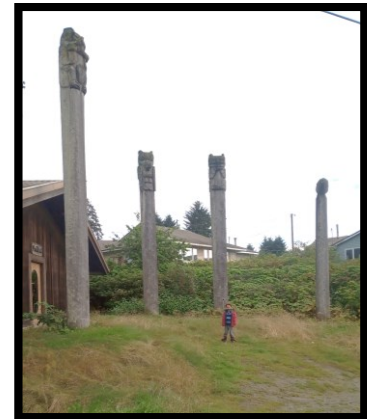




WHO IS INDIGENOUS?

PERSPECTIVES ON INDIGENEITY, IDENTITY,
DISPOSSESSION, AND TRANSITION



EDITED BY

E. BARRETT RISTROPH



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DEDICATION

For Magnus—my reason for this book.

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CHAPTER 14

THE CHUKCHI OF MEINIPILGYNO VILLAGE AND THEIR TRADITIONAL RITUALS

By^{1*}

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¹ Acknowledgments: NABU International – Foundation for Nature funded the trip of Konstantin Klokov to Chukotka and BirdsRussia (the Russian Society for the Conservation and Study of Birds) provided the logistic support. The village administration of Meinipilgyno and the NGO Chychetkin Vetgav (Meinipilgyno Branch, headed by Elena Tevlyavye) provided great assistance in organizing the interviews that supported this article. The authors express their deep gratitude to all for their participation in this work.

* Translation by E. Barrett Ristroph.

² Valeria Masalova has passed away since the writing of this article. The black border around her name is a Russian custom.

In this chapter, he collaborates with residents of a Chukotkan village (Meinipilgyno), to consider how traditional rituals endured through the Soviet era and continue to play a central role in the residents' identity. Here, the women have served as culture bearers in the face of drastic economic change.

This chapter considers modern Chukchi rituals and how they remain part of the Chukchi identity, with a case study from the village of Meinipilgyno, Chukotka, Russia (see map below).³ The rituals of the indigenous peoples of Northern Russia are often seen as a relic of the past. In fact, they have not completely disappeared. Rather, they have evolved and continue to play an important role in the modern life of indigenous peoples, helping to preserve their ethnic identity.



In Soviet times, government authorities and communist party leaders fought against all religions and cults, including the rituals of reindeer herders. The Chukchi could only participate in a holiday called “Reindeer Herder’s Day,” which was sanctioned by government authorities. This holiday included reindeer sled races, sports, folklore concerts, traditional dress contests and

³ These rituals were described by Olga Elyanto, Valeria Masalova, and Irina Koravye and recorded, transcribed, and edited by Konstantin Klovov. These texts were supplemented by information shared by other residents of Meinipilgyno. Photos were taken by Konstantin Klovov in Meinipilgyno between 2016 and 2019.

other events, but the ceremonial rituals associated with the holiday were not officially allowed. Reindeer herders could only do them in secret. When the Soviet regime ended, rituals were allowed on the official holidays of the indigenous peoples. But they are now performed much less frequently and in a simplified form.⁴

The Village of Meinipilgyno and Its Residents

The village of Meinipilgyno (Photo 1) is located in the southeast of Chukotka, in the tundra along the Bering Sea and the mouth of a large lagoon. Less than 500 people live there and ninety percent are Chukchi. The village has a school, a cultural center, a post office, a store with a bakery, a hospital, and an art school for children with a small museum of ethnography. There is also an Orthodox chapel, which is almost never used. There are no roads to the village. A commercial helicopter connects Anadyr (the capital of Chukotka) with the village, but flights are only once or twice a month. Tracked all-terrain vehicles can also drive along the seashore to the neighboring village of Khatyrka. The journey takes almost a whole day. Cargo is delivered by ships, which are unloaded offshore in a roadstead near the village.



Photo 1. *The Village of Meinipilgyno*

Almost the entire adult population participates in subsistence fishing. Cash income from the sale of fish is limited, since it is difficult to bring fish to market out of the village. The main type of fish is sockeye salmon, which is caught during the two months of the year when salmon come to spawn. Each family has a designated area not far from the village where they set up fishing nets. In addition to fishing, two thirds of the men hunt geese during the spring migration, and all residents pick berries and mushrooms for their food. Poor families, especially the unemployed, also collect berries and mushrooms to sell.

