition, Evenkis were often not able to find berries in the usual places because Russians and Buriats had already cleaned them out (Petri 1930:68).



Figure 8.8. *Ianda* drying under the ceiling in the zimov'ie. Nomama, August 2009.

The same sort of competition exists today between villagers and newcomers in medicinal herb gathering. The former Baikal–Amur Railway (BAM) builder Sergei Petrovich, who stayed in Kholodnaia and works now as a cook at the reindeer farm, said that *zolotoi koren'* was one of the most popular medicinal herbs among his colleagues who worked as Magirus truck drivers.' Sergei said that BAM builders [*bamovtsy*] 'took everything out near the mountain Dovyren and, as a result, this plant almost disappeared from there.' Now Sergei has to gather *zolotoi koren'* on the territory of the *obshchina* 'Uluki,' located more than fifty kilometers from Kholodnaia. As a result of these kinds of events,

people try to keep the knowledge of places rich in medicinal herbs a secret and avoid telling outsiders of the locations. Thus, after visiting the places where *ianda* and *zolotoi koren'* were abundant, I was asked by hunters and reindeer herders not to share the information about the exact locations with other people [*Ty im-to khot' tam ne rasskazyvai!*].

Kholodnaia villagers believe that sunlight reduces the effectiveness of these herbs and therefore recommend drying them in the dark. They also prefer to dry them in small bunches; as mentioned above, *zolotoi koren'* is cut into small pieces and threaded onto a string, like beads. Some people, however, put the pieces on a sheet of paper laid on a flat surface. Hunters dry *ianda* in the space under the ceiling in winter log houses (*zimov'ia*), and it takes about one week to dry (Fig. 8.9).

Pana Lelareva stated that this method of drying *ianda* has been used by Evenkis for many years, since the time when reindeer herders lived mostly in *iurty* [conical mobile lodges], the only difference being that the tendons [*zhily*] of animals were used instead of thread. Keeping the herbs in small bunches was practical, given their constant mobility. In Kholodnaia, people often dry different kinds of herbs in the same place.



Figure 8.9. Medicinal herbs drying in a veranda of a house.
Kholodnaia, September 2009.

Every herb has its own spectrum of use. While people use *ianda* and *zolotoi koren'* for healing a wide range of diseases, others are used only for one illness. A type of wild thyme known in the region as *bogorodskaiia trava* [Rus.] or *chabrets* [Rus.] (*Thymus serpyllum*) is used for several complaints: short breath, coughs, treating nervous disorders and liver disease. This plant has a strong and pungent smell, so it is also used to 'smudge' [*okurivanie*] a cow after calving in order to avoid a 'bad smell.' Finally, it is used in burial rituals for 'smudging' the dead. The people of Kholodnaia also use another herb as an expectorant, known as Labrador Tea, *sviniachii bagul'nik* [Rus.] or *senkire* [Ev.] (*Ledum* sp.). Pana Lekareva recommends putting both Labrador Tea and wild thyme into a cup and filling it with boiling water. Rita Arpeul'eva said that children used to eat Labrador Tea for fun, despite its bitter taste.



Figure 8.10. *Oktiabrina Uronchina* with polyn' (*Artemisia*) and tysiachelistnik (*Achillea*) she had gathered two days before. Kholodnaia, August 2009.

Other medicinal plants gathered by local people are a wild rhododendron *sakhan-dalia* [Buriat] (*Rhododendron adamsii*) and a cliff fern known as *kamennyi zverboi* [Rus.] [Ev. *erekte*, *Dryopteris fragrans*]. The wild rhododendron is rather rare in the North Baikal area; it can be found in the mountains near the Chaia River as well as near the former geologists' village of Pereval and looks similar to Labrador Tea. It is drunk as a tonic to normalize low blood pressure and help insomnia. According to the elders, Evenkis have only recently begun to gather *sakhan-dalia*; they learned of it from Buriats and its name came from the Buriat language. The cliff fern is much easier to find, as it grows on scree.

