

# THE CHUKCHIS AND SIBERIAN YUPIKS OF THE RUSSIAN FAR EAST

**Peter P. Schweitzer**

**University of Alaska Fairbanks**

**and**

**Patty A. Gray**

**University of Alaska Fairbanks**

## 1. CULTURAL OVERVIEW

### *The Peoples*

The Chukotka Autonomous Region of the Russian Federation is inhabited by several Native and non-Native peoples. The Chukchis and Siberian Yupiks constitute the two most numerous Native groups in the region, while ethnic Russians and Ukrainians dominate among the non-Native population. According to the last census of 1989, there were approx. 15,000 Chukchis and 1,700 Yupiks living within Russia. More than 90% of the Yupiks and most of the Chukchis live within the borders of the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug. Some Chukchis also live in the Sakha Republic to the west and in the Magadan Province to the south.

Historically, significant cultural differences developed between the coastal Chukchis and Yupiks in eastern Chukotka (on the Chukchi Peninsula, roughly coinciding with Providenskii and Chukotskii districts) and the tundra or reindeer Chukchi of western Chukotka. Thus, the

similarities among coastal Chukchis and Yupiks were often more pronounced than among coastal and reindeer Chukchis. Commensurate with the ethnographic expertise of the authors, our account will focus on the Yupiks and Chukchis of the Chukchi Peninsula and the Chukchis of the Anadyr River Basin (Anadyrskii District). Nevertheless, the general tendencies described hold true for the entire region of Chukotka. Neither “Chukchi” nor “Siberian Yupik” are self-designations. “Chukchi” has been used by Russians since the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the origin of the word probably goes back to the Chukchi term for “reindeer”. The label “Siberian Yupik” came only recently into use and partly coincides with the self-designation “Yupigyt”. “Siberian” in this context serves to distinguish them from Yupik groups in Alaska, although the Yupiks of Chukotka do not feel themselves as “Siberians” (Siberia is located further to the west in their view).

Other, smaller, Native groups of Chukotka not specifically discussed in our account include the Chuvans, the Evens, Evenks, Koriaks, and Yukagirs. Most of them have their “home bases” in other regions and/or have moved into Chukotka during the last few centuries. The non-Native population – although sometimes referred to as “Russians” – is of heterogenous ethnic origin, albeit dominated by Slavic peoples from the European parts of Russia. We will use the term “Incomers” (a rough translation of the Russian word used in Chukotka) in referring to them collectively.

Both Chukchis and Siberian Yupiks have inhabited Chukotka for several thousand years. The Chukchi language shows little dialect differentiation and belongs to the Chukotko-Kamchatkan language family. The Siberian Yupiks are speakers of Eskimo languages (part of Eskimo-Aleut language family) and until recently there were three distinct Yupik languages spoken in Chukotka (currently there are two left). Although several researchers have assumed

that the ancestors of the Yupiks preceded the Chukchis in settling the coastal areas of Chukotka, there is not enough evidence to settle the issue definitively. In any case, in the eastern parts of Chukotka, Chukchis and Siberian Yupiks have a long history of cultural exchange and mutual influence.

The Native peoples of Chukotka have had contact with non-Native peoples since the seventeenth century, beginning with the first Russian/Cossack explorers who moved into Chukotka in search of fresh economic opportunities (and who were later followed by American traders with the same goals). The Chukchis gained a fierce reputation during the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when they successfully withstood Russian military attempts to subdue them. The eastern parts of Chukotka did not come under full government control until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The following brief description of Chukchi and Yupik traditional culture refers to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (ca. 1900-1925). This period, although far from representing an “untainted past,” is characterized by largely self-determined subsistence activities for which we have a reasonably good ethnographic record. In subsequent decades, Chukotka became fully incorporated into the Soviet which led to far-reaching transformations to deal with in later sections.

### ***The Setting***

Chukotka is located in the far northeast of Russia, in a region known as the “Extreme North.” It is bordered by the East Siberian and Chukchi Seas to the North, and the Bering Sea to the

southeast. It is a huge territory of 737,700 square kilometers, or about two-thirds the size of Alaska. Most of Chukotka, and the entire Chukchi Peninsula, is situated north of the tree line and its vegetation resembles typical tundra flora, with only intermittent brush tundra. The fact that the Chukchi Peninsula is surrounded on three sides by the sea causes high atmospheric humidity and relatively warm winter temperatures. During the short summer, rain and fog are characteristic of the coastal areas. The continental areas of western Chukotka experience lower absolute winter temperatures, but without the humidity and strong winds of the coast.

The Chukchi Peninsula constitutes the northeastern fringe of Russia and only the 70km wide Bering Strait separates it from Alaska. The Bering Strait is a major transit route for migrating sea mammal species. Locally, the most important sea mammals are a variety of whales and seals, as well as walrus and polar bears. Most of the land animals on the Chukchi Peninsula are small mammals, such as lemmings and hares. Among the larger mammals, wolves and foxes are most common. Wild reindeer, which were once abundant, no longer range on the Chukchi Peninsula and have been replaced by domesticated reindeer.

The western tundra region of Chukotka stands in sharp contrast to the peninsula. Here the terrain and vegetation varies from true tundra broken up by low mountain ranges and numerous lakes to mixed-forest zone and riverine habitats. A significant feature of this region is the Anadyr' River, which flows south out of the center of Chukotka before turning east to bisect Anadyr' District, emptying into the Bering Sea through the Gulf of Anadyr'. Land animals here are the same as those found on the Chukchi Peninsula, with the addition brown bear, moose, and wild reindeer. Several species of fish are found in inland rivers, the most important being salmon, trout, arctic grayling, whitefish and smelt.

