

In the Time of the Lizard: On Indigenous Problems, Post-Colonialism, and Democracy

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During the surprisingly wet summer on the northern Kamchatka peninsula in 1994, a Koriak man in the village of Tymlat spotted a lizard. When he retold the incident, his face was livid with shock. The grayish small reptile, he said, had been fast to vanish into the cleft between two stones but he had seen her glassy eyes and red double-tongue. His audience was unnerved. One of the women explained that the animal's appearance suggested destruction and harm. People began to debate the question of how the lizard would play a role in bringing ill to the community. Some villagers argued that only the family and closest relatives of the man who had noticed the lizard would be concerned; others argued that only the community would be plagued. Yet amidst the battle of opinions that waged in Tymlat one certainty at least held true: the lizard had made her appearance on the stage of history.

Like most animals in northern Kamchatka the lizard is endowed with extraordinary powers. There are already mentionings of its destructive faculties in 18th century ethnography (for example, Krasheninnikov 1755), and there are other indications that further understanding of her potent significance. In northern Kamchatka, as in any circumpolar region of the world, the lizard is a rare guest. As a reptile the lizard is distributed all over the world, yet she turns up only occasionally and in unpredictable intervals in arctic or sub-arctic regions. This suggests that part of her powers came with her rarity; in the villages of northern Kamchatka the appearance of the lizard is a sporadic yet special event.

In the boardrooms of policy-makers and the high halls of academe it is easy to dismiss the appearance of the lizard as an insignificant event in the making of history. After all, by appearance a lizard is no more than a quick yet small-sized reptile, seemingly disconnected from history and rational thought. In the modernist imagination, indeed, the lizard is most of all a mythic object. As a site of either romantic fascination or brazen disdain, the lizard is no match for the complexities of the modern world. Yet Koriaks reaction at its appearance suggests a different interpretation. They refuse to affirm the view of the lizard as an object of historic

innocence; rather, the lizard points to the shape of future events. I begin this essay then with the awareness that the lizard is not just an atavistic survival of the magical imagination or an exotic site of endogenous, localized knowledge. It is, I suggest, rather a site of displacement within powerful discourses of history.

In this spirit, the object of my exercise is then to rethink and challenge some of the ways in which the history of indigenous peoples in northern Russia has been perceived. There are two frameworks that stand out as I write on the writing of history with regard to the Russian North. The first historic plan invokes metaphors of decay and death (for example, Schindler 1997) to define the history of northern indigenous peoples in Russia as a matter of apocalyptic doom or “extinction.” This is an understanding of the world that situates Koriaks within a discourse of endangerment that leaves little room to explore and see the creativity and originality of their efforts to tap the power of governments and local administrations. The second framework analyzes the recent, seismic shifts in post-Soviet Russia as an expression of a positive politics of identity; it sees not death but increasing freedom from the constraints of coherence. In point of fact, there has been a widespread tendency to embrace the demise of the Soviet Union as a historic rupture, as the final moment in ushering out this epoch. Gregory Freidin (1994), for example, casts the Soviet Union’s dissolution as liberating; Russia is now a “decidedly post-colonial Commonwealth of Independent States.”

At first glance, these views appear as mutually opposed. In the way in which the first view invokes only bleakness and thwarted hopes, the second one celebrates polyphony and a liberating disengagement from the coherence of political identity. Yet even though these views seem at odds with one another, there is a common historical assumption that ties them together. Both perspectives advocate a historical view of rupture and break; both views posit conditions of before versus after. Even though both views differ in analysis and outlook, they strike a similar chord in relation to their structural frameworks of history. They both imply a linear narrative of succession. Within such a framework there is not much room for the history of the lizard; it’s history is not progressive but thematic. The lizard challenges the assumptions of either progress or decay in one particular moment of time. She forces us to attend to the predicaments of an indigenous peoples for whom all histories of successive governments and administrations are structurally the same.

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In this argumentation I rely heavily on insights gained from one of my most prudent and rebellious hosts and teachers: a man in Tymlat everybody called “The Bear.” When I met The Bear he lived with his wife and five children in a shabby apartment in the village. There was no electricity, no running water, and no insulation against the cold. The conditions of the building in which he lived were not better or worse than those of any other houses he knew. They reflected, he explained only the general atmosphere of dejection in Tymlat. The village, indeed, enjoyed a notorious reputation for heavy drinking and strong booze. Justified or not, it certainly lowered its standing in the eyes of regional administrators and neighbors.

