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'THE LAST KULAK' AND OTHER STORIES OF POST-PRIVATIZATION LIFE IN CHUKOTKA'S TUNDRA

Patty A. Gray

Introduction¹

'... What stories and histories represent or depict is not precisely physical events but human experiences, actions, and sufferings...'

David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*

The Chukchis and Evens of western Chukotka led a nomadic or semi-nomadic way of life for hundreds of years, until mid-twentieth century campaigns by the Soviet state for the most part settled them in permanent villages (Bogoras 1904-09; Bogoras 1918; Nikolaev 1964; Sverdrup 1939; Vdovin 1965; Tugolukov et al. 1997). Settlement did not mean immobility; Chukotkan reindeer herders in the Soviet period continued to migrate with state herds, but were obligated to follow pasture-rotation plans imposed from above, and to work according to a shift method: 12 hours on, 12 hours off, with scheduled trips to their village apartments for periodic breaks from the tundra. Movement of people and supplies eventually became dependent on helicopter transportation, and the easy availability of helicopter flights gave a whole new meaning to nomadic migration. The Soviets brought drastic changes to the lifestyle and social organization of tundra-dwelling Chukotkans, but at least the Soviet state supported the continuation of the one

activity that meant the most to them: herding reindeer. That state support, as well as the ready availability of helicopter transportation, began to break down when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, and a sweeping privatization program was implemented all across Russia. How are these once-nomadic peoples living today in this post-privatization context?

In Chukotka, privatization of the state farms precipitated a crisis in the reindeer herding economy, the details of which have by now been well documented (Gray 2000, 2003; Jernsletten and Klokov 2002; Krupnik 2000; Ulvevadet and Klokov 2004). Chukotka once had the largest domestic reindeer herd in the entire country, and the plummet in Chukotka's reindeer headcounts was steeper than anywhere else in the country. Herds were decimated by an unprecedented convergence of detrimental factors, including wolf predation, mismanagement, repeated icing-over of tundra, opportunistic slaughtering by carpetbagging entrepreneurs, and a startling rise in the wild reindeer population coupled with a change in their migration routes that clashed most unfortunately with domestic reindeer herds. Statistics can tell a vivid story about these changes: The reindeer headcount in Chukotka plummeted from a peak of 540,000 in 1980 to less than 100,000 by 2001;² the number of people employed in reindeer herding dropped from 2,272 in 1976 to 837 in 2001;³ village populations shifted as former herders moved around seeking other employment opportunities. Between 2001 and 2002 alone, 27 out of 38 villages lost inhabitants, some reduced by as much as 80% of their population (the average loss was about 19%).⁴

Statistics alone, however, cannot capture the quality of how the individuals and families represented by these figures experienced these years of rapid change. In this paper, I want to tell a different kind of story, one that complements the statistics and provides glimpses into those experiences. Consequently, I focus very closely on the lives of a handful of individuals out of the many acquaintances I made during my fieldwork. The stories they told me showed a tundra

population that was eager to take on independent management of their reindeer, or if there were no reindeer, then to support themselves and their families by independently hunting and fishing. I encountered everywhere bright, ambitious, capable people who were proving by their very tenacity that they had far more energy and stamina than anyone gave them credit for. Yet, at every turn, their efforts to take more control of their own local situation were stymied by those in the bureaucracy above them who controlled access to the institutional resources they needed to accomplish this self-sufficiency in a practical and legally recognized way. This same bureaucracy also frustrated my own attempts to gain access to the fieldsite I planned to visit, and it was only later that I began see my own frustrations as a window into better understanding what rural Chukotkans were experiencing. My struggle with Chukotka's bureaucracy, brief in duration and ultimately escapable, mirrored the endless, daily struggle faced by the very people I was having such difficulty reaching.

As other papers in this issue show, reindeer herding in some regions of Russia, such as Yamal, is relatively stable. Why are some herders in some regions, such as Chukotka, faring so much worse? The difference is certainly not just a matter of 'native culture', as though there is something deep in the tradition of a people that enables them to better survive rapid change (cf. Stammler 2004). Nor is it solely a matter of the natural environment, which tends to be strongly emphasized in discussions of reindeer and caribou 'systems' (cf. Turi 2000). I would argue that much of the difference between Chukotka and other regions can be attributed to the particular, and very political, nature of the social relationship between local tundra-dwelling populations and the most immediate representative of the state apparatus that they face, the district and administration. In other words, I am arguing that most of the explanations offered for Chukotka's crisis (the botched privatization, the wolf predation, the caribou, etc.) do not really *explain*

anything – but the nature of these social relations and the power differentials embodied in them *does* explain something. In this paper, I seek to characterize the nature of these social relations through the experiences of a selection of residents in one district of Chukotka, Bilibinskii, as those experiences were conveyed to me.

