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Chaipit'e (tea drinking) on the Bank of River Vym



Every visitor in the Russian North has been initiated into it, an essential part of Northern everyday life, hospitality, food routines, social life, and identity. It is chaipit'e, tea-drinking. It is part of teaching about the North, part of living in the North, part of the Northern world.

Some may find this ironic, because tea is an imported product in the North, irrespective of its long-term presence and significance. Like many other goods, including flour and sugar. And still, tea drinking is a deeply local tradition. Meeting us with tea on the bank of River Vym on a sunny afternoon in late May 2018, our hosts strived to show the important specifics, the unique character of local village life and aesthetics. To socialize us into their everyday life and welcome us into and teach us about the contemporary village of Kozlovka. Kozlovka, one of many old and depopulated villages along banks of the River Vym in the Komi Republic. Tea, as a rule is served with several accompaniments. Bread and butter, cheese and sweets, are

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musts. Jam made out of local berries, such as cloudberry, blueberry, and cranberry is what makes tea drinking in the North different and original. It provides sustenance and helps one recover one's strength after the uncomfortable trip along badly maintained and unpaved roads, or after a hard day's work in the cool Northern climate. But it is also a nurturing tradition, an introduction and initiation into an original culture. Tea drinking is deeply rooted in everyday life and its web of meanings.

Upon our arrival in our hosts' house in Kozlovka we all sit and drink tea. This is the way to get properly introduced to each other, to meet and build up our commonality, to identify as a group. A diverse group of teachers and students from different parts of the world, and of our host family, of course. Tea drinking is a deeply social activity. It is social in consuming the same food and drink, in sharing substances from the same pot and plates, in sitting together around the table, and in talking and laughing with each other.

Tea drinking is a recurring and regulated social behavior (Douglas 1987). It structures everyday life in individual and group settings. Tea drinking can organize life temporally, as we know from the familiar British example. More importantly in the Russian North, it is an important referent for the social timing of events. Even if we do not arrive at the time when people would normally drink tea, we are welcomed with tea. Our farewell with Kozlovka is yet another chaipit'e. These are the temporal markers of our life together in the village. They, however, are not exclusively linear, they do not imply an absolute end. Because, as we learn from anthropologist, Haim Hazan, and many others, conventional social and cultural practices like these, belong to cyclic perceptions of time that are embedded in repetitive behavior and reproduce symbolic meanings (Leach 1961, Hazan 1987).

Welcome and farewell tea, as well as many shared tea occasions in the meanwhile, however, have a creational role. They expand our individual worlds and transform them. A transformation that is going to stay with each of us during the rest of our lives. Thus even upon parting, the togetherness and sense of belonging to Kozlovka on River Vym will leave an impression on our sense of identity. And perhaps a longing to get together again, to merge in the landscape along the river. Apropos, about landscape.



A notion that is historically inseparable from associations with aesthetics and contemplation. Tea drinking is a deeply aesthetic tradition. Besides its many artistic representations in Russia, it poses many practical aesthetic requirements. To take only one example, look at the emblematic samovar, at its enticing shape and beautifully decorated surface. In the old village of Kozlovka, water for the welcoming tea needs to be prepared in authentic old coal samovars. Our hosts arrange a performance



around the starting of fire in the samovar and all following procedures of preparing the tea. Thus not only drinking, but preparation becomes an important social practice that we do together, even though our roles in it differ. We show and negotiate our positions in the group, those of hosts and of visitors. And our relations to each other. And we build up our experiences and attitudes to the place and its landscape simultaneously. Because it is 'through living in it, that landscape becomes a part of us, just as we are a part of it' (Bohm 1980). It is not by contemplation alone but by participating in social activities like tea making and drinking on the bank of River Vym that we perceive the landscape surrounding us. And learn about it from our hosts. Not through their stories alone, but by sharing their emotions, and through our senses in the process of tea drinking. Not through visual experience alone, no matter how impressive the view in front of our eyes is, especially a moment later when the sunset falls over the water. It is through the full complex of sensual experiences, including the taste of cloudberry jam and strong black tea, the smell of the smoke from the samovars, the bodily activity of feeding the fire inside them with pine cones from the woods that we get acquainted with the landscape. And we become part of it, enter into its 'enduring record of – and testimony to – the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves' (Ingold 2000). And the landscape of River Vym becomes part of our personal records, of our lives.