

## Post-Soviet structures, path-dependency and passivity in Chukotkan coastal villages

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### Article abstract

Based on examples from Chukotka's history, this article focuses on a comparison between the early Soviet period and the years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, in order to analyse points of distinction and surprising similarities between the two periods. This article compares the events of the two periods and uses the concept of "path-dependency" as an analytical tool to explain the discrepancy between statements of democracy/market-economy and the continued Soviet way of thinking in order to examine the widespread state of powerlessness and passivity among Chukotka's Indigenous population and the inertia of progression in the bureaucratic system. The article also highlights the importance of the Indigenous elite. In the early years of the Soviet era, the elite underwent suppression and subjugation, which among other things led to an incipient powerlessness and passivity among the Indigenous people in Chukotka. During the past few decades, new up-coming Eskimo (Yupik) and Chukchi elites have begun to launch a number of embryonic initiatives with a non-Soviet origin.

# Post-Soviet structures, path-dependency and passivity in Chukotkan coastal villages

Bent Nielsen\*

**Résumé:** Structures post-soviétiques, dépendance de l'itinéraire et passivité dans les villages côtiers de la Tchoukotka

Introduisant quelques exemples tirés de l'histoire de la Tchoukotka et se concentrant sur une comparaison entre le début de la période soviétique et les années suivant la chute de l'URSS, cet article analyse les différences et les similarités surprenantes entre ces deux périodes. Dans le but d'examiner l'état d'impuissance et de passivité répandu parmi la population autochtone de la Tchoukotka et l'apathie qui caractérise le système bureaucratique, cet article compare les événements des deux périodes et emploie le concept de *path dependency* («dépendance de l'itinéraire») comme outil analytique afin d'expliquer le décalage entre les discours sur la démocratie ou l'économie de marché et la façon de penser soviétique omniprésente. Cet article souligne également l'importance de l'élite autochtone. Au début de l'époque soviétique, l'élite fut réprimée et subjuguée. Cette persécution a marqué le début d'un sentiment d'impuissance et de passivité parmi la population autochtone de la Tchoukotka. Au cours des dernières décennies, les élites yupik et tchouktche se sont néanmoins régénérées avec pour conséquence l'éclosion de quelques premières initiatives non-soviétiques.

**Abstract:** Post-Soviet structures, path-dependency and passivity in Chukotkan coastal villages

Based on examples from Chukotka's history, this article focuses on a comparison between the early Soviet period and the years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, in order to analyse points of distinction and surprising similarities between the two periods. This article compares the events of the two periods and uses the concept of "path-dependency" as an analytical tool to explain the discrepancy between statements of democracy/market-economy and the continued Soviet way of thinking in order to examine the widespread state of powerlessness and passivity among Chukotka's Indigenous population and the inertia of progression in the bureaucratic system. The article also highlights the importance of the Indigenous elite. In the early years of the Soviet era, the elite underwent suppression and subjugation, which among other things led to an incipient powerlessness and passivity among the Indigenous people in Chukotka. During the past few decades, new up-coming Eskimo (Yupik) and Chukchi elites have begun to launch a number of embryonic initiatives with a non-Soviet origin.

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## Introduction

Situated between the Polar Sea, the Bering Strait and the Bering Sea, the climate in the coastal and interior regions of the Chukotka peninsula is characterised by strong winds from different directions for most of the year. These winds bring a great deal of precipitation in the form of rain from June to October, and snow from November to May. However, in the early spring the weather tends to be relatively settled for a few weeks, with clear blue skies, a light wind and temperature of about  $-10^{\circ}$  Celsius.

I arrived at Novoe Chaplino, a small village situated at the southernmost tip of the Chukotka peninsula, on one such beautiful day in mid-March 2003. Novoe Chaplino has a population of just over 400, and the majority of the inhabitants are of Eskimo<sup>1</sup> origin. The distance from the district centre, Provideniya, to Novoe Chaplino is around 25 km, but the journey took about two hours, as a thick layer of snow covered long stretches of the track, impeding the progression of the heavy lorry. In spite of the fact that I was aware of the huge changes that had taken place in Chukotka since the election of the governor, Roman A. Abramovich, in December 2000, I was very astounded by what I saw as the lorry slowly drew closer to the village. Five years earlier, I had visited Novoe Chaplino for the first time, and my impression then was that this remote place was more grey, dirty, poor, decayed and hopeless than any other place I had seen in Russia. Now, as I entered the village, several rows of brightly coloured, brand-new houses appeared in the distance. These houses exuded robustness and wealth in comparison to the old houses, which had been in a poor state of repair. Later, I realized that every house had running water and was connected to a main sewage system—facilities that had been unheard for the inhabitants of the old houses.

Immediately after his election, Abramovich initiated a large-scale restoration campaign which affected almost every place, institution and individual in Chukotka. The improvements to housing conditions are an example of how one of his decisions has affected the lives of the inhabitants of Novoe Chaplino. The governor and his building department in the region's capital, Anadyr, decided to demolish the dwelling houses in the village and subsequently to construct new houses. During the summer of 2002, 150 workers from Ukraine, Belarus, and Uzbekistan worked in the village, erecting 46 new prefabricated houses from Moscow, as well as a new store, which was equipped with a cold counter and which stocked a selection of goods that had never before been available in the village. The following summer, 54 more houses were erected and the entire population of Novoe Chaplino was rehoused in modern, prefabricated houses.