Tilting at Windmills

Everyone read your letter. They very much regret that you did not come. They reminisce about you and ask: ‘And when is Patty coming? Have you seen her? Well, how is she? Have they again prevented her from coming?’

Resident of Kaiettyn,
in a letter of July 2001

In 1995, I began doing fieldwork in the Anadyr’ River basin, from Chukotka’s capital city of Anadyr’ to the village of Snezhnoe about 300 kilometres upriver (Gray 1997, 2000, 2004). In 2000, I decided to shift focus slightly and take up what I intended to be a long-term project in Bilibinskii District, on the western border of Chukotka. I chose this district because I had taken an interest in the *obshchina*⁵ phenomenon in the Russian North, and this was the location of one of Chukotka’s few (and its first) *obshchiny*, established in 1993 at Kaiettyn, a resupply station of the former Omolon state farm. Although the *obshchina* had become a popular alternative form of both land tenure and local self-government for indigenous peoples across Russia (Fondahl 1998; Stammner 2004; Ziker 2002), the *obshchina* movement had curiously not taken root in Chukotka. Only three *obshchiny* had ever been established in Chukotka, and these

three were more or less defunct by 2000 (Gray 2001). There was resistance among regional authorities to supporting *obshchiny*, as will be demonstrated below. The passage of a Russian federal law on *obshchiny*⁶ in July 2000, literally days before my arrival in the field that year, seemed to open new possibilities for Chukotka's rural residents to reach beyond the regional level to find the support they needed to establish *obshchiny* if they wished. Much of the reason for visiting Kaiettyn was to encounter members of a 'real' *obshchina* first hand, learn how they had been operating in this unsupportive context, and find out how the new federal law on *obshchiny* might potentially be changing their outlook.

In principle, I had excellent access to the Kaiettyn community because of my long-standing working relationship with one of its notable citizens, Vladimir Etylin, a Chukchi activist and politician, whose mother and other relatives still lived there. It was one of his cousins, Anna Kutynkeva, who established the *obshchina* at Kaiettyn. Etylin had taken an active role in drafting the federal law on *obshchiny*, and he was eager to support my research on the topic. It seemed like an ideal situation – members of the local community were already aware of my plans and had sent word that they would welcome my arrival. What I did not count on were the layers of local bureaucracy and the political manoeuvring, much of it related to my association with Etylin (who was then in the midst of an opposition campaign for the governor's seat), that would hinder me and turn my two intended visits to Kaiettyn into quixotic quests to simply reach my fieldsite at all. In the end, I was able to spend only two weeks at Kaiettyn during the first trip. The remaining nine weeks of that first trip and all of the second trip were spent in the regional capital (Anadyr') and the district centre (Bilibino), often in the company of the local bureaucrats who held power over my access to transportation to and from the tundra, as well as access to public records about the reorganization of state farms in the district that I wished to study. I petitioned

them almost daily, struggling against their attempts to stonewall me and puzzling over what seemed to me an elaborate and senseless political game.

Although on the one hand I felt it was rather bad luck to be prevented from spending much time with herders at their tundra homes, on the other hand I was fortunate to encounter in Bilibino a rather fluid network of people moving between tundra, village and city on various errands concerning money, administrative matters, and/or getting medical treatment, a network I would have been otherwise unaware of. Thus, I could always find people in the city freshly arrived from the tundra who were full of stories to tell, or others who were stuck in the city and desperately trying to return to the tundra, and who welcomed a chance to share their frustrations. In the city, I also encountered what was locally called the 'Native intelligentsia,' indigenous urbanites who had their own insights into the political manoeuvrings of the local administration. As word spread around the city that I was interested in the concerns of tundra dwellers, I was invited to parties and other social events or just to tea, and I had many opportunities to interview people, both formally and informally. In fact, some of the most compelling stories I heard were not those told to me in the log cabins at Kaiettyn, but rather those told to me in the concrete block apartments in Bilibino, the district centre. One of the most consistent themes in these stories was the colossal effort required to wade through layers and layers of bureaucracy, which people faced with a patience that far exceeded my own.

Travails of Transportation

With difficulty I flew from Bilibino to Kaiettyn. All June I went to the administration and to the department of education, so that they would take me on the helicopter. I was refused everywhere. Shul'gin crossed me altogether off every list, even though I was listed as a specialist.

