

Chukchi reindeer herding culture La culture des éleveurs de rennes tchouktches

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Article abstract

This research note describes a project about the relationship between humans and wild reindeer in Chukotka. The study attempts to answer the following questions: 1) How have reindeer herders managed the wild reindeer issue in the past and in the present? and 2) Which peoples have been involved in wild reindeer hunting?

Chukchi reindeer herding culture

Vladislav Nuvano*

Résumé: La culture des éleveurs de rennes tchouktches

Cette note de recherche décrit un projet sur la relation entre l'homme et les rennes sauvages en Tchoukotka. L'étude tente de répondre aux deux questions suivantes: 1) Comment les éleveurs de rennes ont-ils géré le problème des rennes sauvages dans le passé et le présent? et 2) Quels peuples ont été impliqués dans la chasse au renne sauvage?

Abstract: Chukchi reindeer herding culture

This research note describes a project about the relationship between humans and wild reindeer in Chukotka. The study attempts to answer the following questions: 1) How have reindeer herders managed the wild reindeer issue in the past and in the present? and 2) Which peoples have been involved in wild reindeer hunting?

Introduction

The Chukchi culture has three basic roots: reindeer herding; coastal sea mammal hunting; and from very ancient times hunting wild reindeer and fishing. These economic activities are the basis of rituals and celebrations. Studying these economic activities enhances our understanding of many cultural elements and also indicates how the culture developed. The study of reindeer herding culture in Chukotka is also essential for cultural preservation. This is especially true now that reindeer herding is in crisis and the wild reindeer are sharply increasing in number. This tendency started in the 1980s, and by 2000 the domesticated reindeer decreased from 500,000 animals to only 100,000, before rising again to 160,000 in 2007, while the wild reindeer grew to 149,000 in 1997.

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From ancient times (possibly ca. 10,000 years ago) until the 19th century, wild reindeer were actively hunted in Chukotka. For some Chukotka peoples, such as the Even and the Yukaghir, wild reindeer was their main means of subsistence. For some time domesticated and wild reindeer have coexisted, and consequently people developed methods to protect domestic herds from the wild ones. Reindeer owners (mostly Chukchi, Koryak, and Chuvantsy) coordinated efforts to lead their animals to the free pastures, and by the early 20th century the expanding reindeer herds overwhelmed wild reindeer. Competition for food and territory among domestic and wild herds thus existed in one form or another throughout the history of their co-existence.

In 1998, the Laboratory for Traditional Resource Use and Ethno-Social Research (later named Ethnography Lab) of the Chukotka Unit, North-Eastern Institute for Science and Research in Anadyr, started studying the relationship between domesticated and wild reindeer in Chukotka. That research aims to demonstrate that these two populations can be mutually supportive, rather than antagonistic, if their respective resources are properly used. Research on this issue should contribute to optimising livestock for both populations and to preserving the invaluable reindeer pastures.

Research objectives

The objectives of my own research are linked to my ongoing doctoral dissertation "Role of the landscape in the formation of the Vaegi Chukchi reindeer herding culture." This research focuses on the relationship between the human and the wild reindeer and attempts to answer the following questions: 1) How have reindeer herders managed the wild reindeer issue in the past and in the present? and 2) Which peoples have been involved in wild reindeer hunting? The case study takes place among the Vaegi Chukchi and focuses on the relationship between domesticated and wild reindeer in Chukotka from ancient times to the present. It also includes an ethnohistory of the Chukchi and their neighbours.

Methodology

Reindeer herders and hunters were interviewed in four districts: Ust'-Belaia (1998, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2007); Vaegi (1999, 2000, 2004); Markovo (2002, 2004) and Anadyr'. The data collected concerns traditional knowledge about wild and domestic reindeer as well as wildlife management.

My research also incorporates the results from other studies in which I took part. For example, that of the Alaska Chukotka Development Program (ACDP) which has been monitoring wild reindeer in West Chukotka since 2004, and the genetics analysis of the Vaegi reindeer (Velikaia River) that was carried out in partnership with the Vavilov Institute for Genetics.

Preliminary results

Culture history

Ethnohistory establishes that the Chukchi followed a complex historical path. Based on literature and memories of elders (Nuvano 2004a), we traced the emergence of the Vaegi Chukchi. Their descendants identify themselves only with specific Chukchi groups and even have their own historical heroes. We also described the funeral ritual, which is performed through cremation (Nuvano 2006b). This ritual is still practiced by the Southern Chukchi in Chukotka and Kamchatka.

Reindeer herding

We described the pre-collectivisation experience of the reindeer herders on the Chukchi Peninsula and in the South-East of Chukotka. We collected data on the relationship between domesticated and wild reindeer in Chukotka.

The ongoing ACDP monitoring study shows that even in the 1990s wild reindeer from the Sundrun population in Yakutia have been crossing the Kolyma River into Chukotka. This means that the wild reindeer are still following the passage through the Kolyma River, even if the latter ceased to exist by the late 19th century. We also collected information on snow and weather conditions in Chukotka.

Dissemination of results

We have presented papers at conferences and published articles on our results (Nuvano 2003a-d, 2004a-c, 2006a-c; Valgirgin and Nuvano 2006).

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