The southern end of the Chukchi Peninsula is a long, flat, gravel tongue of land located about 30 km southeast of Novoe Chaplino. In the Yupik language, this place is called *Ungaziq* (perhaps meaning 'the place that is far away'). The Eskimo inhabitants of the region used to subsist on sea mammals, fish, birds and various kinds of roots and

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<sup>1</sup> The population of *Yupiget* in Chukotka often and proudly use the word "Eskimo" to designate themselves. For that reason, I also use "Eskimo/Eskimos" when talking about Yupik/Yupiget.

plants found on the tundra. They dug hollows in the terrain and built semi-subterranean sod houses using the ribs and jaws of enormous bowhead whales. In the 19th century, the Eskimos adopted the Chukchi style of housing and built *yarangas* (Chukchi-style tents) out of stone, driftwood and walrus hides. In 1923, the Bolsheviks definitively conquered Chukotka. Shortly afterwards, they took the first initiatives towards a reorganisation of the societal structure of the Indigenous people. About 10 years later, a move towards a more hard-line political ideology in the Kremlin resulted in a hastening collectivisation of the Indigenous peoples' occupations and in the late 1950s, the Soviet regime decided to integrate the Eskimos and the Chukchi more fully into the Soviet system. To this end, the regime closed down several settlements and concentrated the population in larger centralized villages (see Krupnik and Chlenov, this issue), consisting of inhabitants of both Eskimo and Chukchi origin as well as a handful of newcomers<sup>2</sup> from the European part of the Soviet Union.

In 1958-59, the Soviet regime established a new village between the mountains and the Tkachen Bay, and named it Novoe Chaplino (New Chaplino). This village consisted of new wooden houses, and subsequently of a small electricity plant, a heating plant, and a small store which stocked European goods such as flour, sugar, tobacco, tea and a few other items. The inhabitants of the old Eskimo settlement Ungaziq were relocated to Novoe Chaplino on the pretext that Ungaziq was under threat of flooding. A Soviet ethnographer, Il'ya S. Gurvich, wrote with enthusiasm in 1973:

The transition to houses has really revolutionized the coastal Chukchi way of life. Not only furniture and kitchen units were changed but also food and clothes. Nowadays, all coastal villages have electricity and their inhabitants to a high degree avail themselves of electric equipments. Electric hotplates, irons and ovens have come into daily use (Gurvich 1973: 10)<sup>3</sup>.

However, local elders recall how they built the houses themselves, under the guidance of Soviet pioneers, while simultaneously carrying out the necessary tasks of hunting, fishing etc. The Eskimos did not share the Soviet officials' enthusiasm. Even 40 years later people in Novoe Chaplino recall the relocation with frustration and anger:

When we arrived this place [Novoe Chaplino], we were like a reindeer herd. No one felt like moving here. We depend on the open sea (Eskimo elder man born in Ungaziq and interviewed in 2001).

Whales, walruses and seals had their migration routes off the coast close to Ungaziq. All kinds of animals passed by there; a place of abundance. Then we were relocated to this hole. In 1958, they began to build houses in Novoe Chaplino. [...] Several people of the older

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<sup>2</sup> "Newcomer" is a term often used in English literature concerning Chukotka, meaning people who moved into Chukotka from elsewhere in the former Soviet Union. Most of these people are Russian, Belarusian or Ukrainian (Gray 1998: 124-126).

<sup>3</sup> All quotations from Russian texts are translated by the author and his expedition-mates.

generation [...] lived with a longing for Ungaziq. The first years were the harshest (Eskimo elder woman born in Ungaziq and interviewed in 2003).

Forty-five years after the relocation, Abramovich and his staff decided to provide the Eskimo and Chukchi inhabitants of Novoe Chaplino new and better houses in order to facilitate their daily life and improve their opportunities for survival in a harsh and severe environment. Like the Soviet officials 45 years earlier, Abramovich intended to change Eskimo and Chukchi behaviour and attitudes by means of investment and infrastructural improvement<sup>4</sup>. In an interview in 2001, Abramovich's information manager, S.A. Kapkov, quoted the governor: "It is not my task to change people's mindsets. One has to provide technology and, hopefully, their consciousness will change, little by little. First, you have to change the economy and thereby the mindset."

One may ask, what has changed, after all? Are there any substantial differences between the European newcomers' current attitudes and the policy towards the Indigenous peoples in the era of the socialist Soviet Union? If the attitudes are unaltered, what then may one expect concerning Eskimo and Chukchi reactions to the new infrastructural initiatives of governor Abramovich? This article examines these questions and focuses on how Soviet manipulation and charity has resulted in apathy and passivity among Chukotka's Indigenous people. The theoretical term, "path-dependency," is used as an analytical tool in the investigation of the relationship between Soviet ideology and practice, and present day attitudes. Socialism and the Communist Party do not exist in present day Chukotka, but administrative practice as well as social and personal attitudes are still deeply rooted in the Soviet way of thinking. This phenomenon results in a discrepancy between official political statements and concrete administrative practices, which significantly curbs development in Chukotka's Indigenous villages.

