

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Proxies and partial connections in an anthropologist's archive

Dmitry V. Arzyutov¹ and David G. Anderson²

¹Department of Slavic and East European Languages and Literatures, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, USA and ²Department of Anthropology, University of Aberdeen, Scotland

Corresponding author: Dmitry V. Arzyutov, Email: arzyutov.1@osu.edu

Abstract

This article examines the role of primary ethnographic materials – of field notes, letters and photographs – and even of the shelves and bookcases – in building accounts of the human condition. We trace the lives of incomplete and not-yet-found manuscripts, which have been treated as representative of whole archives, as well as closely held convictions and ideas in the history of anthropology. In so doing, we employ the notion of a ‘proxy’, or a set of signs and images which point the audience in particular directions, without determining their overall destination. Our research is based on a few episodes from the histories of paper and digital copies of manuscripts and photographs of the anthropological couple Sergei and Elizabeth Shirokogoroff, who conducted ethnographic, linguistic and some archaeological research, first on the borderlands between China and Russia, and then later within China. We aim to show the complexity and social and intellectual vibrancy of their ethnographic field archives, which have been scattered across countries, institutions and personal collections. We conclude by suggesting that engaging anthropologically with field archives enables us to approach existing perspectives on archives in a new way, viewing them not as containers of catalogued information, but as entanglements reflecting social relations in local communities, the trajectories of ethnographers, and the aspirations of scholars asking questions today.

Liuba, do you actually know how old this bookcase is? ... It was made exactly one hundred years ago ...

To my dear and much-honoured bookcase! I congratulate you on your existence, which already, for more than a hundred years, has been devoted to the shining ideals of justice and the good. Your silent call to uplifting work has not faltered in over a century. [sobbing] You have upheld, for generations in our family, vigour – and a belief in a better future, and have instilled in us the ideals of kindness and of a social conscience.

Anton Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard* (1903)

This article reflects on the history of several unsuccessful attempts to assemble the field-work archive of the anthropologists Sergei and Elizabeth Shirokogoroff. In telling the life history of the found fragments, and of the failed quest for the complete archive, we will

analyse the role of primary materials – of field notes, artefacts, letters and photographs – and even of the shelves and bookcases that house them – in building accounts of the human condition. In telling the story of how an anthropological archive can be reassembled we will use the concept of proxies; of how partial and not-yet-found manuscripts are empowered to stand in for the whole.

Sergei (Mikhailovich) Shirokogoroff (or Shirokogorov) (1887–1939) and his wife Elizabeth (Elizaveta Nikolaevna) Robinson (1884–1943) are authors of multiple published books on Evenki (Tungus) and Manchu ethnography, and are the creators of significant photographic and phonographic collections based on their travels in eastern Eurasia between 1911 and 1930 at a time of remarkable political instability. In Europe and North America they are best known through English-language works authored under Sergei's name on the shamans of Tungus Indigenous hunters and reindeer herders whose descendants today live on both sides of the border dividing Russia from China and Mongolia.¹ In Russia, their legacy has been considered by many different agents to represent a range of positions from racial science to bourgeois and relativistic ethnography, and even to a biosocial vision of a foregone Russian nationalism.² Remarkably, despite this eclectic curiosity shown in their work in Russia, most of this work is still not available in Russian. In Japan and China, where their work was widely translated and disseminated, they are known as founders of anthropology and as important cultural translators of ethnic theory.³

This article uses the example of their lives and work to contribute to a broader debate about how knowledge artefacts, including images, are used in making arguments. Over the past century, several scholars and collectors, including ourselves, have tried to compile a single authoritative archive of their writings and fieldwork: this article attempts to reconstruct that work. At the time of writing, this reconstruction represents one of the largest assemblages of digital proxies for the work of any Russian or Chinese ethnographer. It consists of over ten thousand reproductions of letters, field notes, manuscripts, brochures, published journal articles and books, glass-plate negatives, artefacts and wax-cylinder recordings, while the original copies of these proxies remain fragmented, spread across public and private collections on four continents.⁴ Despite the Sisyphean effort made by different generations of enthusiasts at assembling this collection, we argue that the project remains necessarily incomplete for this couple, which has important implications for historians working with the collections of other anthropologists.

In this article we examine in particular the 'life histories' of a particular portion of the assemblage: field photographs and their indices, some unpublished manuscripts, and the hand-made proxy translations of published books. Through these examples, we can see how the authority of the anthropologist, based in the fieldwork they have conducted, comes to be represented in inscriptions and images. More to the point, we show how second-order approximations of the fieldwork relationship – photocopies, glass-plate negatives, index cards and digital proxies – play their own ironic and contradictory role

¹ Sergei Shirokogoroff, *Psychomental Complex of the Tungus*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. Ltd, 1935.

² Aleksandr Dugin, 'Vozvrashchenie zabytogo klassika', in Sergeĭ Shirokogorov, *Ėtnos*, Moscow: Librokom, 2010, pp. 5–8.

³ Wang Mingming, 'The intermediate circle', *Chinese Sociology & Anthropology* (2010) 42, pp. 62–77; Nikolai Cheboksarov, 'Osnovnye etapy razvitiia etnografii v Kitae', *Sovetskaia etnografiia* (1959) 6, pp. 23–149; Gregory Guldin, *The Saga of Anthropology in China*, London: M.E. Sharpe, 1994.

⁴ At the time of writing the digital proxy archive consists of 536 ethnographic artefacts, 4,362 archaeological artefacts, 814 photographs, 69 recordings and 389 manuscripts and letters.

in efforts by other scholars, commentators and (sometimes) politicians to theorize society. We argue that the existing and imagined fragments of this couple's work entangle together social relations, the life trajectories of these field ethnographers, and the aspirations of those who ask questions of the artefacts.⁵

This article builds on a growing literature on the multiple interpretations and 'co-creation' of field studies. Previously, scholars of museum studies have not always clearly engaged with the literature on the history and philosophy of science when considering the potential ambiguity of artefact collections. For example, Aston and Matthews, in an edited volume on cultural appropriation, examine how digital annotation and the linking of collections create 'multiple windows' onto Wendy James's work on the Sudanese civil war.⁶ Vidali and Phillips describe the 'non-linear engagement' and 'multi-modal' quality of their ethnographic sound archive from Zambia.⁷ Ladwig *et al.* investigate the contextualizing work of 'fieldwork between folders' in an interpretation of Portuguese colonial archives as a form of ruins.⁸ Theoretically all these works build on the hermeneutic and literary theories of Paul Ricoeur and Mikhail Bakhtin. The literature in the history of science, by contrast, tends to focus on how the evidential weight of artefacts enables interdisciplinary discussions through constructing 'boundary objects', by assembling 'biographies' of collections, or even by sketching 'circulating references'.⁹ All of these positions fundamentally challenge the idea that a fieldwork archive encapsulates a social relationship. Building on this critique, we focus on how the material records of a journey, which are temporarily stabilized by infrastructure (boxes, shelves, catalogues), can become reassembled to represent often vastly contradictory ideas. In thinking this through we are supported by Marilyn Strathern's empowering notion of a 'partial connection', which she offers as an antidote to James Clifford and George Marcus's scathing criticism of anthropological texts as generating only 'partial truths'.¹⁰ The story of the Shirokogoroffs is a colourful example of both processes, in which field notes, photographs and artefacts alternately connect and conceal social relationships as they are reassembled in competing collections.¹¹

⁵ See also Efram Sera-Shriar, 'From museumization to decolonization: fostering critical dialogues in the history of science with a Haida eagle mask', *BJHS* (2023) 56(3), pp. 309–28.