The Chukchi of Meinipilgyno belong to the group of southern Chukchi, which includes all Chukchi living south of the Anadyr River. Their ancestors—nomadic reindeer herders—came from northern lands across the Anadyr River in the 18th century.⁵ They supplemented their

⁴ For example, in Chukotka, after the 1956 ban on polar bear hunting, the rituals of thanksgiving associated with the harvest did not stop. Forty-five out of sixty-four Chukchi and Eskimo polar bear hunters interviewed between 1990 and 2005 continued to perform this ritual in a highly simplified form so as not to attract attention. See A.A. Kochnev, *The Role of Fishing Rituals and Beliefs in the Traditional Use of Natural Resources of the Indigenous Peoples of Chukotka*, in *Humanitarian Aspects of Hunting and Game Management* 43-44 (2014).

⁵ V.V Lebedev & Y.B. Simchenko, *Achayvayam Spring* 143 (1983).

reindeer husbandry with fishing, since a large number of salmon spawn in this area along the coast of the Bering Sea.

The fate of reindeer husbandry in this area deserves special attention. In Soviet times, three large reindeer-breeding, state-owned collective farms were organized in the southeast of Chukotka, each of which had 15,000 to 20,000 reindeer. One of them was in Meinipilgyno. With the beginning of market reforms in 1991, the state farms of Chukotka were transformed into joint stock companies, and then into municipal enterprises. With the transition from a planned economy to a market economy, the enterprises lost state support. They also lost the system of centralized sales of products, materials and technical supplies. This led to the loss of their production potential within just a few years. Most of the reindeer were slaughtered. Their meat was distributed or sold to the villagers, whose situation in the late 1990s bordered on starvation.

In the southeast of Chukotka, there remained a single small herd of 320 reindeer, preserved by the reindeer breeder Yuri Ranautagin in the village of Khatyrka. In Soviet times, he was the most respected foreman of reindeer herders, a member of the district committee of the Communist Party. When the economic crisis of the late 1990s began, he and his two assistants drove the remains of the herd to the distant tundra in the mountains. For two years they herded reindeer there, almost without communication with the outside world, since no one there could offer help. They ate mainly fish and bear meat, which they hunted themselves. In order to save the herd, they refrained from slaughtering the reindeer for food.

In 2002, when the economic crisis in Russia ended and Roman Abramovich became the governor of Chukotka, the economic situation in Chukotka improved. Grants were available through the local government for projects to restore reindeer husbandry. Yuri Ranautagin returned to Khatyrka with his herd. He would not be the only herder going forward: a municipal enterprise in Khatyrka received funding from the Chukotkan government to buy 1000 reindeer from the neighboring region of Koryak. Reindeer did well in Khatyrka—as of this writing there are three herds with two thousand animals each.

Seeing the success of their neighbors, the residents of Meinipilgyno also began looking for ways to restore their reindeer husbandry. The Cheyvytegin family, who had herded reindeer for generations, initiated the movement. The idea immediately gained support and became the subject of village meetings. Several former reindeer breeders from Meinipilgyno and their children took jobs at Khatyrka's municipal reindeer herding enterprise to rebuild their skills and potentially earn enough money to buy their own reindeer. In 2015, Anatoly Cheyvytegin, the son of Sergei Cheyvytegin (a well-known foreman of reindeer herders at the time), registered his family farm as a legal entity and received the official status of a farmer under Russian law. His sister, Valeria Masalova, later received the same status.

The registration of two farms allowed the family to receive two grants for business development. With these funds, they purchased 600 reindeer in the village of Kanchalan (located about 300 km north of Meinipilgyno). This first effort ended unsuccessfully, however. During the herd's journey to Meinipilgyno, almost all the reindeer were destroyed by wolves and poachers. The next year, the farmers managed to get another grant to purchase 300 reindeer in Khatyrka. These reindeer are still grazing near Meinipilgyno at the time of this writing.

This story shows the importance of reindeer husbandry for the identity of Meinipilgyno and explains why, despite the absence of reindeer husbandry for two decades, residents continued to perform a modified version of the key reindeer husbandry rituals.

