The Predicament of Chukotka's Indigenous Movement

POST-SOVIET ACTIVISM IN THE RUSSIAN FAR NORTH

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EPITOMIZING EVENTS

THE SOVIET PERIOD has been widely reported as a time when indigenous peoples in the Russian North were so badly mistreated through the process of "building socialism" that their cultures were nearly destroyed. While the Soviet regime has certainly earned its criticism, it does not follow that the elimination of that regime automatically improved the lives of Russia's indigenous peoples. In the 1990s, Russia was presumably making a "transition" to a democratic, market-oriented society that was supposed to create a new "civil society" that would bring a better life for all. This was of course an oversimplification (seen in the clarity of twenty-twenty hindsight), and many of the changes that took place actually created greater restrictions and hardships for many people, especially indigenous peoples. Rather than simply taking those hardships as given (with a sigh and a sad shake of the head), this book documents them and analyzes the underlying social and political conditions that created them.

The research initially undertaken for this book in 1995–6[1] began with the hypothesis that Chukotka's indigenous peoples were

beginning to redress past wrongs through the new phenomenon of indigenous activism in Russia, a phenomenon assisted through the contact of indigenous peoples in Russia with established indigenous advocacy organizations outside of Russia. This has certainly become a fair depiction of the situation taking shape after the turn of the twenty-first century. However, in the 1990s, largely as a result of transformations in political organization in Russia that partially shifted control from the center to the regions and changed the face of the local administration, indigenous activists in Chukotka found themselves in a predicament. They were not fulfilling their original optimistic goal of improving the status of indigenous peoples in relation to the (post-) Soviet state, as well as having their unique rights and interests recognized. This book ethnographically explores why and how this happened, while making reference to wider political processes in Russia and the work of indigenous activists in national and international contexts.

This is not just a book about indigenous activism; it is also an ethnography of a place, Chukotka – a place that has rarely been explored in American scholarly work, and has been presented only through a very partial lens in Russian and Soviet scholarly work. It is an attempt to situate a specific phenomenon – indigenous activism – within a very "thick" description of a specific place and time – Chukotka during the 1990s. The book's focus is further narrowed to emphasize urban Chukotka, specifically its capital city of Anadyr', and when the book does draw upon rural examples, these all come from Chukotka's western tundra region (while nearly all previous work on Chukotka in English has focused on its eastern coastal area, that is, the Chukotka Peninsula). This book is concerned more with characterizing the phenomenon of indigenous activism in this limited place and time than on analyzing in-depth indigenous activism as activism per se. As a matter of course, this work also maps out some of the changes in the regions of post-Soviet Russia outside of Moscow – "beyond the monolith," as one book phrases it (Stavrakis et al. 1997) – and affords a look at the effects of rapid social, political, and economic change.

Gwich'in Niintsyaa and the Raising of Consciousness

When I came upon the scene in Anadyr' in the fall of 1995, it was during a lull in the post-Soviet momentum of reform. At first glance, it seemed to me that there was almost no political awareness among the indigenous population in Chukotka. My first hint that there indeed *was* political awareness came when I learned of an apparently watershed event that took place a month after my arrival. One of my incomer consultees, Anastasia Zinkevich, had long been an environmentalist, and she had recently visited Alaska and returned with a copy of a video she had received from some acquaintances she made in an environmental group there. The video, titled *Gwich'in Niintsyaa*, was made by members of the Gwich'in people of Arctic Village, in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge of Alaska. The focus of the video was a 1988 gathering of Gwich'in peoples called by their chiefs, the first such gathering in one hundred years. The motivation for the gathering was the news of impending oil development on Gwich'in land, which threatened the fragile calving grounds of the Porcupine caribou herd. The Gwich'in relied heavily on this herd for subsistence and, moreover, the caribou carried significant symbolic meaning for the Gwich'in people. The gathering sparked the Gwich'in people's struggle to defend their land and their rights on it against the state and the large oil companies wishing to develop it.[2]

Anastasia, who was a supporter of indigenous self-determination (uncommon among Chukotkan incomers), thought the video would have relevance for a Chukotkan audience – especially since the governor of Chukotka, Aleksandr Nazarov, was at the time negotiating the sale of oil drilling rights in the region. She suggested to Sofia Rybachenko, a Chukchi who produced Chukchi-language programming for local television, that the video could be broadcast during her program with a Russian-dubbed translation that Anastasia herself would record. Anastasia had some difficulty convincing Sofia, since her first response, after viewing the video, was that local indigenous viewers would be too depressed when they saw how hard life was for indigenous peoples in rural Alaska. Indigenous Chukotkans

had been traveling to urban Alaska since 1989 and had brought back stories of the wonderful, comparatively affluent life of Native Alaskans. These stories were in great contrast to the official Soviet version of how life was for indigenous peoples under U.S. rule, perpetuated in part by the popular stories of the Chukchi writer Iurii Rytkheu, and had given indigenous Chukotkans great hope that reform in Russia would bring them a similar kind of life.[3] Sofia was reluctant to burst their bubble, so to speak, with this video, but Anastasia persisted and persuaded Sofia, and her program presented the video.