### *Traditional Subsistence Strategies*

Sea mammal hunting activities of the coastal Chukchis and Siberian Yupiks shared a number of general characteristics. Economically, the most important animals were several kinds of seals and walrus. Bowhead whales, which were extremely important socially and ritually, were only hunted by a few large villages, situated at capes facing the open sea. A few settlements specialized on the pursuit of gray whales. Forms of individual hunting prevailed during the winter (e.g., seal hunting at ice holes). Boat crews staffed by six to ten adult male hunters provide the framework for the organization of labor during summer and fall hunting. Sea mammal hunting was traditionally defined as a male activity, although it happened that women could fulfill the social role of male hunters if a particular family or kin group did not have enough eligible males for the task. The gathering of tundra plants (berries, grasses, etc.), bird, duck, and goose eggs, as well as river fishing were necessary but auxiliary subsistence activities in all coastal villages. Plant gathering, the preparation and distribution of meat, the processing of hides, the production and maintenance of clothing and skin-sewn gear were among the prime responsibilities of women.

In the inland tundra region of Chukotka, the primary economic activity has long been the management of domestic reindeer herds. Herds were held by families, who would work to accumulate a large number of deer and then would hire younger men to help tend these herds. The more ambitious among these young men would eventually acquire deer of their own and settle separately with their own family. The nature of tending domestic deer dictated that these family groups be mobile, migrating constantly in search of fresh pasture for the deer. As on the

coast, a traditional sexual division of labor existed, with men engaged in herding, hunting and fishing activities, while women cooked, sewed, gathered tundra plants, and were responsible for setting up and taking down the mobile camp.

Interaction between the Chukchi reindeer herders of the inland tundra and the coastal villagers dates back at least several centuries. Both occupational groups were mutually dependent, at least economically; the reindeer herders were in constant need of sea mammal fat and hides, while the coastal residents sought reindeer meat and hides. Social mobility between coastal and inland settlements was limited for the Yupik residents and occurred mainly among different Chukchi groups.

### ***Religion and Worldview***

The cosmological views of Chukchis and Yupiks bear many similarities. Among both coastal and inland tundra peoples, the entire non-human environment was considered to be animated and endowed with the abilities to act and speak. Animals and humans alike were considered to be persons possessing souls, and the boundary between these different species of persons was permeable – animal persons could transform into human persons and vice-versa. Species of wild animals and trees, lakes, rivers, etc., were thought to have “owners” or “masters” – spiritual entities controlling resources – with whom humans had to maintain reciprocity in order to use these resources. Male and female shamans had privileged access to the spiritual world which they used to cure the sick, prevent misfortune, and predict the weather.

Bowhead whales were the most prominent animals in the rituals of the coastal hunters of

the Chukchi Peninsula. The “ceremonial of boats” in May--marking the beginning of the hunting season--and the ritual greeting of a hunted whale were the major ceremonies. Only the Yupik settlement of Nuvuqaq knew a special “whaling festival”, celebrated in winter after the closing of the whaling season and lasting for an entire month. The central theme of the whale rituals among the maritime hunters of Chukotka was the “resurrection of the animals,” a way to guide them back to their “homeland.” Seals and walrus, despite their major economic importance, played only a minor role in the ceremonials. However, the attitude toward all game animals was one of social reciprocity; the captured animals were treated as honored guests to the settlement, and not merely as a resource to be harvested.

The western parts of Chukotka came first into contact with Russian-Orthodox missionaries during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, the Chukchi Peninsula was until recently outside the reach of missionary activities. The lack of governmental control of the area prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century prevented the Russian-Orthodox Church from establishing a permanent presence. After Soviet power had brought the area under state control, religious activities were outlawed for ideological reasons. Since 1990, a steady influx of missionaries has attempted to reverse this situation. Protestant activists from abroad have thereby clearly outperformed the Russian- Orthodox Church in financial and personnel investment. The population most responsive to these newest Christianization efforts is the Native population, particularly individuals suffering from alcoholism, and primarily in the cities and district centers.

### ***Social and Political Organization***

The major difference in the social organization of reindeer herders and coastal residents was that among the former there was a more pronounced differentiation into rich and poor. However, rich herders could lose their fortunes quickly through epidemics and other misfortune. Among coastal residents where the harvested resources were distributed more equitably. Economic stratification there developed only in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, through contact with commercial whalers and traders.

The settled village was the most important social and political unit for the inhabitants of the coastal areas of the Chukchi Peninsula, while among reindeer herding peoples it was the mobile herding camp. Larger political units (e.g., consisting of several neighboring villages or camps) rarely seem to have been formed and acted as corporate and/or unified groups. Larger villages tended to consist of two or more subgroups, which were generally named after their current or previous places of residence. The “whaling crew” – a group made up of relatives and neighbors – was the most important social unit (beyond the extended family) within coastal villages. Among the reindeer herders this unit coincided with the herding camp, which typically consisted of four to five extended families.

In contrast to many other Siberian peoples, neither the Chukchis nor the Siberian Yupiks followed a strict clan organization. The Siberian Yupiks had kin groups which resembled the so-called “clans” of St. Lawrence Island, Alaska. Both linguistic groups had a variety of mechanisms to extend kinship links beyond what Euroamericans call relatives (for example, through “spouse exchange”). Marriages were not initiated by a special wedding ceremony nor the payment of a bride-price, but by a period of bride-service (i.e., the future groom would live and work with the bride’s family for a certain amount of time, after which both spouses typically removed to the husband’s family). There were no particular rules as to marry within or without



certain social boundaries, but there was a general tendency to marry within one's camp or village. Still, marriages between coastal residents and reindeer herders did occur.