⁶ Judith Aston and Paul Matthews, 'Multiple audiences and co-curation: linking an ethnographic archive of endangered oral traditions to contemporary contexts', in Mark Turin and Claire Wheeler (eds.), *Oral Literature in the Digital Age*, Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2013, pp. 41–61.

⁷ Debra Vidali and Kwame Phillips, 'Ethnographic installation and "the archive": haunted relations and relocations', *Visual Anthropology Review* (2020) 36(1), pp. 64–89.

⁸ Patrice Ladwig, Ricardo Roque, Oliver Tappe, Christoph Kohl and Cristiana Bastos, *Fieldwork between Folders*, Halle: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, 2012.

⁹ Susan Star and James Griesemer, 'Institutional ecology, "translations" and boundary objects: amateurs and professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907–39', *Social Studies of Science* (1989) 19(3), pp. 387–420; Lorraine Daston (ed.), *Biographies of Scientific Objects*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000; Samuel Alberti, 'Objects and the museum', *Isis* (2005) 96(4), pp. 559–71; Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

¹⁰ James Clifford and George Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986; Marilyn Strathern, *Partial Connections*, Walnut Creek, Lanham, New York, Toronto and Oxford: AltaMira Press, 2004.

¹¹ It may be reasonable to ask to what degree the Shirokogoroff collection is unique in terms of its fragmentation across five continents. There are prominent collections of the founders of national traditions which are similarly dispersed, such as the archives of Franz Boas (1858–1942), Bronisław Malinowski (1884–1942) and Nikolai Miklukho-Maklai (1846–1888). See Regna Darnell, Joshua Smith, Michelle Hamilton and Robert L.A. Hancock, eds., *The Franz Boas Papers*, vol. 1, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015; Elisabeth Kaplan, "'Many paths to partial truths": archives, anthropology, and the power of representation', *Archival Science* (2002) 2(3–4), pp. 209–20; Daniil Tumarkin, *Belyi papuas*, Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 2011. In the end the degree to which a collection remains fragmented is related to how prominently a person presents themselves as a person of interest for research.

Emplacing artefacts and photographs as proxies

Artefacts are a special class of souvenir. These are normally crafted objects which are collected to reflect how people in the field represent and transform their world. The Shirokogoroffs collected more than five thousand objects, ranging from archaeological artefacts to tools, and from clothing to shamanic ritual objects – and this is not counting the haunting songs that Elizabeth recorded on her wax-cylinder phonograph.¹² In this article we also treat inscriptions – field notes and letters – as yet another type of crafted object. The meaning of artefacts is hotly debated, and has even founded what many see as a new discipline of material-culture studies.¹³ To some extent this debate parallels that of the old question whether materials are things in themselves or are given identity by the human who transformed them. The argument itself could seem arcane to an Evenki or Orochen herder, who might insist instead that a carved idol emplaces a living spirit (Figure 1) much like a shelf emplaces a set of manuscripts (and that neither the material nor the craftsman are relevant). Nevertheless, a collected artefact, much like a photograph, is wielded to assert an authoritative connection to ‘having been there’, and on the whole artefacts have proven to be more successful at stabilizing ideas than alluring words are.

The fieldwork that the Shirokogoroffs conducted was initially designed to fill in gaps for an artefact collection in the Peter the Great Museum of Ethnography and Anthropology. Russian anthropology at the end of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth bore much in common with German *Völkerkunde*. Artefacts, photographs and primary texts served as proxies for key elements that had been identified within different cultures and contributed to the subsequent mapping and classifications of ethnic groups. Sergei had a particular early interest in the analysis of hunting arrows, which he used as an identifier of a community’s position on a social-evolutionary ladder, a concept he later criticized and replaced with a complex relativistic theory of human–environment relations. He was also charged with collecting vocabulary lists in order to help philologists correctly catalogue the languages in this border region. However, his letters and field diaries establish that he quickly grew frustrated with the lack of clarity in the texts and artefacts he and his wife collected. Like a contemporary anthropologist he first chafed over the diversity of mixed cultural and language identities of his interlocutors and guides, and then became obsessed with documenting those mixtures. When working with the unpublished materials of the Shirokogoroffs we initially relied on these photographic proxies both as the representation of cultural and social life in the region and as the way of decoding the collection strategy of the couple. We were captivated by the shadows of the couple within their ethnographic photographs, or the image of Sergei being asked to heal a sick elder in his tent by placing his hand on his chest.¹⁴ However, we found it frustrating that neither the images, nor the written notes or artefacts, seemed to refer to one another or have clear connections to the published works. The photographs themselves seemed to be a work-in-progress as if fieldworkers were choosing what Max Gluckman called ‘cases’ or an ‘apt illustration’ of an event – stories worth telling.¹⁵ The proxies/photographs embody various instances of anthropological inquiry, each capable of

¹² The eighty-eight wax cylinders representing five hours of audio recordings are available online at <https://youtu.be/7tWX9vCP6wM> (recordings of 1912), <https://youtu.be/kVSNho02LOU> (recordings of 1913), https://youtu.be/6103W_yWUPw (recordings of 1915–1917).

¹³ Tim Ingold, ‘Materials against materiality’, *Archaeological Dialogues* (2007) 14(1), pp. 1–16; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010; Ian Hodder, *Entangled*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

¹⁴ Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), Saint Petersburg (subsequently MAE): MAE 2638-7 and 2500-106.

¹⁵ Max Gluckman, ‘Analysis of a social situation in modern Zululand’, *Bantu Studies* (1940) 14(1), pp. 1–30; Gluckman, ‘Ethnographic data in British social anthropology’, *Sociological Review* (1961) 9(1), pp. 5–17.

