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Chukotka's Indigenous intellectuals and subversion of Indigenous activism in the 1990s

Patty A. Gray*

Résumé: Les intellectuels autochtones de la Tchoukotka et la subversion de l'activisme autochtone durant les années 1990

Se fondant sur une recherche de terrain extensive menée par l'auteure dans la Tchoukotka des années 1990, cet article examine les conditions de l'activisme autochtone dans cette région de l'Extrême-Orient russe durant la décennie qui a suivi la dissolution de l'Union Soviétique. Le mouvement autochtone a fait face à une situation extrêmement difficile en Tchoukotka dans les années 1990 en raison d'une attaque concertée de la part d'une administration régionale chauvine et belliqueuse visant à saper tout effort émanant des activistes autochtones pour monter un mouvement efficace.

Abstract: Chukotka's Indigenous intellectuals and subversion of Indigenous activism in the 1990s

This paper, based on the author's extensive field research in Chukotka in the 1990s, examines the conditions for Indigenous activism in Chukotka during the decade following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The Indigenous movement in Chukotka faced extremely difficult conditions in the 1990s because of a concerted attack by a belligerent and chauvinistic regional administration that sought to undermine any effort on the part of Indigenous activists to mount an effective movement.

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Introduction

Nearly two decades after the advent of *glasnost'* in the Soviet Union, Indigenous[1] Northerners in Russia are recognized as participants in the international arena of Indigenous activism (Køhler and Wessendorf 2002; Pika et al. 1996). From all appearances, Chukotka's Indigenous activists in the 2000s are no less a part of this. However, as this paper argues, conditions for Indigenous activism in Chukotka are significantly different from conditions in the other parts of the circumpolar North outside Russia, such as Alaska, to which Chukotka is often compared. I would further argue that Chukotka is even a bit different from the rest of the Russian North. One of the keys to understanding these differences as they are today lies in the events of the 1990s, when Chukotkan Indigenous activists were adjusting to the multiple changes confronting them. This paper deals specifically with the events of that period.

Perhaps more than anywhere else in Russia, Chukotka's Indigenous activists in the 1990s were not only engaged in a struggle to secure rights to land and to their preferred way of life, as were other Indigenous persons in Russia, but they also faced an attack on their very ability to voice dissent, *i.e.* to be activists at all. In this paper[2], I explore this difficult situation by first contextualizing the Indigenous movement of the late 1980s and 1990s in Chukotka within the broader phenomenon of Indigenous activism in Russia, highlighting the key role played by elite intellectuals (*intelligenti*)[3]. I then go on to examine the specificities of Indigenous activism in Chukotka, including the role played by a chauvinistic regional administration that employed disauthenticating discourses[4] to undermine the Indigenous movement. I am arguing that one of the key explanations for why Chukotka's Indigenous movement initially faltered was not only the belligerence of this local administration, but also the way that Chukotka's Indigenous activists were caught off guard by the new post-Soviet logic that developed in the region. Because Indigenous activism in Chukotka in the early 1990s was most naturally an extension of Soviet-era activism, it was initially unprepared for the new logic of a nominally "democratic" Russia.

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1 It is the policy of *Études/Inuit/Studies* to capitalise the word "indigenous" in reference to persons or cultural identity. The author feels that such capitalisation is appropriate in the phrase "Indigenous peoples," which functions grammatically as a proper noun similar to an ethnonym, but not elsewhere, such as in the phrase "indigenous activists." The author has submitted to the journal's policy.

2 This paper is based on approximately 24 months of cumulative research carried out in Chukotka in 1995 to 1996 and 1998 to 2001.

3 It must be understood that, especially when discussing local regions such as Chukotka, I am using the term "intellectual" as it is used and understood locally and historically. An intellectual in Soviet Chukotka—and in the 1990s when I was conducting my research there—did not imply someone who had a university degree within a specified discipline; it was a term of respect for individuals who were seen as educated, enlightened, and providing intellectual leadership for the community.

4 Thanks for this phrase to Jonathan Hill, my MA advisor at Southern Illinois University Carbondale and a specialist on Amazonian Indigenous peoples; see also Hill (1992).

The beginnings of transnational Indigenous activism in Russia

Transnational Indigenous activism has been taking shape throughout the world since the 1970s, and Indigenous Northerners have been involved from the beginning (McFarlane 1993: 160; Sanders 1980: 4). However, it was only much later that Indigenous activists in the Russian North were able to form links to this transnational phenomenon. Open and critical activism was risky in the pre-*glasnost'* Soviet Union (*cf.* Sedaitis and Butterfield 1991: 1), but Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost'* allowed Russia's Indigenous activists to begin to communicate more freely with their counterparts in the rest of the world and to share new—and more sharply critical—ideas about Indigenous rights within the Soviet Union.

