

Firelight on the River: Siberia's Ket People and Ancient North America

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Siberia's Ket people are known as the last hunter-gatherers of Inner Eurasia. Their origins present a mystery that is only now being solved. Living in conical birch-bark tents near the Yenisei river in summer, then nomadizing upland in winter to hunt reindeer, bear and moose, the Ket hunting bands contrasted starkly with their pastoral neighbors, the horse- or reindeer-breeding Turks, Mongols, Tungus (Ewenki), and Samoyeds. This presentation describes Western Washington University's Professor Edward Vajda's original fieldwork with Ket elders during six different trips to Siberia over the past two decades. The Kets are proving to be the oldest inhabitants of northern Asia, and their language, with its unique word tones and complicated verb prefix system, appears related to languages spoken in North America by the Tlingit and Dene (Athabaskan) peoples. Beautiful photos of traditional and modern Ket lifeways serve as a backdrop to historical, linguistic and anthropological discoveries. The narration of fieldwork adventures includes helicopter rides over the Siberian boreal forest (taiga) and the joys and challenges of subsistence living in one of the most remote places on earth.