## **2. THREATS TO SURVIVAL**

### *Demographic Trends*

Despite a long history of interaction with foreigners, the Russian Revolution initiated a period of outside influence unprecedented in Chukotka. The new Bolshevik government began an active campaign to bring "socialist enlightenment" to the "backward" peoples of the far northeast. This was further intensified in the 1930s, when Stalin ordered the forced collectivization of all agricultural activities throughout the Soviet Union. Privately-owned reindeer herds were seized and assigned to collective farms, and resistant owners were at best simply disenfranchised, at worst killed. The most important social unit became the collective farm, further divided into work brigades (reflecting the bias towards "proletarianizing" even the rural population). On the coast, this meant that what was formerly the "master of the boat" now became the "brigadier," and his boat crew became a "brigade." Similarly, in the tundra, the herding camp was now called a brigade and was led by a brigadier. Every square hectare of land in Chukotka was divided up among the newly-created collective farms, and rigid boundaries were drawn between them. Thus, while formerly the owner of a herd could make the decision to migrate several hundred miles to find better pasture depending on seasonal and cyclical climate variations, in the collective farm system the herds were forbidden to cross these farm boundaries.

The collective farm system in Chukotka evolved continually from the 1930s and up to the present. A large number of collective farms (in which all members ostensibly shared in the farm's management and profits) were eventually converted into a smaller number of consolidated state farms (in which a state-appointed manager made all of the decisions and farm workers merely received a salary for their labor). As a result, hunters, herders and gatherers were turned into wage laborers who, while technically continuing to predominantly hunt, herd, gather, and fish, no longer had control over the processes of production and distribution. Reindeer herding, sea mammal hunting and fur farming were all subsumed as branches of the Soviet economy and subjected to the system of centralized planning. In the constant quest for greater productivity that characterized this system, a continual campaign to increase the number of reindeer was pursued until the total head count peaked at about 500,000 in the late 1980s. Even then, a popular slogan circulated in Chukotka was "Onward to one million!", reflecting an utter disregard for the limited carrying capacity of the tundra pastureland.

Throughout this process of the collectivization of traditional economic pursuits in Chukotka, there was also a continual influx of Soviet citizens from the European part of the Soviet Union and Siberia (ethnically, mostly Russians and Ukrainians), which changed the social fabric of the villages of Chukotka significantly. At the same time, the more beneficial aspects of state incorporation—schools (with Native language programs), health care facilities, paid vacations, libraries, etc.—guaranteed a certain level of acceptance of these radical changes. A significant effort was made to transform a small percentage of Chukchis and Yupiks into a "Native intelligentsia," who would become living examples of the positive power of socialist social transformation. These elite Natives worked as politicians, teachers, doctors and "cultural workers" and took up residence primarily in the larger towns and cities of Chukotka. A select

few Chukchi individuals held highly visible positions in both local government and the local Communist Party apparatus; over the years, the second highest post in both the government and the Party was almost without exception a Chukchi.

Under the clarion call of “economic efficiency,” a number of prominent (mostly Yupik) coastal settlements were forcibly closed in the Soviet period and their residents relocated. As a result, the following decades witnessed a sharp increase in the numbers of suicides and other violent deaths, the extent of alcoholism and other social problems. The rate of non-Native in-migration increased from the 1950s through the 1980s, coinciding with a campaign of industrial development in Chukotka (construction, mining, oil drilling, etc.). While the total population of Chukotka in 1930 was 14,500 and 96.3% were Natives, by 1970 the population was 100,000, and only 12.8% were Natives. In-migration to Chukotka continued until 1989, when the population peaked at 164,783. As a result of these drastic demographic shifts, local Native residents gradually became a minority in their own settlements, received lower ranking jobs and smaller salaries than the Incomers, and the Russian language became the dominant means of communication in public.

### ***Current Events and Conditions***

As a result of *perestroika* (“restructuring”) in the late 1980s and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Chukotka has undergone sweeping political, economic and social changes that have had a significant impact on the social status and living conditions of the Chukchis and Yupiks of Chukotka. Not only did the Russian Federation become an independent country in 1991, but the

various territories within Russia began a struggle for autonomy in relation to one another and to the Russian center in Moscow. The Chukotka Autonomous Region had been administratively subordinate to Magadan Province since 1953, but in 1990 the Chukotka Soviet of People's Deputies (still at that time led by a Chukchi chairman) declared independence from its parent province, and today Chukotka is an independent territory within the Russian Federation. After changes in federal election law in 1996, the head of the region became an elected governor.

While this transformation of the local political structure is meant to signal the arrival of democracy in Russia, it also marks the end of the long Soviet tradition of reserving positions in the government of Chukotka for Natives. Although some Natives do still hold positions in the administration, the new political power in Chukotka is unabashedly non-Native and predominantly Russian-Ukrainian. Building on patterns of the Soviet past, this new government (comprised primarily of Communists-turned-Democrats) is structured as a tightly-controlled patronage system under the more or less totalitarian control of the governor. Criticism is not tolerated, and opposition is systematically eliminated. This has made it very difficult to develop even a discussion about Native rights and interests, much less an acting Native advocacy movement.

The collapse of the Soviet Union also caused a reverse demographic trend in Chukotka (and many other regions of the Russian Far North): massive out-migration, as Incomers sought relative economic safety back in western Russia (what is known in Chukotka as "the mainland"). This meant that the relative percentage of Chukchis, Yupiks, and other Natives in Chukotka began to rise from its low point of less than 10% to almost 20% by 1998, as the overall population of Chukotka dropped to about 78,000. While out-migration continues and the relative percentage of Natives to Incomers may continue to rise, this does not mean that Chukotka is

returning to a social condition in which Natives will once again become dominant, or even equal. Non-Native Incomers continue to exert dominance over a very marginalized Native population, for a combination of political, economic and social reasons. Paternalism – a “benevolent” attitude based on clear-cut hierarchies – continues to be the key characteristic of Native/non-Native relations in Chukotka.