Rituals of the Meinipilgyno Chukchi

The question of how the reindeer herders' rituals could continue after the loss of the herds is a critical one. The answer lies with the women of Meinipilgyno—wives and daughters of the former reindeer herders who grew up in the tundra in nomadic families. From childhood they learned all the features of nomadic life, including ritual practices. According to the Chukchi tradition, the woman is the owner of the *yaranga* (a traditional dome-shaped tent for shelter). She controls everything inside the *yaranga*, while the man is responsible for maintaining the herd and all property outside the *yaranga*. It falls to the woman to make the ritual fire using a traditional *gyr-gyr* board and a set of special tools that passed from generation to generation in the families of reindeer herders (Photo 2). Once this was the only way to make fire, but it is now a ritual performed only during the holidays. The owner of the *yaranga*, usually the eldest woman in the family, keeps not only the tools for starting a fire, but also a large bundle of ritual objects consisting of a wide variety of small items, *tainykvyt*, and other things needed to perform rituals (Photo 3).



Photo 2. *Gyr-gyr* boards and other devices for making fire by friction



Photo 3. *Tainykvyt* - ritual objects - the guardians of the *yaranga*

Preserving the ritual objects is essential to the traditions associated with the *yaranga*. According to Olga Elyanto in Meinipilgyno, these objects are now kept only by eleven families and in the village museum.⁶ Most of these families also have wooden poles and *ratem*, a covering for the *yaranga* sewn from reindeer skins, which traditionally were essential for constructing the *yaranga*. But *ratem* can also be made from tarpaulin, and the wooden parts of the *yaranga* can be replaced with other materials.⁷ The *tainykvyt* is more essential than the *ratem* and the wooden parts. In Meinipilgyno, *yarangas* are usually installed only for a few days a year during the holidays. Only one or two families use them as temporary shelters during the salmon fishing season. Thus, in modern life, the *yaranga* has become more of a cultural symbol than a shelter.

The full annual cycle of rituals among the southern Chukchi includes more than a dozen holidays associated with important events in the nomadic life of reindeer herders. As of this writing, several families in Meinipilgyno remember and partially perform the rituals of just three of the most important holidays.

The first of these holidays, *Kilvey* is celebrated in May in connection with reindeer calving. In recent years, six to eight families in Meinipilgyno have been celebrating *Kilvey*. *Yarangas* for the celebration are set up for one or two days in the tundra, near the village. Instead of setting up the complete *yaranga*, some families simply use a tripod, *tevrit*, consisting of the three central poles of the *yaranga*, which symbolizes the entire *yaranga*.

The second holiday is *Vaamk'oranmat* or *Vaamk'aanmat*⁸, the holiday of water. It is celebrated in early June, when the rivers open up. In the past, the families of nomadic reindeer herders did not roam with the men during the summer, but lived in a summer camp where they processed skins, sewed clothes, fished, and preserved fish for future use. Soon after *Vaamk'oranmat*, male reindeer herders took their herds to graze in summer pastures for two months, while the herders' families remained at the summer camp. During the holiday, they slaughtered several fat reindeer to provide their families with meat for two months in advance. The slaughter of each animal was accompanied by rituals, which were also performed during other holidays. The slaughtered reindeer was given a ritualistic drink of water in the form of pouring water over the carcass. Small parts of each part of the carcass, including the skin, hooves and tail, were cut off for a ritual offering. The frontal bone with the antlers was cut out and placed on the contents of the stomach, and sliced pieces of meat were placed next to it. After that, everyone started eating. The last time *Vaamk'oranmat* was carried out in this way was in 1990, when there

⁶ The museum at the children's art school contains a *yaranga* and a set of traditional objects required for rituals. This enables the school to stage *yarangas* and participate in celebrations and ceremonies.

⁷ In Khatyrka, where wooden parts needed for the *yaranga* have not been preserved, the *yaranga* frame is made from iron fashioned through electric welding (from interview materials, 2017).

⁸ In the Chukchi language, there are two ways to pronounce this word.

were still reindeer. After 1990, villagers began to conduct a very simple ritual with beads, which can symbolize the sacrifice of a reindeer at any holiday.

To start the ceremony, two beads are placed on a willow twig about thirty cm long or a blade of grass. The twig is put on the ground and encircled in a tiny “lasso” of thin leather, like the lasso that would be used on a live reindeer. When an animal is slaughtered, it flutters and moves. Likewise, the twig is also fluttered, as if it were a reindeer still moving.