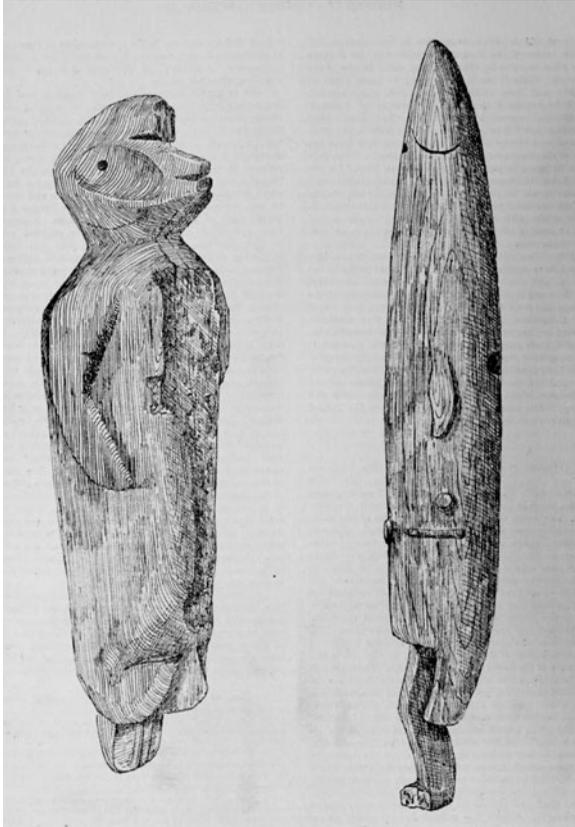


Figure 1. A Tungus 'emplacement monument'. Sergei Shirokogoroff, *Psychomental Complex of the Tungus*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd, 1935, p. 194.

altering the interpretation of preceding images and the anthropologist's comprehension. They transcend mere depictions of physical bodies or artefacts, capturing the ongoing conceptual life history in and beyond the field.

In contrast to our experiences within the archive, the philosophical literature tends to treat proxies as equivalent to an unambiguous mathematical symbol that stands in for a similar value.¹⁶ In comparison, scholars from the rising field of 'big data analysis' point out that proxies 'spark controversy' by subverting such a conventional notion as the archive.¹⁷ In turn, historians of media state that '[p]roxies are intermediaries – they mediate between the practicality of getting work done and the collective, aesthetic, and political work of capturing the world in an instant'.¹⁸ By far the most common use of the word today is in environmental science, where grains of archaeological pollen, or a sliver of ice, serve to represent a complex set of abstract relations like climate.¹⁹ Simon Schaffer asserts in his dialogue with environmental anthropologists that the idea of using visual proxies for distant and difficult-to-reach environmental objects has been a strategy

¹⁶ Luciano Floridi, 'A proxy culture', *Philosophy & Technology* (2015) 28(4), pp. 487–90.

¹⁷ Wendy Chun, Boaz Levin and Vera Tollmann, 'Proxies', in Nanna Thylstrup, Daniela Agostinho, Annie Ring, Catherine D'Ignazio and Kristin Veel (eds.), *Uncertain Archives*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021, pp. 419–25.

¹⁸ Dylan Mulvin, *Proxies*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021, p. 5. See also Langdon Winner, 'Do artifacts have politics?', *Daedalus* (1980) 109(1), pp. 121–36.

¹⁹ Christoph Rosol, 'Data, models and earth history in deep convolution: paleoclimate simulations and their epistemological unrest', *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* (2017) 40(2), pp. 120–39.

since at least the time of Humboldt.²⁰ But ethnographic fieldwork proxies, by contrast, are ‘much more messier and open-ended’ than laboratory or climate proxies and deserve to be treated differently.²¹

In anthropology, or at least with these anthropologists, proxies seem to be projects started but not completed – a set of signs and images that are pointing in a certain direction but never seem to arrive at their destination. It is this fetishist momentum which haunts the story of the Shirokogoroff archive(s), much like Evenki spirit masters haunt some of their artefacts sitting in state museums or abandoned in attics in their houses in remote Siberian villages.²²

Stranded collections

On 19 October 1939, Sergei Shirokogoroff unexpectedly died of a heart attack at his home in Japanese-occupied Beijing, and was buried at the Russian cemetery in the city’s Foreign Quarter. Just before his death, Shirokogoroff had bitterly regretted that part of his manuscript collection was stranded in Petrograd ‘in the Committee’s cabinet’.²³ That wooden cabinet – like Chekhov’s much-honoured bookcase – contained a collection of handwritten manuscripts which had been compiled following a series of expeditions to visit Orochens, Evenkis, Buriats and Manchus in 1912, 1913 and 1917. It also represented a serious source of concern. Shirokogoroff was anxious that young Soviet ethnographers would misquote or misuse his data.

Struck with grief, Sergei’s widow Elizabeth struggled to publish their collective work (under the name of her husband). She compiled lists of manuscripts and offered them to publishers worldwide, including an index to Sergei’s ‘archive’ – which teasingly suggested that a well-organized archive of the couple existed. A published photograph from about this time shows Sergei Shirokogoroff sitting in front of another honoured wooden shelf holding folders (perhaps containing his manuscripts) and books.²⁴ Elizabeth passed away at their home four years later on 23 November 1943 in the midst of the battles to regain control of Beijing. Nikolai Speshnev (1931–2011), a famous Russian–Chinese translator living in Beijing, captured the mood:

At the time, [everyone] felt that the most important goal was to preserve the priceless archive of the scholar [Sergei Shirokogoroff] – and to prevent it from falling into the hands of the Japanese. Towards this end, my sister with my father spent several nights creating an inventory of the books and works in the enormous archive of S.M. Shirokogoroff. This list was later secretly sent to [Ivan] Patrikeev at the [Russian] general consulate.²⁵

²⁰ Hildegard Diemberger *et al.*, ‘Communicating climate knowledge: proxies, processes, politics’, *Current Anthropology* (2012) 53(2), pp. 226–44.

²¹ Jeff Kochan, ‘Objective styles in northern field science’, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A* (2015) 52, pp. 1–12.

²² Anatoliĭ Mazin, *Traditsionnye verovaniia i obriady évenkov-orochonov (konets XIX–nachalo XX v.)*, Novosibirsk: Nauka, 1984, p. 32.

²³ See the letter of Sergei Shirokogoroff to Władysław Kotwicz, 24 February 1931, Scientific Library Polish Academy of Sciences, Kraków, 4600/7: 30–1. The cabinet in question belonged to the Committee for the Preparation of an Ethnographic Map of Russia – a subcommittee of the Imperial Russian Geographic Society.

²⁴ The photograph was published as a frontispiece to the Japanese-language edition of the *Social Organisation of the Northern Tungus*. See Sergei Shirokogorov, 北方ツングースの社会構成 *Hoppō tsungūsu no shakai kōsei* (Social Organization of the Northern Tungus), Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1941.

²⁵ Nikolai Speshnev, *Pekin: strana moego detstva. Kitaïskaia rapsodiia. Zapiski sinkhronnogo perevodchika*, St Petersburg: Bel’veder, 2004, 217.