Immediately after the video aired, the television station was flooded with telephone calls about the video. Indigenous Chukotkans had been deeply moved by it. "These people are just like us! This film is *about* us!" was Anastasia's paraphrase of the viewers' comments. She said that what most impressed viewers was the way the Gwich'in seemed to be unintimidated by anyone or anything, much unlike indigenous Chukotkans. People demanded that the television station show the video again. Anastasia said that no other television program in recent memory had triggered such a response, especially not from indigenous viewers. A few days later I mentioned the video to Marina Peliave, a graduate student at the research institute where I was based. I told her I had heard that a lot of people had called in after seeing it. "Including me," she said, with a curt nod of her head. I asked Marina what had impressed her about the video. She replied that these people, the Gwich'in, realized that they could fight for their rights, and that they did not have to just sit back and tolerate being treated as if they did not matter. This video about indigenous activism in Alaska seemed to have struck a chord of resonance with indigenous Chukotkans like nothing else had before.

This became a general pattern that I observed regarding indigenous activism in Chukotka: a general inertia punctuated by watershed events that consolidated the awareness of more and more indigenous Chukotkans, events that told them they really were being poorly treated and that they might be able to do something about it. The video made indigenous Chukotkans realize not only that their own situation was similar to that of indigenous peoples in another country, but that

those people felt justified to fight back publicly, without being deterred by their small numbers in the face of the government and the oil barons. It served to draw a line in the sand that goaded indigenous Chukotkans into a confrontation, if not directly with authorities or opposing groups, then at least with their own consciousness of their marginal position in Chukotkan society. For a generation raised in a Soviet society that constantly told them how much that state had done to advance the standing of every nationality large or small, that told them they were perhaps the most special of all because they had traveled so much farther than anyone else just to "catch up" in their social development and should therefore be the most grateful of all peoples, this awakened consciousness was perhaps revolutionary enough.

Three Events

The indigenous community of Anadyr' was small and close-knit. I attended or heard about countless small, informal indigenous social gatherings, and there were also frequent large-scale gatherings organized on a more or less informal basis by indigenous organizations. This community was not a seamless entity, however. Aside from the occupational and ethnic divisions it reflected (coastal versus tundra peoples, sea mammal hunting versus reindeer herding peoples, Chukchis versus Eskimos versus Evens, and so on), there were also class distinctions – one could clearly distinguish an indigenous working class from an indigenous intelligentsia. Moreover, different segments of indigenous society at times seemed to blend together with analogous segments of nonindigenous society – for example, white-collar indigenous Chukotkans and incomers could be found working side by side in administrative offices. Intermarriage, especially among the female indigenous intelligentsia, meant that indigenous Chukotkans often bore Russian or Ukrainian surnames.

Nevertheless, the sense that Chukotka's indigenous peoples comprised a single community was quite palpable. Since they came from villages all over Chukotka, the indigenous residents of Anadyr' were woven into kinship networks that extended beyond the city,

much as Nancy Fogel-Chance has shown for Iñupiat in Anchorage (Fogel-Chance 1993), and Ann Fienup-Riordan for Alaskan Yup'iks in Anchorage (Fienup-Riordan 2000). They continued to identify strongly with their villages of origin, and they waged a kind of friendly competition as each touted the merits of his or her own natal village. However, greater emphasis was placed on integration – in general, I sensed that the Anadyr' indigenous community was proud of its diversity, and the fact that everyone came from a different village merely emphasized their unity as indigenous peoples of Chukotka.

In this chapter, I focus on showing the Anadyr' indigenous community in action as it responded to the changing political situation in Chukotka. The showing of the video *Gwich'in Niintsyaa* was a relatively quiet event. During my year in Chukotka, three other events occurred that I gradually came to recognize as major landmarks in terms of defining indigenous Chukotkans' understanding of their growing disenfranchisement in relation to the dominant nonindigenous population. One involved the closing of an indigenous meeting house, thus effectively shrinking the physical space that indigenous Chukotkans had to call their own; the second involved the closing of an indigenous newspaper, thus shrinking their space to represent themselves in public media; and the third involved the blockage of an indigenous candidate from running in the gubernatorial election under the endorsement of the indigenous peoples' association, thus shrinking the indigenous population's presence in the social space of politics.