Very quickly in the late 1980s, a plethora of published material appeared that bore witness to the growing political consciousness among Indigenous activists in the Russian North (Vakhtin 1994: 70-72). The speeches of Indigenous political representatives in the national legislatures of both the Soviet Union and the Russian Soviet Republic addressed the unique problems of the group that was defined by the Soviet state as the *malochislennye narody Severa* ('Less-Numerous Peoples of the North') (*e.g.*, Aipin 1991; Etylen 1989). The writings of Indigenous intellectuals, published in newspapers and magazines, decried the poor conditions of Indigenous Northerners and called for change (Achirgina-Arsiak 1992; Rytkheu 1988; Sangi 1988). These were echoed by the writings of a few concerned ethnographers who could, "for the first time in their careers, explicitly associate themselves with the welfare of 'their peoples' in opposition to state interests and in support of the Indigenous intelligentsia" (Slezkine 1994: 371-372). In particular, a watershed article published in the national Soviet newspaper *Kommunist* by the late ethnographer Aleksandr Pika and Boris Prokhorov stirred great interest as it described conditions in the North that contradicted all of the success stories that had been told about the Peoples of the North (Pika and Prokhorov 1988)[5].

This new activism in Russia led to the organization in March 1990 of a national-level (*vse-rossiiskii* or 'all-Russia') Congress of Peoples of the North in Moscow. At this congress, the *Assotsiatsiia malochislennykh narodov Severa* ('Association of Less-Numerous Peoples of the North') was established—the moniker "Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North," with its much more pronounceable acronym RAIPON, would be invented later. The Nivkh writer Vladimir Sangi, who reputedly originated the idea as early as 1988, was elected to be the founding president (Pika and Prokhorov 1988)[6]. In its charter, the Association is declared to be "a political organization uniting the small [*sic*] peoples of the North to take an active part in the

5 This article was translated to English in Pika and Prokhorov (1989), and to French in Pika and Prokhorov (1990).

6 See also *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press* of 1990, 62(13): 34. Apparently Sangi created his organization prior to the congress in 1990; Sangi himself made this claim to me in an interview in Moscow in April 1996. The newspaper *Pravda* reported on 9 August 1989 that an association of Less-Numerous Peoples of the Soviet North had been created. See *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press* of 1989, 61(32): 28.

development of the economy" (IWGIA 1990: 47). A program was also outlined at the congress, and one of its clauses acknowledged the need for international cooperation: "The Association will base its activities not solely on Soviet but also international experience, in order to bring Soviet legislation on national relations in agreement with the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and other international documents" (IWGIA 1990: 56). The congress was surrounded by a flush of international attention (Glebov and Crowfoot 1989; Korobova 1991; Luk'iachenkho and Novikova 1991; Schindler 1992; Shinkarev 1990).

There seems to be some poetic symmetry to this, as if, with the addition of Russia's Indigenous peoples to the common struggle for rights, the last link had been added that would "close the circle" of the circumpolar North in terms of Indigenous politics. It might be tempting to assume that Indigenous politics in the Russian North are one and the same with the rest of the circumpolar North. Indeed, the rhetoric of activists is often quite similar, with common issues on the agenda: rights to land; control of resources; desire for autonomy and self-government; preservation of native language; culture and "traditional" economies. Indigenous activists in Russia and in the rest of the circumpolar North have actively sought one another out in order to work together on these issues. However, strong caveats are in order here so as to avoid mistaken assumptions and false equivalences. A key difference to consider, particularly when examining national-level Indigenous activism in Russia, is the fact that most of the Indigenous activists who arose in Russia in the late 1980s were not only Moscow-based intellectuals, but they had enjoyed comparatively elite positions prior to *glasnost'* by virtue of their positions in the Soviet Writers' Union or in the Communist Party. This should by no means be read as cynicism toward their position: it is merely a statement of fact. Others, such as the Chukchi activist Vladimir Etylin, were based in the far-flung regions of the North, but had strong ties to Moscow by virtue of their involvement in national-level politics. They were well educated and, when compared to Indigenous populations in other parts of the North, relatively well enfranchised in the sense of being generally endowed with the rights of Soviet citizenship[7].

This Indigenous intelligentsia began to appear in the Soviet Union as early as the 1920s. A number of studies have elaborated the history of Soviet colonization in the Russian North, and the far-reaching effects (both positive and negative) of the Soviet education system on Indigenous persons (*e.g.*, Balzer 1999; Bloch 2003; Grant 1995; Gray 2005; Slezkine 1994; Vakhtin 1994). For the most part, the Indigenous intelligentsia in Chukotka, as in other parts of the Russian North, was a deliberate creation of the Soviet state, a centrally planned "product" (Slezkine 1994: 157; Uvachan 1990: 45). In the words of Anatolii Lunacharskii, the Soviet Commissar of

7 This is a relative statement. It might be argued that very few Soviet citizens, indigenous persons included, were genuinely enfranchised. But one thing the Soviet system did accomplish on behalf of indigenous persons was to provide many of them with an excellent education, and to promote a few of them to elite status, and celebrate them. Many of those I interviewed told me that they appreciated this, sometimes in the same breath with criticism of the Soviet state for its other policies toward Indigenous peoples. These tended to be the persons who most actively promoted the indigenous movement in the Russian North.