### *Environmental Crisis*

Official policy regarding the environment during Soviet times was largely determined by attempts to increase the country’s productivity and industrial/agricultural output. Consequently, there was little concern about the long-term effects of the Soviet command economy on the natural environment. Chukotka’s marginal position within the USSR prevented, to a certain degree, full-fledged industrial development activities. Nevertheless, several attempts have been made to “modernize” Chukotka. One of these legacies is the nuclear power station at Bilibino, one of only two such reactors in the Soviet North. For many years, reindeer herders in the region have complained about the pasture damage inflicted by this industrial project. In September 1997, the federal government approved a plan to build two pressurized-water reactors on a barge floating in the East Siberian Sea, although with the current economic crisis in Russia, it is unlikely that this plan will be executed anytime soon.

Gold and other mining activities are another source of environmental destruction. Currently, the major mining enterprises are concentrated in the northern half of Chukotka: these include the gold mines of Leningradskiy, Polyarniy (both in Shmidt district), Komsomol’skiy

(Chaun district), and Bilibino, as well as the tin mines near Pevek. In the late 1990s, commercial bids are constantly being held for the rights to new mining areas in all of Chukotka's eight districts. The low-cost techniques of surface gold mining are particularly destructive, making vast stretches of tundra unusable for reindeer herding and other subsistence activities. In addition to the purely environmental threat, these mining activities have triggered far-reaching sociocultural changes, since most mining towns were almost entirely inhabited by short-term Incomers. In recent years, several—especially minor—mines and their supporting towns were closed, creating a patchwork of deserted “ghost towns” across Chukotka. One very controversial case is Iul'tinskii, which was unilaterally shut down by the Chukotkan administration in 1996; all communal services were cut off even before many of the residents had relocated, causing residents to appeal to the federal government for help. Typically, hardly any attempt at environmental cleanup is made at these abandoned sites.

Even the areas little affected by Soviet industrial policies, such as the Chukchi Peninsula, have to bear their share of environmental destruction and endangerment. For example, the coastal strips of the Chukchi Peninsula are littered with hundreds of thousands of empty oil drums, which were brought in to fuel state farm operations and were never taken out of the region again. Even in the vast, seemingly wild stretches of inland tundra these oil drums can be found. The irresponsible attitude of military personnel toward the natural environment (e.g., by “fishing empty” streams with the use of tanks) could never be prosecuted, nor could poaching activities by high-ranking local officials. Everywhere in Chukotka, the fragile tundra is striped with the permanent tracks of tank-like ATVs, known locally as *vezdekhody* (“go-everywhere”), which is one of the key forms of transportation in rural Chukotka. In 1998, a local law was finally passed limiting the use of these tanks by private individuals from urban areas

(“weekenders” who used them to take hunting or fishing trips into the tundra); however, these passenger tanks have become an even more important form of transportation in far-flung villages, as helicopter travel, which was once so abundant, has become drastically more limited.

The early 1990s seemed to bring relief from ecological disaster. On the one hand, local environmental organizations were emerging that began to raise awareness about those threats. On the other hand, neither the disappearing Soviet Union nor the newly emerging independent Russian Federation had the financial means to invest into large-scale projects, as in the past. At the same time, foreign investment—mainly in oil and gas resources—was much less active in Chukotka than in other regions of Siberia and the Russian Far East. Now, however, there is renewed interest in the small-scale exploitation of any resource that has some exchange or use value. This has clearly been triggered by the disastrous economic situation throughout the region and many of the people (Native and non-Native) involved can hardly be criticized for trying to survive somehow.

An important category of environmental crisis in Chukotka can be classed as “natural.” Chief among these problems are predation of domestic deer by wolves, the rise in the size of wild reindeer herds, tundra fires, and fall icing-over of tundra pastureland. Wolf predation has always been a problem for reindeer herders, to the extent that in the Soviet period wolves were described as “enemies of the people.” However, this became an especially serious problem in the early 1990s, when political and economic changes in Chukotka led to the breakdown of reindeer management practices. While central managers often claim that it is the Natives’ fault for being drunk and irresponsible and not watching the herds, in fact the increasing wolf predation coincides with a time when rifles, bullets and working snowmobiles were poorly supplied to the reindeer herders, who are entirely dependent on central distribution mechanisms for all of their

supplies. One young herder in the village of Snezhnoe describes his frustration: “Without bullets, there is nothing we can do. We run and scream at the wolves, but they don’t pay any attention.”

Today’s “enemy of the people” has become the wild reindeer herd, which migrates in detached groups primarily throughout central and western Chukotka. Besides exhausting pastureland that is needed by domestic herds, wild bucks regularly drive off does from domestic herds, accounting for large losses to the collective farms. The size of this herd regularly fluctuates in long-term cycles, and wild deer have always interacted with the domestic reindeer population; however, in the late 1990s the wild herd has grown to an unprecedented size. Estimates in 1998 ranged from 50,000 to an outside figure of 150,000, while the official count for all domestic deer in Chukotka was about 150,000 as of 1 January 1998. Obtaining an accurate count of the wild herd is difficult since no monitoring program exists, and although the problem is officially acknowledged as a serious one, an official program for handling it has yet to be developed in Chukotka.