Resident of Kaiettyn,
in a letter of July 2001

I first arrived in Bilibino, the district centre of Bilibinskii district, in July 2000. This was as far as I would be able to get on public transportation – Kaiettyn could be reached only overland (a rugged trip that took days) or by helicopter (a quick trip, but there were no scheduled flights to Kaiettyn). The one helicopter controlled by the district administration flew infrequently and unpredictably, at the pleasure of the administration, and there was inevitably a backlog of hopeful travellers trying to secure a spot on the next available flight. I would be dependent – as were all residents of villages in the district – on the local administration to arrange and provide my transportation. I was advised to personally petition the head of the district administration, Valerii Nikolaevich Shul'gin, with my request to be taken to Kaiettyn. Shul'gin heard my petition, and perhaps because I was accompanied by Anna Kutynkeva (who was also a deputy in the regional legislature at the time), he immediately picked up the phone and made a show of ordering a helicopter. ‘There you go,’ he said as he hung up the phone, ‘a helicopter will take you to Kaiettyn in one week’. In fact, it would be two weeks before that helicopter took me or anyone to Kaiettyn, after a week of almost daily cancellations and promises that the helicopter would go ‘tomorrow’. A later confession to me by Shul’gin himself, made in a moment of unprecedented candour, revealed that the delays had been deliberately and politically motivated because of my affiliation with Etylin.

During those two weeks, I made a daily pilgrimage to the administration building, determined that the helicopter should go nowhere without me and that my presence should be a constant reminder that *I* would not go away until I was sent away on the helicopter. As it turned out, I was not the only one who had adopted this gad-fly strategy, and I encountered other fellow would-be travellers on my rounds. I formed an alliance with one of these, Grigory,⁷ who had come to Bilibino to manage some financial affairs and who had been waiting far longer than I to return to his family at Kaiettyn. We exchanged the addresses and phone numbers of our temporary digs in the city, and made a pact with each other: whoever got word first that a helicopter was really leaving for Kaiettyn would call and alert the other. When the helicopter did finally go, it was I who tipped off Grigory with a phone call; but in the meantime, Grigory tipped off several of his acquaintances in the city to my presence, which helped draw me into the network of displaced tundra dwellers whose frustration I was just beginning to comprehend. Travel woes, which loomed so large for me and seemed such an insurmountable difficulty, turned out to be the least of their problems.

Tundroviki and the District Nachal'niki

To be honest, we must confess that we're hoping to get some help from you. It's been almost a year since we established the obshchina, and we're sooner standing in place than moving ahead. We are lacking specialists, like a lawyer, an economist, a bookkeeper. How do non-commercial organizations abroad that are similar to us find a way out of such a situation? Maybe we could work with some kind of foundation.

Residents of Keperveem

in an e-mail message of February 2002

One of Grigory's connections led to my acquaintance with a group of young men from Keperveem, current and former reindeer herders related by a mixture of kinship and friendship, who were seeking stability for themselves and a way to support Keperveem residents who had no way to support themselves (such as single mothers, invalids, and pensioners). I was invited to the Bilibino apartment of Roman,⁸ who allowed his residence to be used as something like a dormitory for the men when they were in Bilibino. The apartment was crowded when I arrived. These men had all grown up in Keperveem and went to the residential school together, and now they were engaging in cooperative hunting and fishing together, getting out to the tundra whenever they could. Most of them had other jobs, but they spent their vacations working together to store up meat and fish. I asked them if they had registered themselves as a *fermerskoe khoziaistvo*,⁹ and they said no, because then they would have to pay taxes, and they worked primarily for subsistence. They had no reindeer, but they said their dream was to re-establish a herd, because reindeer was the future for *tundroviki*, those who live and work in the tundra.

I sat for hours with them at their kitchen table as they plied me with questions about how Native people managed their lives in Alaska. I asked them if they had considered establishing an *obshchina*, but they said they had no idea how this could be done. I asked them why they did not go to the district administration and ask for information and even ask to see a copy of the new federal law on *obshchina*, but they said it was hard to find out anything from the *nachal'niki* ('the ones in charge'). As an example, Roman described how he had called to the administration to find out where I could be reached, but was stonewalled. 'What do you need her for?' was the only reply to his request. I then asked what would happen if they went to the administration and

asked to see laws that were relevant to them, and he said it would be the same: ‘They’d say, “What do you need that information for?”’ The story of these young men illustrates well the basic dilemma of the *tundroviki* of Bilibinskii district: having the desire, and even the ready personnel, to strike out independently was not enough – one had to get past the *nachal’niki*, and for *tundroviki*, that was nearly impossible.

For their part, the *nachal’niki* had a plan to manage the increasingly destitute tundra population. Since 1998, the regional Department of Agriculture had embarked on a program to convert all Chukotkan reindeer herding operations to municipal ownership, to be managed by the districts. The program required that the district hold at least a 51% share of assets in each herding operation, what was called the *kontrol’nyi paket* (‘controlling package’ of shares, i.e. just enough of a majority to control decision making in the enterprise). Small, family herding operations of just a few hundred reindeer or less were encouraged to join with larger operations to make for stronger, more easily managed enterprises. One *tundrovik* described to me how this plan was put into action, and his telling was neither the first nor the last time I had heard this story: The governor of Chukotka organized in the capital city what he called a ‘gathering of reindeer herders’ – except that more directors of large reindeer herding operations were in attendance than actual reindeer herders. At this gathering of directors, a plan was unveiled to ‘save’ reindeer herding in Chukotka: if each individual reindeer herding operation, from the larger and relatively successful ones to the small and struggling ones, would voluntarily sign over 51% of its assets to the municipality, it would receive in exchange unlimited support from the administration. The herders could certainly refuse to sign over their assets, but of course, if the municipal administration did not hold any stock interest in an enterprise, so the argument went, then of course it could not provide it with any support. Those present at the gathering overwhelmingly