### **Soviet ideology, reorganisation and charity**

Based on communist ideology, the Communist Party and the Russian government in Moscow<sup>5</sup> directed the administrative, economic and social development in Chukotka, during the Soviet era. In 1924, a new body—the Committee of the North<sup>6</sup>—was established with the primary objective of helping the Indigenous peoples of Siberia and Far East Russia towards equal rights. From the mid-1930s, central government

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<sup>4</sup> An official from Abramovich's office in Anadyr gladly provided me with a copy of the governor's first draft of a new economy and a new administrative structure in Chukotka, when I approached him for an interview with the governor. This draft constituted the background for the subsequent interview with the information manager.

<sup>5</sup> *I.e.* Narkomnats (Narodnyj komissariat po delam nacional'nostej) – Peoples' Commissariat for National Affairs, 1918-1924; NKVD (Narodnyj komissariat Vnutrennix Del) – Peoples' Commissariat for Internal Affairs, 1924-1946; and MVD (Ministerstvo Vnutrennix Del) – The Soviet Union's Ministry of the Interior, 1946-1991.

<sup>6</sup> Committee of the North (Severnoj Komitet, Komitet sodejstvija narodnostjam okrain) – Committee for Assisting the Peoples of the Far North.

agencies like Glavseморput and later Dal'stroy<sup>7</sup> superseded the lenient development under the Committee of the North. This administrative change, which was a result of the growing power of radical, totalitarian communism in the Soviet Union, brought about the forced transformation and collectivisation of the Eskimo and Chukchi economy and way of life (Balzer 1999: 104-105; Pika et al. 1993: 22-29; Slezkine 1992; Vakhtin 1992: 10-16).

In the Soviet Union, theories about interrelations between ethnic groups and societal development were based on Karl Marx and V.I. Lenin's communist ideology. According to Marxist-Leninist dogmas, every human society will progress from the primitive commune to socialist society through the classical, feudal, and bourgeois societal stages. Based on this theory, Soviet ethnographers codified their prescriptions for the development in the North under a headline known as the *ne-kapitalisticheskij put' razvitija* ('non-capitalistic path of development') (Anderson 1991: 18; Sergeev 1955). At the second Komintern Congress in 1920, Lenin proclaimed the idea that the "primitive" peoples could bypass the intermediate stages of development and demanded furthermore the Soviet state's systematic propaganda and supervision to ensure the implementation of the societal development (Eidlitz 1979: 39). This non-capitalistic path of development was often called *preobrazovanie* or *reorganizacija* ('reorganisation'), which indicated the nature of the transformation process. The reorganisation was formulated and directed by Russian and other Slavic peoples, in order to achieve the overall objective of creating a "Soviet People" out of the many different peoples in the Soviet Union (Bromley 1977: 184-185; Schindler 1997; Vakhtin 1992:17). Yulian V. Bromley, an influential ethnographer in the former Soviet Union, formulated it as follows:

The October Socialist Revolution, having radically changed the destinies of the peoples of Russia, has brought about most profound changes in the life of the formerly backward peoples. With regard to these problems, V.I. Lenin brought forward and substantiated the idea of their transition to socialism, bypassing all intermediate stages of social development, including capitalism (Bromley 1977: 172).

The Communist ideology and the *Historical Imperative* expressed ideal intentions, and were wrapped up in humanistic visions and solemn pledges, but the theories proved to be at odds with the reality. The Communist leaders' address about equality and a common future at the Party Congresses was in complete contrast to the daily experiences of the Eskimos and Chukchi (Pika and Prokhorov 1989). The Chukchi economist and politician, Vladimir M. Yetylen<sup>8</sup> formulated it as follows:

Previous methods of government were based on a paternalistic policy within the framework of which the peoples of the North were simple objects of state rule, being at best able only to hope for an "understanding" of their needs and for the "benevolence" of the state system. At the root of this type of paternalistic policy lies state charity [...] it was something

<sup>7</sup> Glavseморput (Glavnij severnij morskij put') – Central Agency for the Northern Passage. Dal'stroy – Chief Administration for the Development of the Far North.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on Yetylen, see Gray (1998: 76, 93).

extrinsic to the peoples of the North, who themselves remained the objects of this external rule, and played and continue to play a passive role (Yetylen 1996: 85).

Yetylen emphasizes that the Soviet regime's policy towards the Indigenous peoples varied in different historical periods and he argues that the epoch under the Committee of the North (1924-1935) was the most efficient and goal-oriented. The members of the committee formulated three main tasks: the promotion of 1) self-government, 2) cooperation and 3) education in order to facilitate the integration of the peoples into the Soviet system. Yetylen maintains that the first two objectives were never achieved. Furthermore, he recommends these tasks be resumed in order to "save our peoples" (*ibid.*: 83-84), stating that the alternative is that "[...] they will have to fall back upon the kindness, humanism, and mercy of the administration, *i.e.*, they will still ultimately be relying on charity" (*ibid.*: 87). Yetylen's warning is not only political rhetoric, but also a precise reference to realities observed in Chukotka villages by several anthropologists from Russia and abroad (Gray 1998; Kerttula 1997; Pika and Prokhorov 1989; Schindler 1992).

### Paternalistic attitudes in the Soviet period

In the introduction to this article, an example of forced relocation illustrated the Soviet regime's paternalistic attitude towards the Indigenous peoples. The following examples will provide further details about the relationship between Chukotka's Indigenous population and socialist policy. These examples will also demonstrate the causative relationship between the regime's paternalistic attitude and the apathy and passivity of the Indigenous peoples.