Tundra fires also present an environmental threat to reindeer herding. Chukotka does have a department for battling summer tundra fires, but in the early 1990s, at just the time when there was a break-down in the efficiency of such departments, a large fire broke out in Anadyrskii district, destroying hundreds of square hectares of pastureland. During the winter, a serious threat to pastureland is the periodic “icing-over” of the tundra, which is primarily a problem on the Chukchi peninsula. Icing-over occurs when a late fall warm spell melts the snow cover and is followed by a hard freeze. Such icings are said to occur about every seven years, but the 1990s have been extremely unlucky for Chukotka: icings occurred in 1996 and again in 1998, causing the loss of hundreds of head of badly-needed breeding stock.

In summary, it can be said that Chukotkan landscapes show a rather varied picture of



environmental degradation: from heavily impacted areas (such as Bilibino) to areas with few visible problems (mainly large parts of the Chukchi Peninsula). However, it seems that wherever human activities (other than traditional subsistence pursuits) have occurred in Chukotka, they have left their—mostly damaging—marks. Those can be seen from the smallest village to the largest towns. Their roots have to be sought in a western/Soviet attitude which treats the environment as a resource container to be exploited for short-term profit. Since Chukchi and Yupik subsistence activities were incorporated into an economic model based on such a logic, they too became – by necessity – environmentally damaging. Generally, land-based resources (such as reindeer pastures and riverine fishing) have been more seriously impacted than sea-based resources (such as sea-mammals). This also means that “Yupik subsistence activities” are less threatened by environmental factors than are “Chukchi ones.” Maritime subsistence has been much more afflicted by national and international regulations, as implemented by the Soviet state and the International Whaling Commission.

### *Sociocultural Crisis*

The severe “cultural alienation” that afflicted Chukchis and Yupiks during the Soviet period can still be felt until the present day. For example, Native language competence, which so severely decreased between 1960 and 1990, has not rebounded to previous levels, despite the fact that “the tragic loss of Native language and culture” is a continuing refrain in Chukotka, and a major concern among the Chukchis and Yupiks (primarily the urban intelligentsia) and a few concerned non-Natives. Nevertheless, the early 1990s brought signs of hope to Chukchis and

Yupiks, who began to feel again that their cultural heritage was precious, after decades of indoctrination to abandon “old ways” for the sake of “Soviet modernity.” The appearance of foreign scholars and tourists, none of whom were interested in Soviet/Russian culture, clearly reinforced the feeling that traditional knowledge was a resource worthy of being transmitted and documented. Contacts with indigenous peoples from other parts of the circumpolar North and elsewhere opened the eyes of many Chukotkan Native leaders to the achievements of those other groups, whom Soviet propaganda had always tried to portray as suffering and disadvantaged under the corrupted rule of capitalist America. The demographic trend of Incomers leaving Chukotka also contributed to the general optimism of Native leaders. Most everybody was convinced that things could only get better. Among the different visions circulated, most noticeable was the belief that a return to “tradition” was possible and desirable.

When perestroika and glasnost’ made it possible to publicly voice criticism about existing conditions, Native concerns initially appeared as the most urgent ones. In all of the Chukchi and Yupik villages there was a pronounced social stratification, which clearly favored the Incomers over the Native people. Wherever one looked—salaries, housing standards, job and educational opportunities, health services, etc.—the local people were at the bottom of the hierarchy. It was thus quite obvious that changes had to occur which would attempt a more equitable distribution of social and economic resources. However, far from improving conditions for the Native population, the post-Soviet trend seems to be a redoubled effort to secure a position of dominance for the Incomer population, pushing Natives ever further to the margins of productive society in Chukotka. This trend is intimately related to the arrival of “capitalism” and “democracy” in Chukotka. For example, according to current logic, while the socialist system deliberately and openly claimed to provide special programs to facilitate the advancement of

Natives socially, culturally and economically (however much these programs may have failed in practice), in the democratic system, everyone – whether Incomer or Native – supposedly has an equal opportunity to make their own advancements and should therefore not rely on outside help.

This is related to the perceived philosophy of capitalism: everyone has a chance to strike out on his own in business (or in obtaining education in order to later secure lucrative employment), and anyone who fails economically has only himself to blame for not trying harder. When Natives complain about their persistent disadvantages in employment, education, housing, etc., they are often answered with a recitation of this new philosophy of the new Chukotka. However, since Incomers had always occupied the top tier in the Communist Party, in government positions, in industry, on collective farms, and in all important cultural institutions, they were already in the best position to take advantage of the changing political and economic landscape. Natives, on the other hand, lacked the training, experience, connections and financial resources to take advantage of the new capitalist rules. In the face of persistent criticism, the Chukotka administration has recently adopted a new rhetoric of concern and assistance for the Native population; however, beneath the surface of this positive veneer, very little seems to be changing in terms of the structural inequality that exists between Natives and Incomers.

Probably the most serious threat to the cultural survival of Chukchis and Yupiks in Chukotka is the sweeping program of privatization mandated in Russia beginning in 1992. In Chukotka, the botched implementation of this program has had a disastrous effect on the traditional Native pursuits of reindeer herding and sea mammal hunting. Collective farms had been entirely subsidized by the state, and their workers had become completely dependent on deliveries of food, clothing, supplies and fuel. The collective farm was not merely an economic enterprise, but an entire social support system for the village, managing schools, stores, utilities,

housing, etc. State support was abruptly withdrawn after 1992, the social network of the collective farm was dismantled, and all that was left were the immediate commercial assets (for example, reindeer herds and whale boats).

This meant that reindeer herding and sea mammal hunting, which had always been primarily subsistence activities for Chukchis and Yupiks, suddenly had to become commercially-viable enterprises, paying salaries to their workers out of their own profits. In this the “privatized” collective farms failed utterly and miserably; as of 1998, most collective farm workers (the majority of whom are Natives) had gone a full five years without a single paycheck. The supplies they relied on stopped being delivered, and families began to survive primarily on bread, tea, locally-gathered plants, and meat that they harvested for themselves. This has triggered a migratory displacement that begins in the collective farm itself: farm workers seek jobs in other segments of the village economy, which have been vacated by villagers seeking better opportunities in the district centers and cities, which have opened up as a result of out-migration by the urban Incomer population to other, more temperate, regions of Russia.