Education in the 1920s, "We cannot move ahead if we will not work intensively on the creation of the Indigenous peoples' own intelligentsia" (quoted in Udalova 1989: 101)[8]. The speeches of Indigenous politicians in the Soviet period were rhetorically indistinguishable from the speeches of their Russian counterparts; the poems, stories and novels of Indigenous writers often reflected the themes and styles of the Russian writers they read in the course of their training, such as Pushkin, Chekhov and Tolstoi (*e.g.*, Rytkheu 1956; *cf.* Slezkine 1994: 369).

For these elite intellectuals, it was a more or less natural move to become involved in the worldwide Indigenous movement. These Moscow-focused Indigenous activists had a political agenda, and they put much effort into drafting legislation in Russia that clarified the status of Indigenous peoples, as well as lobbying the Russian legislature to pass that legislation. Ironically, rather than actually providing leadership to Indigenous persons all across Russia, the high-profile Indigenous activists seemed to have had greater impact *outside* of Russia. They were most effective in drumming up a heightened consciousness abroad of the plight of Indigenous peoples in Russia, employing what Keck and Sikkink (1998: 12) have termed the "boomerang pattern" to "bypass their state and directly search out international allies to try to bring pressure on their states from outside." They became quite well traveled, and even local intellectuals from Chukotka gained remarkable access to sites around the world after *glasnost'*.

However, the Moscow-based activists were far less effective in drumming up a similarly heightened consciousness among Indigenous persons within Russia, especially in the far-flung regions beyond Moscow. When I interviewed the Moscow-based Association president Eremei Aipin in Moscow in 1996, he openly admitted that it was far too much for him to monitor what all of the regional Indigenous associations were doing. The poor communications infrastructure in the country, and his organization's tiny budget, made it almost impossible for him to maintain regular contact with the regions. This rather grim state of affairs for the Association in Moscow would not last long—by the end of the decade, the Association would successfully tap into the resources of transnational organisations, and with large infusions of grant money from Canada, Denmark, and Norway, it would create a website[9] and as "RAIPON" it would begin to serve as a conduit for development programs throughout the Russian North. However, in the middle of the decade, such eventualities hardly could be imagined, either by myself, or seemingly by the leadership of the Association.

The state of the movement in Chukotka

Meanwhile, Indigenous intellectuals in the regions had been active for their own part. The locally published sources in Chukotka dating from 1989 to about 1993 give

8 All English translations from Russian are from the author.

9 The address of the Association's website was originally http://www.raipon.ru. Around May 2006, a new website was launched at the address http://www. raipon.org. As of the time of this writing, the old website is still archived at the address http://raipon.grida.no.

the impression of a growing Indigenous movement that paralleled the Moscow-based one. Magazine and newspaper articles tell the story of how an Association of Indigenous Less-Numerous Peoples of Chukotka and Kolyma[10] was created in 1990, and how a regional conference was held in Anadyr' that brought delegates from each village in Chukotka (Grichenkovaia and Ivkev 1990; Tymnetuvge 1990). A well-known Chukchi intellectual, Aleksandr Omrypkir, was elected president of the new association. The Chukotka association had a charter and program similar to the national association, and similarly aimed to represent a diverse constituency, in this case all of the various Indigenous peoples resident in Chukotka: Chukchi, *Eskimosy*[11], Even/Lamut, Chuvan, Yukagir, Koryak, and others[12]. District, town and village chapters of this association were established throughout Chukotka, and sources convey an aura of excitement and optimism surrounding what seemed to be the growth of a movement throughout Chukotka.

When I arrived in Anadyr' to begin my research in 1995, I immediately visited Omrypkir in the office of the Chukotka regional association, which I expected to be a hub of activity, based on what I had read about it. Quite to the contrary, the office seemed tiny and desolate, and Omrypkir sat there alone. Our interviews were fascinating—he seemed exceptionally intelligent and well informed about the problems of Indigenous Chukotkans, particularly from a legal perspective. But the association held no regular meetings, it sent out no periodical newsletter, and there was no evidence of active participation by a constituent membership. It had an office, a tiny budget given by the administration, and a public reputation as being the one organisation that represented the views of all Indigenous Chukotkans, but very few of them were involved in its day-to-day functioning. Yet aside from this association, none of my consultees was able to indicate to me any locus of an Indigenous movement[13].