As early as the first few years of the Soviet era in Chukotka, the new regime commenced the elimination of the *kulaks*<sup>9</sup>, who were accused by the regime of exploiting the working people. In Chukotka and elsewhere in the Russian North, reindeer herders with large herds, whaleboat captains, and shamans were designated as the "exploiting class" (Schindler 1997: 196; Sergeev 1955: 294-311; Vdovin 1965: 275-293) and were therefore singled out for subjugation:

The first step in the policy against class-stratification in the Eastern provinces must be a removal of all Natives exploiting elements from wielding influence on the masses, a struggle against them in all self-governing Soviet agencies, and a deprivation of their class privileges by means of a self-organizing in labour soviets of the Native masses (Sergeev 1955: 296).

In the case of the Eskimos, this meant that the boat captains were deprived of their right to decide when and where to hunt and to distribute the catch (Lopulenko 1980:

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<sup>9</sup> In the Soviet epoch, the term *kulak* designated farmers with some possessions and employed labourers. Kulaks were in large numbers eliminated in order to introduce collective utilisation of the agricultural land.



231). However, the *kulaks* not only represented wealth and influence but also initiative and entrepreneurship. Therefore, these political measures also sowed the seeds of the passivity, which would later flourish among Chukotka's Indigenous population. Additionally, the shamans were the object of persecution and suppression because they posed a threat to the new communistic ideology (Lopulenko 1980: 230; Slezkine 1992: 62). According to Tazan S. Tein (a Soviet ethnographer of Eskimo origin), the shamans were the primary bearers of tradition and they played a particular role in the upbringing of boys and young hunters (Tein 1995: 211). When shamans were suppressed or subjugated, a great deal of knowledge disappeared with them; a loss of knowledge that contributed to the erosion of the Eskimo population's initiative and belief in their own strength and ability.

The situation concerning language usage is another example of how the Eskimo population's self-confidence has been undermined. Forced relocation to centralized villages with Eskimo as well as Chukchi and Russian speaking people has put a considerable and persistent pressure on the Eskimo language. In addition to this, the institutions of obligatory schooling, higher education institutions and the boarding school system suppressed the Eskimo language in favour of Russian. This development had at least two negative consequences. First, the Eskimo people were coerced into communicating in an unfamiliar language, which left them in a weak position. Secondly, they were forced to acknowledge that in the long term, Russian would out-compete their own Eskimo language, which their ancestors had spoken since time immemorial (Dunn and Dunn 1965: 22-24; Slezkine 1992: 71; Vakhtin 1992: 23). In other words, the language situation also positioned the Eskimo people in a passive role, so that their own initiatives seemed to be undesirable and futile in the greater context.

In the late 1960s, the Soviet regime replaced traditional skin boats and small cutters with a professional whale-hunting vessel, *Zvezdnyj* ('Star'), which sailed with a non-Indigenous crew. Every summer, *Zvezdnyj* arrived in the waters off Chukotka and caught the maximum number of (grey) whales allowed by the International Whaling Commission (Krupnik 1984: 112; Vol'phson 1987: 132-133). At the same time, Eskimo and Chukchi hunters were banned from hunting whales from small boats, which entailed a loss of traditional hunting-skills. Twenty years later, when the Soviet Union collapsed and *Zvezdnyj* failed to turn up, the hunters had to relearn all of the ancestral insight and knowledge about whale hunting. In the first years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, some hunters were killed by whales because they were not skilled or precise enough to kill the whale while also avoiding the whale's counterattack. A Chukchi spoke of this in an interview in 1998:

We lost six people, because everything depends on proficiency—it is a dangerous line of work. Unfortunately, we lost six people. We have forgotten [...] young people do not know about it, and elderly people passed away. There is a sort of gap in between. The particular skills that are necessary have not survived. The whale destroyed two small boats [...].

The Eskimos and coastal Chukchi impaired ability to catch whales only exacerbated the negative self-perception caused by the Soviet regime.



To sum up this section, one may say that the concrete policy towards the Indigenous peoples in Chukotka in the Soviet era was deeply rooted in the communist ideology, and Eskimos and Chukchi were regarded as "backward peoples." Moreover, the policy had a devastating influence on the Indigenous peoples' cultural heritage and societal structures. Resulting from these two facts, the Indigenous peoples in Chukotka grew in powerlessness, inferiority, and dependency on state-charity, which in turn caused a widespread passivity.

### **Post Soviet vacuum in Chukotka**

The collapse of the Soviet Union and of socialism in Chukotka was a result neither of armed confrontation, nor of Indigenous peoples' resistance, nor of any Chukotkan ideological or political movement. The Soviet Union appeared and disappeared due to decisions made more than 7,000 km away in Moscow. Shortly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the economic situation in Chukotka worsened. State-subsidized supplies rapidly diminished or ceased, and thousands of people failed to receive their salary for months or even years. The state enterprises (*sovkhozy*) were converted into something similar to joint stock companies, of which reindeer herders, sea mammal hunters, and office workers received a share. After some years within the new framework, the enterprises in the eastern part of the Chukchi Peninsula were in a state of economic crisis. Gradually, the small enterprises merged and were partly owned by the local municipal authority; all attempts to establish entirely private enterprises failed (Vakhtin 1994: 3-6; V.M. Yetylen, pers. comm. 1997). In 1998, the general foreign exchange crisis in Russia further intensified Chukotka's economic problems; the exchange rates for foreign currencies fell by more than 50%.