supported the idea, and it was widely publicized in the media as a decision taken *by the reindeer herders of Chukotka* – glossing over the fact that it was their directors who had spoken for them. The directors, along with representatives of the district administration who had been in attendance, then went back to the herding operations and essentially strong-armed the herders to sign over their reindeer to municipal ownership. The net result of this plan was to wrest control of reindeer herding from the hands of the herders who had broken away from state farms and were operating as *fermerskie khoziaistva*.

In the course of my struggles with district *nachal'niki*, one of them stated forthrightly that the plan was needed because Native herders were incapable of managing their own reindeer herds. Wherever enterprises had been led by Russians, he said, they survived, but wherever Natives had led them, they 'fell to pieces'. It was not the first time I had heard such aspersions cast upon Natives in Chukotka by district or regional-level *nachal'niki*. By the time I had heard it from this *nachal'nik*, one question stood out in my mind: was the success of the Russian managers a self-fulfilling prophecy? Were their herding enterprises successful because they were Russians and therefore better managers, or did the fact that they were Russians mean that they were taken seriously by the Russian-dominated administration and given the support that would assure their success? Conversely, did the Native managers fail because they lacked any aptitude for management or because they were denied, even if not intentionally, adequate support by the administration? Did the stories of bureaucratic stonewalling told by the *tundroviki* attest to this?

The head of the Bilibino district Department of Agriculture provided further insight that partially answered my questions. He insisted privately to me that there were two reasons why the reindeer headcounts had fallen in Chukotka: First, the herders did not bother to go to work. As he put it, the typical herder 'got up that morning to a hard freeze and decided, eh, I'm not going out

there today'. Consequently, the reindeer were left open to wolf attacks with no herders to protect them.¹⁰ Second, the herders simply drank away (*propili*) their reindeer. He summed up the administration's justification for implementing the municipalization plan with this paraphrase of the administration's message: 'Excuse me, guys, if we're going to take on the responsibility [for the herds]. *WE* are going to be in control – otherwise nothing would happen'. Clearly, from his point of view, what needed to happen was to make reindeer herding in Chukotka's tundra more visible and controllable, as it had been in Soviet times, and small herds managed by independent tundra dwellers, such as Roman and his friends, did not fit the needs of bureaucratic control.

Kaiettyn

Our school has been closed for one year because there is no teacher. There's no fuel for the diesel electric station, and even the kerosene lamps can't be refuelled. The tractor is broken. It's a good thing that Strauzov at least brought some petrol. Today Viktor brought us raw firewood. We've been sitting without dry or raw firewood. The corral that you shot with your video camera was already taken apart last year for firewood. And that little corral next to the Zaporotsky's house, I took that apart myself. That's how we are living.

Resident of Kaiettyn,
in a letter dated November 2001

Kaiettyn is so small that it does not even show up on official maps, and it is not recognized as a village within the administrative structure of the district. Kaiettyn was originally built as a way-station for reindeer brigades of the Omolon state farm who pastured their reindeer

more than a day's distance from the village. Most of these brigades had since then broken away from the state farm to form independent *fermerskie khoziaistva*. Anna Kutynkeva, founder of the *obshchina* at Kaiettyn, explained to me how the different brigades tried to organize themselves to manage their own herds independently from the state farm; we sat hunched together over a piece of paper at a kitchen table in Bilibino as she tried to draw a visual representation of the complicated trajectories of the brigades as they split apart, moved around the tundra, sometimes rejoined one another and sometimes splintered further, attempting to find some economic and social stability.

A few years after they split away from the Omolon state farm, three of the now-independent brigades that pastured their reindeer in the vicinity of Kaiettyn decided to jointly hire a manager who they hoped would help them bridge the gap between themselves and the administrative centre, where bureaucratic tasks had to be attended to and where a market for reindeer meat could be accessed. Elizaveta, a Kaiettyn resident who took a particular interest in my research, was the first to explain to me a scenario I would later hear about from many others. The three brigades hired Bartosh, a man they had known for years because he had worked as the economist for the Omolon state farm and who before that had been a deputy to Shul'gin in the district administration). According to Elizaveta, it was Bartosh who actively convinced the brigades to hire him. They entrusted to him their commercial and financial affairs; he had responsibility for transporting and marketing their reindeer meat and banking their profits. This money was to be used for buying groceries and supplies, which Bartosh was responsible for transporting to them.