Another ritual connected to *Vaamk'oranmat* is *K'ne'et*. It marks the beginning of the salmon fishing period—the most important event in the life of the Meinipilgyno Chukchi since they shifted from reindeer husbandry to fishing. Valeria Masalova describes *K'ne'et* as follows based on her childhood memories:

Soon after *Vaamk'oranmat*, salmon move in the rivers. When someone caught the first fish, we performed a special ceremony. To do this, my mother asked us to collect grass and weave it into a thin braid about half a meter long. My mother put a “lasso” made out of the braided grass onto the first fish and dragged it into the *yaranga*, as if it were a reindeer, since the reindeer and fish are brothers. And we were glad that the first fish came. Then my mother cut out the top of the fish's head and brought a piece of it to each family member's mouth. At this moment we had to shout loudly: “Knau-knau!!!” imitating the cry of a seagull. The louder you shout, the better: there will be a lot of fish. Then they put a saucepan on the fire and added all the parts of the fish to it. For the first fish, we were supposed to boil everything, even the offal [entrails]. For the next fish, we usually did not cook the offal.

Unfortunately, this ceremony is no longer held in Meinipilgyno.

The third, most important holiday of Chukotka reindeer breeders is *Vylgyk'oranmat* or *Vylgyk'aanmat*, also known as the “Day of the Fawn.”⁹ *Vylgyk'aanmat* is the name for the thin skin of fawns used to make light clothing. The holiday takes place at the end of summer when reindeer herders return from their summer migration to the camp. Family reunification after two months of separation is the most important event in the annual cycle of the nomadic life of the Chukchi.

⁹ For additional details see Konstantin Klokov, *Substitution and Continuity in Southern Chukotka Traditional Rituals: A Case Study from Meinipilgyno Village 2016-2017*, 55 *ARCTIC ANTHROPOLOGY*, 117 (2018).

Now that people no longer roam the tundra, the holiday is held when it is convenient for the villagers. In recent years, five *yarangas* in Meinipilgyno were part of the holiday, including four belonging to the families of former reindeer herders and the *yaranga* at the museum. The ceremony begins with a ritual of purification or *emtenragtat*. All those present are fumigated with smoke from the fire started using traditional tools (Photo 4). Coal diluted in water is used to anoint the forehead, palms and feet (or shoe soles).



Photo 4. *The ritual of cleansing with smoke*



Photo 5. *Figurines of reindeer, made of sorrel porridge with antlers from willow twigs*

wooden bowls in each *yaranga* to be used to feed the forces of nature little bit later during the ritual (Photo 5). In front of each *yaranga*, residents place dried fish, pieces of steaming sod, and ritual items kept by each family – everything necessary for the rituals (Photo 6).

In connection with these modernized ceremonies, a thick porridge of wild sorrel (a common herb) is prepared. Ritual reindeer are “sculpted” from it, with willow twigs used as antlers (Photo 5). These symbolic figures in this ritual have their own Chukchi name – *tak’algyn*. They can replace real reindeer during the sacrifice. Salmon caviar and berries are added to the remaining sorrel, and small portions are placed in



Photo 6. *Ritual objects laid out before the beginning of the ceremony*



Photo 7. *Women carry out a board with pieces of steaming sod to ward off evil spirits*

The ceremonies are held in each *yaranga* in turn, starting with the one located farthest to the east. First, the participants drive away evil spirits. The men take turns shooting from a small ritual bow. The women pick up a pre-prepared board with chunks of steaming sod from the ground and throw them in a southerly direction with exclamations of “O-hey! O-hey!” (Photo 7).

Then the participants turn to the forces of nature and “feed” them. They take the sorrel porridge from the bowls and throw it in the southeast direction with exclamations of “O-hey! O-hey!” (Photo 8). The participants call out first to the inanimate forces of nature, then to reindeer and fish, then to the burial sites of ancestors, and finally to the ancestors themselves (Photo 9).

Then the participants turn to the forces of nature and “feed” them. They take the sorrel porridge from the bowls and throw it in the



Photo 8. *Symbolic feeding of the forces of nature*



Photo 9. *Appeals to the forces of nature are pronounced to oneself*

After that, the symbolic slaughter of not only reindeer, but also fish begins, since reindeer and salmon are considered brothers. A “lasso” is put on the symbolic reindeer and dried fish (Photos 10 and 11), and then a knife is stuck into them. This means that reindeer and fish are caught and slaughtered. Their “meat” must be cut into small pieces.



