

Nomad School Teaches New and Ancient Skills

By Pierre-Yves Frei

In south-eastern Siberia, a nomadic people are trying to preserve their way of life against the march of modern society. The traditional culture of the Evenk, who excel at reindeer herding, hunting and fishing, has been eroded through contact with Western civilization. For eight years Alexandra Lavrillier, a brilliant French ethnologist, has been fighting alongside them to save their heritage, setting up a nomadic school that will give Evenk children the chance to receive a modern education without having to sacrifice their ancestral traditions.



👑 Alexandra Lavrillier France



Alexandra Lavrillier is French, but she has always felt she belonged in the far North. ‘As a child, I spent hours in the Musée de l’Homme [Museum of Mankind] in Paris, gazing at the displays about the Inuit and the peoples of Siberia,’ she says. Now she spends much of the year far from the comforts of Paris, in a region far more austere and demanding: in the middle of the Siberian taiga, where winter temperatures can drop to -50°C.

In 1994, after studying Russian at the Institut national des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (National Institute of Eastern Languages and Civilizations) and the Centre d’Etudes mongoles et sibériennes (Centre for Mongolian and Siberian Studies) in Paris, and learning Yakut, an indigenous Siberian language, from immigrants living in France, the young Frenchwoman accompanied an expedition organized by several French photographers. For three months she travelled, as the expedition’s interpreter and ethnologist, the length and breadth of Yakutia, in Siberia, the region that had fascinated her as a child, and there she had a life-changing encounter with the Evenk people. ‘I found them the most welcoming of all the Siberian people, and they had conserved their culture and their language better than anyone else,’ she explains. Twelve years later, her passion is unabated. Now a highly respected ethnologist, 36-year-old Lavrillier is married to an Evenk nomad from the Stanovoy Mountains. Together they have a little daughter.

The first known mention of the Evenk, as hunters and reindeer herders, dates back to the 17th century when the Russian empire, in constant expansion eastwards, came into contact with the ethnic group. At the time, there was no respect for cultural diversity, and, as the centuries passed, there was little improvement in the status of the Evenk. In the 20th century, their animist rituals, in which shamanism plays an important role, were frowned upon by the Soviet government. The Evenk needed a great deal of determination and courage to preserve their beliefs and traditions, often in the utmost secrecy. To add to the difficulties, the authorities decided late in the 1960s that Evenk children should follow the normal school curriculum, even if this meant that for months at a time, year after

Her heart belongs in the Siberian taiga, home to the nomadic Evenk people. Laureate Alexandra Lavrillier was fascinated by the region as a child and now spends much of the year with the reindeer herders. She has founded a travelling school, housed in a tent, where (preceding pages) an Evenk child trudging to school through new-fallen snow can learn both the Russian curriculum and Evenk skills and rituals.



'Alexandra Lavrillier's knowledge of the local language, techniques, institutions, rituals and culture is exceptional. She also proved extremely brave in the difficult conditions of life in the taiga and extremely diplomatic in the delicate post-Soviet context.'

Roberte Hamayon director, Centre d'Etudes mongoles et sibériennes, Paris

Modern technology and nomad ways are taught by Lavrillier and two Evenk teachers who joined the school upon earning their teaching certificates. Computers will help the youngsters cope with the modern world, while learning how to clean a bear skin or create a cap of grey reindeer fur relate to their daily lives. In warm weather classes are held outside (overleaf).

year, the children had to attend state boarding schools far from their families and nomadic life.

Alexandra Lavrillier knew that to safeguard the future of Evenk culture, children's education was paramount. For eight long years she has devoted her time and energy to setting up the travelling school that the Evenk nomads had dreamed of for so long. The nomad school has been up and running since the start of 2006, after a successful campaign by the French ethnologist to overcome the many administrative obstacles in her path. Finally, she succeeded in doing what no one else had done for a nomadic school for a Siberian minority: after she won approval from the Russian education ministry and the relevant authorities in the region of Amur, in south-eastern Siberia, the school was granted the status of 'official experimental school', recognition that may pave the way for similar experiments elsewhere in Siberia.

Now at last Evenk children have a school that can travel with them, that is adapted to their lifestyle and, most importantly, does not require them to be separated from their parents for long periods so they can attend classes. The Rolex Award presented to Lavrillier will pay for at least the crucial first three years, covering the cost of teaching materials, multimedia equipment, a team of reindeer for transport and salaries for three Evenk teachers, including Lavrillier, and for a guide. The Award will also cover the costs of printing and distributing books that the nomadic school will produce on Evenk language and culture.

