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Carole Ferret. *Une civilisation du cheval: les usages de l'équidé de la steppe à la taïga*. Paris: Belin, 2010. 350 p. ISBN 978-2-7011-4819-9.

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Researchers specializing in nomadic societies will welcome the publication of Carole Ferret's book. It results from fieldwork carried out over a fifteen-year period and follows on from her doctoral thesis, directed by Jean-Pierre Digard, an anthropologist specializing in animal domestication (Digard 1990) and particularly in the human-horse relationship.

The anthropology of domestication tries to understand why certain species can be more easily domesticated by humans than others. In particular, researchers analyze the new social relationships and new ideas that the treatment of animals introduces into the human community. The study of animal-human relationships in Yakutia is particularly important in the case of nomadic peoples because of the analogical relationship between animals and humans that exists in Yakut thought. Pastoral societies move together with their herds to find pastures for them. In Siberia, geographic and climatic conditions make breeding animals a difficult task. For this reason animals called "domestic" live in nature in a state very similar to that of wild animals.

The anthropological study of Siberian societies has made huge strides over the past seventy years. In France, the most interesting are the contributions of Evelyne Lot-Falk (1953), Françoise Aubin (1986), Laurence Delaby (1987/1988) and Roberte Hamayon (1990). Younger authors—Jean-Luc Lambert, Patrick Plattet, Virginie Vaté, Alexandra Lavrillier, Carole Ferret and myself—continue to reflect on the relationship between humans and nature in Northern Siberia. The contemporary French studies of human-animal relations in Yakutia (Alexandra Lavrillier's, Carole Ferret's and my own research) can be compared with the work of American anthropologist Susan Crate (2006) and Japanese author Hiroki Takakura (2002). As for Russian research, Soviet-era terminology needs to be approached with caution. However, the very precise ethnography provided at the time and, in particular, the information gathered from local peoples remains extraordinarily useful. Today's Russian ethnography is greatly inspired by Western anthropology.

The work of Carole Ferret is characterized both by its original theoretical approach and by an important empirical contribution. Having spent around four years in Russia and Central Asia since 1993, she has specialized in the comparative study of Kazakhs in Central Asia and Yakuts in Far Eastern Siberia—pastoral societies speaking Turkic languages. Ferret rejects symbolic analysis and instead develops an "action anthropology" that aims to show how societies differ from each other by their propensity to act in certain ways (Ferret 2006). For her innovative study, she

uses the concepts of “input,” designating human action on an animal (for example, a man putting a saddle on a horse), and its opposite, “output,” meaning all the actions humans receive from the animal (the horse can carry the man into the forest on its back for hunting).

However, Ferret only comments briefly on this in the book under review (except in the more theoretical section dealing with sacrifice, pages 287–294), which is actually presented as an ethnography of horse-related practices in the Altaic world, and more precisely the practices of the Central Asian Kazakhs and especially the Far East Siberian Yakuts. Thus the book is not primarily a conceptual analysis, but rather a descriptive monograph, touching on everything from mounting to saddle-making, from breeding techniques to symbolic identity, and including rituals, covering the entire period since the arrival of the Russians in the 1630s. In five chapters, Carole Ferret compares the Yakut horse with the mammoth, the pig, the sheep, and the cow, focusing on their common properties and the particular advantages of the horse. Her very rich book contains eight tables, ten graphs, some sixty illustrations and a similar number of photos. The only problem with all this is that there is such a vast amount of information that each page could be turned into an entire article.

Like her academic adviser and predecessor (Digard 2004), Carole Ferret distinguishes between societies with horsemen “where riding is reserved to a minority,” and horse-riding societies where the use of the horse is “generalized and manifold” (12). She defines the Altaic populations as an “equine civilisation” in which the horse is used to support a national identity, while the Yakuts prefer to eat horses rather than ride them, and they like to preserve the independent character of these animals (312).

In my own doctoral research, I focused on a symbolic analysis of the significance of the horse in Yakut culture (Maj 2007). I came to the same conclusions as Ferret about the distance between man and horse in the Yakut tribes. Due to the geographical constraints that make it vital for the horse to be autonomous in order to find its food, equines are kept in vast areas with minimal control, and some Yakuts maintain that they are wild. Thus our studies, based on completely different approaches (one analyzes actions, the other representations), came to similar results, showing that a certain distance between man and horse is needed for an optimal use of animals in this particular Siberian geocultural context.

Nevertheless, I must disagree with some of the conclusions of Carole Ferret’s book. In her study, she does not include the reindeer, justifying her decision by the fact that it is an animal borrowed from Tunguz peoples. However, while the Yakuts moved in several groups to their current territory from the 13th century onwards, they had already lived alongside reindeer herding peoples for some seven centuries, from whom they sometimes borrowed their breeding techniques and, in certain areas, even their animals. The question is thus raised of the legitimacy of coupling synchronic and diachronic analyses, of the limitations of a global perspective and the necessity of micro-level studies for analyzing local adaptations of behaviors and ways of thinking to environment.

Another problematic point of Carole Ferret's book is that she contributes to legitimizing the identity of the Yakut people, considering them to be essentially breeders and forgetting that these people were previously, and still are today, attached to the practices of hunting and fishing, whose economic and symbolic importance are comparable to breeding. It is precisely this economic activity that helps us understand the status of the horse, halfway between the wild and the home. The horse is a semi-domestic animal, which, contrary to the bovine, can at any point return to its wild state, and even if the Yakuts still continue to train their horses, they never make them totally subservient (Maj 2007:474). If the domestication were to engender the total submission of the horse, this animal and everything that is linked with it would be not used for hunting. But the partial domestication by humans enables the horse to be part and parcel of the culture of the Yakuts: indeed, it must be remembered that the breeder and the hunter are often the same person in Yakut societies.

I am impatient to see Carole Ferret's subsequent work, which will probably develop in greater detail her theory of an anthropology of action.

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