10 *Assotsiatsia korennykh malochislennykh narodov Chukotki i Kolyma.* Kolyma is essentially the region that was left from the Magadan Province when Chukotka split off from it. Chukotka used to be subsumed within Magadan, but declared independence and had this affirmed by the Russian Constitutional Court in 1993. It is the only autonomous region in Russia to have separated from its parent province in this way.

11 It is the policy of *Études/Inuit/Studies* to use the term "Yupik" (pl. "Yupiget"). However, it is inappropriate to use this terminology in reference to persons in Chukotka, as they do not use it themselves. All indigenous activists in Chukotka speak Russian, and for some it is their first language. The activists with whom I spoke in Chukotka do not use the term "Yupik" in self-reference; they use the gendered terms "*eskimos/eskimoska*" (pl. "*eskimosy*"), which are not capitalized in the Russian. "Yupik" is used only in the name of the society organized by Chukotka's *eskimosy* (*Obshchestvo eskimosov "Yupik"*). When they do use a more specific local terminology, the terms "*naukantsy*" or "*sireniktsy*" or "*chaplintsy*" are used, which refer to the places of origin of specific *eskimosy*. Rather than impose language usage from another country upon the indigenous activists of Chukotka, I prefer to use their own terminology of self-reference. Since translating the term into English results in a term that may sound offensive or controversial to some ("Eskimo," which is frowned upon in Canada but which is in wide usage in Alaska by Alaska Natives), for the purposes of this paper I leave it untranslated, but capitalized to conform to English-language rules for proper nouns ("*Eskimosy*").

12 The original charter and program of the Association of Indigenous Peoples of Chukotka are published in *Magadanskii olenevod* of 1990, 42: 15-22.

13 Late in the decade, the Anadyr' City Association of Indigenous peoples, (referred to locally as *gorodskaia assotsiatsiia*) began to be talked of as the "real" association, the one that actually did

I was surprised to find so little evidence of the Indigenous movement I had read about, and for the first few weeks I felt perplexed as I sought to reconcile the information in the written sources with what I was observing on the ground. When I asked Omrypkir why the association seemed so inactive, he blamed the current financial crisis that had gripped all of Russia. Fundraising was a perennial problem, he said. They used to collect dues from members, but now people were not even getting their salaries paid on a regular basis. The association was an officially registered social organisation (*obshchestvennaia organizatsiia*) in Chukotka, which entitled it to be included in the regional budget, and Omrypkir even collected a small salary from the regional administration at first. Nevertheless, Omrypkir lamented that the association did not have enough ready cash even to buy the paper, envelopes, and stamps it would take to send out any kind of newsletter to the local chapters of the Chukotka Association in the district centers and villages in order to maintain communication. A regional conference of the association had been held in 1992, but since then they had not been able to afford to hold another one, although the association's charter stipulated that such a conference must be convened every two years, during which elections must be held. Omrypkir had thus remained president by default.

The state of the economy had obviously caused hardships in Chukotka; nevertheless, I felt there had to be more to why the association seemed so inactive. Why, for example, was Anadyr's Indigenous community so little involved with the association when it was right in their midst? Anadyr' had an Indigenous population of about 1,500 in 1996 (out of a total population of about 13,000), and there was no financial barrier to communication within the tiny city. Anadyr's Indigenous community did maintain strong personal ties, even across "ethnic boundaries" (Chukchi, *Eskimosy*, etc.), through telephoning one another and visiting one another's homes. There were native-language radio and television programs (in Chukchi and *Eskimoskii*[14]) as well as a native-language newspaper (in Chukchi, *Eskimoskii* and Even) to serve as a locus of Indigenous identity and communication, although these all had limitations[15]. Anadyr's Indigenous inhabitants were highly visible in society by virtue of their frequent performances of Indigenous song and dance in traditional costume. By all appearances, this was fertile ground on which the association could have promoted the full agenda of the Indigenous rights movement as it was articulated in the documents of both the regional and national associations. Enthusiastic and

represent the interests of an indigenous constituency and have a stronger voice. It seemed to be a locus of anti-Omrypkir sentiment.

14 The spoken and written language that is used by *Eskimosy* in Chukotka is locally called *eskimoskii* (not capitalized in the Russian, but here capitalized to conform to English-language rules for proper nouns).

15 Limitations included poor telecommunications infrastructure which meant the television and radio broadcasts were not received in some villages; the fact that many native-language speaking indigenous persons remarked that they had trouble reading the language in printed form, and therefore might not read the newspaper very actively; the subscription cost of the newspaper, which although it was negligible, was often more than some people could pay in the cash-strapped 1990s; and a concerted campaign to wrest control of the native-language newspaper and subsume it under the dominant Russian-language newspaper—which, once accomplished, caused many indigenous persons to develop a negative attitude toward the native-language newspaper. The latter situation is discussed at length in Gray (2005).

optimistic reports in local papers provided some evidence that Indigenous activists had tried to promote this agenda in the early 1990s. So why in the mid-1990s did it seem that effort had fizzled out? It appeared to me as a riddle.