Photo 10. *The sacrificial “reindeer” is lassoed*



Photo 11. *Sacrificial salmon—the reindeer's brother is also lassoed*



Photo 12. *The “antlers” of the sacrificial “reindeer” are cut into small pieces with a knife*

Since the “deer” made from sorrel porridge has no real meat, willow twigs are cut into pieces instead (Photo 12). Then these finely chopped willow twigs and pieces of fish are distributed to all family members. The participants in the ceremony throw them to the south with exclamations of “O-hey!” Children and adolescents participate in the ceremony. They are invited to take part so they will remember it (Photos 13 and 14).



Photo 13. *Olga Elyanto explains the ceremony to children*



Photo 14. *Children participate in the ritual of feeding the forces of nature*

In accordance with tradition, each slaughtered animal must be offered a drink of water. A pot of water is prepared in advance, in which willow leaves (reindeer food) are floating. Then, the slaughtered symbolic reindeer and dried fish (brother to the reindeer) are watered with this pot (Photo 15).



Photo 15. *The sacrificed “deer” and his brother salmon must be “watered”*

The last step is to share porridge and dried fish with all those present, including guests. Everyone is offered a spoonful of porridge and a piece of fish (Photo 16). Thus, at the beginning of the ceremony, the inanimate forces of nature are fed, then the animate forces (deer and fish), and finally the people.



Photo 16. *After performing the rituals, each participant eats a spoonful of ritual porridge*

Family rituals follow. An example comes from the family of O.V. Elyanto. In times past, at the beginning of the ceremony, a fawn would be slaughtered in front of the *yaranga*. All of the family members are anointed with the fawn's blood. In modern times, instead of blood, participants use raw willow bark, which symbolically means a slaughtered reindeer. Next, the owners of the *yaranga* begin a ceremony in memory of their ancestors. They take tambourines and walk around the hearth inside the *yaranga*, stepping over the slaughtered fawn (willow branch) and singing the songs of their ancestors. Next, the floor of the *yaranga* is swept with tambourines. All the rubbish, and symbolically with it all the negative energy, is swept out of the *yaranga*. Then the tea party begins (Photo 17), after which another reindeer is symbolically slaughtered. In total, twelve reindeer are symbolically slaughtered in the *yaranga* throughout the holiday. In other families, the number of reindeer could be greater or fewer.



Photo 17. *Tea drinking in the yaranga after family rituals*

The Chukchi Meinipilgyno attach great importance to the authenticity of their rituals and try to carry out each part as their ancestors did. Accuracy is important. Thus, the steps of modern ceremonies do not differ much from those described by V.G. Bogoraz¹⁰ and V.G. Kuznetsova.¹¹

¹⁰ WALDEMAR BOGORAS (aka Vladimir Germanovich Bogoraz), *THE CHUKCHEE: MATERIAL CULTURE, RELIGION, SOCIAL ORGANIZATION, AND MYTHOLOGY* (1904-1909).

¹¹ Varvara G. Kuznetsova, *Materials on the Holidays and Rituals of Amguem Reindeer Chukchi in SIBERIAN ETHNOGRAPHIC COLLECTION* (1957).

In this way, Meinipilgyno residents can rely on the customs of the past and the authority of their ancestors and elders. At the same time, they emphasize that strict observance of tradition should not interfere with its implementation. Simplified options are perfectly acceptable if there is no opportunity or time to complete the entire ritual in the traditional way.

For example, the use of a *tak'algyn* (“symbolic reindeer” made of sorrel porridge and willow twigs) in rituals is not just a recent phenomenon. The Chukchi always used a substitute in a sacrificial ritual if live reindeer were unavailable. As of this writing, with small herds of reindeer grazing near the village, there are more opportunities to carry out the reindeer sacrifice in the traditional way, as did the ancestors of today’s residents (Photos 18-20). Still, relatively few people can carry out the sacrifice using actual reindeer, since not everyone has the opportunity to go where the herd is grazing.