At first things went well, said Elizaveta, and they had everything they wanted, even chewing gum for the kids. But little by little Bartosh was embezzling their money; he would use

part of it to buy their groceries and supplies, but would also pocket part of it. Eventually, he absconded with everything in the bank account – about 300,000 rubles' worth including social welfare checks for single mothers and pensioners – and fled to Belarus. What goaded Elizaveta most was that the brigades had already begun to suspect him, and had reported it to the police in Bilibino. The police claimed to be looking into the matter, but somehow Bartosh managed to escape on a scheduled airliner to Moscow. Even worse, Bartosh returned a year later to Bilibino – he had apparently become a *kommersant*, one who buys products cheaply in the Russian mainland and transports them to sell at a high mark-up in the regions of the Far North. He managed to sell his load in Bilibino and fly off again, without being apprehended.

After Bartosh left, the three brigades were left destitute. District records show that in July 1998, a 51% share of the property of the three brigades was legally signed over to the district in accordance with the new municipalization plan. The district appointed a manager, a former professional hunter at the Omolon state farm who had actually worked as Bartosh's assistant in the management of the independent brigades but had been fired by him. By the time I arrived in 2000, this new manager had stabilized the situation at Kaiettyn and had consolidated the herds of three brigades into one. What the brigades had lost in the process was control over their own activities – the shots were now being called by the district.

Many of the people at Kaiettyn spoke admiringly of Strauzov, saying he was fair and hard-working, and that he had definitely improved things. However, not all of Kaiettyn's residents were so satisfied with the situation; some felt they were being involuntarily forced to submit to the new manager's control, and they longed to extract themselves from this predicament. I spoke to two families who intended to cut ties with Strauzov and strike out on their own. They planned to retrieve their reindeer from the collective herd, because once they

had their reindeer, they said, they would be able to collect belongings they had left at an old summer base camp, and could set up a more permanent homestead somewhere on their territory. They intended to hunt and fish and find a way (they were not sure how) to barter for supplies and staple foods, using their reindeer to supplement their subsistence needs. It would be difficult *not* to be dependent on the new manager in any case, since he controlled their access to village services (like electricity), supplies (like staple foods and rifle bullets), and transportation. Moreover, breaking away from his control necessitated falling out of the social safety net. Social welfare benefits could only be activated if one showed up on the employee rolls of some sort of officially recognized work place. Reindeer herders in particular had to appear in the books of a herding enterprise in order to qualify for the special allowance (*posobie*) that the regional administration now paid (using federal funds) to *tundroviki*. Anna Kutynkeva said that families like the ones above would become ‘invisible’ – in limbo with no recognizable legal status.

***Obshchina* Fever**

We decided to revive the obshchina ... So far I have not been able to imagine what can be done, realistically, for the obshchina, for improving our life. We are going to continue to defend the mouth of the Arenkovka River from the ‘Istok’ gold mining company. People are set for a fight. After all, it is our land and in the summer we pasture reindeer there... Still, I’m in a good mood, at least some meaning for life has appeared. There’s a goal, there are plans. God grant that they get carried out.

Resident of Kaiettyn,
in a letter of November 2001

Before travelling to Bilibinskii district to start out on my second, ultimately unsuccessful quest to reach Kaiettyn, I stopped in Anadyr' to attend the Third Congress of Indigenous Peoples of Chukotka. The opening event of the Congress was a roundtable for delegates organized by the regional legislature on the topic 'Legal problems of the status of the indigenous peoples of Chukotka'. Each delegate was given a packet of relevant legislation, including the federal law on *obshchina* that had been passed nine months earlier. Later I was surprised to find that, in spite of this growing enthusiasm in Chukotka for the *obshchina*, the reindeer herding specialist at the regional department of agriculture remained somewhat negative in his attitude toward them. In a final interview with him before my departure, I asked him if the Department of Agriculture would be supportive of *obshchiny*, and he said 'Sure'. But then he waxed a bit cynical and said, '*Obshchina* – what is it for? What will they do? I doubt there will be enough work for all their members. Isn't the purpose mainly to supply their own needs anyway?' I said that the law on *obshchina* specified that they were permitted to 'realize their surplus' for cash. He smiled and said he suspected everything would turn out to be 'surplus'. He then pulled out a notebook with his own copy of the federal law on *obshchina*, and began to flip through it, saying he was looking for the clause that specified the purpose of the *obshchina*. I found it and quoted it to him: '*v tseliakh zashchity iskonnoi sredy obitaniia*' ('for the purpose of defending the age-old place of habitation [of the indigenous inhabitants]') He shut his notebook and concluded our interview by saying, 'All these *obshchiny* will just end up coming to us and saying, "gimme, gimme, gimme" (*dai, dai, dai*)'.