Soviet activism and post-Soviet logic

I suggest that the answers to the riddle of the Indigenous (non-)movement in Chukotka can be found in the changes in power relations between increasingly marginalized Indigenous persons and increasingly chauvinistic incomers,[16] as a result of the transformation in regional political dynamics after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many sources published during *glasnost'* place blame on the policies of the Soviet period for destroying Indigenous social systems, damaging Indigenous cultural traditions, and causing the loss of the Indigenous languages (*cf.* Schindler 1990). Such accusations are more than justified. However, because the Soviet system was strongly centralized, there was at least some consistency to how policies were applied across the Soviet Union, and some recourse for appeal to the central authorities if abuses did occur locally. There was a script that was well rehearsed by all, and this provided predictability—with a script, at least one can rely on most participants to perform according to their roles.

This script in fact called for activists representing all walks of life in the Soviet Union to play a role. Of course, all manifestations of Soviet social activism—including Indigenous activism in Chukotka—always had to have the endorsement of the local branch of the Communist Party, and quite often were initiated by the latter. The activists who were the leaders of sanctioned social movements (or organisations, for all movements were organised) were nearly always Communist Party members, and they understood the script and the role they were expected to perform. Caroline Humphrey deftly characterizes this phenomenon, proposing the term "evocative transcript" to refer to "the social reproduction of texts that circulate as the reiteration of previous texts" (Humphrey 1994: 22). Everyone knew the texts, and knew when and how they were expected to reproduce them, and the most successful performances came with certain rewards.

Given the common view that the Communist Party *was* the state in the Soviet Union, saying that the Party or Party members initiated a social movement or founded a social organisation would thus seem to be saying that the state itself initiated it. But the Party *was* the state and *was not* at the same time—somewhat in the same sense that early 21st century NGOs are non-governmental and yet governmental at the same time (Elyachar 2005; Ghodsee 2006). Locally, the Communist Party could function as a sort of "cheerleader" for social and political activism that aimed to communicate up to the state the need for change. While from the outside it may seem obvious that the

16 The word "incomer" is a translation of the Russian term *priezzhii*, based on the verb *priezzhat'* ('to arrive, to come'). It can imply those who are newly arrived, but in Chukotkan usage it is applied to those who have come from the outside—whether recently or not—and show no commitment to Chukotka as their true home.

Communist Party was synonymous with a state that sought to repress its population, from the inside—and especially on a local level—it was entirely plausible to see it as an activist organisation working for the betterment of society, and to see oneself as a partner with it. In this sense, awareness of the script could become deeply subverted, while attention was drawn to the positive aspects of one's social involvement. There was a space for citizen action in the Soviet Union for those willing to accept the limitations placed on that action, and many Soviet citizens made the most of that space. For those who wished to participate, the ways in which their activism was channeled by the Party was accepted as a given component of the social system.

Thus, rather than seeing the Chukotkan Association as representing a new kind of activism, a product of democratic "opening up" in Russia, it actually makes far more sense to think of it as properly belonging to this very genre of Soviet citizen activism, the last in a long tradition of Soviet social organisations. This point was driven home to me when one Chukchi activist who was intimately involved in the establishment of the Chukotkan Association one day described to me how she participated in writing the charter of the organisation. Laughing at her own *naïveté*, she admitted that she and her collaborators had no idea how to write a charter, so they simply adapted the charter of the *Komsomol* (Communist Youth League).

In fact, there had been social organisations created in Chukotka long before *glasnost'* that strongly resembled the association and involved some of the very same Indigenous intellectuals who founded the latter. For example, in 1969, the *Obshchestvennyi sovet po rabote s naseleniem iz narodnostei Severa* ('Social Council for Work with the Population of the Peoples of the North') was created in Anadyr' with official endorsement by the regional-level Communist Party. "The activists of the local (*mestnyi*) intelligentsia have opportunely begun to practically resolve, on a social basis, the problems of culture and daily life of the local population," stated the Chairman of this new council, thus seeming to imply that the council was formed as a result of a movement already initiated by these activists (Krushanov 1986: 108). The council was described as having an "advisory character"; its members were elected from among the "more active and authoritative workers of the local intelligentsia." A few of these were named: "the engineer Iurii Nikulin, the journalist Tatiana Achirgina, the artist Ekaterina Rultyneut, and others" (*ibid.*: 109).

