Gray, Patty A. 2004. "Chukotkan Reindeer Husbandry in the Twentieth Century: In the Image of the Soviet Economy." In *Cultivating Arctic Landscapes: Knowing & Managing Animals in the Circumpolar North,* ed. by D. Anderson and M. Nuttall, pp. 136-153. Oxford: Berghahn Press.

# Chukotkan Reindeer Husbandry in the Twentieth Century:

# In the Image of the Soviet Economy

***Forthcoming in:*** **David Anderson and Mark Nuttal, eds. *Cultivating Northern Landscapes: Ranching, Co-management, and Translocation in the Circumpolar North,***

**Berghan Books**

**Patty A. Gray**

**DRAFT. PLEASE DO NOT CITE**

## Introduction: Post-Soviet Chukotka

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 had far-reaching effects that precipitated social transformation throughout Russian society. Although most of the information that reaches the West concerns more visible locales such as Moscow, the most cataclysmic changes occurred in rural areas far from Moscow, about which little is generally heard. This paper concerns one particular region of the North that is located as far from Moscow as one can go in Russia – the far north-eastern Chukotka Autonomous Region. It moreover concerns one of the key economies of the North, reindeer herding, which is also one of the economies most severely affected by the post-Soviet transformation.

As everywhere in the Soviet North, pre-revolutionary Chukotkan reindeer husbandry

was a private (i.e., non-state) occupation of indigenous communities. It underwent collectivisation beginning in the 1920s and by the height of the Soviet period had been transformed into a branch of the Soviet economy. Today, by all accounts, Chukotkan reindeer husbandry is in a state of collapse, as deer headcounts plummet, dwindling herds are merged, and entire herding operations liquidate. Most agree that Chukotka represents the worst case scenario in all of the Russian North for the fate of post-Soviet reindeer herding (cf. Krupnik 2000: 53). Part of my goal in exploring these issues is to understand why this is so.

Assumptions about the Soviet system and its legacy often take one of two extremes. Stated in over-simplified terms, they are:

1) The Soviet system ('Communism') was bad, and democracy/privatisation will fix everything (for example, it can be the salvation of Chukotkan reindeer herding by providing an outlet to markets for reindeer products).

2) Privatisation was ill-conceived and badly executed, and is to be blamed for all that is bad now, especially in rural areas (for example, it precipitated the collapse of Chukotkan reindeer herding by dismantling social support systems).

But there is something both more complex and more subtle going on. The Soviet system was indeed flawed and the privatisation program was indeed wrong-headed, but mechanisms that caused the collapse in Chukotka can be found in both (and can be reduced to neither). It would be a mistake to assume that all of the problems for Chukotkan reindeer herding started with privatisation, even if that is precisely when observers outside Russia began to notice them. In fact, by the 1980s Chukotkan reindeer herding already seemed headed for a collapse that the privatisation program merely expedited.

I argue, first, that it must be recognised that the Soviet system both systematically

destroyed reindeer herding as it was practised in Chukotka prior to collectivisation – what is often called 'traditional' reindeer herding – while at the same time it reconstructed it in a new, Soviet form and then maintained its existence throughout the twentieth century. This new form was a reinvention in the image of the Soviet socialist economy, and by the 1980s any resemblance it bore to pre-collectivisation reindeer herding was for the most part superficial. In other words, *that* form of reindeer herding – a diversified subsistence economy that had been developed over many generations and which was rather beautifully self-sufficient – simply does not exist any more. What does exist is a thing created by the state, a thing which survives only by virtue of the extent to which it is propped up by that state.

Second, what privatisation triggered, then, was the collapse *not* of 'traditional' Chukotkan reindeer herding, but rather of the Soviet form with which it had been replaced. Since the Soviet form could only survive with state support, this is precisely why it is collapsing now that state support has been withdrawn, and why it had begun to deteriorate in the late Soviet period just as the entire Soviet economy was deteriorating. There is, therefore, no possibility to return to a latent, pre-Soviet form of reindeer husbandry in Chukotka. There is, however, the possibility of locally creating a new form of Chukotkan reindeer herding, one that is irrevocably affected by the Soviet legacy, but one which should be influenced, to whatever degree that local practitioners and managers desire, by notions of what *ideal* Chukotkan reindeer herding should be. There is already plenty of evidence that what is locally considered the ideal form is something known as 'traditional'.

In this paper, I sketch out the historical contours of Chukotkan reindeer husbandry over the course of the twentieth century. I begin briefly with a snapshot of its pre-revolutionary form, and then examine more carefully the Soviet project of collectivisation. Finally, I discuss the crisis that has befallen Chukotkan reindeer husbandry in the post-Soviet period, as well as the increasing importance of – and conflicting understandings of – the

concept of ‘traditional’ reindeer herding. I argue here that this needs to be examined in a more critical way.

**Pre-Revolutionary Chukotkan Reindeer Husbandry**

It must first be clarified that the appellation ‘Chukotkan reindeer husbandry’ is a convenient and somewhat artificial construction, since historically there were variations in practises across Chukotka, blending into the practises of the bordering areas. Also, the word ‘Chukotkan’ by no means signifies that this is something practised only by the people known as the Chukchi - other reindeer-herding peoples include Evens, Chuvans, Koryaks and Yukagirs. Chukotka is also home to Yupik Eskimos, who reside primarily in the coastal areas of the Chukotka Peninsula and are associated with sea mammal hunting. There are also coastal Chukchis who historically engaged in sea mammal hunting from sedentary communities.