Pana Platonova remembers that reindeer herders used to mix *zveroboi* with salt and give it to reindeer, but people also used it to treat themselves (Shubin 2007:169). The plant can be gathered from spring to autumn, and it is considered to be less valuable than *ianda* and *sakhan dalia*. According to local people, *kamennyi zveroboi* helps coughs and it is especially useful for lung diseases and tuberculosis. A plant called *gol'tsevaia polyn'* (*Artemisia* sp.) has a similar medicinal quality. This plant has a strong bitter taste and the mix of *polyn'* and *bogorodskaia trava* is considered to be an effective medicine for habitual drunkenness as it is thought to create an aversion to alcohol. However, people emphasized that the person should want to stop drinking, otherwise the treatment will not help. The elders stress that any type of treatment is effective only when the person wants to be healed.

I observed the gathering of other herbs, *kamennyi zveroboi* and roots of *badan* [Rus.] (*Bergenia* sp.), at the beginning of May. As described above, most people consume a brew of the medicinal herbs and plants when they are ill; however, some of the elderly Evenkis, for example, Viktor Tsyvilev who was born in Tompa Village, used to gnaw the roots of *badan* instead of brewing it. This particular herb is said to help an upset stomach. It is also used to turn leather, used for clothing, black. Other medicinal herbs are not used to cure disease, but for strengthening health. Thus, every summer Oktiabrina Uronchina gathers *tysiachelistnik* (*Achillea* sp.), which increases immunity and helps gastritis (Fig. 8.10).

Some medicinal plants can be extracted at any time of the year, but hunters gather them only when they are needed. For instance, the medicinal herb *chilitkan* [Ev.] grows in the birch forest near the village; it prevents the appearance of pus and also helps drain any pus already present from a wound. When a person is wounded, *chilitkan* can even be gathered from the snow in winter. Oleg Ganiugin from Kholodnaia said he used *chilitkan* on a hand wound sustained during muskrat hunting one autumn and that it helped even better than the special ointment from the local medical centre.

Several other herbs are gathered for different diseases, for instance in order to heal women's diseases, people gather *borovaia matka* [Rus.] (*Orthilia secunda*). Some gather a plant known as *siniukha golubaia* [Rus.] or *ortiliia odnobokaia* [Rus.] (*Polemonium caeruleum*), considered to be useful for people with heart diseases, but it is rather rare in the forests near Kholodnaia. Pana Lekareva told me that stomach diseases, bowel complaints and diarrhoea could be treated with *troelistka* [Rus.] or *vakhta trekhlistnaia* [Rus.] (*Menyanthes trifoliata*), which grows in swampy areas and around lakes. As with *ianda* and other herbs, people observed that moose eat this plant frequently.

Another rare plant, known as *baiunchuka* [Ev.], may be found in the remote, stony, treeless mountains and foothills and is used the same way as *ianda*. It is known mostly to elderly people but they do not know the Russian name of this herb. *Sopchokty* [Ev.] is another herb that the elders of Kholodnaia used to gather; according to Pana Lekareva, the Russian name of this herb is *gornaia valeriana* (*Valerian* sp.) and translates as 'shaggy' [*lokhmataia*]. Both *ianda* and *sopchokty* are high-altitude herbs found in particular locations. These two plants often grow in the same places, but taste quite different. The pedicle of *sopchokty* is similar to those of carrot; however, the leaves are longer and a different colour. It is used instead of iodine as an antiseptic. Wounds can be disinfected using a special powder prepared from this herb; it can also be consumed as a tea. People say that *sopchokty* is even more effective than the disinfectants available in the pharmacy. Arkadii Lekarev emphasized that iodine was not previously available for most Evenkis. Even though there was a small medical centre [*meditsynskii punkt*] in the village when he was young, people who worked at the *kolkhoz* reindeer farm far from the village relied mostly on folk medicine and local knowledge.

Pana Platonova gathers *chistotel* [Rus.] (*Chelidonium* sp.), used to help purify the blood [*ochishchaet krov'*] and treat liver disease. Pana Lekareva said that Evenkis did not previously gather this herb; they only started after learning about it from newcomers. The herb is dried and used to make special tinctures: Pana Lekareva puts dry *chistotel* into a bottle with one glass of sugar, adds vodka and leaves it for ten days. She learned of this tincture when she worked as a cook in a kindergarten and was given this remedy from the local medical centre. Having tried it and felt better the same day, she started making it herself. While medicines were given for free in the Soviet period, tinctures today are rather expensive in the pharmacy so she makes several herself.