The ideological vacuum which arose after the dissolution of the Soviet Union left many Chukotkan people questioning their cultural identity. The Soviet Union and the Soviet people ceased to exist, and a new movement swept over Chukotka in the mid 1990s, whereby people turned to their ethnic origins and attempted to revitalize their ancestors' values (Gray 1998; Schweitzer and Gray 2000). In this period, Eskimo and Chukchi people experienced a new openness and took their first staggering steps from a relatively secure and passive Soviet way of life, to decisions based on their own initiative. An incipient self-consciousness was a common trait among Chukotka's Indigenous peoples, and a few well-educated people tried to formulate and direct the movement into an ethnic, pre-Soviet way of thinking (Achirgina-Arsiak 1992; Vakhtin and Krupnik 1998). In relation to the focus of this article, the aforementioned movement contrasts starkly with the situation in the early Soviet years, when the regime subjugated the elite (shamans and *kulaks*) in order to promote the socialist ideology.

## The path-dependency theory and the Chukotkan reality

A new political direction or even a new political system does not change all of the political, structural, administrative, or economic ways of thinking in a given society. According to Nielsen et al. (1995), actors in a political struggle remain dependent on the former institutions and structures. Societal institutions and traditions constitute a relatively strong structure which, to some degree, connect new policies and political actors to old paths, even though the new policy radically differs from the former one. "Path-dependency" may be considered a consequence of a limitation from certain institutional rules having an effect on individual political actors' rational choice. The outcome of such paths often impedes political reforms and change (North 1993; Torfing 2004: 53-57). In other words, the past matters. A new policy must not only contend with other policies, but it is simultaneously challenged by traditions and institutional structures, which are often very persistent. Nielsen et al. (1995) describe two extremes in a continuum of positions regarding institutional innovation—the voluntarist and the determinist—while attempting to position themselves in the middle ground between these two extremes. They propose the following definition: "Path-dependency suggests that the institutional legacies of the past limit the range of current possibilities and/or options in institutional innovation" (Nielsen et al. 1995: 6).

In 1991 in Russia, a democracy-like and market-like system replaced the 70-year-old socialist regime, but deeply rooted administrative, economic, structural, and social practices did not change. Behind and around the politicians was a huge machinery of procedures, routines, plans, and programmes, which unquestionably transformed at a slower pace than the official policy. The description of path-dependency above-mentioned, is very similar to the point of view of a hunter whom I met during an interview in 2001 in the Provideniya district<sup>10</sup>:

The Soviet nomenclature<sup>11</sup> still works. They have not been able to get rid of the officials, who they bred themselves. If one strips them of their feeding trough, the system falls to pieces. Erhm [...] what can I say? [...] We have the governor. He is a well-to-do man; he doesn't need money. He fights the local nomenclature. It is hard to him. It is as firmly rooted as a tree—it is difficult to uproot it. Should one really uproot it? Should one cut off the roots? Should one plant a new tree? Oh my, how can I explain this? It's very difficult to struggle against the nomenclature [...].

When referring to path-dependency, most authors refer to institutional innovation, as outlined above. In the case of Chukotka, the term path-dependency can also be applied in a broader context, as everybody in Chukotka—politicians and commoners, Russians and Indigenous peoples, hunters and reindeer herders and educated people, etc.—was brought up under the rule of a strong and ideologically manipulative regime:

<sup>10</sup> *Rayon* ('district') is the smallest administrative unit in the Russian Federation comparable to a municipality in, for instance, Greenland.

<sup>11</sup> "Nomenclature" was the system of patronage in Soviet time, controlled by committees in the Communist Party. Nowadays, the term is mostly used to designate the complete bureaucratic system.

Leninism and socialism. After Boris Yeltsin's proclamation of the end of the Communist Party in Russia, millions of people—not only policy-makers—expected new and better conditions. The Eskimos of Chukotka in particular looked forward to a new situation to be comparable to that of their fellow kinsmen in Alaska. However, few years or even months after the collapse of the Soviet Union it appeared that administrative traditions, acquired attitudes, and ethnic prejudices had begun to impede the realisation of these expectations. In the next part of the article, the cases outlined will demonstrate the extent to which old paths and habitual ways of thinking continue to impede newcomers, as well as Eskimo and Chukchi people, from developing in accordance with the political ideals and people's own expectations.