By contrast, the reindeer herding communities of inland Chukotka were historically nomadic. They practised a style of reindeer herd management that later came to be classified as the tundra type (Krupnik 1993: 88), in contrast to taiga reindeer herding. A key distinction between the two is that, with the tundra type, herds tend to be much larger and used primarily as a source of food and raw materials, whereas with the taiga type, herds tend to be smaller and used primarily for transportation (Ingold 1980). Chukotkan tundra reindeer herding, like Nenets reindeer herding, represents the extreme in terms of the size of the herds (1500 head or more) and the reliance on nomadism, which was continual and could involve migrations of hundreds of kilometres. These long migrations enabled tundra reindeer herders to engage in long-standing trade relationships with coastal communities, in which reindeer skins, a key raw material of the tundra used for the construction of dwellings, might be traded for seal oil,

a key product of the coastal economy used for heating those dwellings (Bogoras 1909).

Tundra reindeer herding communities tended to be loose affiliations of a handful of kin-related households who nomadised together and cooperated with other such neighbouring communities. Tundra reindeer herds were not held collectively or communally, but were owned and managed individually by families. Those who were poor in reindeer typically worked cooperatively with families who owned large herds, exchanging their labour for products of the herd (Krupnik 1983: 91). Pastures were typically shared cooperatively within these neighbouring communities, who worked out the seasonal rotation of pastures and the migration routes. These territories were flexible, so that in an emergency situation (such as a hard freeze of the tundra), neighbouring pastures could be temporarily used.

Due to strong local resistance, Tsarist government agents were never fully successful in imposing Tsarist administrative structures and policies on Chukotkan communities, although efforts had begun in the seventeenth century (Dmytryshyn et al., eds 1985). By the end of the nineteenth century, Russian and American traders had begun to make commercial inroads into Chukotkan communities, primarily among the coastal communities in the first instance. After the Bolshevik revolution, more concerted, and comparatively more successful, efforts were made to impose new Soviet administrative structures and policies on both coastal and inland communities, as well as to oust American traders, and by the 1920s the first efforts to collectivise Chukotkan reindeer herding were undertaken. What I will now turn to is an overview of the process by which the Soviet state accomplished its thorough dismantling and restructuring of Chukotkan reindeer herding.

**How Reindeer Herding Was Collectivised in Chukotka**

Collectivisation in Chukotka, as everywhere else in the Soviet Union, was driven by the

ideology that the application of socialist economic principles would naturally improve any kind of economic activity, even something as alien to the average Russian as reindeer herding. In many ways, Chukotka's very remoteness and intractableness made it a particularly enticing challenge to the Soviet mission of bringing socialist enlightenment to every dark corner of the country. More so perhaps than other parts of the Russian North, Chukotka became a testing ground for experimental policies. The idea seemed to be that if it could be made to work in Chukotka – a place so far from the centre and so resistant to outside control – then it could surely be made to work anywhere. Therefore, Soviet planners were all the more zealous about pushing policies and strategies to the limit in Chukotka – the pace of collectivisation had to be faster, the *sovkhozy* (state farms) had to be bigger and more diversified, the reindeer herds had to be larger. Late Soviet-period scholars described the collectivisation process in Chukotka as 'marked experiments of social engineering aimed at destroying nomadic ways of life' (Pika 1999: 96).

Considering its remoteness from the centre, collectivisation started very early in Chukotka – efforts were already underway by the 1920s, and in 1929 Chukotka's first sovkhoz was established in the newly-created village of Snezhnoe, along the Anadyr' River (where I conducted fieldwork in the 1990s). This was one of a handful experimental stations set up in regions of the Far North to prepare the way for the establishment of sovkhozy as the primary organisational form of the reindeer economy (Druri 1989: 4). One of the founders, Ivan Druri, was sent directly from a post in the village of Lovozero, Murmansk, where the first experimental station for studying reindeer herding had already been set up in 1926. In Chukotka, Druri and his cohort began to travel among local reindeer herders. Writes Druri:

> We had to prove to the Chukchi that we wanted to organise a large Soviet enterprise and needed advice and help from local, experienced reindeer herders, and we also

> wanted to acquaint them with more rational modes and methods of doing reindeer husbandry practised by other nomads of our country. We lived and ate with the herders together in the *iaranga*.[1] We went out to the herd, helped were we could, and evenings we conversed with them, exchanged impressions, and talked about the work and life of reindeer breeders in the European North (Druri 1989: 5-6).

The next sovkhoz in Chukotka would not appear until much later, and the Snezhnoe sovkhoz was a remarkable, although influential, exception. For the most part, collectivisation efforts began with the strategy of coaxing local reindeer herders to voluntarily form themselves into *artely* (cooperative associations) and the even more basic *tovarishchestva* ('comradeships'). This was seen by the organisers as a golden opportunity for the poor reindeer herder to strengthen his individual position through cooperation and to facilitate more successful production, goals they assumed would be recognised by all as obviously desirable.