Moreover, poverty and unemployment created a desolate atmosphere, pressing down on the village like the heavy clouds hanging constantly above the shore. Men drunken with schnapps staggered along the sludgy roads. Frightened by others and themselves they tried toothless smiles. Children hid away from school; their games mimicked adult predicaments. Jestful imitations of drunkenness transformed distress into play, and boastful stories mirrored adults’ veils of angst-ridden selves. Women hurried between home and work; they felt exhausted by financial worries. The village was a pained place for living.

Like most Koriaks I knew, The Bear did not like to spend much time in Tymlat. As a passionate hunter and accomplished herder he preferred the life in the tundra. It was also in these lands of torrent rivers, open grass-plains, marshes and bogs that he had received his name. Indeed, his name kept reminding him of one particular incident that had forged this name. Years ago, when The Bear was still a young man, two zoo-keepers from the game park in the city (Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii) had approached him. Looking for several bear cubs they wanted to exhibit to the public eye, they asked The Bear if he would assist them in their search. And so he did. Knowing the region well, The Bear found two newly born cubs in the neighborhood of a well-hidden cave. First he snared them, then he narcotized them. Traveling by boat to the city, The Bear gave them over to the zoo. At first it seemed as if things were all right. There were no repercussions, and no special events troubled him. Yet years later, when The Bear was already a grown-up man, married twice, and the father of nine children, his namesake took revenge. The animal that had given The Bear his name killed one of his eldest daughters who worked as a forestry manager in the densely wooded area around the city of Khabarovsk. A bear fell upon

her, tearing her from limb to limb. In the village this grueling event caused a stir. All dismembered body parts had been arranged in a coffin and sent to Tymlat. But The Bear refused to believe that the person in the coffin might be his child. Distrustfully he opened the casket only to realize that the dismembered body parts were his daughter, indeed. The Bear had unrightfully taken from the land what was not his; now the land took from him.

Thus The Bear explained how in youth he had just once violated the equilibrium that defines the relationship of humans with the land; thus he grew up to become an influential elder and community leader. In the village The Bear was recognized as a masterful herder because he had spent most of his lifetime in the tundra as a reindeer herdsman. To The Bear tending and watching reindeer was a meaningful way of making a living. When I lived in The Bear's camp in the summer of 1992 for several months in the tundra he offered his knowledge to me by way of apprenticeship and learning. By traveling with him and the herd I began to learn how to look at reindeer as one of the most important beings in the Koriaks universe. Where I at first saw only animals that looked much alike, he taught me how to differentiate between the different grayish and brownish shades of reindeer fur. Where I at first saw only healthy animals, he taught me how to tell weak from strong. He tutored me in the ways a herder can assist cows to give birth to their young; he reminded me never to touch a calf: each heifer refuses a calf with human smell.

The Bear had gained his accomplished knowledge through long years of care and expertise. As a boy he grew up in the tundra; later he became a well-known leader of one reindeer brigade in Tymlat's collective farm. It was as a leader that The Bear began to experience and see the destructive force of a state-endorsed economy in the northern tundra. For example, the authority of defining reasonable migration routes for reindeer herds were no longer with the herders but with the state. Sporadically, knowledgeable herdsman were asked for their opinion but then regional administrators took such advice rarely into consideration. Migration routes were now envisioned on the drawing boards of mostly inexperienced, extra-regional officials who paid more attention to the fulfillment of an economic plan than the well-being of animals and the land. There were other problems as well. Too many herds grazed in too small a state-defined piece of land; the size of the herds exceeded the capacity of pastures to support all of them. At the same time, diseases began to spread.

In seeing that regional administrators were not very perceptive to local concerns, The Bear began searching for opportunities that would allow others and him to craft a possible future.

He challenged regional authorities on several occasions; he shook his fist when he talked about his family's and his neighbors' plight; and he raised his voice in scorn when he raised charges against the short-sightedness of the state. Yet he was also looking for some answers in the midst of injustice and discrimination. He found one answer in the winter of 1991 when the whole country was beginning to fall apart. The Bear decided to withdraw the animals of four reindeer brigades from Tymlat's collective farm and created his own business: "Schamanka."

This was a bold move on the part of The Bear, yet he was able to succeed because he was recognized as an experienced and circumspect man. The vision of The Bear engendered much excitement among his followers. First, the animals were no longer considered state property but reinstated as family and private wealth. Second, regional authorities would be sued for the injustice afflicted on Koriak families and their subsistence economy. Third, the traditional, family-based system of reindeer husbandry should be restored. And fourth, profitable business connections with North American and Japanese entrepreneurs were to be forged. This was an ambitious plan, indeed. It involved both local and extra-regional elements. Families were attending to their own herds; international business relations should guarantee the continuance of reindeer husbandry while making a profit.

