

Peter P. Schweitzer and Patty A. Gray, "Chukchis." In: *Supplement to the Modern Encyclopedia of Russian, Soviet and Eurasian History*, Vol. 6, ed. by Bruce F. Adams, pp. 79-84. Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press.

CHUKCHIS. Indigenous people of the far northeast of Russia. Historically engaged in reindeer herding and sea mammal hunting.

Chukchis is an anglicized plural form of the Russian word *chukchi*, which is itself a plural form. In Russian there are two singular gendered forms, *chukcha* (masc.) and *chukchanka* (fem.). In some older literature the spelling *Chukchee* may also be found. The name *Chukchi* is not a self-designation. It is a label used by the Russians since the seventeenth century and is probably a derivative from the *Chukchi* word *chavchyv*, meaning reindeer herder. In the 1930s the self-appellation *Lygoravetlan* (real people) was made the official term in Soviet publications. However, since neighboring *Koriaks* knew the same self-designation, *Lygoravetlan* went out of official use by the end of the 1930s. *Lygoravetlan* is currently not in common use, although some *Chukchi* activists promote it.

Chukchis number approximately 12,000 and constitute the largest indigenous group in the *Chukotka Autonomous Region*, where they can be found in all eight districts. In addition there are smaller groups of *Chukchis* in the *Nizhne-Kolymsk* district of the *Republic of Sakha* to the west and in the *Koriak Autonomous Region of Kamchatka* to the south as well as in *Magadan province*. Approximately eighteen percent of *Chukchis* live in urban areas, while eighty-two percent live in rural areas. Of those in rural areas, the majority live in a tundra environment, since only the southernmost areas of historical *Chukchi* habitation are characterized by forest tundra. Within the *Chukchi* language, which belongs to the *Chukotko-Kamchatkan* language family, several dialects can be distinguished, including dialectical differences between men's and women's speech.

Historical settlement in *Chukotka* dates back several thousand years. *Chukchis* have had contact with non-indigenous peoples since the seventeenth century, when the first Russian

Cossack explorers sailed from the Kolyma River around the Chukotka Peninsula and eventually established a fortress at the site of what is now the region's capital city of Anadyr. Russian settlement continued primarily along the Anadyr River basin. Meanwhile, by the nineteenth century American traders began to arrive and set up trading outposts on the peninsula, and many Chukchis hunted furs to trade for manufactured goods and tea. These traders were ousted and their assets nationalized when Soviet power established itself in Chukotka in the 1920s. In the course of the twentieth century the Soviet government attracted Russian, Ukrainian and other immigrants to Chukotka for purposes of industrializing the region. By the late 1980s the Chukchi constituted only seven percent of the total population of the region.

Two populations of Chukchis are commonly distinguished, defined primarily in economic and spatial terms. Reindeer herding Chukchis were historically more mobile and lived in the inland tundra and taiga regions of Chukotka. Sea mammal hunting Chukchis were historically settled along the coastal areas of Chukotka, especially on the Chukotka Peninsula at the region's easternmost end. Culturally, the coastal Chukchi were regarded as similar to the neighboring Siberian Yupik, who were also coastal sea mammal hunters, although the two groups mostly occupied separate settlements. In the twentieth century, as both reindeer herding and sea mammal hunting were reorganized by the Soviet government, settlement patterns of both tundra and coastal populations changed. Today sea mammal hunting Chukchis live in mixed villages along with Yupiks, Russians, and other incomers, and even Chukchi who engage in mobile tundra reindeer herding maintain family apartments in ethnically mixed villages alongside incomers and other indigenous groups.