It bears mentioning that this was an urban-biased Bolshevik model of economic development that was simply being imported and imposed upon the Chukotkan population with little modification, much as it had been imposed on Russian peasants elsewhere (Shanin 1987). The model took as given that there was class differentiation between poor labourers and rich exploiters. The organisers of collectivisation simply sorted the available population into these categories and began to work from there to reproduce the process occurring elsewhere in the country, from urban factories to rural farms. The *artely* and *tovarishchestva* were seen as a preliminary phase, building blocks for the eventual construction of *kolkhozy* (collective farms).

Not surprisingly, the process was not without snags. At first, local Soviet administrators assumed that since Native society was at a level of 'primitive communism' (as Marxist theory had taught them), joining a collective enterprise, or kolkhoz, would be a

relatively natural transition for the Native population, and they pushed hard for *artely* and *tovarishchestva* to join with one another and form kolkhozy. This over-eagerness led to some mistakes, as one late Soviet source openly admits:

> The underestimation or complete ignorance of private-ownership tendencies among the native population (especially the nomads) the socialisation of dogs, sleds, whaling boats, nets, weapons and even *iarangi*, all this provoked legitimate dissatisfaction. In many districts of Chukotka, this brought an increase in cases of armed resistance and attacks on the local activists, Party people and soviet workers (Dikov 1989: 211).

Successful reindeer herders were alarmed to suddenly find their achievements reviled as the hoarding of *kulaks*,[2] and to hear themselves called 'class enemies'. In response, some herders fled from Chukotka altogether. Many of those who stayed behind slaughtered their deer to keep them from being handed over to the collective herd, a phenomenon that occurred across Russia.

The zealousness of local organisers was tempered when orders came down from above to recognise the existence of private deer ownership and to take a more liberal attitude towards it. Thus in the early 1930s *tovarishchestva* and *artely* were allowed to exist alongside the nascent kolkhozy. Later in that decade, conditions for membership in kolkhozy were mitigated; their voluntary nature was emphasised, and individuals were allowed to maintain some private ownership, including up to 600 of one's own reindeer (Dikov 1989: 213). By the end of the 1930s, the Soviet organisers in Chukotka had managed to organise a large number of kolkhozy.

In the 1940s, the emphasis shifted to the next step in the overall plan, which was the consolidation (*ukreplenie*) of the many small and dispersed collective enterprises into larger

and more centralised units. The problem, from the point of view of the Soviet state, was that the Native people were scattered all about Chukotka in tiny camps and settlements, which was considered unthinkably inefficient for the purpose of developing and diversifying the tundra economy, not to mention incorporating the residents into the state system. In order to improve efficiency, larger groups of people would have to be brought together so that their efforts could be combined and their productive activities diversified (adding hunting and fishing to reindeer herding, or combining reindeer herding and sea mammal hunting) (Dikov 1989: 276). Consolidation was a burdensome process for the Native population across the Russian North; in many cases it meant closing down an entire village and moving its inhabitants into another village. On the coast, it meant ethnically distinct Chukchi and Yupik villages were forced to break down their historical distinctions and live as one community, defying the whole notion of dynamic cooperation between independent communities of tundra reindeer herders and coastal sea mammal hunters. In the tundra, it resulted in communities that were a multi-ethnic jumble.

A key goal of consolidation in the tundra was that of 'settling the nomads', i.e., tying down the nomadic reindeer herders to a central place, since Soviet planners considered such constant movement both unnatural and counterproductive. This goal of sedentarisation was by definition diametrically opposed to the very nature of Chukotkan reindeer herding, and the Soviet managers could not escape the fact that, with the large-scale tundra style of herding, someone had to be following the herd at all times. The solution they devised was a system known as the shift-work method. It entailed periodically rotating brigades of reindeer herders out of the tundra to be resident in their village homes. Thus every Chukotkan 'nomad' in fact had an apartment in a village somewhere, where it was likely many of his family members lived, and his residence was officially registered in that village. Among both scholars and practitioners, many have blamed this policy in particular for sounding the death knell for

Chukotkan reindeer herding.

The process of consolidation continued into the 1950s, and progressed alongside a complementary project, which was the reorganisation of all kolkhozy into sovkhozy. Sovkhozy differed from kolkhozy in that the property within them was not collectively held by the members, but was instead state-owned property. While the kolkhozy had members who theoretically set their own production quotas and paid themselves out of their own profits, the sovkhoz had employees who executed a plan handed down by the Ministry of Agriculture and were paid a salary and benefits by the state. Most significantly, this meant unequivocally that reindeer herding should no longer be considered a way of life developed by the herders themselves over generations, but rather a branch of the Soviet economy in which the herders were merely employees of the state.

As Humphrey (1998: 75, 93) has pointed out, the sovkhoz was considered to be a more advanced form of production than the kolkhoz, and should therefore in principle be reserved for areas of the Soviet Union that were generally more developed. In this sense, Chukotka (and perhaps the North in general) was truly an experimental region, a kind of laboratory of economic relations, for not only was the first sovkhoz already established by 1929, but by the 1980s all kolkhozy in Chukotka had been reorganised into sovkhozy, in contrast to southern areas of the Soviet Union, where kolkhozy remained in existence up until the time of privatisation.