Some of these figures were later found at the forefront of post-Soviet social activism in Chukotka in the 1990s. Achirgina would go on in the 1990s to be one of the founders of the *Obshchestvo eskimosov "Yupik"* ('Society of *Eskimosy* "Yupik"') in Chukotka, and would serve on the board of the Inuit Circumpolar Council when the *Eskimosy* of Chukotka were finally able to activate their membership in that international organization[17]. Rultyneut, founder in 1968 of the *Gosudarstvennyi*

[17] Chukotka's Yupiget first began to participate in the Inuit Circumpolar Conference in 1989 (as it was called before it was changed to Inuit Circumpolar Council). In an interview I conducted with Achirgina in 1996, she stated that the Society of *Eskimosy* was founded in Chukotka partly to counterbalance Chukchi dominance in the regional association. However, *Eskimosy*-Chukchi tension was not emphasized by my interlocutors in Chukotka, and therefore I do not place emphasis on it. Achirgina

Chukotsko-eskimoskii ansambl' "Ergyron" ('State Chukchi-*Eskimosy* Ensemble *"Ergyron"*'), a song and dance group, went on to occupy a high-level managerial position in the Chukotka Department of Culture, and in the late 1990s she became a vocal advocate of Indigenous cultural revitalization. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, these individuals felt they were doing nothing so qualitatively different from what they had done in the Soviet period. Although Western observers might put a negative spin on this and characterize them as "Communist holdovers," they themselves put a positive spin on it—they saw their own careers as a more or less seamless whole, and in their own minds, they were in the past, and continued to be, social activists, working as they always had to correct imperfections in society.

When the association was formed in 1990, it certainly followed the Soviet-era precedents for such social organisations, and it had the approval of the still existing Communist Party. However, this does *not* mean I am arguing that it was therefore doomed to failure, mired in the Communist system. On the contrary, given local political circumstances different than those which arose in Chukotka *after* the collapse of the Soviet Union, such an "activist" organisation, regardless of being state-sanctioned in the Soviet period, might have gone on to fulfil a transformative agenda.

However, the Chukotka Association faced a key obstacle. The rhetoric of the Indigenous movement described an ideology-driven system that had colonized Indigenous peoples and systematically sought to dismantle their social orders and replace them with a Soviet social order. But it was a *system*, and at least in that system Indigenous peoples had a role in the script; they occupied a position that fit into the logic of Leninist nationalities policy. The agenda of the Indigenous movement as articulated in the documents of the late 1980s and early 1990s was in *essence to enhance the role of Indigenous peoples within that logic,* giving them greater autonomy culturally, economically and politically. But the collapse of the Soviet Union also meant the collapse of so unitary a system of policy. In Chukotka, I would argue even more so than in other regions of the North in the 1990s, a new post-Soviet logic quickly developed that was nominally democratic but promoted a local interpretation of democracy as a system in which society is an ethnically undifferentiated unit and majority opinion prevails. The challenge for Indigenous persons was no longer simply to enhance their part in the logic of the system, but to create from scratch a part for themselves within a new logic that was attempting to erase them from the script altogether as representing a minority voice that carried little weight and therefore mattered little. When a federally restructured post-Soviet administration took shape in Chukotka after 1993[18], the non-Indigenous bureaucrats who controlled it began to recognise the potential challenge that an independent and internationally connected Indigenous organisation might present. They quickly sought to co-opt the association and make it subject to their own agenda, which was decidedly hostile to Indigenous

herself was a strong supporter of the Chukchi activist Vladimir Etylin when he ran for governor of Chukotka in 1996.

18 Although many of the same people carried over from the pre-1993 administration, including Nazarov (see below), the power relations within the new administrative structure were quite different from before.

Chukotkans and repressive of efforts to act autonomously as a sub-unit of society with special interests.

Disauthenticating discourses

Between 1991 and 1993, a new form of leadership arose in Chukotka, in the persona of its new "governor," Aleksander Nazarov. As a pro-democratic "reformer" Nazarov had won favour with then-president Boris Yeltsin and thus emerged the victor in a local power struggle with Vladimir Etylin (at that time the Chairman of the regional council) for control of the Chukotka administration (Gray 2005; Thompson in press). At first subtly, later more blatantly, Nazarov developed a systematic, repressive chauvinism that played a decisive role in defusing the energy of the original Indigenous movement in Chukotka and accounts for the riddle of the "non-movement." Whereas in the Soviet period Chukotka had been created as a "national region," ostensibly in a Leninist gesture to the self-determination of its Indigenous inhabitants[19], in post-Soviet discourse of the 1990s the region was increasingly claimed by incomers as a Russian space, "discovered" by Russian Cossacks in the 17th century.

More than once, Indigenous acquaintances pointed out to me what they saw as the irony in the fact that Chukotka had been an Indigenous space to begin with, and it was they who had *allowed* Russians to settle there. Incomers often countered by raising the technicality that certain parts of Chukotka were only recently settled by Chukchi, and therefore claims to indigenousness should be considered spurious. This debate was often carried out in the pages of the regional newspaper *Krainii Sever* ('Far North'). The tone of these articles differed sharply from that of the Soviet era, when a discourse of international friendship and brotherhood among peoples had prevailed, even if that discourse had always carried paternalistic overtones. Articles in the mid-1990s offered a belligerent rebuke to any attempt by Indigenous Chukotkans to assert a special identity as *korennoi* ('Indigenous') and claim rights commensurate with that identity.