Chukchi reindeer herding generally involved keeping very large herds of 1,000-3,000 animals primarily for meat consumption in contrast to Evenki-style herding, which generally involved keeping smaller herds used primarily for transportation and milk, while obtaining meat through hunting. Since at least the nineteenth century, Chukchi herds provided most of their consumption needs, including food (reindeer meat), clothing and dwelling covers (reindeer hides), as well as tools and other utensils (reindeer bones and antlers). Other needs were supplied through

exchange with the coastal dwellers. Sea mammal blubber for heating and lighting and hides for ropes, boot soles, etc, were particularly needed. Sea mammal hunters among coastal Chukchis historically relied on various kinds of seals and walrus. The hunting of whales, especially bowheads, had social and ritual significance, and was only pursued in a few larger, predominantly Siberian Yupik, settlements, which were strategically situated at capes and promontories. The walrus hunt required at least one umiak, a frame-boat covered with walrus hides, which the Russians call baidara, which was normally manned by eight male hunters who were usually kin-related. Whaling required the cooperation of several umiaks, and one harvested bowhead whale could provision an entire village with the yearly demand of meat and blubber.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, fur hunting and trapping was limited to the forested areas in the southern and western parts of Chukotka. It was only in the course of the twentieth century that the tundra regions became attractive for fur resources, and at the height of the Soviet period fur farming was an important component of the coastal economy, since the sea mammal meat could be used to feed the fur-bearing animals. Land-based hunting was always oriented primarily toward wild reindeer, which disappeared from most areas of Chukotka in the nineteenth century but which returned in force at the end of the twentieth century. Fishing was practiced to varying degrees by all populations of Chukchis, and the gathering of plant resources was also important. During the short summers a variety of grasses, roots, berries, and pine nuts was collected for nutritional and medicinal purposes and stored for the long winters. Mushroom collecting was introduced by Russian settlers in the region.

According to Chukchi cosmology, the natural environment was animated with both benevolent and malevolent spirits. Amulets and other sacral items were used to protect against the latter. Among Chukchis the most important such item was an anthropomorphic wooden fire drill, which was kept in every household and guaranteed its well-being. Not only animals and plants, but rivers, lakes, and other natural phenomena had the ability to act and speak. Animals and humans alike were persons possessing souls, and the boundary between these different species of persons was permeable. Animal persons could transform into human persons and vice-versa. Animal

species and features of the natural environment were controlled by spiritual entities, often referred to as owners. Humans had to make sure to treat those owners properly if they wanted to use the resources which the latter commanded. Each settlement was home to several male and female shamans, who had privileged access to the world of the spirits. Their tasks included healing the sick, promoting good hunting, preventing disaster, and predicting the weather.

The Chukchis are unique among indigenous peoples of the Russian North in that outside missionary influence on them was minimal. Since the Russian government exerted little control over the area until the beginning of the twentieth century, there were hardly any attempts to introduce the Russian Orthodox faith to the region other than along the Anadyr and Kolyma rivers. There was some activity by Protestant missionaries based in Alaska just before the Russian Revolution, but these were not successful in the long run. During Soviet times Chukchis became officially atheists along with everybody else in the country. With looming persecution, their animistic and shamanistic beliefs and rituals could only be practiced in private. The situation changed around 1990, when religious activity became possible once again, and Protestant as well as Russian Orthodox missionaries flocked to the area. Protestant missionaries from Alaska pursued their activities more aggressively and with more financial backing than their Russian counterparts, and several US-based churches proved to be quite successful. A number of Chukchis have converted, although there are also sustained efforts to revive native beliefs.

The Chukchis' successful resistance against Russian Cossacks and their frequent attacks on Koriak reindeer herders were responsible for their image of being the most warlike people of the Russian North. In addition to the pressures of Russian colonization, the development of large-scale reindeer herding, an expansive economic form that constantly requires more pastures, certainly added to the militancy of the reindeer Chukchis. At the same time, it would be inappropriate to suggest that warfare and military technology are solely a product of Russian colonization and of emerging large-scale reindeer herding. There are prehistoric and historic findings from the Chukotka Peninsula and from neighboring areas that contain so-called plate armor and other sophisticated military technology. Interestingly, the Chukchi armor is strongly reminiscent of

Japanese forms of protective hardware. While the exact pattern of distribution of such forms of armor is still undetermined, it is likely that individual pieces, or maybe just the construction patterns, diffused through indirect contact and trade from eastern Asia to the Bering Strait area, without a single samurai ever entering the Chukotka Peninsula.