The consolidation and reorganisation process continued through the 1960s and 1970s, which was a time of accelerated industrial development in Chukotka as well. By 1958, what had been nearly 100 small collectives was reduced to 41, and by 1968, the total number of collectivised enterprises was down to 28, a number that held steady until the beginning of the privatisation program (see Table 1). At this point only three kolkhozy remained – the rest had been converted to sovkhozy (c.f. Leont'ev 1977: 43, 162-171). In many cases what was now

considered a single enterprise actually consisted of a headquarters with two or three branches that might be located a hundred kilometres away.

**TABLE 1: The Collectivisation and Reorganisation of Chukotkan Reindeer Herding in Official Figures, 1920-2001**

| Period | Number and type of enterprise | Reindeer headcount |
|---|---|---|
| 1920s | before collectivisation | 556,900 (100% private) |
| 1930s | 62 kolkhozy | 427,400 (% decreasing) |
| 1940s | 76 kolkhozy | 414,000 (20% private) |
| 1950s | about 100 kolkhozy | 408,422 (18% private) |
| 1960s | 41 kolkhozy & sovkhozy | 571,400 (6% private) |
| 1970s | 28 sovkhozy & kolkhozy | 580,500 (4% private) |
| 1980s | 28 sovkhozy | 464,457 (4% private) |
| 1990s | 57 various privatised entities | 148,980 (100% private) |
| 2001 | 28 enterprises | 85,947 (not all private) |

Note: Data from Dikov 1989, Leont'ev n.d., Ustinov 1956 and the Chukotka Department of Agriculture. Data found in the secondary sources is sometimes conflicting. 'Private' may include both deer held personally by members of kolkhozy as well as deer outside of the kolkhoz system altogether. The data presented here should be taken as snapshots in time meant to give a comparative picture of how collectivisation progressed throughout the century.

Increasingly, these consolidated sovkhozy were treated as productive branches of the Soviet economy just like any other, made subject to the production quotas of centrally determined five-year plans. They also continued to be made subject to Soviet ideology. In the

spirit of the Soviet Constitution's call to eliminate the material differences between city and village, as well as between the centre and the peripheral regions,[3] the concept of the factory work brigade was transposed even to the reindeer herders of the tundra and the sea mammal hunters of the Bering Sea coast. Ideally, the brigade should replace the family in both function and affection. In fact, throughout the Soviet period, one could still find family members working together in any given brigade; however, these brigades did not function as family-run herds, since they were closely integrated into the sovkhoz work plan, with constant contact to the sovkhoz headquarters maintained by radio and helicopter. Moreover, the brigade concept to some extent colonised the consciousness of reindeer herders, so that to this day, groups of reindeer herders working in the tundra are referred to – and refer to themselves – by brigade number (and this seems consistent across the North – cf. Anderson 2000). For example, in the village of Snezhnoe, a 'Brigade No.4' existed in the tundra even though there were only two brigades left altogether in the sovkhoz.

The role of Natives in these collectivised operations shifted over the years. In the beginning, Natives were appointed as the veterinary specialists, accounting clerks and even chairmen of the kolkhozy. This occurred in part because of Lenin's policy of indigenisation (a kind of affirmative action policy that was meant to assure that at least some positions were staffed by local non-Russians), but also in part simply because there were not enough trained Russians to cover all of the positions. Historical accounts take great pains to point out the high percentage of Natives staffing the kolkhozy in these early years as a great boon to the Native population and a credit to the Soviet system (Dikov 1989: 216). However, as more Russians arrived in Chukotka with desirable professional skills, the percentage of Natives in kolkhoz management positions declined, and the majority of Natives came to occupy a labouring class within the sovkhozy. This was more a by-product of systematic racism and the Soviet version of the 'glass ceiling' rather than the real skill level of these Native

managers – many Russians undoubtedly felt uncomfortable having Natives in superior positions.

**Changes in the Practise of Reindeer Herding**

All of the foregoing has sketched the process by which an attempt was made to force Chukotkan reindeer herding to conform to a Soviet organisational structure imposed from above. But what about herd management itself? Here also, a deep transformation was caused by Soviet management policies and practises. Throughout the Soviet North, the management of reindeer herding was centrally directed by mostly Russian and Ukrainian specialists in reindeer husbandry, some of whom had never had a first-hand encounter with a reindeer, who worked in regional agricultural, veterinary and land use institutions (the ones who directed Chukotka were based in Magadan, capital of the province under which Chukotka was formerly subsumed). Sovkhoz directors then obliged local herding brigades to implement the herd management and pasturing plans of these specialists. As Krupnik points out, the Soviet state 'introduced large-scale, heavily subsidised, collectivised, and centrally planned reindeer industry, and it promoted this model with an iron fist' (Krupnik 2000: 52). In this way, what was a very diverse set of reindeer husbandry systems and local herding practises, not only across the North but within any given region, became artificially uniform. In fact, although in Chukotka one can generalise about a large-scale tundra type of herding, historically there was variation in the size and composition of herds when comparing poor and wealthy herders. For example, the former placed more emphasis on transport deer (usually castrated bulls), while the latter emphasised breeding does, thus resulting in very different herd structures and managements tasks (Krupnik 1993: 103-104).