This inventory has never been found, but the stories of its existence have fuelled a parallel search for ‘the Shirokogoroff archive’ by Russian sinologists that to some extent continues today.²⁶ This absent archive seems to fuel the aspirations of Russian nationalists in the twenty-first century who read into the work of Shirokogoroff and his theories of ethnicity (*etnos*) a promise of a non-Bolshevik future for the Russian state.²⁷

Our scene now shifts from occupied Beijing to the city of Aberdeen in north-eastern Scotland in 2014. Both of us were sitting in our project office immersed in matching proxy thumbnail images of field photographs to digital copies of manuscripts. David’s office landline unexpectedly rings, and an excited voice starts listing copies of letters and manuscripts. David puts down the telephone, and with a puzzled expression, announces, ‘I was just contacted by a man by the name of Don Tumasonis. He is an American living in Norway who used to be a student of Fredrik Barth. He claims that he has Shirokogoroff’s field notes.’ It emerged that in 1974, at the behest of the renowned Norwegian ethnographer of East Asia Fredrik Barth (1928–2016), Donald Tumasonis (1945–2022) had also set out to collect a detailed account of the Shirokogoroffs’ fieldwork. Working from a desk at the University Library in Oslo, he had received more than 350 letters from former friends and colleagues of the Shirokogoroffs from around the world – acquisitions which were often followed up with telephone or in-person interviews. One intriguing item was a faded photocopy of a handwritten, leather-bound notebook, the pages of which seemed to be in Sergei Shirokogoroff’s hand, which offered an index to the glass-plate negative collection we happened to be working on.²⁸ All of these letters and photocopies, the seventy-year-old Don told us, were housed in a special shelf in his home in Oslo.²⁹ This was yet another cabinet and another archive, assembled to elucidate the interest of Scandinavian ethnographers in ethnic boundaries.³⁰

At first glance, these stories point to separate attempts to assemble collections representing the lifework of Sergei and Elizabeth Shirokogoroff. Naively, we felt that each partial collection would help contextualize the others, and therefore yield a more complete picture. It was much later in the project that we realized that each partial collection had come to lead a life of its own – and that many of these paper lives pointed in opposite directions.

²⁶ Soon after the Soviet army helped to reclaim Beijing, Moscow sinologist and diplomat Sergei Tikhvinskii (1918–2018), at the request of Shirokogoroff’s friend Vasilii Alekseev (1881–1951), started the hunt for Shirokogoroff’s library and papers. See Alexandr Khokhlov, ‘V nachale tvorcheskogo puti’, *Vostochnyi arkhiv* (2008) 18, pp. 85–93. During the height of the Soviet period there were numerous attempts to circulate unpublished translations of Shirokogoroff’s work. Notable attempts to compile a comprehensive archive of his writing in the post-Soviet period since have been attempted by Anatoly Kuznetsov, Aleksandr Reshetov and Anna Sirina. See Sergei Shirokogorov, *Étnograficheskie issledovaniia*, ed. Anatolii Kuznetsov and Alexandr Reshetov, 2 vols., Vladivostok: Izdateľstvo Dal’nevostochnogo universiteta, 2001; Anna Sirina, Vladimir N. Davydov, Olga A. Povoroznyuk and Veronika V. Simonova, ‘S.M. Shirokogorov i ego kniga “Sotsial’naia organizatsiia severnykh tungusov”: istoriia sozdaniia i perevoda, struktura, interpretatsii’, in Sergei Shirokogorov, *Sotsial’naia organizatsiia severnykh tungusov*, Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 2017, pp. 676–706.

²⁷ Dugin, op. cit. (2); Mark Bassin, *The Gumilev Mystique*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016.

²⁸ MAE 2002, 2500, 2638, 2639, 2825.

²⁹ After the death of Don in 2022, his collection was handed over to Dmitry Arzyutov by his widow, Tone Rolstad. Once the collection is fully annotated, it will be donated to one of the university libraries in the USA, Don’s homeland.

³⁰ Fredrik Barth’s most famous work on ethnic boundaries presents terms and examples which are stunningly similar to how Shirokogoroff wrote about the *etnos*. Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969. Carlo Ginzburg often cites the pioneering relativism of Shirokogoroff’s account of shamanism. Carlo Ginzburg, ‘Travelling in spirit: from Friuli to Siberia’, in Peter Jackson (ed.), *Horizons of Shamanism*, Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2016, pp. 35–51. An interview with the historical anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1930–2021) documents his curiosity with Shirokogoroff’s description of shamanic worlds. ‘An interview of the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins in 6 June 2013, Prof Alan Macfarlane – Ayabaya (Cambridge, 2014)’, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIDBHsKzAAg.

Each was physically localized by a cabinet, case or shelf. However, each collection was often assembled to prove a different argument – and to some degree continued those quests even when cut off from their authors. Sergei’s stranded manuscript and photographic archive in Soviet Leningrad was assembled in order to tease out the unique racial identity of East Asian reindeer pastoralists living at the boundary between Russia and China, but was more often than not used to group these peoples together within a larger unity.³¹ The much-coveted, and seemingly fragmented, archive from occupied Beijing likely was assembled by the Shirokogoroffs to illustrate their developing biosocial theory of the *ethnos*, but was thought by political agents to hold the key to a source of social power.³² The letters and some manuscripts in the archive enthusiastically collected by Donald Tumasonis illustrate the forgotten history of the transnational development of ideas of ethnicity. They demonstrate the global influence that Shirokogoroff had on both liberal and fascist thinkers, showing how their work was interpreted and used by these opposing camps of social thought.³³

To describe the very different lives being led by these archives, we find Marilyn Strathern’s concept of partial connections to be useful.³⁴ Strathern’s concept was designed to try to contextualize the notion of the individual within the complex contexts of kinship relations in Melanesia and in England, where a person is assembled through different social, material, spatial and temporal identities. Our examples here are of collections that also have tangled or competing genealogies. Moreover, they are enlivened by their own life trajectories as part of a project which may only have been partly fulfilled by their authors and which often were taken over by students or critics of the Shirokogoroffs in later years. Instead of seeing archives localized as ‘a place of becoming’ and an ‘event’ we draw attention to the critical potential of ‘non-events’ – what Raymond D. Fogelson describes as the event ‘that never happened, but could have occurred, or ... should have occurred’.³⁵ With this archive, or perhaps with all archives, many of the fragments were never really assembled (and some were perhaps never written). Taking Fogelson one step further, we also find evidence that these incomplete collections are often taken by their curators in directions that the original collectors could never have anticipated – and therefore perhaps are brought to participate in what shouldn’t have occurred. The globally scattered and ill-connected parts of the archive of the Shirokogoroffs allow us today to reveal those entanglements between the ‘original’ and the ‘copy’, the ‘part’ and the ‘whole’, which lived multiple lives. All of this makes the idea of the archive – as an event localized in time and space – elusive.

Paper prints of glass-plate proxies

While the Shirokogoroffs are unarguably best known to sinologists, anthropologists and historians through their published work, it is important to note that – unusually for

³¹ David Anderson, ‘Notes from his “snail’s shell”’, in David Anderson, Dmitry V. Arzyutov and Sergei S. Alymov (eds.), *Life Histories of Ethnos Theory in Russia and Beyond*, Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2019, pp. 203–47.

³² Shirokogoroff defined the *ethnos* in the following way, ‘a group of people, speaking a common language who recognise their common origin, and who display a coherent set [*kompleks*] of habits [*obychai*], lifestyle [*uklad zhizni*], and a set of traditions that they protect and worship. [They further] distinguish these [qualities] from those of other groups. This, in fact, is the *ethnic unit* – the object of scientific ethnography’. Sergei Shirokogorov, *Ėtnos*, Shanghai: Sibpress, 1923, p. 13, italics added.

³³ David G. Anderson and Dmitry V. Arzyutov. ‘The ethnos archipelago: Sergei M. Shirokogoroff and the life history of a controversial anthropological concept’, *Current Anthropology* (2019) 60(6), pp. 741–73.