### **Paternalism, passivity and budding initiative in post-Soviet Chukotka**

Following the introduction of collectivisation and “industrialisation” in the Soviet era, all hunters were employed in relatively huge state enterprises, *sovkhozy*, and their private hunting was limited to the hunting of small seals, ducks etc, in their spare time. This occupational pattern continued after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and into the early years of “democracy” and “market-economy,” and professional organisations for hunters of sea mammals were non-existent. Even today, the entire employment sector in the villages of the Chukchi Peninsula is made up of a handful of municipal institutions, in which every adult man or woman is employed: school, health care, energy supply, transportation and production enterprise. Private entrepreneurs are all but non-existent. Every village has a production enterprise (sometimes two or more villages are merged into one enterprise), which is primarily engaged in reindeer breeding and/or hunting sea mammals. Reindeer herders and sea mammal hunters do not own their own hunting gear; all weapons, ammunition, fenders, boats, motors, petrol etc. belong to the enterprise. In the morning, the hunters are supplied with equipment necessary for the hunt, and they must return the equipment to the office of the enterprise when they return to the village at the end of the day. The catch also belongs to the enterprise and not to the hunters, but the hunters do not hand over the catch to the enterprise, at the end of the day. Usually, a group of people—usually women—await the hunters' return to the beach, and after the hunters have divided the catch (of whale, walrus or seal) into pieces, the women or other representatives from each family receive an appropriate portion of meat and blubber. There is also a representative from the enterprise on the shore, equipped with a weighing scale and a notebook. Everybody has to have his or her portion of meat or blubber weighed and noted down in the notebook, to be paid for at a later date. As everybody—including the hunters—receive their salary from a municipal institution, the municipal wage office simply deducts a sum corresponding to the price of the meat/blubber from everyone's monthly salary. In the villages, almost all of the inhabitants are of Eskimo or Chukchi origin, but there is also a minority of newcomers, who most often occupy positions of authority (head teacher, physician, head of the enterprise, etc.).

Many Eskimo and Chukchi people in the coastal villages of Chukotka are engaged in hunting sea mammals, while others are connected to hunting via their relatives and

through the common history: fathers, grandfathers and countless ancestors, who subsisted on sea mammals. In order to exemplify how the concept of path-dependency applies to the relationship between sea mammal hunters and administrative officials, I have selected a few occurrences from the hunters' lives and organisational experiences that I observed in the period between 1998 and 2006.

### ***A meeting of sea mammal hunters in Yanrakynnot, 1998***

In 1997, the aforementioned Chukchi economist Vladimir M. Yetylen, initiated the establishment of an organisation for sea mammal hunters. The next year, the hunters in Provideniya district attended the first meeting of their association. About 30 hunters gathered in a classroom in the village of Yanrakynnot, where Yetylen opened the meeting in his capacity as president. The hunters grumbled and complained about the administrative rules, nature conservation, increasing costs, the absence of salaries, etc. In contrast to their attitude, Yetylen emphasized the importance of solidarity and the value of strong relations with the hunters' organisations in Alaska and with the International Whaling Commission. Towards the end of the meeting, a young hunter read out a letter "To the president of the Russian Federation, B.N. Yeltsin." The letter contained a catalogue of problems faced by the hunters during the past few years. But why were there only complaints and no proposals for solution? Why address the letter to the president instead of the regional authorities? The answers are closely linked to the Soviet past: from the first purging of shamans and *kulaks* and throughout the forced collectivisation and relocations, Eskimos and Chukchi gradually became aware of their own powerlessness and their lack of influence in the decision-making process. Additionally, the sea mammal hunters were well aware that the local and regional officials did not have the authority to make the most important decisions; the Soviet regime was highly hierarchical and most of the major orders and decisions came from the Kremlin in Moscow. The hunters weakened sense of decision-making, which they internalised during the Soviet era, created a familiar path for them to follow. Even though the hunters were able to participate in the meeting without political restrictions, they continued to depend on the Soviet way of thinking, and exhibited path-dependency. Another important point is that the meeting actually took place. As representative of the elite, the Chukchi economist V.M. Yetylen took the initiative on behalf of a group of Eskimo and Chukchi hunters and exemplified how one actually can take matters into one's own hands.

### ***Eskimo hunters and a Russian manager in Inaghpiik, 2001***

As a result of the Soviet relocation of the Eskimo population from "a place of abundance" to a new settlement—Novoe Chaplino—at the end of the Tkachen Bay, there was a great distance between the hunters and their hunting grounds; either the coastal area near to the old village or another stretch of coastline where a hunting hut was established, a long way from Novoe Chaplino. Some of the hunters often spent 2-3 weeks in the hunting hut, hunting whales and walrus on behalf of the village

enterprise. I spent some days in the hunting hut in the summer 2001. The weather conditions and the season were perfect for hunting grey whales, but the hunters chose instead to guide an American journalist and her photographer to places where the effects of climate change were evident. Certainly, they were able to earn much more money doing the guide-job than doing their usual hunting, but the hunters were at the hut in order to carry out whale hunting and the boat belonged to the enterprise. Somehow, the manager (Russian) learned that the hunters had interrupted the whale hunt in favour of guiding foreigners. He contacted the hunters by radio and scolded them for desertion, irresponsibility, and theft of the enterprise's possessions. The hunters just shrugged their shoulders, but at the same time, one could easily detect their guilty consciences in their glances, posture and conduct. This observation exemplifies the discrepancy between the new post-Soviet market economy and the attitudes of the persons involved. Why did the hunters not ask for one or two days off beforehand? Why did the manager not await the hunters' return and paid them in accordance with the outcome of their hunt? Of course, there are several interesting aspects to the event that is described above, but in relation to the focus of this article, it is clear that a change of political system is not necessarily reflected by a change in people's attitudes and customary mindsets. The Soviet system was based on control rather than confidence, and there was no direct link between production and pay. Therefore, in this example, both the hunters and the manager seem to be dependent on a Soviet path of mistrust and irresponsibility while at the same time attempting to act within the context of a so-called market-economy.