The key to achieving this uniformity was the creation of standardised reindeer

husbandry manuals, produced in these regional institutions as well as in Moscow, which embodied Soviet policy and ideology regarding reindeer herding. These manuals covered techniques for feeding, breeding, veterinary care, slaughtering, and increasing meat productivity, and they stipulated the seasonal use of pastureland, indicating precisely where and when each brigade should move its herds. Some of the manuals were focused on particular regions of the North or particular ecological zones (e.g., taiga vs. tundra), while others were more comprehensive, covering the North as a whole.[4] These manuals began to appear as early as the 1930s, and new ones were produced continually throughout the Soviet period and beyond. One of the most recent manuals (Syrovatskii 2000) is remarkably similar to Soviet manuals except for one difference: the inclusion of a chapter titled *'Biznes-plan'* (business plan), which reads much like any socialist-era chapter on planning except for the mention of investors, bank loans and markets.

A classic example of such manuals is the 1950s sourcebook on reindeer herd management specifically in Chukotka written by V. Ustinov, a zootechnical specialist with the Magadan land use office. This early manual also gives clues about the motivation behind what came to be the accepted Soviet model of reindeer herding, i.e., one that pushed for the highest possible overall deer headcount as well as the highest possible average herd size.[5] Ustinov states in his introduction, 'the reindeer herders of Chukotka should seek to make their contribution in the business of increasing food products for the population and raw materials for light industry' (Ustinov 1956: 6). He then goes on to openly challenge the 'incorrect opinion of certain managers' who had gone before him that there was a certain optimal herd size that could not be surpassed (Ustinov 1956: 18), and later argues:

> Currently, when the task of obtaining high productivity and marketability of reindeer husbandry has been placed before the *kolkhozniki*, the old system of organizing herds

> cannot be suitable. Therefore in the last ten to fifteen years specialists and practitioners of northern reindeer husbandry… have worked out and applied in many places new forms of organizing the reindeer herd (Ustinov 1956: 93).

Consequently he urges that the total headcount of reindeer in Chukotka – at that time just over 400,000 – could and should be increased to 683,000 head by 1960 (Ustinov 1956: 6). The highest headcount ever reached in Chukotka was just over 580,000 in 1970, a figure many consider to have been beyond Chukotka's carrying capacity. From there it began a slow and steady decline, until in the 1990s it crashed most precipitously (see Table 1).

The motivation behind all of these recommendations is made quite clear in Ustinov's arguments: increasing production was the highest priority of the Soviet economy, and nothing should stand in the way of achieving that priority. This encouraged managers of sovkhozy to ignore recommendations from land use specialists about pasture carrying capacity and push for higher average herd size and a higher number of deer per sovkhoz. Chukotka had always been known for having the most reindeer of any region in the North, as well as the largest average herd size, even prior to collectivisation (Krupnik 1993: 100). Whether it was pushed by the planners above the Chukotkan managers, or was a result of the zealousness of those working within Chukotka, one way or another the expectation developed that Chukotka should always be pushing at the frontiers of the rural economy. The time scale for consolidation of kolkhozy and conversion to sovkhozy was faster, the sovkhozy were larger and more diversified, the reindeer herds were bigger, and those herds were more productive in terms of tons of meat (Zabrodin 1979: 189-191).

In regard to the pasturing of deer, it should be pointed out that collectivisation had entailed a kind of socialist land enclosure of tundra pasturelands (cf. Fondahl 1998: 72). When a sovkhoz was created, the regional land use office carved out for it a strictly bounded

territory, beyond which its reindeer herds were forbidden to range. Moreover, each brigade was also assigned a specific parcel within which it was obliged to stay, except for when the herd was driven to a central slaughtering point used by the entire sovkhoz. Further, all of the pastureland within each territory was studied and its characteristics determined, and on the basis of this information the seasonal rotation pattern of each herd was designed and written into the manuals. It was no longer important to have access to alternative pasture in the event of an emergency, since there were now specialists in the development of manufactured reindeer feed, which could be hauled in for the deer. What was far more important was to ensure that nothing that might interfere with the goals of high production was left to chance – nor to the skills of the herders themselves, in spite of their intimate knowledge of the pasturelands and their generations of experience working within it.

As for the Native reindeer herders, those generations of experience, having once been mined for information by experimental specialist like Druri, were cast aside as irrelevant to all but the ethnographers, who ironically described this as dying culture that needed to be collected and preserved. Young Native men, who in the past would have learned the practise of herd management by working alongside their male relatives of an earlier generation, were now taken out of the tundra altogether as children to attend boarding school, where reindeer husbandry was one of the subjects they learned from textbooks. Later, as young adults, some might be sent to agricultural vocational schools to be trained as specialists, studying zootechnical and veterinary aspects of reindeer herding alongside other subjects related to rural economy. In Snezhnoe I became acquainted with one of the sovkhoz veterinary specialists, who showed me his diploma from the Magadanskii Sovkhoz-Tekhnikum (technical school) in Ola, a small town near Magadan. He had passed exams in all the standard subjects printed on the diploma, such as the husbandry of cattle, sheep, pigs and poultry, as well as in reindeer husbandry, which was written in below.

This veterinary specialist also took me in to visit the headquarters of the former Snezhnoe sovkhoz, which by then already had the atmosphere of abandonment that became typical of post-Soviet sovkhozy. We stepped into the empty director's office, where he showed me a shelf lined with reindeer husbandry manuals. As we leafed through the pages and examined seasonal pasturage maps, he softly exclaimed, 'As if we needed to be told that. Our people long ago knew how to pasture reindeer – we didn't need a plan'. And yet the socialist plan came to replace the memory of those long-ago practises of his own ancestors. By the 1990s there was virtually no one left with first-hand memory of pre-collectivisation herding practises, especially in Snezhnoe, where nearly all of the male elders had died in quick succession from a variety of causes, including suicide. Any local knowledge about herding practises that these elders had managed to pass down could have been applied only in a piecemeal and subversive manner, since that knowledge would have been considered secondary to the authority of the manuals and the urgency of the socialist plan.