³⁴ Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988; Strathern, *After Nature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992; Strathern, op. cit. (10).

³⁵ Raymond Fogelson, ‘The ethnohistory of events and nonevents’, *Ethnohistory* (1989) 36(2), pp. 133–47, 142. See also Maria Tamboukou, ‘Traces in the archive: re-imagining Sofia Kovalevskaya’, *Life Writing* (2022) 19(3), pp. 341–56.

their time – these works were richly illustrated with line drawings, diagrams and the odd coloured lithograph. Their printed visual legacy rested upon a remarkable collection of photographs – or, more correctly, a set of boxes of stereographic glass-plate negatives likely taken using a Richard Verascope.³⁶ Elizabeth Edwards theorizes the colonial photograph as a ‘virtual witness’ which plays a subordinate role in power relationships: ‘Photographs closed the space between the site of observation on the colonial periphery and the site of metropolitan interpretation’.³⁷ There is an element of truth to this if we think of the life histories of the images. The images were precursors to the development of the ‘ethno-eye’ – a strikingly ocular and descriptive way that Soviet ethnographers used to describe their informants.³⁸

However, we think that it is important here to pause to think about the material qualities of these visual proxies. The glass plates themselves were clumsy. They were difficult to print, difficult to view, heavy to move, and fragile. These plates, over 980 in number, were taken during their expeditions in 1912, 1913 and 1915–17, and almost from the beginning were rarely consulted also due to the political situation in Russia at the time. When the couple left St Petersburg in 1917, it was to take up residence in the anti-Bolshevik enclave of Vladivostok: when they moved on to nationalist China, they came to be associated with White or counterrevolutionary emigrants. By 2009, the *Kunstkamera* museum in Saint Petersburg had long lost the capacity to make contact prints from the glass slides, let alone to make enlargements. To return to Edwards, they ‘could’ close the space between subject and object, but much like field notes themselves they spent much of their time locked in their boxes.³⁹ For more than a century the collection was instead consulted through a set of low-resolution and faded contact prints pasted on index cards (Figure 2). Instead of making visible the colonial relationship, the Shirokogoroffs’ glass-plate collections served as ‘potential witnesses’.

When we ‘rediscovered’ the neglected collection in St Petersburg in 2009, our first task was to use a flatbed scanner to create high-resolution copies of the entire collection.⁴⁰ Our naive and positivistic goal was to allow the images to be viewed next to the published work, thus enriching an understanding of the texts. We also digitized the images, made them available online and sent back copies to source communities. Once we could easily consult the collection, we immediately had the nagging feeling that we had seen some of the images before. It turned out that several images had been published, often without attribution, in a number of well-known and classic works – also, completely unexpectedly, in a book written by a military agent.⁴¹

In trying to understand this silent and unattributed circulation of images, we realized that the lacklustre index cards had once served a purpose. Painstakingly assembled and then hand-annotated with enigmatic one-word titles, the cards bore catalogue numbers, which meant that they could serve as a finding aid to access the glass-plate originals. The annotations likely were compiled by a museum cataloguer decades after the deaths of the

³⁶ Jérôme Bourgon, ‘Obscene vignette of truth: constructing photographs of Chinese executions as historical documents’, in Christian Henriot and Yeh Wen-hsin (eds.), *Visualising China, 1845–1965*, Leiden: Brill, 2013, pp. 39–92, 65–6.

³⁷ Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories*, Oxford: Berg, 2001, pp. 32, 187.

³⁸ Dmitry Arzyutov, ‘Ethno-eye’, *Russian Review* (2022) 81(4), pp. 49–52.

³⁹ Edwards, op. cit. (37).

⁴⁰ The digitization project involved a collaboration with the Department of Siberian Ethnography at MAE. This was one of the first photographic digitization projects in the museum. The images can be viewed at <http://collection.kunstkamera.ru/en/entity/OBJECT?query=Shirokogorov&fund=44>, as well as at <https://homepages.abdn.ac.uk/etnos>.

⁴¹ Marie Czaplicka, *Aboriginal Siberia*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914, plates 10–15; Maxim Levin and Leonid Potapov (eds.), *The Peoples of Siberia*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964, p. 643. See also Shirokogoroffs’ images in this unexpected book: Ivar Lissner, *Man, God, and Magic*, London: Johathan Cape, 1961, plate 22.



Figure 2. An index card made up of contact prints from a Verascope glass-plate negative. Photograph by Jocelyne Dudding, 2015.

Shirokogoroffs, who chose to describe the images in the most abbreviated and functional manner. This, it would seem, helped the photographs to rise above the political controversies connected with their creators. In short, the cards themselves had become proxies which served to insulate, simplify and decontextualize the images – arguably the opposite of the reason the Shirokogoroffs had had for making the collection.

From what we can reconstruct, the Shirokogoroffs had used the camera for many different purposes. The government committee which originally supported the Shirokogoroffs was particularly interested in grouping the people of the region together, first on the basis of language, then according to physical form, and finally by material culture. The state-of-the-art equipment that the Shirokogoroffs were given reflected these goals: an Edison phonograph to record songs and voices, accurate callipers to measure skulls, the Richardson Verascope to record profiles, and finally a budget to procure and ship material artefacts. The couple collected recordings, measurements and images accordingly.⁴² Statistically, the largest number of images are inspired by physical anthropological portraiture, with subjects sitting in profile and facing the camera – often wearing traditional clothing out of season and context (Figure 3).⁴³ However, there are a large number of photographs documenting their travels illustrating landscapes, dwellings and everyday life. A substantial number seem simply to be snapshots of the Shirokogoroffs on a journey together. Given his reputation in the West as a scholar of

⁴² Dmitry Arzyutov, 'Nabliudaia za nabliudateliami: o vizual'nykh tekhnikakh teoretizirovaniia Sergeia i Elizavety Shirokogorovykh', *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie*, (2017) 5, pp. 32–52, 33.

⁴³ As one helpful reviewer pointed out, many of the images fail as racial science because the physical body is often concealed under clothing and there is no scale. It is likely that he and Elizabeth adopted a classic pose, sabotaging it by dressing their subjects up.



Figure 3. ‘Anthropological views’: Orochens of Povamiskii ulus, Zabaikailaskaia oblast’, Siberia (MAE 2002–92).

shamanistic belief, we were surprised, and a little disappointed, that a very small number – less than fifty – documented shamans or shamanic objects.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Shirokogoroff, *op. cit.* (1).

It is clear from their own notes and indices, including the mysterious squares, crosses and circles that they etched into the glass, that both Shirokogoroffs organized the images using an exploratory logic that one might describe as ‘people emplaced’. Their written notes organized images by place, by date and then by what one might call sets or views:

landscapes – 8 negatives
 typical males – 12 negatives
 views of streets and houses – 12 negatives.⁴⁵

These ‘views’ seemed to work in an exploratory manner, helping the couple to document places and the relation between people, their horses and reindeer, and the environment. Ten years later, Sergei would experiment with a theory of identity where self-identity was linked to something he called ‘milieu’, which can be interpreted as a precursor to a landscape theory of identity.⁴⁶ Given the hegemony of singular *ethnos* identities in the museum today, it is surprising to us that the original photographers did not (yet) order these images according to ethnic units. Instead, they were read as proxies of place, of gender and of travel itself. It would be up to the nameless Soviet-era curator in Leningrad, twenty years later, to place ethnic titles on the collection and subtly nudge the interpretation of the collection in a new direction.