A particularly indicative example of disauthenticating discourse that helped to defuse the Indigenous movement occurred in April 1994 when the Nazarov administration orchestrated what it called the "First Congress of Indigenous Peoples of Chukotka." At first glance, it seems a mistake to call this the *first* congress, since Indigenous Chukotkans had gathered twice before, in 1990 and 1992. However, those gatherings had been called *conferences* (*konferentsiya*) of the Indigenous *association*, while this was called a *Congress* (*s'ezd*) of Indigenous *peoples*. The person placed on the front line to organize this event on behalf of the Chukotka administration was

19 In 1980, the title "national" was dropped and replaced by "autonomous." This occurred across the Soviet North in all seven of the regions (*okrug*) created ostensibly for Indigenous peoples, and marks a shift in national policy toward Indigenous peoples in the Soviet Union. However, the general attitude embodied in the policy of that time remained paternalistic and benevolent.

Aramais Dallakian[20], an incomer and the newly appointed head of the newly created *Upravlenie po delam natsional'nostei i migratsii* ('Department of the Affairs of Nationalities and Migration'). My interlocutors described lavish sums being spent on the event out of the administration's budget; participants were flown in from Moscow and Yakutiya, as well as from Alaska and Canada. In two interviews published in *Krainii Sever*, Dallakian spoke optimistically of the effect the congress would have on solving problems of "self-government of the Indigenous population" and other "purely economic and social problems."

Dallakian also made one important statement that foreshadowed the new post-Soviet logic of regional politics. He said that the governor himself had appeared twice at the congress, and he continued,

> By the way, [the governor] was forced to take note of the terribly incorrect statements of our guests from abroad. They called for conducting similar measures exclusively on narrow national[21] terms, thereby programming international tension. That's not something we need: in Russia, including in Chukotka, there are more than a hundred peoples and ethnic groups, and there should be no exclusions. We all have the same problems in common, we must decide them together! [...] In the course of the congress, this was understood even by those who started out with a confrontational attitude toward the administration and the so-called "incomers"[22].

Dallakian was attempting to claim that Indigenous-incomer tension was irrelevant to the problems that Indigenous Chukotkans were experiencing, going so far as to attempt to delegitimate the distinction between Indigenous Chukotkans and incomers by putting the latter word in quotes[23]. Dallakian's statement was made all the more important by the fact that it was repeated two days later in an article by a reporter who had attended the conference. She writes (at times almost word for word repeating Dallakian):

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20 Two years later, Dallakian would be promoted to a position high within the Chukotkan administration and very close to the governor, and would be called colloquially "Nazarov's right-hand man." He would later be supplanted in this role by others, as various personalities rose to, and fell from, grace with the governor. Dallakian rose again, however, when Abramovich become governor in 2001; as of this writing in 2007, Dallakian was the second of four deputy governors under Abramovich.

21 The Soviet/Russian use of the adjective "national" is fraught with complexity. Although it is sometimes translated as "ethnic," this is too simplistic and glosses over the term's historical dimensions. In Soviet usage, both Chukchi and Ukrainians were nationalities. For a fuller treatment of Soviet nationalities issues, see Beissinger (2002) and Bremmer and Taras (1993).

22 "*Pered s"ezdom stoiat bol'shie zadachi...*" ('Major tasks stand before the congress...'), *Krainii Sever,* 7 April 1994; "*Smena orientirov*" ('A change of orientation'), *Krainii Sever*, 26 April 1994.

23 Although I am quoting a newspaper version of this interview, it is highly likely that the piece underwent editorial review by Dallakian personally, since the newspaper was controlled by the regional administration.

> Obviously mistaken was the statement of Kaleb Panaugve[24], our guest from across the ocean [Alaska], about the necessity of carrying out such a congress exclusively "without white people" [...] Supposedly the "aliens," as a majority, steam-roller and harass the locals, and they need to attain their own political freedom. Personally, I think that we are all one nation—*severiane* ('Northerners'). Suppose tomorrow the Ukrainians gather their own congress, then the Belorussians, then the Russians, then the Caucasians. But truly we all have the same problems. Do we really need to solve them separately? Is this not absurd?[25]

The writer goes on to blame such attitudes on Boris Yeltsin's statement that the regions should "take as much sovereignty as they can swallow," which she says led to the problems the country was experiencing with renegade regions such as Chechnya and Tatarstan.