Photo 18. *Catching the sacrificial reindeer*



Photo 19. *Watering the sacrificed reindeer*



Photo 20. *Front bone and antlers of the sacrificed reindeer and sliced pieces of sacrificial meat*

In contrast to the ceremonies among the Khanty and Forest Nenets,¹² modern ceremonies of the Meinipilgyno Chukchi take place quietly, without shamans, mushrooms, or alcohol, and no signs of two-way communication with the spirit have been observed. The ceremonies are performed in such a way that everyone who is interested can attend them, but they have not turned into a theatrical performance. Those who carry out ceremonies are not simply performing a certain sequence of physical actions. Rather, these actions are accompanied by internal appeals to the forces of nature, ancestors, and spirits, which are not spoken aloud. Every participant makes the pronouncements to themselves. It is not customary to talk about it. Most often the pronouncements are very simple like, “I’m giving you this,” or “So that everything is good.”

Of course, there may be some participants that are only going through the motions of the ceremony and not appealing to the forces. But these “mechanical” performances are not without merit. They allow a new participant to learn how to perform the ritual steps and remember their sequence—the performer can eventually understand the meaning of these actions.

Significance of Rituals and Relation to Indigenous Identity

The evolution of traditional cultures is a general trend among the northern peoples of Russia. As G.P. Kharyuchi observed,¹³ the annual cycle of holidays and ceremonies traditionally served a stabilizing and organizing function, streamlining the seasonal economic activities. In modern times, holidays and ceremonies serve as a refuge where traditional culture is preserved. Such “refugia” maintain the integrity of traditional communities,¹⁴ as families invite their relatives and friends from other villages to come and join in the rituals.

A new, political function has emerged in the rituals of some Siberian peoples in the post-Soviet era. Research on the modern holidays of the Khanty and Nenets have made this clear.¹⁵ Such holidays, which are typically organized by local political leaders, demonstrate ethnocultural identity and ethnic cohesion.¹⁶ In Meinipilgyno, however, holidays have no political context. Still, the fact that so many local residents participate signals the strengthening of the self-identification

¹² Anzori Barkalaja, *On the Sacrificial Rituals of the Pim River Khanty in December 1995*, ARCTIC STUDIES I, PRO ETHNOLOGIA 5, at 57 (1997); Art Leete, *Ritual, Politics and Mentality: the Nenets and Ob-Ugrians of Siberia*, 14 CREATING DIVERSITIES: FOLKLORE, RELIGION AND THE POLITICS OF HERITAGE 125 (2004); Art Leete, *Landscape and Gods Among the Khanty*, 11 J. ETHNOLOGY & FOLKLORISTICS 19 (2017).

¹³ Galina P. Kharyuchi, *Nature in the Traditional Worldview of the Nenets*, Historical Illustrations 160 (2012).

¹⁴ Virginie Vaté, *Maintaining Cohesion Through Rituals: Chukchi Herders and Hunters, a People of the Siberian Arctic*, 69 SENRI ETHNOLOGICAL STUD. 45 (2005)

¹⁵ Leete, *Ritual Politics and Mentality*, *supra* note 11; Leete, *Landscape and Gods*, *supra* note 11.

¹⁶ Natalia I. Novikova, *Hunters and Oil Workers: Possibilities of a Contract, Socio-Economic and Cultural Development of the Peoples of the North and Siberia: Traditions and Modernity* 43-64 (1995).

of the Chukchi and positions their culture within the regional politics of Chukotka. It is significant that one of Meinipilgyno's holiday organizers is an elected local leader for the community. She is a connoisseur of Chukchi customs and transfers her knowledge to young people. On holidays, she not only conducts all the rituals in her *yaranga* herself, but also attracts a large group of schoolchildren that come to join her.

In Soviet times, the authorities of the Chukotka Autonomous Region tried for many years to “reconcile” the ceremonies with the state and party ideology, making them a kind of theatrical performance. Following the strictly atheistic policy of Marxism-Leninism, authorities were trapped between not allowing any seemingly religious rituals and nurturing in every possible way the “friendship between the peoples” of the Soviet Union. Despite this interference, the Chukchi have preserved the semantic content of their rituals and take them seriously. The rituals are held not only in Meinipilgyno, but also in other Chukchi villages. On major holidays—two or three times a year—a significant number of people gather to take part in village ceremonies. In other cases, ceremonies are conducted modestly, in the privacy of the family, according to highly simplified schemes. In the tundra, nomadic reindeer herders continue to perform rituals, slaughtering real sacrificial reindeer.