Thus, the economic crisis has severe implications for the cultural survival of Chukchis and Yupiks. While urban intellectuals frantically seek programs to preserve and promote Chukchi and Yupik language and culture, the simple fact remains that language and culture is most “naturally” preserved wherever Chukchis and Yupiks are allowed to freely practice their traditional economic pursuits. Native language survives most successfully in reindeer brigades and on whale boats, where it is a working language, and not in classrooms, where young people cut off from their cultural traditions do not see the relevance of speaking Chukchi or Yupik. However, for those living in the towns and cities of Chukotka, seemingly the only practical thing to do is establish clubs and classes and educational programs to promote Native language and

traditional culture.

### **3. RESPONSE: STRUGGLES TO SUSTAIN CULTURAL SURVIVAL**

#### *Native Activism*

The chronology of recent political events in Russian history requires looking at recent local responses to threats to cultural survival from a perspective that differentiates between at least three different phases in the field of Native political mobilization. These periods could be called “Soviet stagnation,” “perestroika optimism,” and “post-Soviet stagnation”. As was already pointed out above, the decades prior to the fundamental changes brought about by perestroika saw a period of major social and cultural upheaval for the Native peoples of Chukotka. At the same time, there were very few channels for expressing discontent or alternative solutions, since the political system was centrally governed by party decisions. Joining the C.P.S.U. (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) was one of the few theoretical options for participating in local and regional decision making. However, most people were aware that real change could never be initiated through such activities, and thus these jobs were often left to opportunistic careerists who cared little about the specific problems of their constituents.

Nevertheless, there were undoubtedly individuals at different levels of Chukotkan state institutions (from party organizations to schools and state farms) who honestly tried to make a difference and—sometimes—were able to initiate minor reformist changes. The new Native and non-Native “dissidents” of Chukotka (mostly urban intellectuals), on the other hand, were so

marginalized that their voices were little known to the general populace. The most successful strategy during those days was probably to refrain from any kind of activism, be it pro- or anti-party positions. Living your life by superficially conforming to Soviet demands while at the same time ignoring their ideological implications—a kind of “internal emigration” – proved to be a viable cultural survival strategy.

The winds of perestroika quickly changed the level of political activism throughout Chukotka. It became apparent that the existing state or state-controlled organizations—despite their often mind-blurring attempts to reinvent themselves during the late 1980s and early 1990s—were insufficient for voicing most of the pressing needs and demands. In Chukotka, it was especially the Native population—Chukchis and Siberian Yupiks primarily—which felt that their time to publicize their plight had come (the majority of Incomers were busy packing their suitcases and felt little need to initiate local changes). At the height of the period of *glasnost* (“openness”), during a period of optimism and excitement in newly-independent Russia, a movement of indigenous peoples appeared that seemed to mirror similar movements in other parts of the circumpolar North. At the national level, this was reflected in the creation of an “Association of Lesser-Numbered Peoples of the North” in Moscow. At the same time, local Native associations were formed all across the Russian North, including in Chukotka.

In 1989, a US-USSR agreement made visa-free travel for indigenous residents on both sides of the Bering Strait once more possible, after 40 years of Cold War separation. On the Russian side, Siberian Yupik residents actively used this opportunity to visit their friends and relatives on St. Lawrence Island and on the Seward Peninsula, while the Chukchis were involved in these travels to a lesser degree. The new affiliation of Siberian Yupiks with the larger Inuit world outside of Russia (Alaska, Canada, Greenland) influenced the formation in Chukotka of

the “Regional Society of the Eskimos of Chukotka” in August of 1990. Meanwhile, an “Association of Lesser-Numbered Peoples of Chukotka” was also created (meant to represent all of Chukotka’s Native peoples), and the two organizations continue to exist side-by side. Within a few years, both a Reindeer Herders’ Union and a Sea Mammal Hunters’ Union were created to represent these two predominantly-Native professional groups in Chukotka.

Despite the high level of superficial activism, the organizational activities of those transitional years were clearly characterized by the aftereffects of Soviet political culture. For example, the general tenor of many organizational activities was to compile “problem lists”, which contained complaints ranging from insufficient housing to Native language loss. Most of the time, these complaints were passed on to “higher authorities” with the demand to take care of the problems. There were very few attempts to approach the problems through concerted community activism. Because of decades of life experience within the Soviet political system, where everything—be it good or bad—came from “above,” the thought of trying to change negative circumstances yourselves was hardly entertained. Even today, this more passive approach continues to hamper local initiatives.

### ***The Role of the Government***

One of the problems in trying to launch a movement for Native rights and interests is the persistence of the traditional Soviet understanding of the relationship between social organizations and the government. The meaning of “civil society” is still being debated in Russia; while in many parts of the world it specifically implies initiative from below by private

individuals and groups, in the post-socialist world there is far more acceptance of government involvement or control of supposedly citizen initiatives. Thus, the Association of Lesser-Numbered Peoples of Chukotka, while officially registered as an independent social organization, is entirely dependent upon the Chukotkan administration for financing, making it in some sense a virtual branch of the administration. This compromises the Association's ability to raise issues that cast the administration in a critical light.

Moreover, when Natives do bring criticism against the administration and ask for attention to specific problems, the administration often responds by either denying existence of the problem or trying to distract attention away from the problem or towards far less serious problems. For example, instead of attempting to develop a comprehensive program for helping Natives attain education that could lead to improved job opportunities, the administration instead promised to pay a lump-sum monthly compensation to the entire Native population, which, when divided among all Native inhabitants, came to about twenty dollars per person.