The Chukchis' warlike reputation did not allow them to prevail against Soviet power, however, and in the course of the twentieth century several generations of Chukchis were raised as Soviet citizens in a socialist economy. As children, many of them attended Soviet residential schools, and as adults, a significant number were trained for careers in teaching, nursing, and village administration. Those who worked in the traditional Chukchi occupations of reindeer herding and sea mammal hunting became employees of the state in collectivized economic enterprises that typically combined these pursuits with professional hunting, fishing, and fur farming. Women were salaried as fur seamstresses or as tent workers whose job was to maintain the tundra reindeer camps. Where the tundra was once filled with family-owned herds of reindeer, it transformed into a patchwork of herding brigades, each one attached to a collectivized Soviet state farm. The kin group that shared an umiak for sea mammal hunting similarly transformed into a salaried brigade in service to a state farm. Production in both reindeer herding and sea mammal hunting became subject to Soviet central economic planning. In the interest of efficiency, smaller collectives were combined into a smaller number of larger, consolidated farms, and in the coastal areas the typical state farm had both reindeer herding and sea mammal hunting branches.

When the political and economic system of the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, most Chukchis were optimistic that the new situation would trigger a revival of traditional cultural practices. However, it quickly became clear that the dependence on Russian goods and services that developed during the Soviet period could not be overcome that easily. While the economic crisis led to a noticeable increase in the consumption of traditional Chukchi food items, such as reindeer and sea mammal meat as well as tundra plants, this can in no way be seen as a return to tradition. The trend was less an expression of conscious cultural revival than it was an economic necessity, since imported food items, which had been highly subsidized during Soviet times, were

either prohibitively expensive or simply no longer available.

The 1990s were a difficult period for Chukchis as the economic reorganization of reindeer herding and sea mammal hunting triggered significant social changes. All Soviet state farms were nominally privatized, and many of them were decollectivized and broken into smaller units. While it was hoped that this would lead to the development of private enterprise among Chukchis, ultimately most of these smaller units were economic failures. Reindeer herding, the activity most closely associated with Chukchis, was hit hardest, since the economic difficulties came at a time when the wild caribou population moved into a cyclical upswing, and many herds of domestic reindeer were swept up with passing caribou herds. The collapse in the reindeer population removed the possibility for many Chukchis to remain employed in the tundra, and this triggered waves of migration as many sought alternative employment in towns and cities. Chukchis became the beneficiaries of humanitarian aid efforts in the 1990s, particularly from Alaskan citizen organizations, and more recently a large-scale economic development project funded by USAID (United States Agency for International Development) has been established in the region to benefit all Chukotkan residents.

Attempts to revive subsistence whaling in Chukotka have been underway since 1993. In 1994 the International Whaling Commission (IWC) allotted a yearly quota of 140 gray whales to the coastal areas of Chukotka. The Chukchi village Lorino led the way in reviving almost forgotten gray whale hunting techniques and practices. At the same time several other Chukchi and Siberian Yupik villages led an active campaign to reintroduce the hunt for bowhead whales, which resulted in the extension of Alaskan Eskimo bowhead quotas to Chukotka. During the 1990s contacts with indigenous whalers from Alaska were reestablished. These contacts stimulated revitalization projects in Chukotka and provided much-needed technical assistance. A particularly successful cooperation developed between the North Slope Borough in Alaska and indigenous sea mammal hunters of the Chukchi Peninsula. Within a multi-year project the latter observed and documented the migration routes and numbers of whales. The results made it evident that a sub-population of the bowhead whales migrating north through the Bering Strait every year spends its summers off

the northern coast of Chukotka. While scientists had previously been unaware of this fact, the indigenous whalers of Alaska and Chukotka use it now in support of higher harvest quotas by IWC.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, intellectual Chukchis, along with other indigenous peoples in the Russian North, have been involved in social and political activism to advocate for their special rights to be recognized by local and federal administrations. An Association of Indigenous Less-Numerous Peoples of Chukotka was established in 1990, and although it struggled during its first decade under a repressive local post-Soviet administration, it has begun to gain momentum since the turn of the twenty-first century.

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