Minerals are also used for healing. For broken bones, villagers rely on 'stone-oil' [*kamennoe maslo*], a specific mineral collected from rocks in the mountains (Fig. 8.11). It is extremely rare, and intensive gathering over the last few years has depleted the resources even further, but experienced hunters know where it can be found. It is gathered by shooting a rifle at a rocky outcrop and collecting the mineral from the ground afterward. A local hunter said it appeared on shale [*slantsy*]. People recommend stirring it into water and drinking it; it tastes sour and chewing it is likely to result in damage to the teeth. It is said that parents should be careful when giving this mineral to their children because it can spoil their tooth enamel. Those who have consumed 'stone-oil' say that 'the bones knitted rather rapidly; yet, it was harmful for the teeth.' I met many people who complained about this negative effect of 'stone-oil;' however, they still recommended it to people with fractures believing that 'bones will knit within a week.' Another possible side-effect of consuming 'stone-oil' is constipation. A hunter named Anatolii Shishmarev said that it can also be used externally, for example, it can be made into a compress or a lotion for applying to bruises. Like *ianda*, 'stone-oil' is highly valued by local people and can be sold in Kholodnaia or in the *raion* [district] centre Nizhneangarsk.

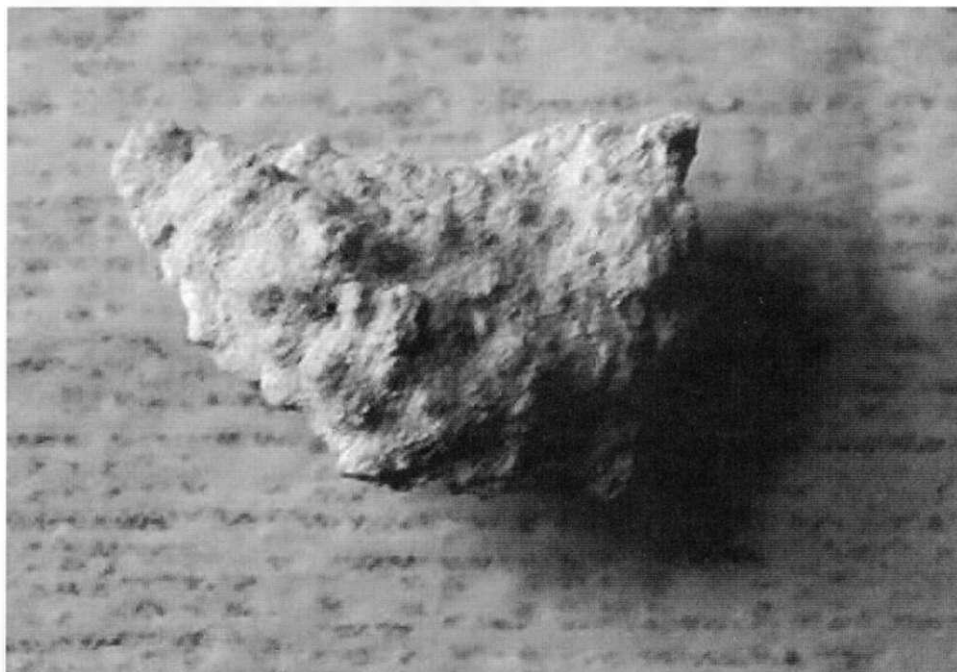


Figure 8.11. A piece of 'stone-oil' gathered by Leonid Tulbukonov.
Kholodnaia, September 2009.