These events were not cataclysmic; rather, each unfolded slowly over the course of several weeks or even months. I refer to these three occurrences as "epitomizing events" because, through their gradual unfolding in a limited context, key issues and conflicts emerged that revealed how different social groups in Anadyr', in a broader context, perceived the social space they occupied and the proper way to share that space. These events are not micro phenomena that somehow magically communicate the macro. Rather, they serve to place the key issues of concern to Chukotka's indigenous population in sharp relief. They are somewhat like the "critical events" that Veena Das isolates and analyzes for India in that after these events, "new modes of action came into being which redefined traditional categories" (Das 1995:6).

The impact in Chukotka may have been more subtle, but these events remain, nonetheless, significant. Each of the events had roots tracing back several years prior to my arrival in Chukotka, but they each came to a head during my first research trip from October 1995 to December 1996.

Event One: The Gutted *Iaranga*

When I first arrived in Anadyr' in October 1995, a gaily painted green and yellow two-story house stood at the end of the street I lived on. It was obviously a public building, because tacked to the front of it was the obligatory plaque revealing its name: *Tsentr Narodnoi Kul'tury*, or Center for Folk Culture. It was also obviously different from other public buildings, because while most plaques were very official looking with their shiny black surfaces and gold lettering, this sign was colorfully hand-painted and embellished with capering reindeer figures. Despite its official name, I learned that the building was known affectionately in the indigenous community as the *Iaranga*. *Iaranga* (plural: *iarangi*) is the Chukchi word for the tentlike structure sewn from reindeer skins that virtually all Chukchis used as a dwelling until the 1930s, when Soviet organizers began to implement a program of resettling indigenous Chukotkans into Russian-style wooden houses.

Even in the 1990s, Chukchis in many parts of the region lived in *iarangi* when they were in the tundra, since it was the dwelling best suited to the mobility required by a reindeer pasturing lifestyle. In Soviet parlance, the *iaranga*, along with fur clothing and the Chukchi language, was one of the key traits of the "national" culture of the Chukchi that defined them as Chukchis. It was also a space that Russians considered filthy, intolerably smoky, and ultimately unfit for civilized human habitation. However, to the Chukchis I interviewed, the *iaranga* carried a very different meaning than this. Without exception, indigenous Chukotkans reminisced about the *iaranga* as the warm and comforting family home of their childhood. It was the place where they curled up on soft reindeer skins alongside other family members and shared meals, stories, and songs. It was a structure that

always turned out lopsided when anyone else but mom tried to put it together. When indigenous Chukotkans called this run-down little building in Anadyr' the *Iaranga*, they were reappropriating an otherwise very Russian space as something quintessentially indigenous, and evoking the place – the tundra – where they felt most themselves and in control of their lives.

Founded only three years earlier and given its name affectionately by local Chukchi activist and politician Vladimir Etylin (who was at that time chair of the Chukotka Regional Soviet of People's Deputies), the *Iaranga* quickly became a meeting place for members of all the indigenous groups in Anadyr', including Chukchis, Eskimos, Evens, and Lamuts. Sofia described to me at length and with obvious pleasure of recall the kinds of activities that went on within its walls. Sofia was herself a member of a folk theater troupe called *Enmen* (Chukchi for "so it was" a phrase that typically begins Chukchi-language folktales much as "once upon a time" begins English-language ones), which frequently performed in the *Iaranga*. She said that "evenings" *(vecherinki)* were held in the building every Friday night, and these were open to all who wished to come (nonindigenous as well as indigenous) to see performances of indigenous song, dance, and drama. The evenings would start at 7:00 P.M., would sometimes continue until midnight, and were always well attended. "It was simply entertaining for us to go there," said Sofia. There were times when only indigenous Chukotkans would attend in a more intimate gathering; for example, her folk theater performed stories in Chukchi language that interested only those who could understand the language. Indigenous children would come to learn sewing reindeer skins or traditional singing styles. The indigenous sobriety movement also used the building for its seminars.

Although this appeared to be the most sanctified of indigenous spaces within Anadyr', the *laranga* was nevertheless a space allotted to the indigenous population by the Russian-dominated administration, and was maintained within given parameters. The Center for Folk Culture was the official branch of the regional Department of Culture that dealt with indigenous traditional culture. Center employees had their offices in the House of Culture, a large and impressive building across from the regional administration building. The *Iaranga* was

considered a "city club" where traditional cultural events could be staged, and according to one of the Center's employees, these were originally planned to occur once a month (Timchenko 1995). But by popular demand, the club was used every week, primarily for indigenous evenings. Thus the *Iaranga* became a space where members of the indigenous community could come and interact in their native language.