After the Congress, I travelled back to Bilibino together with some of the Bilibinskii district delegation who had attended the Anadyr' Congress. I chanced to run into one of them,

Raisa,¹¹ on the street one day. She breathlessly described how busy she had been, visiting everyone she knew in the city to campaign for the establishment of *obshchiny*. Although she was full of enthusiasm for her mission, she also expressed frustration. First, she was disappointed to find that many of the indigenous residents she spoke to did not believe anything good could come from what she was proposing. ‘They've already lost faith,’ she sighed. Second, she said she had already gone to the district administration to discuss the matter of land, and she was met with strong resistance. Not only were they unwilling to give her land for an *obshchina*, she said, but they challenged her on the very idea of *obshchina*, trying to lead her to believe she did not really understand what she was talking about. Raisa remained undaunted, however. She told me that the experience of the Congress in Anadyr' had given her a new sense of direction in her life. ‘I know exactly what I need to do,’ she said, ‘and I am going to fight for the right to establish *obshchiny*’.

The Bilibinskii district Congress of Indigenous Peoples was held a few days later in the nearby village of Keperveem, and I arranged to attend it. I arrived in Keperveem the night before the Congress and spent the night at the home of an acquaintance, Irina.¹² That evening, I was visited by Roman and another of the young men from the group I had met in Bilibino the year before. They were serious and business-like as they sat down with me and showed me the array of seven documents they had prepared to fulfil all the bureaucratic requirements of registering themselves as an *obshchina*, including the minutes of required founding meetings with potential members. They were now ready to send their packet of documents to the regional Department of Justice to be registered. Roman said already people from villages all over the district had come to them and asked their advice on how to go about organizing an *obshchina*. He said that, after they

registered their *obshchina*, they would provide their documents as a template for others to follow.

Irina herself had told me earlier that she and her husband also wanted to start an *obshchina*. ‘It’ll be mostly pensioners,’ she said, ‘but look, we have a tractor, we have a truck, we have hands to work!’ I ran into her on the street in Bilibino a week later, and she happily told me that she was continuing apace to organize her *obshchina*. She had already gotten a copy of Roman’s charter to use as an example, and she would get her own documents together and send them to be registered. She said that the Head of the Department of Agriculture had tried to steer her away from *obshchina* and toward something more ‘entrepreneurial,’ and she screwed up her face as she said this – this was clearly a distasteful option for her. No, she was determined to establish an *obshchina*. I left Bilibino a few days later; but I received a letter from Irina in February 2004 that began: ‘About myself, I can report: We established an *obshchina*’.

The Last Kulak

I said to him, ‘What’s more important, your gathering of directors, or the Russian Constitution?’

Dmitry, resident of Burgakhchan

in an interview of April 2001

On this second trip to Bilibino, when I was unable to make it to Kaiettyu at all, one consolation was the opportunity to interview Dmitry,¹³ a young man who was in the city on business related to his reindeer herding operation. Dmitry’s story captured well the frustrations that Chukotkan reindeer herders in the 1990s experienced in their relations with the *nachal’niki*,

and it provided a punctuation mark at the end of my project, corroborating everything I had been hearing in the course of two long and difficult field trips.

Dmitry described himself as ‘the only *kulak* in the district’ among reindeer herders – using the old Soviet-era word, literally ‘fist’, which Bolsheviks used to describe a property owner whom they presumed to be exploiting poor workers. Dmitry explained what he meant by this: He was the only true private entrepreneur left, the only one not under the control of the *nachal’niki*. Dmitry grew up in Aniuisk, near the border with the Sakha Republic, where his father had been a reindeer herder working at the state farm. Dmitry came of age in an era when the children of reindeer herders were sent to Russian residential schools, and many consequently did not learn what might be called the ‘family business’ of reindeer herding. Dmitry’s father had always wanted him to work in the tundra, but Dmitry went to college in St. Petersburg and studied to be a teacher. However, he came down with tuberculosis in his fifth and final year of study, and this prevented him from graduating and taking up his teaching career. Instead, he came back to Bilibino and went to work for the *agitno-kul’turnaia brigada*,¹⁴ which is the municipal agency that travels around to the reindeer herding brigades in the tundra to bring them books, newspapers, videos, and sometimes live entertainment.

Consequently, Dmitry was in Bilibino when Russia’s privatization program came to Chukotka in the early 1990s. Dmitry’s father, who had only a fourth grade education, had been the brigadier managing a herd of the Aniuisk state farm, whose territory was located far from Aniuisk and bordered on that of the Kaiettyn brigades. When the state farm broke apart, Dmitry had a clearer picture of the privatization process because of his education and his time spent in St. Petersburg and Moscow, and so he went to his father and said, ‘Papa, you have the right to take possession of your property. Do you want to become a proprietor (*sobstvennik*) of your own

herd?' His father said yes, so Dmitry went himself to Moscow to speak directly with the northern specialist in the Ministry of Agriculture on his father's behalf, to help him privatize his own herd of reindeer.