**The Post-Soviet Reindeer Crisis and the 'Return to Tradition'**

By the late 1980s there were already signs that Chukotkan reindeer herding was struggling to hold together, and the reindeer headcount had been declining since 1970. In 1991, then-president Boris Yeltsin began issuing a series of decrees requiring all state enterprises in Russia, including sovkhozy, to reorganise themselves into joint-stock companies or 'farming enterprises' (*fermerskoe khoziaistvo*) (cf. Wegren 1994). In Chukotka, this reorganisation was accompanied by much rhetoric about Natives returning to 'traditional' forms of economy, regaining their ancestral lands, and finally becoming owners of their herds again. In practise, this is not how things turned out.

Some Chukotkan sovkhozy reorganised while managing to remain essentially intact,

an approach that was generally preferred by the Russian directors. However, in some cases, individual brigades broke away from the main sovkhoz to form small independent enterprises, with the Native brigade leader now becoming the director of the enterprise (and in some cases Russians privatised their owns herds, but these they typically slaughtered immediately, selling the meat for cash and moving on to other endeavours). In spite of the rhetoric about returning to the old ways of herding, these newly independent small herds did not resemble pre-collectivisation herds in any respect aside from their smaller size. Although in many cases they involved family members, one cannot say they were family-run, since they typically employed an outsider with some expertise in transport, accounting or marketing (and there were several cases of swindling and embezzlement by these outsiders). These enterprises now had to negotiate market conditions and become entirely self-sufficient, bargaining where they could for supplies, transportation, access to markets, etc., either with former-sovkhoz directors or with independent traders. This proved more difficult than anyone had anticipated, and these new enterprises quickly began to fail.

Meanwhile, the rump sovkhozy[6] were also failing. In Chukotka, as elsewhere in Russia, the sovkhoz had not been merely an economic institution but a 'total social institution'.[7] Virtually all of the social services of the Soviet village were administered by the sovkhoz. The process of privatisation entailed transferring most of these social services to other agencies either within the village or at higher administrative levels in the region. This left the sovkhoz with the seemingly simplified task of focusing on production. However, longstanding state subsidies that had kept the reindeer herding industry afloat during the Soviet period were no longer forthcoming, which in effect meant the instant disappearance of salaries for reindeer herders. By the time I arrived in the village of Snezhnoe in 1996, the herders had already gone several years without a pay check, and were scrambling to find ways to get by. Their salaries were still calculated on paper, but so were their debts to the

sovkhoz for advances of staple foods, and many herders were actually shown to have a negative balance in the sovkhoz accounts. Rather than being within the social safety net of the sovkhoz, they now had to request social services from other agencies, where *sovkhozniki* were now viewed as something like 'deadbeats'.

When I returned to Snezhnoe in 1998, there was a palpable sense of desperation in that village, and many herders had left the sovkhoz in search of more reliable employment. As was then common throughout the former Soviet Union, they expressed nostalgia for the former sovkhoz, which they said had kept them well-supplied and comfortable when they lived in the tundra, and always paid a regular salary. They praised the free mobility afforded by the frequent helicopter flights to the village, saying now they felt trapped. Some told me that although they loved the tundra, they no longer considered it worthwhile to remain under such deteriorating conditions. It was cold there, life was hard, and they felt abandoned.

The health of Chukotkan reindeer herds suffered directly from the privatisation process, that is, from the removal of the Soviet system upon which herd health had been made dependent for so long. Since herders were abandoning the tundra, there were fewer people left behind to tend the herds, and quite often in Chukotka these were, ironically, younger men, with little experience in reindeer herding and fewer resources that would enable them to escape the tundra as they might wish. This was a generation who had grown up in boarding schools and were used to working under the enforcements of socialist work discipline; yet this enforcement had all but disappeared, and this was disorienting for the herders. Moreover, all of the resources they had taken for granted were now gone – scheduled air transportation, rifles and bullets, regular staple food deliveries, veterinary medicines, prosecution of poachers, guaranteed state markets, etc. Whether herders now worked in small privatised enterprises or in larger rump sovkhozy, all of these factors conspired to cause a cataclysmic crash in the reindeer herds. Deer were killed by wolves and bears, since there

were no bullets to shoot them; herders were swindled out of deer by shrewd traders proffering alcohol; inexperienced or neglectful herders failed to follow basic management practises, resulting in losses of deer (for example, in Snezhnoe one year a brigade failed to drive the does across a river to join the bulls before the spring thaw, and thus there were no calves the following year). On top of all these factors of human error, in the 1990s there was an unprecedented increase in the number of wild caribou, and these wild herds began to draw away domestic deer as they migrated. Finally, the few herders who did keep their herds intact had great difficulty transporting slaughtered meat to urban centres where buyers could be found, and thus they had no profits with which to pay themselves and purchase supplies.