Another strategy is the staging of elaborate and colorful "Native" holidays, for which no expense is spared, and which seem to bespeak a strong revitalization of traditional Chukchi and Yupik culture in Chukotka. The problem is that Natives themselves are rarely if ever involved in the planning of these holidays, but are merely directed to perform their traditional culture for public consumption. This strategy is not directed only at the Native population; Russian holidays are staged as well, and with similar intentions. However, Natives in particular increasingly express frustration with this ultimately empty attention. As one Native activist, who was fired from his job in a village House of Culture because of his open criticism of the local administration, phrases it:

"All they do is give us holidays and pretend that everything is fine.



They show us off to international audiences and say, ‘see how well our traditional cultures are doing!’ Dance, sing, they tell us, but they won’t help us where we really need help!”

This young activist recognizes the greatest irony of these staged holidays: while they are taken to be a sign of cultural revitalization, it is actually in the daily practice of traditional economic activities (sea mammal hunting, reindeer herding) that cultural survival and revitalization find their foundation. Yet these are the very concerns that receive the least concrete assistance from the Chukotkan administration.

### *Developing Legal Frameworks*

A serious obstacle to developing new precedents with regard to Native rights and interests in Chukotka (and in Russian generally) is the weak development of the post-Soviet legal system. While many new laws are being passed both at the federal level and within Chukotka, it is widely understood that the laws themselves are usually vague and difficult to implement, and that the enforcement mechanisms are poorly developed. A further problem is the lack of agreement between the federal center and regions like Chukotka over who has authority over what; in many cases, laws clearly contradict the Russian Constitution, but there is little that can be done to bring compliance. Yet the establishment of a strong legislative framework for defining the status of Native peoples is considered a crucial step before any significant progress can be made.

There is a national community of Native advocates (including both Natives and non-

Natives) in Russia that is working to develop legal precedents with regard to the indigenous peoples that are consistent between the federal center and the regions where indigenous peoples live. They face many obstacles beyond the general weakness of the legal system. One problem is that, as a result of a wave of Russian nationalism that appeared in the 1990s, there is a great deal of resistance on the part of many non-Natives to passing laws that carry specific benefits for indigenous peoples. Another problem is achieving consistency between federal laws and regional laws. In some cases, rather progressive legislation supporting indigenous peoples has been passed in other parts of Russia, but getting the federal legislature to pass a version of such laws proves more difficult.

In the 1990s, several draft laws have been proposed to the regional legislature in Chukotka that are considered fundamental to the progress of guaranteeing some basic rights for Chukchis and Yupiks: on sea mammal hunting; on reindeer herding; on local self-government for Native communities; and on traditional resource management. The local legislature is very resistant to hearing these laws, and in some cases has demanded drastic revisions in a law before giving it serious consideration; the one law that seems most likely to be passed is the law on reindeer herding. Federal versions of these laws (except for the first), as well as a general law on the status of indigenous peoples, have also been proposed, but the federal legislature has so far refused to hear them.

### ***Looking Beyond Borders***

One of the most positive achievements of recent years are international contacts. The above-mentioned agreement on visa-free travel between Chukotka and Alaska has enabled many

Chukotkan residents to cross the Bering Strait for to visit friends and relatives, to attend conferences, and to participate in professional exchanges. These travels are happening despite many remaining bureaucratic obstacles. The belated arrival of electronic mail – which became available to the general population of Chukotka only in 1998, although it had been available to the administration since 1995 – is a hopeful sign. Contact with those beyond Chukotka, who can share ideas and possible solutions to common problems, has long been the most powerful instigator of change in Chukotka. In 1998, the administration also began to switch over the telephone system to a seven-digit system capable of direct international dialing. Hopefully, this will make phone- and fax-communication with Chukotka more reliable.

An especially interesting project of international collaboration is a whale monitoring project funded by the North Slope Borough in Alaska and the U.S. National Park Service, Alaska Region. Instead of relying on problematic guesses by biologists, this project documents the the movements and numbers of Bowhead whales and other sea mammals through direct observation by experienced Native hunters. Over several years, this project has provided coastal villages on the Chukchi Peninsula with much-needed cash-income, while it provided the Inupiat of North Alaska with information about little-known whale-stocks (which are important in the allocation battles with the International Whaling Commission). Currently, US-funding has expired and the Chukotkan administration has pledged to finance it for three more years. It has to be seen whether this promise will be followed through.

Finally, some of the above-mentioned Native organizations provide important links to global or circumpolar indigenous networks. For example, the president of the Chukotkan Reindeer Herders' Union was also the founder of the National Reindeer Herders' Association, which operates in close cooperation with the World Reindeer Herders' Union. The Siberian

Yupiks joined the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, which is one of the most influential indigenous organizations on an international level.

#### **4. FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

The predicament of Chukchis and Yupiks in Chukotka differs from that of other indigenous peoples around the world primarily because of the socialist history of the Soviet Union. At least in material terms, that history is viewed nostalgically by many in Chukotka, including Natives. In comparison with the current situation, the Soviet period was a time when even Chukchis and Yupiks were comparatively well-fed, comfortably-housed, and given a token measure of prestige in society. In that sense, the advent of so-called democracy and capitalism in Chukotka, however ironic it may seem, has meant a dramatic drop in the quality of life and a serious threat not only to cultural survival, but to physical survival. But the roots of the problems of today can be found in the structured inequalities between Natives and Incomers that were established during the Soviet period. While in the past these inequalities were deliberately masked by the supposedly benevolent paternalism of the Incomer population toward Chukchis and Yupiks, in the post-Soviet period an attitude of intolerance has developed towards the inability of Natives to bring themselves up to speed in the new economic conditions.