As brigadier, Dmitry's father was entitled to the largest property share of the reindeer in that brigade, which amounted to 900 reindeer. He took only half of his share of reindeer – about 450 head – and drove them over to the territory of another brigade, where his younger brother was the brigadier and remained employed by the state farm. A third brother also worked in that brigade, and Dmitry's father wanted to unite with his family. This meant that Dmitry's father's privately-owned reindeer were mixed together with the collectively-owned reindeer of the state farm. Technically he had no right to pasture his reindeer on that territory, but it appears this was tolerated in the ambiguity that was characteristic of the privatization period.

Sometime after this, Dmitry's father fell ill with cancer, and he died in the summer of 1995. Dmitry's mother told him that, before he had died, his father had said he wanted Dmitry to come and take over his herd. This motivated Dmitry to leave his job in the city and go into the tundra to fulfil his father's wishes. Meanwhile, the former state farm based in Aniuisk had been taken over by a new director, and in Dmitry's words, 'Here all kinds of machinations started'. The man was Bartosh, about whom I had already heard so many tales from Kaiettyn residents. Bartosh had convinced the herders in the Aniuisk tundra to allow him to manage their business at the same time he had convinced the herders in the Kaiettyn tundra to manage theirs. Dmitry's father had known that Bartosh was stealing reindeer by doctoring paperwork. Dmitry said that after he had been with the herd for a year, his share had been reduced to about 200 – less than half of the original number his father had taken as his share. He had little leverage to do anything about this.

Ultimately, when Bartosh fled the region, he embezzled most of the Aniusk herders' salaries before he left, just as he did at Kaiettyn. The tundra was now a patchwork of privately-owned independent herds and collectively-owned herds still nominally connected to the former state farm, and Dmitry said it was like watching a chess game as people moved themselves around the tundra during this time. I found his use of this metaphor interesting, since it implied well-considered strategy. People seemed to be thinking: Where can I move (with my kin and my reindeer) so that I do not get picked off by the more powerful forces around me? Dmitry ended up together with five families tending a small herd of about 1000 reindeer. They had no legal status, either to operate as a commercial herding enterprise or to occupy that territory – another of Anna Kutynkeva's 'invisible' *tundroviki*. This was toward the end of 1996.

By this time, *nachal'niki* at the regional Department of Agriculture were coming to terms with what seemed to them to be chaos ensuing in the tundra, and had begun to formulate the municipalization plan. Dmitry is the *tundrovik* mentioned above who had described for me the gathering of directors that the Chukotkan governor had staged as justification for implementing this plan. After that gathering, Dmitry went to the Bilibinskii district Head of the Department of Agriculture to ask for assistance in formally registering his herd as an independent herding operation. He was told that he would get no assistance until he signed over 51% of his assets to the district according to the municipalization plan described above. Dmitry refused, saying he wanted to keep 100% of his assets, but the Department Head persisted, saying, 'As soon as you sign the documents handing over 51%, we'll formalize your requests; but then we will call all the shots and you will work for us'. Dmitry argued with the Department Head, but was told the new plan was put into place 'because you reindeer herders drank away your reindeer, and now we

want control to prevent you from doing that anymore’. Dmitry went away with his request unfulfilled.

Dmitry brought his story up to date by telling me he then had only about 100 reindeer left from his father's original 450 head. About a year earlier, he had joined together informally with some herders who were nominally still part of the old state farm (now a municipally-controlled operation), and together they collectively pastured about 350 reindeer. During the winters, he was leaving his reindeer to the care of these other herders while he hunted, and in the spring and summer he would work together with the others to pasture the herd. Dmitry had managed to arrange a contract with the district schools to sell them meat from moose that he hunted. However, Dmitry said the police had recently come to him and accused him of illegally pasturing his reindeer on land that was not his. The Director of the large, municipally-controlled operation that held use rights to the pasture wanted him to pay for pasturing his reindeer there. Dmitry tried to reason that the presence of his privately-owned reindeer would only help to increase the overall herd. The director in turn offered to simply buy Dmitry’s reindeer from him, but Dmitry replied they no one could afford the price – these were the last of his father’s reindeer.

Conclusion

The obshchina ‘Star’ was registered in the Department of Justice, and they are trying to work in order to create jobs for Native inhabitants and catch food for the elderly (meat and fish). But it takes a great deal of time and strength to formalize a license for the right to remove animals from nature, to secure hunting and fishing grounds. Overall, life goes on; it’s not standing in one

place. The main thing, which my compatriots understand, is that they can only depend on themselves. Nobody is going to think about our future.