Ceremonies are not limited to those involving reindeer. Marine hunters celebrate whale hunting with rituals, while fishers have their own rituals that take place in the spring when fishing season starts. In the capital of Chukotka - the city of Anadyr – cultural holidays are held twice a year: *Kilvey* in the spring and the “Day of Indigenous Peoples” in August. These are holidays with an extensive agenda, attracting hundreds of people. In addition to hosting contests for cooking ethnic food, there are Chukchi and Eskimo dances and songs, concerts and sports competitions, and a fire worship ceremony. Thus, the Chukchi rituals have become an important factor in preserving and maintaining the identity of the Chukchi. Local residents strive to reproduce rituals with maximum accuracy, relying on childhood memories and the stories of their parents to bring them into the future.

Conclusion

The ceremonies described in this chapter play an important role in modern Chukchi culture and environmental world view. They reflect the relationship of humans with all of nature. Holidays are dedicated to everything, from the tundra, to willow bushes, water, the sky, the sun, the moon, mountains, and people. Yet reindeer are the common thread running through all holidays. Their significance is expressed in the Chukchi proverb: “The tundra feeds the reindeer, the reindeer feed us.” The ritual food at the holiday is a symbol of this relationship. By eating a ritual portion of reindeer meat, people combine their spiritual essence with that of the reindeer. Since the reindeer is fed by nature and is an integral part of it, people can thus connect with nature as a whole.

In Meinipilgyno, the meat of the sacrificial reindeer has largely been replaced with ritual sorrel porridge, but this has not changed the essence of the holiday. Thanks to the inclusion of salmon in the ritual of sacrifice along with the reindeer, the holiday has become even more comprehensive and symbolizes the unity of people not only with the world of the tundra, but also with the world of the sea, and with all of Nature. With the same persistence that the women of Meinipilgyno carried on the most important reindeer herding rituals from year to year, several village men have continued their efforts to revive reindeer husbandry. Thus, the people of Meinipilgyno have been able to preserve many aspects of their culture and identity, as well as restore some that were lost in the last century. In the environmental worldview of the Chukchi, the connection between people, spirits, and Nature is obvious. This enduring view offers guidance for preserving the culture and nature in the North, not only for other indigenous peoples, but also for the non-indigenous population.

C HAPTER 15

THE YUKAGHIRS OF RUSSIA: ETHNIC IDENTITY FROM PRE-COLONIAL TIMES TO TODAY

BY

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In this chapter, he explains how the Russian government recognizes the Yukaghir people; how they recognize and govern themselves; and prospects for preserving their identity and culture in the global world.

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This chapter outlines the history of the Yukaghirs, an indigenous people in northeast Siberia, Russia with about 1600 citizens.¹ Two groups of Yukaghirs exist today—those of the tundra and those of the forest. Both groups have preserved some aspects of traditional Yukaghir culture, including the language and traditional occupations such as reindeer husbandry, fishing, and hunting. Still, the culture and identity have changed significantly, through legal shifts in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, as well as those brought by globalization. Many younger Yukaghirs have ceased to recognize themselves as Yukaghirs. At the same time, there is still a significant portion of the Yukaghir population that wants to carry this identity into the future.

Yukaghirs Prior to the Russian Empire

Like other peoples of Northern Russia, the Yukaghirs traditionally practiced a form of self-government based on a communal-clan structure and customary law. In the Russian Empire, up until the twentieth century, non-ethnic Yukaghirs who wandered into Yukaghir territories could be adopted as Yukaghir citizens.

Traditional Yukaghir society consisted of four levels: the simple family (close relatives), the clan (combined households of families related to each other by kinship), the tribe (a union of several related clans occupying the same territory), and a larger community of all the tribes of the region, who took part in an annual meeting known as the *shahadyibem* to resolve various issues.² Clans also had their own community gatherings, in which all members of the clan, including women and children, could partake.³ The complexity of Yukaghir relationships is reflected in their terminology: the term *omo* was a name for a people or tribe that spoke the same language; the term *kudeye* was a group of blood relatives; and the term *miibe* was a group of people connected by common laws and leadership.

Government was led by elders (*knyaztsami*), including the primary ruler known as the *ligeye shoromo*, a shaman (*alme*), a strong man/warrior (*tonbeye shoromo*), and the best hunter (*haniche*). There was also a family advisory council (*polutpe*) that met with and advised mothers.⁴

¹ All-Russian Population Census (2010).