Chukchis and Yupiks in Chukotka are not a homogenous population; besides the cultural differences between the two groups, there are significant differences between the urban Native intellectuals and those who labor in the villages and in the traditional occupations of reindeer herding and sea mammal hunting. Rural Natives today are today struggling to stay alive; they are

aware of the advocacy efforts of their supposed “leaders” in the urban centers, but it is difficult for them to find these efforts relevant to their own daily lives. Conversely, it is difficult for urban activists to sufficiently understand the problems of rural Natives. Moreover, the 1990s have been a period of crisis and upheaval for all of Russia, and the specific problems of these endangered peoples of Chukotka will most likely remain on the back burner of the government agenda for many years to come.

The following questions could be used to structure a class discussion or to organize a research paper:

- What effects did the different waves of in- and out-migration have on the social and cultural fabric of Chukchi and Yupik culture?
- Comparing the Chukchis and the Yupiks, what are the similarities and differences in the contemporary problems faced by them?
- How would you characterize the policy of the local government in Chukotka toward Chukchis and Yupiks, and what are the implications of this policy for their cultural survival?
- How might future developments of reindeer herding and sea mammal hunting influence the cultural fates of the Native peoples of Chukotka?
- How do the social and political conditions for indigenous peoples in the former Soviet Union differ from those in other parts of the Arctic?

## **5. RESOURCE GUIDE**

### ***Published Literature***

1. Bogoras, Waldemar. 1904-09. *The Chukchee*. The Jesup North Pacific Expedition 7. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
2. Gray , Patty A. 1997. Snezhnoe: Where East and West Collide. *Transitions: Changes in Post Communist Societies* 4(6): 96-100.
3. Kerttulla, Anna M. 1997. Antler on the Sea: Creating and Maintaining Cultural Group Boundaries among the Chukchi, Yupik, and Newcomers of Sireniki. *Arctic Anthropology* 34(1): 212-226.
4. Krupnik, Igor I. 1993. *Arctic Adaptations: Native Whalers and Reindeer Herders of Northern Eurasia*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.
5. Schweitzer, Peter P. 1997. Traveling Between Continents: Native Contacts Across the Bering Strait, 1898-1948. *Arctic Research of the United States* 11: 68-72.
6. Sverdrup, H.U. 1978. *Among the Tundra People* Transl. by Molly Sverdrup. La Jolla, CA: Scripps Institution of Oceanography, University of California, San Diego.

### ***Films and Videos***

*Beringia*. 1992. Directed by Alexander Burimsky. For purchase and rental information contact the director through Goskino, Valdaisky pr. 16, 125445 Moscow, Russia.

*Chukotka Coast of Memories*. 1989. Chronicle of contemporary village life, subsistence activities, and Native dancing. Directed by Andris Slapinsh. For purchase and rental information

contact Natasha Diushen, Ruses Street 9-46, LV-1029 Riga, Latvia.

*Traveling in the Arctic*. 1980. Includes footage of Sakari Palsi's 1917-18 expedition to Chukotka. Directed by Hanu and Sakari Palsi. For purchase and rental information contact Hanu Palsi, Suomen Elokuvaarkisto, Finnish Film Archive, Box 177, 00151 Helsinki, Finland.

Copies of all three films are housed at the Alaska Native Heritage Film Center, University of Alaska Museum, PO Box 756960, Fairbanks, AK 99775-6960, and at the Arctic Studies Center, Smithsonian Institution, NHB 307, MRC 112, Washington, DC 20560.

### ***Internet and www sites***

NOTE: Unfortunately, as of 1998, there is not yet a single www site operated by a Chukotkan–Native or non-Native–organization. The following www sites were set up by “outsiders” and provide at least some internet information about the region, although the information on most sites is outdated.

1. The Chukotka Autonomous Okrug: An Ethnographic Web Site by Patty Gray.

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Atlantis/7097>

2. Paleoenvironments and Glaciation in Beringia

<http://www.geo.umass.edu/projects/chukotka/berhome.html>

3. Chukotka: Russian Reindeer Country

<http://www.informns.k12.mn.us/rfe/chukotka>

4. Rusline -- Russian Internet Directory Information page on Chukotka

(Created by the Russian Information and Business Center, Inc., USA)

<http://www.rusline.com/oblast/CHUKOTKA/CHUKOTKA.html>

5. East of Russia -- Information page on Chukotka

(created by the American Business Center)

<http://vladivostok.com/usis/CHUKCHI.htm>

6. United Nations Environment Program, GRID-Arendal, information page on NITs "Chukotka"

<http://www.grida.no/prog/polar/add/cip/instit15.htm>

***Organizations***

1. The Association of Lesser-Numbered Peoples of Chukotka

President: Aleksandr Omrypkir

37 Otke Street

Anadyr', Chukotka Autonomous Okrug

Russia 686710



2. “Yupik” Society of Eskimos of Chukotka

President: Liudmilla I. Ainana

Provideniia, Chukotka Autonomous Okrug

Russia 686910

[Address/phone and fax numbers will be provided shortly]

3. The Ecological Society of Chukotka “Kaira Club”

Chairman: Gennadii Smirnov

5 Mir Street, apt. 39

Anadyr’, Chukotka Autonomous Okrug

Russia 686710

e-mail: [kaira@anadyr.ru](mailto:kaira@anadyr.ru) or [kaira@chukotka.ru](mailto:kaira@chukotka.ru)

Tel: (42722) 4-05-87

4. Native Cooperative “Naukan”

Chairman: Mikhail A. Zelenskii

Lavrentiia, Chukotka Autonomous Okrug

Russia

[Address/phone and fax numbers will be provided shortly]