Anna Mikhailovna Kutynkeva,
founder of the Kaiettyn *obshchina*,
in a letter of January 2002

Chukotkan *tundroviki* were eager to take responsibility for their own lives and those of people whom they saw as unable to support themselves: the elderly, children, invalids. Having been raised in the Soviet system, living in a border zone where even domestic travel required stamps in passports, they understood the need to jump through bureaucratic hoops, and they were willing to do it. They were willing to adapt to post-Soviet conditions, and although the complexities of market relations were a challenge to them, they at least recognized their own limitations and knew when to ask for help. It would not have been difficult for the *nachal'niki* to equip the *tundroviki* to effectively manage their own lives, but where they should have gotten assistance, they instead got resistance. The fact that I, a foreign ethnographer, at times supplied the information and assistance they needed is utterly absurd. This makes the situation in Chukotka very different from areas like Taimyr (Ziker 2002) or Yamal (Stammler 2004) or Transbaikalia (Fondahl 1998), where regional agencies were more cooperative and facilitating, or at least less tyrannical.

The Chukotka administration of the 1990s was very active in issuing, through both formal and informal channels, a remarkably consistent story that explained what 'went wrong' with reindeer herding ('the herders are to blame') and how to fix it (concentrate management back in the hands of the *nachal'niki*); the *tundroviki* had few channels through which to issue

their own story of bureaucratic stonewalling. While the fragmentary picture I am presenting here is heavily filtered by my own impressions and interpretations, hopefully it nevertheless begins to convey a sense of their alternative story. The moral to be taken away from it is that politics and power relations – even when they are hidden from the casual observer – are a crucial factor in determining regionally-variable outcomes in post-privatization reindeer herding in the Russian North. It is a factor that is ignored – whether by the reindeer herder, the researcher, the policymaker, or the development agency – at one’s peril.

Notes

¹ Research for this paper was undertaken in 2000 and 2001 and was supported by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, Germany.

² Figures provided to the author by the Chukotka Regional Department of Agriculture.

³ 1976 figures from Dikov 1989:397; 2001 figures provided to the author by the Chukotka Regional Department of Agriculture.

⁴ 2001 figures provided by the Committee for State Statistics of the Chukotka Autonomous Region on 23 May 2001; 2002 figures taken from the website of the Chukotka Duma, <http://dumachao.anadyr.ru/>.

⁵ The Russian concept of *obshchina* (pl. *obshchiny*) is difficult to translate precisely – it means something more than simply ‘the community’, almost something like ‘commune’, but does not carry quite the semantic load that the latter word carries for English speakers.

⁶ *Federal’nyi zakon ot 20 iulia 2000 g. N 104-FZ ‘Ob obshchikh printsipakh organizatsii obshchin korenykh malochislennykh narodov Severa, Sibiri i Dal’nego Vostoka Rossiiskoi*

Federatsii’ (Federal Law of 20 July 2000 No. 104-FZ ‘On general principles for the organization of *obshchiny* of indigenous less-numerous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation’)

⁷ A pseudonym.

⁸ A pseudonym.

⁹ *Fermerskoe khoziaistvo* (pl. *fermerskie khoziaistva*) can be translated as ‘farming enterprise’, and is one of several legal forms allowable under agricultural privatization law in Russia in the early 1990s. See Wegren 1998.

¹⁰ This account rang particularly false to me. During my previous fieldwork in the village of Snezhnoe, reindeer herders told me stories of being so poorly supplied at their tundra camps that they ran out of bullets for their rifles. When wolves attacked the herd, they would wave their arms and yell, but they were essentially powerless to chase off the predators.

¹¹ A pseudonym.

¹² A pseudonym.

¹³ A pseudonym.

¹⁴ *Agitno* is short for *agitirovat*’, which means ‘to agitate’ or ‘to campaign’; *kul’turnaia brigada* means ‘cultural brigade’. While in the 1990s these brigades merely brought mass media entertainment to the tundra, in the Soviet period their mission was more specifically to ‘enlighten’ the tundra dwellers with socialist propaganda.

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Abstract

Privatization of state farms in Russia precipitated a crisis in the reindeer herding economy. Chukotka once had the largest domestic reindeer herd in Russia, and the plummet in Chukotka's reindeer headcounts was steeper than anywhere else in the country. At the same time, reindeer herding in some regions of Russia, such as Yamal, remained relatively stable. This paper argues that much of the difference between Chukotka and other regions can be attributed to the particular, and very political, nature of the social relationship between local tundra-dwelling populations and the most immediate representative of the state apparatus that they face: the district administration. Using stories told by tundra-dwellers in one district of Chukotka, the paper explores the frustrations they experienced as their efforts to take more control of their own local situation were stymied by those in the bureaucracy above them. It concludes that politics and power relations should not be overlooked as a crucial factor in determining regionally-variable outcomes in post-privatization reindeer herding in the Russian North, and can overpower or exacerbate economic and ecological factors.

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