Handmade proxies and Soviet *samizdat* culture

Photographic proxies were not the only artefacts used as stand-ins for direct social experience. For almost eighty years, the published and unpublished written work of the Shirokogoroffs was circulated among ethnographers and archaeologists in the former Soviet Union in the format of handmade proxies. These ‘self-published’ representations of texts were known since the 1950s as *samizdat* in Russian (literally ‘self-published’).⁴⁷ *Samizdat* proxies permeated the hidden intellectual life of Soviet scholars. Metropolitan intellectuals, out of their desire to read both censored and discouraged works, retyped the copies of such works and spread them through their circles of acquaintances. A significant artefact of these informal networks can be found in publications as oblique references to ‘forgotten’ predecessors, or as a turn of phrase, without citation, that ‘everybody’ already knew was associated with a scholar who had fallen out of favour. The field of Tungus ethnography and linguistics was built on the circulation of photocopies and second-hand summaries of the Shirokogoroffs’ work. As we will show in this final part of the article, these were proxies which amplified and to some extent replaced their work, unlike the official index cards discussed earlier, which deflected their authorship.

There were several stages in the development of these circuits of citation by proxy. As mentioned above, as soon as the Shirokogoroffs left revolutionary Petrograd for anti-Bolshevik Vladivostok, their former colleagues started collecting and cataloguing manuscripts which they left behind. The central figure in the chaotic curation of these works was Dmitrii Zelenin (1878–1954), a prominent Slavophile ethnographer who greedily, but messily, gathered together the couple’s manuscript archive into a trove of misnumbered folders. For generations, this collection served as a source for unattributable citation. This hearsay quotation of unpublished work was instigated by the Siberian-born Aleksei Okladnikov (1908–81), who upon arrival in Leningrad in 1936 immediately went to work with Zelenin’s ‘much-honoured bookcase’.⁴⁸ Okladnikov, a famous

⁴⁵ Personal archive of Donald Tumasonis, Norway.

⁴⁶ Sergei Shirokogoroff, *Ethnical Unit and Milieu*, Shanghai: E. Evans and Sons, 1924.

⁴⁷ Ann Komaromi, ‘The material existence of Soviet *samizdat*’, *Slavic Review* (2004) 63(3), pp. 597–618.

⁴⁸ Saint Petersburg Branch of the Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Saint Petersburg (subsequently SPF ARAN), 142/1(1936)/38: 256.

archaeologist of south-eastern Siberia, likely was searching for insights which might help him to recentre the ancient migrations of Tungus within the boundaries of the contemporary Soviet state. Simultaneously, however, while Okladnikov was trying to make sense of Shirokogoroff's messy, discarded drafts, Shirokogoroff himself was reworking and translating either remembered passages or a second set of proxy copies, to compile his own English-language publications to prove the exact opposite – that Tungus origins lay outside the Soviet Union and that Tungus were a 'leading *ethnos*' of East Asia.⁴⁹ The stranded manuscripts and their proxies thus moved in opposite directions. Okladnikov eventually published his analysis of Shirokogoroff's work much later, in 1950, in the leading Soviet ethnographic journal.⁵⁰ Written at the peak of Stalin's nationalism, it predictably criticized Shirokogoroff for his suggestion that Tungus originated deep within what would become the People's Republic of China, identifying him as an ideological enemy of Soviet archaeologists and anthropologists.

Shirokogoroff himself had taken care to send copies of his English-language publications to the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography in Leningrad. These publications were translated locally into Russian. Never published in the Soviet era, they were branded 'for internal use only' and were not for general circulation. Nevertheless, the list of readers who consulted the texts reads like a history of Soviet ethnography.⁵¹ Those translations of Shirokogoroff's published works, painstakingly typed and hand-bound, evoke memories of the famous Soviet *samizdat* culture. They emerged as potent tools in building academic theories, yet also posed significant threats to those who circulated them. A year after Okladnikov's article was published, the distinguished Soviet ethnographer of Tungus-speaking peoples Glafira Vasilevich (1895–1971) was arrested.⁵² Thanks to another proxy, we are aware that one of the reasons for her arrest was the fact that she kept copies of Shirokogoroff's work at home. The vacant academic position of the imprisoned Vasilevich was filled by the young ethnographer of Tungus Anna Smolyak (1920–2003). Smolyak not only kept working on similar topics to Vasilevich but also (secretly) translated the English-language works of Shirokogoroff.⁵³ She would go on to publish her idea of Tungus shamanic personality, which also happened to reflect one of the central themes of Shirokogoroff's *Psychomental Complex*.⁵⁴

A major forum for circulating ideas by proxy was informal debate in the smoke-filled corridors of academic campuses following a lecture. Mikhail Kriukov recalled that young ethnographers were searching for new concepts to counter the epistemic totalitarianism of Stalin's concept of the nation. What better concept to use than *ethnos*, a slightly forbidden term which merged local identity with stable patterns of material culture? That seminar effectively played a formative role for Iulian Bromlei (1921–1990), a historian of Yugoslavia who became the director of the Institute of Ethnography at the height of

⁴⁹ Sergei Shirokogoroff, 'Who are the northern Chinese?', *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1924) 55, pp. 1–13; Shirokogoroff, 'Northern Tungus migrations in the Far East', *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1926), 57, pp. 123–83. Okladnikov's archival research centred around one of Shirokogoroff's 1915–16 archaeological field diaries, which was filed in the Zelenin collection. SPF ARAN, 849/5/807.

⁵⁰ Aleksei Okladnikov, 'K izucheniui nachal'nykh etapov formirovaniia narodov Sibiri', *Sovetskaia étnografiia* (1950) 2, pp. 36–52.

⁵¹ Archive of MAE, K-II/1/214, 215, 216. A group of Russian anthropologists has recently published one of those translations. Shirokogorov, *Sotsial'naia organizatsiia severnykh tungusov*, op. cit. (26).

⁵² Nadezhda Ermolova, 'Tungusoved Glafira Makar'evna Vasilevich', in Daniil Tumarkin (ed.), *Repressirovannye étnografy*, vol. 2, Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 2003, pp. 10–46.

⁵³ Archive of the Institute of Anthropology and Ethnology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, 49/14/1/1, 2, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12 13 and 49/20/1/1.

⁵⁴ Anna Smolyak, *Shaman: Lichnost', funktsii, mirovozzrenie*, Moscow: Nauka, 1991.

the Cold War in 1966. Bromlei's name is today tightly associated with the concept of *ethnos*, which in late Soviet works is presented as a stable and unchangeable cultural core which retains its features throughout historical revolutions and change.⁵⁵ There could be no deeper irony than that an identity concept which Shirokogoroff clearly rooted in the ecological milieu and the reflexive negotiations of boundaries, could become its complete opposite – a theory which justified the solid boundaries of Soviet nationality policy.