As a result of all of these factors, Chukotka, which throughout the Soviet period had been one of the most progressive reindeer-herding regions of the North, now represented the worst case scenario – it had fallen the farthest of all. It became virtually impossible for reindeer herding to continue as it did either prior to collectivisation or during the Soviet period. The 'traditional' – i.e., pre-collectivisation – form was destroyed, and the Soviet form, which was dependent on government support, was no longer possible. Yet there have been frequent calls by Native activists and Native advocates for a 'return to traditional reindeer herding' in Chukotka as well as throughout the Russian North, as exemplified in the following quote:

> The traditional foundation of nomadic herding life has adapted even to this [command-administrative] system. It exists in a latent and covert form hidden behind Soviet state farm documents… However, insofar as this foundation has not died, it provides excellent potential for the revival of traditional herding among northern people, a tradition that is harmonious in its relationship with both nature and culture (Elena Andreeva and Vladimir Leksin writing in Pika 1999: 96-97).

There is some very subtle conceptual slippage here. It is one thing to hold that one can today learn something about a form of reindeer herding that existed in the past (call it 'traditional') and employ that knowledge as an ideal, a model, in attempting to solve the current problems of reindeer herding. It is another thing altogether, and a fallacy, to contend that it is somehow possible to actually return to a past form. Time machines do not exist, after all.

What I have been arguing here is that, at least in Chukotka, 'traditional' reindeer herding – as a complex found prior to collectivisation – does not somehow exist in latent form, and the retreat of Soviet control over Chukotkan reindeer herding does not mean a 'traditional' form has automatically sprung up to replace it. This is not to imply that there was no resistance to Soviet domination – there was – nor is it to deny that there are subtle strategies by which traditions can be retained in spite of persecution, such as the 'bodily practises' described by Connerton (1989). Indeed, certain individual practises related to reindeer herding in Chukotka may be found scattered here and there in a form quite similar to the way they were practised in pre-Soviet times, such as the use of braided reindeer-skin lariats, the wearing of reindeer fur clothing, and even funerary practises involving the ritual slaughter of reindeer. My argument very specifically concerns that complex known as Chukotkan reindeer husbandry and the idea that, as a whole, it may be taken up again in its 'traditional' form.

I make the point not to reject outright the concept of 'tradition', nor to deny the possibility of everyday resistance, but because I think it is important, first of all, to demonstrate the process by which reindeer herding in Chukotka was transformed, and second, to be more precise in our concepts and terminology. To say that 'traditional' reindeer herding can be revived is to imply, however unintentionally, that indigenous peoples themselves allowed it to lapse, perhaps by their own passivity and neglect, and that the intact,

latent form could be simply taken up again, if only some people would muster up enough enthusiasm to do so. It should not be forgotten that cultural practises in relation to reindeer herding were forcibly altered or repressed. Therefore, the obstacles involved in practising reindeer herding today run deeper than mere willpower.

However, I would also argue that this is not so dismal an assessment as it might at first seem. It does not mean that indigenous people living in Chukotka are incapable of undertaking a reconstruction of their own local way of life in a manner that suits them today. And there is no reason why they should not do this under the banner of 'tradition', using their knowledge about past forms as a model for the future. Indeed, Native activists are studying written sources like Bogoras (1904-09) in order to 'remember' and reconstruct past practises. The very concept of 'traditional' as a desirable ideal might be seen as a new model of development offered as an alternative both to the Western neoliberal model as well as to the Soviet socialist model. In that sense it is a potentially powerful and useful paradigm for indigenous peoples, and constitutes a feasible strategy for working within the international system.[8]

However, scholars and practitioners alike need to be more precise and critical in their use of the term 'traditional'. It should not be used when what is meant in fact is 'historical' or 'former', nor should any conceptual confusion be allowed about the difference between looking to the past for models and actually returning to the past. One of the best programmatic statements of these ideas has been offered by the late ethnographer Aleksandr Pika, in his book *Neotraditionalism in the Russian North.* Writes Pika, 'We underscore yet again that the new "traditionalism" does not mean a return to the past. It is a forward-looking development, though one which attends to the specific nature of northern regions and peoples' (Pika 1999:23). In Chukotka, it remains in question as to whether this enterprise will be successful in salvaging what is left of domestic reindeer herds in order to rebuild

Chukotkan reindeer herding for the future.

## Conclusion

Although the point of Soviet interference with the practise of reindeer herding was ostensibly to improve life for those practising reindeer herding, in fact the real point – and the result – was to make reindeer herding conform to the state's socialist identity. When the identity of that state was revolutionary (as in the 1920s), the collectivisation of reindeer herding was cast as a revolutionary process, with *kulaki* and class enemies to be rooted out. When that identity was industrial (as in the 1970s), the practise of reindeer herding was cast as a productive process, with production plans, quotas and competitive campaigns between brigades. When the state's identity became supposedly democratic and market oriented, herders were ostensibly 'free' to choose what form of enterprise they wished to organise, and similarly 'free' to access the market. Some herders express nostalgia for Soviet-style reindeer herding, while others express a desire to 'return' to 'traditional' reindeer herding as it was practised by their ancestors. The challenge for all of them is finding the knowledge and the means to take up any form of reindeer herding in the future, regardless of what model it conforms to.