Both newspaper pieces take particular aim (the first obliquely, the second more directly) at a comment made by an Alaska Native leader who attended the congress, Caleb Pungowiyi. As a political activist, Pungowiyi would have been accustomed to large gatherings of Indigenous persons in North America, such as the annual Alaska Federation of Natives, which is indeed conducted by and for Alaska Natives with only token and ornamental participation by non-Native dignitaries, such as the governor of Alaska. The orchestrated character of the Chukotka congress would have been obvious to him, and he apparently expressed his distaste and incredulity openly. Dallakian's and the newspaper's attention to this particular moment of the congress bespeaks a sharp awareness of the close proximity of Alaska and the strong potential for Indigenous Chukotkans to be influenced by ideas picked up in visits by Chukotkan and Alaskans back and forth across the Bering Strait, which had been carried out since the first "friendship flight" in 1988 and the implementation of a limited "visa-free" travel regime for certain Indigenous Alaskans and Chukotkans who could demonstrate kinship links with the other side (Krauss 1994; Sheldon 1989). These visits would be made increasingly difficult throughout the 1990s until many of the early "regulars" simply gave up.

The implications of the social and political realities represented by attitudes such as those in the *Krainii Sever* articles—that Indigenous Chukotkans had suffered no more than any other "nationality," and in fact there was nothing unique about their problems—were just beginning to dawn on Chukotka's Indigenous inhabitants when I arrived in 1995, and I seemed to witness a long period of regrouping. Although throughout the 1990s everyone in Chukotka was experiencing radical change that was difficult to adjust to, Indigenous Chukotkans carried a dual burden: they also experienced the angst of social, political, and economic insecurity of the post-socialist transition imposed on them. But for them, the period brought in addition a negative change in their status, an adjustment downwards to greater exclusion from the

24 Panaugve is a direct transliteration of the name as it was printed in Russian in the newspaper article. The person being referred to is Caleb Pungowiyi of Kotzebue, Alaska, a former president of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference.

25 "*Nishcheta na fone frantsuzskikh dukhov,*" ('Destitution against the background of French perfume'), *Krainii Sever,* 28 April 1994.

mainstream, to virtual disenfranchisement. Where Indigenous Chukotkans were seeking partnership with the new administration, as they always had done with the Soviet state, Nazarov's rhetoric announced a clear rejection of partnership[26]. To add insult to injury, there was an increasingly open display of Russian chauvinism, and public denial by those in power that Indigenous Chukotkans had any sort of unique experience.

I have claimed that Chukotka differed in this respect from the rest of the Russian North in the 1990s. By the 2000s, as the phenomenon of the "natural resource oligarchs" began to unfold—wealthy businessmen who managed to get themselves elected or appointed heads of resource-rich regions in the Russian North—the distinctions between Chukotka and other regions grew less significant. Nazarov was a unique figure; in some ways, he was the last of the old party bosses in Chukotka, but one who worked under democratic rhetoric even as he systematically reversed the effects of *glasnost'* in Chukotka. The governor who succeeded Nazarov, Roman Abramovich, is the first oligarch in Chukotka, and his initial inclination was to reopen the region; federal pressure has overcome this inclination and kept Chukotka closed, and has also worked the closure of other regions in the North that had been more open than Chukotka in the 1990s[27].

Conclusion

By the late 1980s, Russia's Indigenous peoples were free in principle to join together with Indigenous peoples throughout the world in cultivating and promoting a Fourth-World consciousness, and many Indigenous leaders in Russia actively sought out and interacted with their Indigenous counterparts in other countries. However, in spite of the appearance in Moscow of an Indigenous association that clearly intended to represent the interests of Indigenous peoples of the Russian North as a whole, and a florescence of regional associations that popped up nearly simultaneously across the country, one cannot say that these phenomena were truly connected in a unified movement across Russia, even if only for logistical reasons. In fact and not surprisingly, the more far-flung the region, the less connected it tended to be to activity in the centre, and Chukotka, as the most far-flung region of all, remained quite peripheral.

Yet it was not merely Chukotka's peripheralness that excluded it from greater integration with a wider Indigenous movement in Russia throughout the 1990s; further explanation must be sought in the nature of local politics in Chukotka after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The belligerent and repressive policies of the Nazarov regime

26 I am grateful to Alex King for pointing this out.

27 During the 1990s, my own stories of the difficulties I encountered while working in Chukotka were often met with surprise, even incredulity, by my colleagues who worked elsewhere in the Russian North; by the 2000s, I finally began to have the bitter "pleasure" of commiserating with the same colleagues as they began to share similar tales of fieldwork difficulties in their respective field sites that they had hitherto not experienced.

deliberately sought to disauthenticate the legitimacy of the Indigenous cause, and to undermine the effectiveness of the association. The ousting of Nazarov in 2001 considerably lessened the aggressiveness of this policy. However, it would be premature to declare that all obstacles to the Indigenous cause in Chukotka have now been removed, and many Chukotkans remain critical of developments in their region, in spite of the seeming benevolence of the new Abramovich administration. By now, Indigenous Chukotkans seem to have gained at least a more solid political footing, and as their voices can more easily gain access to channels of communication, the rest of the story will be theirs to tell.

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