The remarkable thing about samizdat proxies was not the degree to which they were authentic copies, but the authority that they carried in circulation. The opportunity to spend a few nights with an unauthorized manuscript in Soviet times was understood to be a gift of inspiration – a type of initiation into secret and powerful knowledge. The meaning of these handmade proxies was not so much in its contents as in the relationships which governed its circulation.

Mimeographed proxies beyond the Iron Curtain

While Soviet ethnographers, through whispers, situated the name of Shirokogoroff within Soviet genealogies of science, other scattered versions of his field notes and letters continued living other lives beyond the Iron Curtain. These proxies lacked the intimacy of samizdat which was painstakingly typed up by hand and circulated personally from friend to trusted friend. Although often also handwritten, these overseas proxies almost always had a *faux*-published quality where mimeographs or photocopies would be bound and circulated as book-like unit of knowledge. In the end the physical qualities of a book – the hard covers and standardized space within – have much in common with the architecture of a shelf. The binding stabilizes a collection of miscellaneous folios which otherwise retain their ambiguity.

One of the key handwritten proxies was *A Tungus Dictionary*.⁵⁶ Since the time of the Shirokogoroffs' first fieldwork among a mixed community of Evenkis, Orochens and Buriats in the Baikal region, they had carefully documented words in local ('Tungus') languages which Elizabeth copied out from her linguistic notebooks onto cards. Upon her death, the catalogue that she had copied onto the large folios of paper fell into the hands of Japanese scholars. The manuscript was brought to Tokyo in the spring of 1943 by a linguistics professor, Tokunaga Yasumoto (1912–2003). Kept in his office desk, it disappeared during the American occupation of the city.⁵⁷ However, prior to this loss, a photogravure of the missing manuscript had been published and put into circulation by the Japanese Ethnological Society. This story of how field conversations were transformed to cards, to a slippery manuscript, and then into a book is again a story of transformation. When Sergei Shirokogoroff first arrived in the Baikal region expecting to hear pure Tungus spoken, he was dismayed by the pitiful local 'jargon'. He did not find this helpful in associating the people speaking it with one or another of the great language families of Eurasia.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Elizabeth dutifully transcribed and documented the terms, writing them all by hand, in alphabetical order, into large folios that became one of the most authoritative dictionaries of Tungus languages in the twentieth century.

⁵⁵ Ernest Gellner, 'The Soviet and the savage', *Current Anthropology* (1975) 16(4), pp. 595–617; Peter Skalník, 'Towards an understanding of Soviet ethnos theory', *South African Journal of Ethnology* (1986) 9(4), pp. 157–66; Yulian Bromley, 'The term ethnos and its definition', in Yulian Bromley (ed.), *Soviet Ethnology and Anthropology Today*, The Hague: Mouton, 1974, pp. 55–72.

⁵⁶ Sergei Shirokogoroff, *A Tungus Dictionary: Tungus-Russian and Russian-Tungus Photogravured from the Manuscripts*, Tokyo: Nippon Minzokugaru Kyokai, 1944.

⁵⁷ Sergei Shirokogoroff and Inoue Kōichi, 'Tungus literary language', *Asian Folklore Studies* (1991) 50(1), pp. 35–66, 38.

⁵⁸ SPF ARAN, 282/2/319: 1–2v.

This article began with the example of another significant photocopied proxy shown to us by Don Tumasonis – a single set of images of one of seven field notebooks which Sergei Shirokogoroff carried in his pocket during his second expedition to Manchuria in 1915–16. This artefact, which consists today of a set of faded photocopies, is surrounded by its own myths and legends. Judging by the description of Don Tumasonis, the original was a leather-bound chapbook with a clasp that held the covers together. Don found it in the collection of the famous French orientalist Alexis Rygaloff (1922–2007) at his *Oriens* bookshop in Paris. It is impossible now to reconstruct the journey of the original, which like the manuscript dictionary has vanished.⁵⁹ Today the only material presence of the notebook is the faded photocopy (now in the possession of the authors) and the digital copy that we made of it.⁶⁰ Full of aspiration ourselves we pored over the photocopy – which was the closest we would ever get to the anthropologist’s presence in the Manchurian settlements. It consisted of phrases, sketches, lists, an index of photographs, accounts of purchases, and addresses. It was not unlike the clothing that one hastily stuffs into a rucksack – crumpled and tangled. We eventually linked some of the sketches to professional drawings published in some of Shirokogoroff’s books (Figure 4).⁶¹ However, the notebook – or at least its photocopy – serves as a memory of our transnational search for the ‘archive of Shirokogoroff’.

Conclusion

Critical scholars of archival collections go beyond the theme of object biographies to examine the way in which objects are ‘haunted’ by overlapping social relationships.⁶² In this article we have taken a page out of Shirokogoroff’s ethnography of Tungus (Evenki) to suggest that collections are invigorated by their emplacement.⁶³ In his early work on Tungus shamanism, Shirokogoroff drew attention to ‘emplacement monuments’ (Rus. *vmestilishcha*; Evenki *burkhan*), by which he meant the carved wooden idols around which (or into which) hunters made offerings to the landscape spirits (Figure 1). In Shirokogoroff’s interpretation, the emplacement monument did not so much contain the spirit imagined or otherwise by a pagan believer, but rather drew attention to itself in a particular social milieu made up of sentient humans and animals. Following Strathern, we tried to show that collections stranded in regional collections and cabinets come to take on a life of their own within a similar social milieu. Instead of being a transcription of reality, we suggested that photographs and notes were made in order to be reflected upon – and that their meaning shifted depending on how they were curated. Archival infrastructure is key to this process. Bookshelves, digital files, handmade proxies and index cards, or what we may call knowledge artefacts: each of these creates meaning through circulation. Sometimes their words and images move in opposite directions from that which their authors might have intended.

⁵⁹ We are grateful to Professor Roberte Hamayon (Paris) who helped us discover the fate of the original notebook. At our request she interviewed the children of Alexis Rygaloff. It would seem that following his death they received his collection of manuscripts, which was divided up amongst the children. Although nobody remembered the notebook itself, it seems that it was discarded along with other papers. How the notebook ended up in Rygaloff’s bookshop is also a mystery. According to Don, it was likely taken by the French consul in Beijing at the period of time when competing imperial powers were dividing up the Shirokogoroff archive.

⁶⁰ It is available online at www.shirokogorov.ru/s-m-shirokogorov/publications/field_diaries_1915-17.

⁶¹ Arzyutov, op. cit. (42).

⁶² Vidali and Phillips, op. cit. (7).

⁶³ Sergei Shirokogorov, ‘Opyt’ issledovaniia osnov shamanstva u tungusov’, in Shirokogorov, *Ucheniia zapiski istoriko-filogicheskogo fakul’teta v Vladivostoke*, vol. 1, Vladivostok: Tipografiia oblastnoi zemskoi upravly, 1919, pp. 82–93; Shirokogoroff, op. cit. (1), pp. 190–3.