The 23 six- to ten-year-olds from several different camps now attending the Evenk nomadic school have all the benefits of a full educational programme. The teachers travel from one camp to another, with the time spent at each camp depending on the educational level and needs of the children, who then continue their work on their own until the school returns. As well as the traditional Russian curriculum, the subjects include English, French and an Internet-awareness module, using a computer powered by an electric generator. Lavrillier insisted on language and computer courses







‘This courageous Frenchwoman has set up a school that travels to nomadic children in remote Siberia to teach them about their traditional culture, along with modern languages and computer technology. Her project is a major step forward for the Evenk people.’

Motoko Ishii president of Motoko Ishii Lighting Design

Learning the ways of their elders and recording them for future generations, Evenk children have busy school schedules. A pupil photographs a wooden sledge for a book about Evenk culture that Lavrillier intends to publish. Early education includes how to lasso and ride a reindeer, an animal vital to their survival. Lavrillier leads youngsters in a traditional dance.



because she believes the students must have the tools they will need to deal with the modern world – and to benefit from it. ‘The state infrastructures that used to provide jobs for Evenks are being shut down one after another,’ Lavrillier says. ‘So, in the very near future, they will need to be ready to defend their rights and learn about the market economy. Some of them might even want to start their own small businesses.’

Education for the modern world is now balanced by the cultivation of the Evenk heritage in the travelling school, which allows the children to stay with their parents and elders and continue to be part of their own community. The young Evenk can learn to fish, look after reindeer and be initiated into various rituals. They will also have an opportunity to study their traditions in class – and a chance to help conserve them, as Lavrillier is relying on their cooperation for the books the school is producing, including a guide to the flora and fauna of the taiga that will explain how the Evenk use and manage this environment with its often extreme conditions. The guide will also explain how the Evenk separate and spread out in winter in order to make the most of the few resources available. When warmer weather returns, they attend a large gathering before accompanying their herds of reindeer to high-altitude pastures where the summer heat is less harsh on the animals. The guide on the flora and fauna will be followed by a handbook on the Evenk language and a book on their traditions and beliefs. The guidebooks should help the many Evenk people who have taken up residence in various parts of Russia to rediscover their roots. For Lavrillier, the fact that the people concerned have access to the information gathered about them is all-important.

These new guides will be critical to revitalizing Evenk culture. Since *perestroika* in the late 1980s, Russia has rediscovered the richness of its ethnic peoples and has tried to rehabilitate them. The Evenk, like about 30 other Siberian minorities, have been granted special status and a degree of autonomy intended to enhance their identity, beliefs and traditions. Resources, however, are often too



When temperatures rise, small streams spring up in the taiga, signalling time to move camp. The Evenk will seek higher altitudes and change location about every two weeks, moving an average 1,000 kilometres every year. Not all children attend Lavrillier’s school. Some, like these two Evenk boys beating a rhythm with reindeer leg bones, leave their families for boarding school in town.





scarce to repair the damage done by centuries of cultural erosion. There are only 30,000 Evenk left in Russia. Most of them have completely abandoned the nomadic way of life and the taiga, and now live in villages and towns, with no memory of their ancestral hunting and fishing techniques. More often than not, these men and women have switched to agriculture, and two-thirds of them can no longer speak their traditional language. Generally there is little to envy in the way of life of these settled Evenk. They find it hard to fit into modern Russian society, and, as with all the Siberian minorities, the proportion of unemployed Evenk is far higher than the Russian average. Only a few of them reach higher education.

However, it is among these settled Evenk that Lavrillier has recruited the two teachers who work with her at the nomadic school, although it took her considerable energy to find them and persuade them to accept the jobs. To leave modern living, however modest, in order to return to nomadic life – especially one which requires enduring the harsh Siberian winters – is a difficult decision to take, even when jobs are scarce.

Alexandra Lavrillier's successful achievements on behalf of the Evenk rely on her outstanding knowledge of their world, gained partly through study, but mainly in the field. While she has carried out research in libraries and archives in Siberia, the principal source of her understanding are the many months spent with these people – almost every year since her first trip in 1994 – sharing their nomadic life, studying their traditions and lifestyle, on the roads and in the forest, in winter and in summer, inside a tent or riding reindeer. Lavrillier is now making the Evenk way of life better known to the outside world, through lectures and articles, and, in 2005, a doctoral thesis presented to the Ecole des Hautes Etudes in Paris for which she received the unanimous congratulations of the jury. 'It is only because I know all about the Evenk nomads, their living conditions and their environment, that I had the confidence to put forward this project for a nomadic school, as a feasible, viable project,' says Lavrillier.

In the broad expanse of the taiga, the Evenk travel at will, usually in small groups. A group portrait includes Lavrillier, her husband and daughter and two other families who journey together. They are often joined by the two teachers who travel between camps, leaving the children to study on their own between visits. One youngster shows the reindeer fur cap she made. Lavrillier says those 'who remain nomadic are the sole custodians of this culture'.