### *Annual session for workers and management in Provideniya district, 2003*

In 2001, I interviewed one of the hunters, a reliable and respectable man, who also was one of the participants at the meeting in Yanrakynnot in 1998. I asked him about the relationship between the hunters and the management of the enterprise:

We are at war with them! They don't pay us our money but they constantly demand that we hunt. Yeah, for the moment, we are a part of a governmental system. For the moment! I guess you have noticed that I constantly put the emphasis on "for the moment." Before long, we will switch to the Alaskan system. I'm talking about the whaling system. That is, the government directly delegates the whale quotas to the hunters. We want it to be like that! The commissioner in Moscow will delegate the quotas to ChAZTO<sup>12</sup>, that is, directly to the hunters.

Thereafter, the interview primarily centred on the manager of the enterprise, and the governmental subsidies to hunting activities in Chukotka. The hunter explained that the subsidies never reached the hunters, but instead vanished somewhere into the

<sup>12</sup> ChAZTO (Chukotskaja Associaciija Zveroboev Tradicionnoj Oxoty) = Association of Traditional Sea Mammal Hunters of Chukotka. ChAZTO is a private institution and a continuation of the "Organisation of Sea Mammal Hunters." ChAZTO has a small office in Anadyr where one to two people do their best to promote the hunters' affairs in a successive balance between periodic subsidy from the governor and persistent mistrust and reluctance from the officials. From time to time the organisation cooperates with American researchers and institutions, who pay them a decent wage.



coffers of the officials—the nomenclature—in Provideniya (the hunter's viewpoint on the nomenclature was quoted earlier). An interesting aspect of his statement is the fact that the hunter does not merely complain about the sad state of affairs, but also understands at least some parts of the economic structure, and realizes that no easy solutions are available. In other words, the hunter has adjusted his point of view since the meeting in Yanrakynnot in 1998, *i.e.* his dependency on the Soviet way of thinking is less noticeable than few years earlier. The hunter's new understanding also emerges in another interview recorded a year and half later (March 2003):

I was born in Staroe Chaplino (Old Chaplino), where many animals had their migration routes. Nevertheless, they decided to move us. Consequently, we reluctantly moved here. Ever since, we have had to drive 10 km to the ice-edge [...] petrol is expensive nowadays. If we want to break loose and create our own hunting-cooperative, we have to sell the meat and buy petrol. It is expensive: 11 rubles per litre [...] 2,000 and 200-300 for 200 litres! And in the summer season, we have to go to Inaghvik to catch walruses. Transport is the problem—one needs the technology; weapons are also expensive. If we break loose, we have to buy weapons or rent them from the enterprise.

In 2001 and 2003, a better understanding of the new structures and the necessity of concrete proposals and claims has replaced the hunter's former passivity to some degree. He is of the opinion that the conditions of hunters' employment in the enterprise are a core problem. Consequently, separation from the enterprise is desirable, but is at the same time expected to be very expensive for the hunters. The hunter interviewed above has gradually become aware of the new structural realities, and his expectations for an improvement of the hunters' situation have simultaneously increased. His expectations culminated in April 2003 at the enterprise's annual session for the workers and the management. The session consisted of a number of meetings, which took place over two days, during which many aspects of the enterprise's activities were discussed. The meetings lasted one to two hours and were usually opened by one or two officials, who made a presentation on a theme that was relevant to that meeting. Often, the official (the fishing supervisor, police officer, health and safety supervisor etc.; all of them newcomers, in my experience) used the introduction to point out the relevant rules and to call attention to the fact that some hunters do not always observe the rules. Afterwards, the meeting opened for questions and comments. The officials spoke loudly and often; the hunters spoke little or not at all. It very clearly appeared that the officials knew the rules; they were used to making speeches, and to being heard. Likewise, it appeared that the hunters felt hesitant; they were unaccustomed to public argumentation, they were not familiar with the details of the regulations, and they were used to receiving reprimands and obeying orders. The fishing supervisor opened one of the meetings. Later, a couple of hunters spoke about some old boats without registration numbers. They were in doubt and asked what they should do:

Fishing supervisor (newcomer): You must stay ashore!

Enterprise manager (newcomer): If I come to the village and see that the boats are not all right, I'll fetch a bulldozer and destroy the boats!



Boat supervisor (newcomer): Listen, folks! The motors almost last for ever, but of course, it depends on your way of handling them. If you had problems when the motors were new, you should have told us and we would have informed the government about the defects. Nevertheless, if the problems are due to your imprudent use, then it's your own problem!

A hunter (Eskimo/Chukchi): You should try to sail these boats yourselves! They run directly into the waves, and then the motors are put under pressure.

Boat supervisor (newcomer): I know how it is. I have seen it.

Enterprise Manager (newcomer): Are you trying to tell me that a 150 horsepower motor cannot cope with the waves? Don't give me that!

A hunter (Eskimo/Chukchi): You should try it yourself...

Enterprise Manager (newcomer): The question today is whether you just take the boat and sail. What if you are drunk and the boat capsizes! That's what we should talk about today! You took the boat in Sireniki and race to Provideniya!

Boat supervisor (newcomer): First, it is your own responsibility and the brigadier's [group leader]. As I see it, only the brigadier is permitted to take the boat or only with his permission, only when he knows about it. Don't forget he's in charge! He has to maintain order and to prevent things like this from happening.

Enterprise manager (newcomer): If you break the rules, you will pay for it!