² N. SPIRIDONOV, YUKAGHIRS OF THE KOLYMA DISTRICT 32-41 (1996).

³ YAKUTSK, PROBLEMS OF THE REVIVAL OF THE DISAPPEARING YUKAGHIRS 126 (1996).

⁴ V. IOKHELSON, YUKAGIRS AND YUKAGIRIZED TUNGUSES 178-79 (2005).

The elder *ligeye shoromo* led military and hunting expeditions, chose fishing grounds and camp sites, hosted festivals, and offered sacrifices to the spirits. The wife of this elder was a leader in her own right, charged with distributing the harvest among relatives.⁵

The shaman (*alme*) played an important role in Yukaghir society. Unlike many other Siberian peoples, the Yukaghir shaman was not considered to be part of separate social institution. The shaman's duties included protecting the family from evil and misfortune with the help of magic and benevolent spirits.⁶

The strong man/warrior (*tonbeye shoromo*), was the third most important in the clan after the shaman. His role was to protect the clan from enemy attacks. He was the strongest and bravest man in the clan. Unlike the elder and shaman, he was not always related to the clan by blood, and more often came to the community as a son-in-law.⁷ The role of the strong man diminished over time and no longer existed by the beginning of the 20th century. In contrast to the strong man, the clan's main hunter (*haniche*), remained an important figure. He was the most experienced and respected hunter, the primary provider of food for the family.⁸

Yukaghirs During the Russian Empire

When the Russians arrived in the Yukaghir territory in the 15th century, the Yukaghirs consisted of 14 tribal groups from the Lena River to Chukotka, united by a single ethnic identity. Contact led to armed clashes between the Yukaghir and the Cossacks, who took some of the most eminent Yukaghirs as hostages to ensure the payment of *yasak* (tribute to the Russian Empire). This often led to their death. Further decimation occurred through the enslavement of girls and women as concubines, as well as devastating epidemics of smallpox, plague, measles and other diseases to the Yukaghirs, of which they had no immunity. By the twentieth century, the Yukaghirs were on the brink of distinction.⁹ Despite all of this, traditional social relations and institutions, strong connections with ancestral lands, a functioning language and culture, and the continuation of the Yukaghir worldview has helped to preserve their ethnic identity and self-awareness as a distinct people.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.* at 180-184.

⁹ Iokhelson, *supra* note 4.

When the Russian Empire began to regulate indigenous peoples of the North and require them to pay *yasak*, it formed administrative clans that did not always coincide with the original Yukaghir clans. These administrative clans were headed elders (princes), who were elected (with the approval of Russian governors) by all adult members of the clan paying *yasak*. The terms of such elders were supposed to be for three years, but the Yukaghirs rarely voted out their elders, so they generally led the administrative clans until death. The elders collected and remitted taxes, maintained population records, carried out orders by Russian authorities, and carried out some police functions.¹⁰ Criminal offenses including murder and assault were an exception: the Yukaghirs tried to solve such delicate issues themselves, but if the authorities learned about the crimes, punishment was inevitable.¹¹

Yukaghirs During the Soviet Union

The social reforms of the early Soviet Union saved the Yukaghirs from physical extinction, but nearly spelled cultural extinction. The traditional space of life was dramatically transformed in the 1930s as a result of forced settlement. The Yukaghir transitioned from nomadic, dispersed settlements to concentrated, sedentary communities. By the 1970s, the Yukaghir were increasingly urbanized, leading to alienation from traditional lands, which transpired to a loss of the traditional way of life. Boarding schools eroded traditional systems of education and knowledge transfer. Yukaghir individuals increasingly formed mixed and interethnic families with Russians and Yakuts, leading to further loss of language and culture.

The transformation of the traditional reindeer herding, hunting and fishing, to a Sovietized, industrial activity, represented another cultural blow. As women joined the Soviet workforce, traditional female roles that tied generations together were lost. This industrialization also affected the Yukaghirs' close ties with nature. A deer that would have once been central to a family and considered sacred, would become a mere object of production. Steel machinery replaced traditional rites associated with success and redemption, which changed the traditional ecological epistemology. The children of nature became owners and consumers.

Sovietization, especially the dismantling of traditional hierarchies, in addition to the formalism and dominance of the government bureaucracy, destroyed traditional social

¹⁰ *Id.* at 99-100.

¹¹ *Id.* at 180-184.