## Endnotes

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS. This paper is based on the author's research in Chukotka supported by a 1995-96 U.S. Department of Education Fulbright-Hayes Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship and a 1995-96 Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Research Residency for Eurasian Russia from the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX). Additional research was conducted in 1998 with support from the National

Science Foundation's Arctic Social Sciences program (‘Regional Problems and Local Solutions in the Post-Soviet Transition: A Pilot Study to Assess the Problems Faced by Reindeer Herding Communities in the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug’, award #OPP-9726308, PI Peter Schweitzer, Co-PIs P.A. Gray and M. Koskey). Research in 2000 and 2001 was supported by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. This paper benefited from discussions with colleagues Deema Kaneff, Florian Stammler and John Ziker of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

[1]*Iaranga* is the reindeer skin dwelling used by indigenous peoples of the Chukotka tundra, most closely associated with the Chukchi.

[2]*Kulak* means literally ‘fist’, and it was the label that Bolshevik zealots gave to any peasant – or Native reindeer herder – who had accumulated more property than his fellow villagers, and was thus considered a mercantilist enemy of socialism.

[3]Constitution of the USSR (1989 edition), Chapter 3, Article 19 (*Verkhovnyi Sovet S.S.S.R. 1989).*

[4]See Syrovatskii 2000 for a comprehensive bibliography of these manuals.

[5]The zealous pursuit of large herds applies primarily to what is called the *tovarnoe stado* or (‘marketable herd’), which is the one from which deer were slaughtered. There was also the *plemennoe stado* (‘pedigree herd’), kept primarily for breeding purposes, and these tended to be smaller.

[6]Just as the term “brigade” remained in common usage after privatisation, so did the term “sovkhoz” to refer to reindeer herding enterprises.

[7]Clarke 1992, quoted in Humphrey 1995: 7

[8]My ideas about ‘tradition’ in this context have been strongly influenced by discussions with my colleague Florian Stammler at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

**Bibliography**


Anderson, David. 2000. *Identity and ecology in Arctic Siberia: the number one reindeer brigade.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bogoras, Waldemar. 1904-09. *The Chukchee.* New York: American Museum of Natural History Memoirs, vol. 11. Volume 7, Parts 1-3, of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition Publications.

Clarke, Simon. 1992. 'The quagmire of privatization'. *New Left Review* 196: 3-28.

Connerton, Paul. 1989. *How Societies Remember.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dikov, N. N.1989. *Istoriia Chukotki s drevneishikh vremen do nashikh dnei*. Moscow: Mysl'.

Dmytryshyn, Basil, E.A.P. Crownhart-Vaughan, and Thomas Vaughan, eds. 1985. *Russia's Conquest of Siberia, 1558-1700: A Documentary Record.* Volume 1 of *To Siberia and Russian America: Three Centuries of Russian Eastward Expansion, 1558-1867*. Portland, Oregon: Oregon Historical Society.

Druri, Ivan Vasil'evich. 1989. 'Kak byl sozdan pervyi olenesovkhoz na Chukotke' (How the first reindeer herding sovkhoz was established in Chukotka). *Kraevedcheskie Zapiski* (Magadan) XVI: 3-14.

Fondahl, Gail. 1998. *Gaining Ground? Evenkis, Land, and Reform in Southeastern Siberia. Cultural Survival Studies in Ethnicity and Change.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Humphrey, Caroline. 1995. 'Introduction' (to the special issue titled *Surviving the Transition: Development Concerns in the Post-Socialist World*). *Cambridge Anthropology* 18 (2): 1-12.

----------. 1998. *Marx Went Away— But Karl Stayed Behind* (Updated edition of *Karl Marx Collective: Economy, Society and Religion in a Siberian Collective Farm*). Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Ingold, Tim. 1980. *Hunters, pastoralists and ranchers: reindeer economies and their transformations.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Krupnik, Igor. 1993. *Arctic Adaptations: Native Whalers and Reindeer Herders of Northern Eurasia.* Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England.

Krupnik, Igor. 2000. 'Reindeer pastoralism in modern Siberia: research and survival in the time of crash'. *Polar Research* 19(1): 49-56.

Leont'ev, V. V. 1977. 'The Indigenous Peoples of Chukchi National Okrug: Population and Settlement'. *Polar Geography* 1:9-12.

----------. no date. *Osobennosti kul'turno-khoziaistvennogo razvitiia narodnostei Chukotki na sovremennom etape (1958-1967 gg.): Shifr - Okonchatel'nyi otchet.* Sibirskoe otdelenie AN SSSR severo-vostochnyi kompleksnyi nauchno-issledovatel'skii institut, laboratoriia arkheologii, istorii i etnografii.

Pika, Aleksandr. 1999. *Neotraditionalism in the Russian North: Indigenous Peoples and the Legacy of Perestroika.* Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Shanin, Teodor. 1987. 'Short Historical Outline of Peasant Studies'. In *Peasants and Peasant Societies*, second edition. Teodor Shanin, ed. 467-475. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Ustinov, V. 1956. *Olenevodstvo na Chukotke.* Magadan: Magadanskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo.

Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR. 1989. *Konstitutsiia (osnovnoi zakon) Soiuza Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik.* Moscow: Iuridicheskaia Literatura.

Wegren, S. K. 1994. 'Yel'tsin's decree on land relations: implications for agrarian reform'. *Post-Soviet Geography* 35 (3): 166-183.

Zabrodin, V.A., ed. 1979. *Severnoe olenevodstvo.* Moscow: Kolos.