As seen in this example, even after a number of years of "democracy," Russian officials continue to look at and treat Chukotka's Indigenous population as they did in the Soviet era. Many newcomers still consider Eskimo and Chukchi hunters as "backward" peoples, who do not know what is best for themselves. This way of thinking can be traced back to Lenin and was an often-utilized path in the newcomers' relationship with Indigenous peoples in the Soviet era. A few days after the session, I once again met the hunter who gave the above interview; he was drunk for the first time in several months due to his disappointment and despair! In accordance with the post-Soviet democratic political system, the hunter and his colleagues reasonably expected a professional organisation of sea mammal hunters characterised by space, possibilities and fairness. However, they confronted an enterprise manager and some other officials who did not take the hunters' opinion seriously. The officials simply brushed the hunters' ideas aside and responded to them with accusations.

### ***The hunters' organisation and the authorities in Anadyr, 2006***

Since the election of Abramovich as Chukotka's governor in December 2000, a considerable amount of money has continuously streamed into all areas of human activity in Chukotka. In 2003-2004, for instance, the authorities under Abramovich took the initiative to establish new production machinery for the processing of sealskins. Every year, the hunters in Chukotka coastal villages hunt thousands of seals

for local consumption, and they often used to throw away hundreds of skins, because people had no use for the skins and because there were no opportunities for sale or professional processing in the villages. Furthermore, demand for sealskins in the rest of the world was quite high in that period. Seen from Chukotka's capital, Anadyr, the idea of establishing production machinery for processing of sealskins was good for the hunters and beneficial to Chukotka's economy. Shortly before the start of the sealskin project, the sea mammal hunters' organisation, ChAZTO, established an office in Anadyr in order to consolidate their activities. A few educated people headed the organisation, and most of the hunters in the villages backed the initiative. In August 2006, during an interview with the head of this office, Eduard Zdor, I heard the organisation's view of the sealskin project:

Unfortunately, the project failed. [...] They made some strategic mistakes. Among other things, they choose a preservation method based on "wet-salting," where the skins were stored in a salt and water solution in barrels. This method of storage often results in the skins losing their hair during the tanning process. Secondly, they placed the processing and tanning enterprise too far from the hunting areas, namely here in Anadyr.

The idea may have been a good one, at least seen from a governmental point of view. Therefore, the ChAZTO-representative did not criticize the basic idea of establishing sealskin-processing machinery. Primarily, Eduard Zdor criticized the strategy employed, which was a result of decisions taken without the hunters' participation. In spite of the new Russian market-economy and democracy, attitudes and ways of thinking continue to keep the officials on a familiar Soviet path of decision-making, which directly impedes progress and positive development in Chukotka.

## **Conclusion**

At first glance, it appears that Indigenous peoples' situation in Chukotka in the first part of the Soviet era is diametrically opposed to that of the first years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. During the first period, the Soviets intervened in all spheres of the Eskimo and Chukchi lives, introducing new ways of living, working, decision-making, etc. In the second period, the Soviet regime vanished and Chukotka was entrusted to new and uncertain political and economic structures. However, the analysis in this article reveals remarkable similarities between the two periods in Chukotka. Chukotka's Indigenous people were most often passive objects of the newcomers' ideas about progress, in the Soviet era as well as in the post-Soviet period. In both periods, Chukchi and Eskimo people have been widely excluded from directly participating in shaping and designing the new political and economic system.

From the mid 1920s onwards, the Indigenous people's leaders were subjugated and the people in general were forced to obey the new regime's demands for socialism and collectivism. The socialist regime regarded Eskimos and Chukchi as belonging to the group of "backward" peoples who required ideological and economic assistance from

the Soviet state and the Soviet people. This kind of charity, in combination with the fact that the regime deprived Eskimo and Chukchi people of responsibility for their own societal development, economy and culture, resulted in widespread apathy and passivity.

Path-dependency within the political and administrative system in Chukotka after the collapse of the Soviet Union retains newcomer-officials in the attitudes and the way of thinking that were characteristic during the Soviet era. Likewise, the Soviet way of thinking holds Eskimos and Chukchi in a role of submissiveness and servility towards the authorities, and ensnares them in a "secure" passive attitude. On the other hand, it appears that the Sea Mammal Hunters Association (ChAZTO) has continued to survive and grow in importance. The organisation's relative success is closely linked to the small elite of Indigenous people familiar with both the former Soviet system and the present nomenclature. It is, of course, nothing new to observe that a few educated people start new initiatives and lead people in a political or cultural movement. The interesting aspect in this context is the difference between the situation in the Soviet era, where the Eskimo and Chukchi elites were subjugated, and in the post-Soviet period where a small elite, made up of educated people, has partially managed to act independently of the post-Soviet nomenclature in Chukotka and has started a number of initiatives on behalf of a group of people.

In other words, there have been two different but concurrent tendencies in Chukotka. The first is a widespread attitude of impotence and passivity among the Indigenous population regarding solutions to societal challenges. This mindset stems from the Soviet era and is still fostered by the decision-makers' (a group almost entirely made up of newcomers) condescending policy of charity towards the Eskimo and Chukchi populations. The second tendency is the emergence of a small group of Eskimo and Chukchi individuals who gained professional qualifications in the final decades of the Soviet period, and are now able to take initiatives and act relatively independently within the concrete political and administrative framework. This little group has attempted with somewhat limited success to organise the Eskimo and Chukchi populations (*e.g.*, through ChAZTO). However, they must continue to battle against the odds to fight the political and administrative machinery's propensity to continue along the familiar paths, which were set in the Soviet era.

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