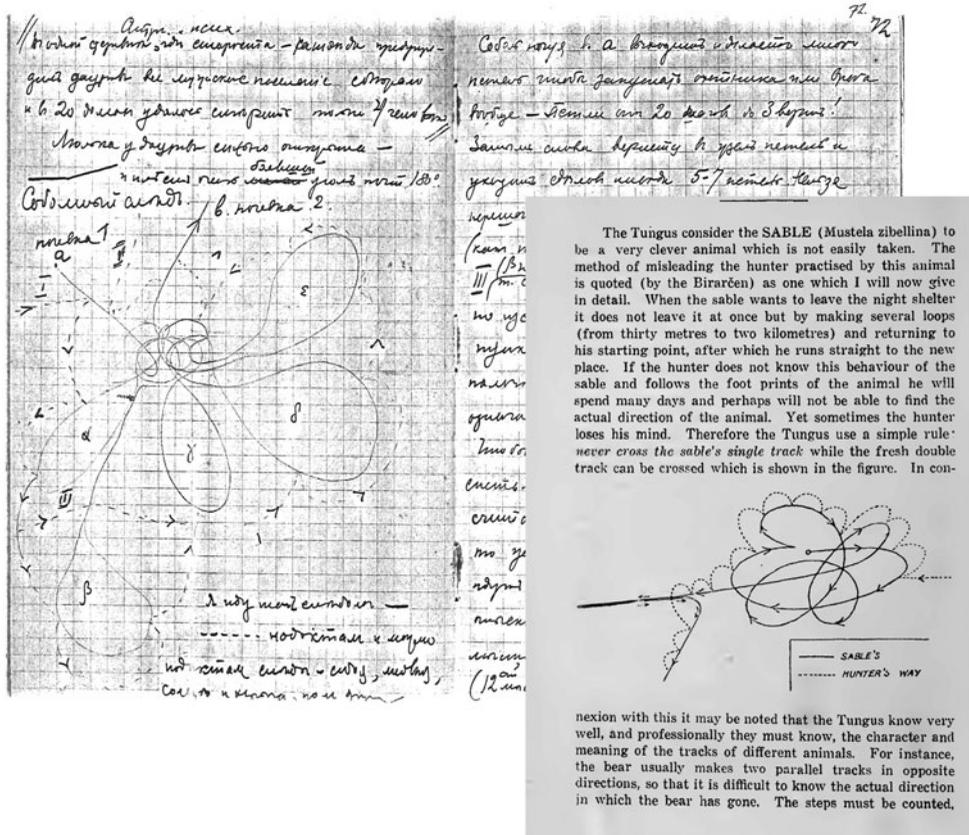


Figure 4. A collage made from two almost identical drawings from Shirokogoroff’s notebook (1915–17, personal archive of Donald Tumasonis) and his book *The Psychomental Complex of the Tungus*, p. 84. It depicts the way a Tungus hunter pursues a sable.

Like the shamans whom the Shirokogoroffs popularized, those of us who read these archives are not bound to follow one or another spirit master. By carefully attending to the collections and entering into a dialogue with it – and perhaps by transforming it using mimeographic or digital technology – we can nudge meanings to move in one or another direction. Not all of this transformative action is successful. We have argued that the Shirokogoroffs used formally staged photography to empower and contextualize mixed Evenki/Manchu/Orochen communities at a time just before these techniques were racialized in an overtly political programme. But there are other spirits lurking in the collections. Shirokogoroff’s name has recently been cited by one of President Putin’s propagandists to describe the *ethnos*-like sense of unity enjoyed by the occupiers of Ukraine.⁶⁴ This unpleasant transformation is just a step or two away from the indifferent museum assistant who summarizes a collection of images with one terse ethnic appellation.

We have suggested that digital technology has the potential to open collections to a wider array of forces – although it is perhaps too early to tell what the results of this experiment might be. Will a website become a ‘much-honoured bookcase’? Digital

⁶⁴ Pavel Tugarinov, ‘Evgenii Prigozhin i etika samuraya’, Geopolitika.RU, 6 October 2022, at www.geopolitika.ru/article/evgeniy-prigozhin-i-etika-samuraya.

technologies make it extremely easy to bring images and texts together, but they can also scramble them. We are often perplexed at how images of Siberian Orochen hunters find their way into Chinese-language websites to illustrate the genealogies and histories of nationalities far away in time and place from their source communities. On the other hand, the original Siberian communities are often gone – swept away in the industrialized rationalizations of collectivization and shifting international borders. Perhaps it is appropriate that the images of these oppressed peoples now inspire younger generations in a different place. The digital infrastructure itself, perhaps like the physical architecture of bookcases and folios, has its own iron rules of resolution, compression, data hierarchy and often timestamps and metadata.⁶⁵ Each of these lends a certain structure and regularity to the data which might defeat the sense of wonder when it was first recorded.

Our conclusion from this experience of working with widely dispersed and difficult-to-read collections is that one often must study the social relationships which generate the archival infrastructure as much as the content of the inscription. Here we draw attention to the power of proxies to nudge meaning and intent in often divergent directions. Specifically, we have suggested, following Edwards, that images can become ‘potential witnesses’ because of the clumsiness of the media (or of the reputation of the photographers). We do not seek to attribute to these shades of meaning a determining quality. Like the shadows of a photographer over their subjects, they point to an aspiration to make an argument which can very likely be subverted through the bemused expression on the faces of those being photographed.

Acknowledgements. This paper sits on the shoulders of a broad network of friends and colleagues. We are grateful for their help and have acknowledged them in the text. We are also grateful for the advice of Jeff Kochan, Amanda Rees and two anonymous reviewers, hopefully bringing it closer to the history-of-science community. A very different version of this article was presented online as a keynote address at the Ab Imperio seminar organized by the Higher School of Economics in St Petersburg in 2021, and then published in *Antropologicheskii forum* (Dmitry Arzyutov and David Anderson, ‘Tselye chasti: transnatsional’nye traektorii arkhivov Sergeia i Elizavety Shirokogorovykh’, *Antropologicheskii forum* (2021) 51, pp. 175–98). Arzyutov’s work was sponsored by the SEEDARC project within Eudaimonia Institute (Oulu, Finland). Anderson’s research is supported by a JPI grant on Arctic Cultural Heritage (AHRC AH/Y000161/1).

⁶⁵ Lilly Koltun, ‘The promise and threat of digital options in an archival age’, *Archivaria* (1999) 47, pp. 114–35; Maarten Blaauw, ‘Out of tune: the dangers of aligning proxy archives’, *Quaternary Science Reviews* (2012) 36, pp. 38–49; Alexandra Ortolja-Baird and Julianne Nyhan, ‘Encoding the haunting of an object catalogue: on the potential of digital technologies to perpetuate or subvert the silence and bias of the early-modern archive’, *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* (2022) 37(3), pp. 844–67.

Cite this article: Arzyutov DV, Anderson DG (2024). Proxies and partial connections in an anthropologist’s archive. *The British Journal for the History of Science* 57, 389–405. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007087424000815>