The building itself had once housed a kindergarten, but it was given over to the Center for Folk Culture when a better space was found for the city's children. The building was apparently in poor condition when it was given to the Center. It stood in a row of identical two-story wooden buildings that served as a kind of buffer zone between a district of newer apartment blocks and an area of crumbling ruins. Directly across the street from the *Iaranga* was another of these wooden buildings with its windows broken out, and beyond that were piles of rubble and mangled wood. By the fall 1995, the building had actually become unsafe. Its users described how the floor would shake when people danced, and everyone began to fear that it might collapse beneath them. Sofia said that the indigenous community had begun to meet there less often because of this (cf. Timchenko 1995).

By February 1996, the dangerous condition of the *Iaranga* was brought up at a session of the regional legislature (the Duma), and a decision was made that the building had to be closed for renovations. Indigenous consultees reported that the administration had agreed to renovate the old building, promising to provide the financing and to complete the work by November 1996. When I returned to Anadyr' in April 1996 after a visit to Moscow and St. Petersburg, I found the *Iaranga* a dark and empty shell. Renovation had clearly been started – siding had been torn off, windows were broken out, and the wooden floor now lay strewn in bits around the outside of the building. But the renovation work had just as clearly been abandoned; day after day I passed the building only to see no activity whatsoever around it and no progress being made.

Marina lamented that the administration now claimed that no more money was available to finance the renovation, which seemed suspicious in light of the fact that plenty of money was found to finance

pet projects of the administration, such as the infamous "Days of Chukotka Culture" in Moscow the following November (see Chapter 5), and considering the administration's repeated defensive claims that it was constantly doling out federal funds on indigenous needs. No date was even estimated for the resumption of work on the renovation. Each time I returned to Anadyr' thereafter, the *Iaranga* had disintegrated further. In 1998, I regularly observed young boys on its roof, pulling the building apart and throwing the pieces to the ground. By 2000, it had been reduced to a pile of rubble that was often on fire under a slow, smoldering flame, while passersby gleaned usable wood for their small construction projects.

In the interim, the Center for Folk Culture was moved to "temporary" quarters within the main House of Culture itself. It was given a set of small rooms, with offices for the director and the trained staff, and a main reception area with display cases where the clerical staff worked. The only meeting space was a long, narrow room that served as the Center's entryway. Sofia said that meetings were held less often after the *Iaranga* was gutted. When I pointed out that they had space to meet in the House of Culture, she said nothing, but simply screwed up her face in an expression of displeasure. I asked Lidia Neekyk, a social activist employed in the Anadyr' district administration, if the indigenous community was meeting someplace else now that the *Iaranga* was gutted. She said no, they had simply stopped gathering. When I asked about the space in the House of Culture, she shuddered slightly and said that the House of Culture was big and cold and that indigenous Chukotkans did not like it there. I asked if perhaps the small and intimate House of Culture in Tavaivaam, an indigenous village located walking distance from Anadyr', would be better, and she demurred that it was awfully far away for city folk. She said that there were certainly times when Tavaivaam invited city folk down to their gatherings, and Anadyr' invited village folk up for their gatherings, but the two groups really felt themselves to belong to separate communities. "When we go down there, we feel like we are at someone else's place," she said.

There should be no implication here that the Russian-dominated administration had insidiously conspired to deprive the indigenous community of its only space to gather as an intimate and cohesive

community. This was a difficult economic time for everyone, when entropy seemed to be the prevailing force, and no one seemed to have enough money. However, it was abundantly clear that money could be found whenever a project was sufficiently interesting to the administration. Besides financing "Days of Chukotka Culture" in Moscow, the administration ensured that construction proceeded apace during this same time on an impressive new state bank building in downtown Anadyr'. The administration also continued to allocate funds to stage public performances of traditional indigenous song and dance. But the administration systematically neglected the less visible, more keenly felt needs of the indigenous community, such as a meetinghouse, in a way that it never had in the Soviet period. It was deemed sufficient for indigenous Chukotkans to borrow space within Russian space.