Local people also use animal parts as medicines, and people prepare remedies both for their own consumption and for sale in Nizhneangarsk and Severobaikal'sk. Hunters know the medicinal qualities of bear's gall bladder [*zhelch*], which is used as a medicine for liver pain, as well as velvet antlers [*panty*] and bears' paws (see also Brandisaukas, this volume). The fat of bears, marmots and dogs is used to treat lung diseases. Tuberculosis remains a common and dangerous disease for Evenkis in Buriatia (Sirina and Fohndal 2006:9). In 2007-2008, there were four chronic tubercular patients [*khroniki*] in Kholodnaia Village. A technician with a mobile X-ray station in the *raion* visits the village regularly and many people have X-ray tests taken every year. However, some people avoid being tested. Generally, eating together with guests from one plate or a frying pan and drinking from one cup is common for many villagers, and this is believed by some to help ward off the disease. Moreover, if one refuses to join, it can be classified as 'disrespect' [*brezglivost*]. This tradition is common for hunters and reindeer herders, who boil the meat in one pot. In the village, I heard the opinion that a person will never be infected by tuberculosis when he or she eats from one plate with a diseased person and regularly consumes dog meat or fat (Davydov and Simonova 2008: 221).

Consumption of marmot and bear fat is also recommend to those with tuberculosis, and Tugolukov wrote that Evenkis who had tuberculosis consumed not just bear fat, but they also drank bear blood (Tugolukov 1969:97). Mixing the fat with pine nuts is said to increase successful healing.

Many people in the village, however, emphasized that even though folk medicine is extremely useful for healing many diseases, it is 'better not to joke around with tuberculosis' and the best decision for a diseased person is a combination of folk and Western medicine. An Evenki woman from Kholodnaia said: "Of course dog's and bear's fat could help. However, people need also special medicines in order to kill the bacillus. Tuberculosis is of great vitality [*zhivuchii*]." For instance, one person from Kholodnaia who regularly ate dog's meat 'as preventive medicine' [*dlia profilaktiki*], contracted the serious form of tuberculosis intoxication in the summer of 2008 and the medical assistants sent him to a hospital in Ulan-Ude. Many people in the village do not have passports or, consequently or medical insurance certificates [*polisy*]; however, the local medical assistants help them even without these documents.

Finally, people in Kholodnaia believe that fresh air and water can serve as medicines as well. Thus, the reindeer herders say that skin wounds heal much more rapidly in the mountains near the river Nomama compared with in the Southern part of the Republic of Buriatia during their military service. As a young hunter—Valerii—said, "the lack of bacteria in the mountainous taiga means that 'all skin wounds disappear like on a dog (*zazhivaet kak na sobake*).'" He added people never become ill in this place because "the mountainous air is clean and people do not need any other medicines." A phrase I heard repeated many times when people had no opportunity for washing their hands or tableware was: 'There is no dirt in the taiga [*V taige griazi ne byvaet*].' People meant that the environment itself in the mountainous taiga does not support the existence of microbes.

In summary, this chapter outlined the main remedies of Evenki folk medicine used by the people of Kholodnaia. The villagers use a combination of both public and folk medicine. In the case of illness, people consult many different specialists, such as *znakhari*, *shamany* and *fel'dshery*, as well as find remedies in the forest on their own. In other words, both nurse-practitioners and specialists in folk medicine are actively engaged into healing practices, demonstrating the existence of medical pluralism in northern Buriatia as identified by K. Metzo. It follows that local medicinal knowledge is not set in opposition to state

medicine. There is no strict border between these domains of knowledge for local people; rather folk medicine has become an integral part of the public health system. However, this integration was not initiated from above, because local nurse practitioners [*fel'dshery*] did not acquire special training in folk medicine as part of their formal training and studies in college. Rather, they possess this knowledge as members of the local community. Consequently, the use of this knowledge in combination with remedies from the drugstore is a result of their own experience. Even though it is possible to buy medicines at Kholodnaia's first-aid post, many people continue to rely on 'Evenki medicines' too. Furthermore, as D. Brandišauskas has shown in his chapter, medicinal knowledge is not a property of a narrow circle of specialists, but it is shared by all representatives of the local community and can be considered part of their daily knowledge of subsistence. At the same time, local people try to keep secret the knowledge of the location of various forest medicines, which became the objects of accumulation, from the BAM newcomers who became their main competitors in the taiga. Gathering 'medicines in the forest' helps local people save money and acquire extra economic reserves, and they continue to be reliable medicines in remote locations such as reindeer herders' and hunters' base camps, where permanent and professional medical first aid is not available.

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