Event Two: *Murgin Nutenut*: The Dispossession of "Our Homeland"

In 1933, not long after Chukotka was created as a "national region" within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, the first issue of a new, Russian-language regional newspaper, *Sovetskaia Chukotka*, was published. Twenty years later, once the cultural revolution had taken root in the North and a generation of literate indigenous Chukotkans had been trained, a Chukchi-language newspaper was established, called *Sovetken Chukotka*. The paper shared the same offices with the Russian-language newspaper, although it had its own Chukchi editorial staff. One of the first editors of the paper was Lina Tynel, a Chukchi intellectual who later became active in both regional and national politics in the 1970s. Tynel's name also appears as Chukchi-language translator of many works of Russian literature and political propaganda. *Sovetken Chukotka* was in fact nothing more than a Chukchi translation of the Russian-language paper *Sovetskaia Chukotka*, and the two were issued together.

When Etylin became chair of the Chukotka Regional Soviet of People's Deputies in 1990, he developed a vision for *Sovetken Chukotka* to become an independent newspaper. It would be a native-language

gazette that published original articles of interest to the indigenous community, rather than just a slavish translation of Russian articles. He devised a plan to assemble a diverse editorial staff capable of putting out a paper in four languages – Chukchi, Eskimo, Even, and Russian – and eventually to cut the paper loose entirely from *Sovetskaia Chukotka*, with its own budget and separate editorial offices. All newspapers in the Soviet period (and many still today) were state-controlled and state-funded, but Etylin had in mind to make *Sovetken Chukotka* as independent as it could be within that system. He called upon the paper's former editor, Tynel (then living in retirement in Magadan), to return and take up her old position, believing she could best lead the paper through its transition. *Sovetken Chukotka* began its independent status in January 1990. Soon thereafter, by popular demand, a contest was held to pick a new name for the paper, and the winner was *Murgin Nutenut* – Chukchi for "Our Homeland." Beginning in July 1990, the paper began to appear under that name.[4]

The next few years were stormy ones for Chukotka, politically as well as economically, and Etylin was ousted from local government by 1993. Thus he was no longer able to control the fate of *Murgin Nutenut*. Already by 1992, the man who would become his successor as the key figure in Chukotkan politics, Aleksandr Nazarov, had been appointed head of a newly created regional administration by Russian president Boris Yeltsin. Under Etylin's direction, the editorial staff of *Murgin Nutenut* was slated to move into new offices on Otke Street in the main downtown district of Anadyr', in a building located next door to *Sovetskaia Chukotka* (which eventually changed its own name to *Krainii Sever*, or "Far North"). But something happened along the way, and *Murgin Nutenut* never came to occupy those offices. As Etylin was losing his influence, the staff of *Murgin Nutenut* was hustled out of their old space within *Krainii Sever's* offices and up to a set of dingy rooms on Energetik Street at the upper end of town. They were not allowed to take any of their own furniture or equipment with them, but were instead given ancient desks and chairs and antiquated typewriters that the editorial staff said made their wrists ache.

A separate budget was created for *Murgin Nutenut*, as planned, using federal funds from *Goskomsevera* (State Committee of the North)

earmarked for the paper. Anastasia Zinkevich estimated the budget of *Krainii Sever* to be about 2 billion (old) rubles[5] for a staff of thirty-five to forty people, while the budget of *Murgin Nutenut* was a few hundred thousand for a staff of five or six people. But since the *Murgin Nutenut* staff was turned out with no real equipment of their own, they were now forced to pay a large sum back to *Krainii Sever* for the use of their computers to lay out the newspaper, and another large sum to use the printing press. This left very little in the budget to pay the staff's salaries. Several indigenous commentators accused the governor of a kind of money laundering scheme: The money the administration paid to *Murgin Nutenut* could be marked in the regional budget as having been spent on the needs of the indigenous population, thus satisfying federal requirements. But in effect the money flowed directly back to be used for nonindigenous needs, and *Murgin Nutenut* staff claimed that during this time *Krainii Sever* was able to make significant capital improvements.

A crisis occurred in 1993, when the administration moved to return the newspaper to the control of the editorial staff of *Krainii Sever*.[6] Activists within the indigenous community rallied and issued a response to the administration protesting the move. They sent a telegram to the Moscow headquarters of the Association of Less-Numerous Peoples of the North reporting the situation, and they managed to have the telegram read on the radio in Chukotka. This was still at the beginning of Nazarov's tenure; the administration backed off on its threat to close the paper.

Meanwhile, the fledgling independent newspaper floundered. The morale of the staff plummeted, and turnover at the newspaper increased; the productivity of those who remained fell. Tynel became so discouraged by the unsatisfactory conditions that she gave up and returned to Magadan. The paper then went through a series of different editors, each of whom eventually gave up in exasperation. The quality of the newspaper began to fall as the staff printed fewer original articles on timely issues and more excerpts from already-published materials. The circulation began to decline, launching a discussion within the indigenous community of what to do about it. Most people said that if only the paper were more interesting and timely, they might