Certainly, in the first days of The Bear's endeavors things went well. Regional authorities were helpless in the face of mayhem and a continuous series of incessant political events. Increasing numbers of foreign entrepreneurs came to visit the peninsula. The Bear invited them all to take a look at the animals taken care of in Schamanka's pastures. His visitors were impressed. They bought meat and hides, and ordered reindeer horn. In his dealings with them The Bear showed much economic acumen, and the enterprise flourished. In Tymlat he was a powerful and respected leader. But at the height of his success problems slowly emerged. One of the most pressing and serious problems was that many of the young herdsmen who worked for The Bear did not know much about herding techniques, or, in that case, reindeer husbandry at all. As part of a younger generation who had fully grown up under Soviet state governance they had not been brought up in the tundra but in the boarding-school system that pervaded the entire northern peninsula (and the rest of Siberia and the Russian Far East). As boarding school students they had been placed under the tutelage of the state to learn from the start, unlike their parents, the ways of the state. They were unfamiliar with the kind of wisdom and herding knowledge that comes only with long years of painstaking care and expertise; to teach them the

proper knowledge involved a laborious process that would take years. At best young herders had spent the two school-free summer months with their parents in a camp in the tundra; this was not enough to gain the needed savvy and skill.

Inexplicably, in his leadership The Bear showed little patience with their pains; he screamed and howled when inexperienced young men touched new-born calves; when they drove the animals at high speed; and when they did not notice the rocky schisms and creeks into which reindeer may fall. As a result, the number of animals in the herds began to decrease. In the village people began to talk about the rashness and quick temper of The Bear; young men complained and villagers began to doubt his ability to run a business well. Such talk was particularly incited by the realization that the economic vision of The Bear faced serious competition that in 1992 nobody could have foreseen. In the northern market economy of reindeer meat and antler trade Alaskan herders, in particular, enjoy long-standing and trustful relationships with Japanese and Korean buyers. These were relationships with which The Bear could not compete.

As an elder and a leader The Bear was increasingly criticized for his inability to professionally run the business and to treat herders well. Matters took a general turn for the worse. Schamanka threatened to fall apart.

When I visited the peninsula again in 1994 it was, however, obvious that mismanagement and the painful deficiency in herding knowledge were not the only reasons for the economic struggles The Bear faced. In the course of global expansion, financial crisis, and Russia's general opening to the West unexpected challenges worsened living conditions in Tymlat and the situation of The Bear. In the wake of some of the world's most bulwark empires (for example, Soviet Union, South Africa, Eastern Europe), and the general demise of communist command economy that had underpinned the party's domination, Russia was empowered to believe that it could progress only if it followed the road to mass consumption prosperity. As one communist, political system passed away, Western values and economies mounted the throne. On the northern peninsula the disconcerting effects of such unprecedented sway are highly visible today. Recently, the demands of an ever-expanding mining industry threaten to lay waste big strips of the land. The increasing privatization of communally used hunting and fishing grounds now disentitles Koriak women and men from further use. And the careless depletion of fish stocks by international fishing floats ferments rage and agitation in northern villages. Koriaks have begun

to think and talk about effective forms of social mobilization; they insist on their rights. For the first time, the idea of industrial progress and technological development is meeting the limits of the world's resources. As a result, international corporations and nations progress ever deeper into indigenous lands. For Koriaks, does this mean that they have to abandon their own vision and projects to settle for a chronically disadvantaged position in the global hierarchy? The world's insatiable demand for gold and other resources hinders their own local vision of development. The Bear and his followers, and his local critics, will need substantive monetary means and legal power in this ever expansive moment.

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Central to The Bear's story is thus a pressing challenge. The story of his vision, enterprise, and local environmental conditions raises serious questions about the ways in which history, democracy, and indigenous rights are conceived in Russian-centered histories. The above-told narrative brings into focus some of the predicaments faced by an indigenous peoples in Russia after the Soviet Union's demise. There is struggle but not death; there is no sudden wealth and ease, but hope. The analytical framework that favors linearity and a historic view of ruptures and breaks meant nothing to many of the Koriak women and men I knew. From a vantage point in the tundra, all governments are selfish and exploitative; all governments are structurally the same.

Certainly, in describing Koriaks' perspectives in such a way I am turning the provocation of the lizard into my own. Yet provocations may be needed in these times. Those who work to move the story of The Bear to center stage find themselves struggling with a set of received assumptions: the narrative of an always advancing history of successive administrations and the periodization of European-influenced notions of linear and not thematic time. Insofar as the academic and public discourse of history is concerned, that is, "history" produced at the institutional site of the university and in public magazines and papers, Russia remains the sovereign (even in the face of its death), theoretical subject, and the focal point of most post-Soviet histories. There is then a particular way in which all these histories tend to become variations of one master narrative that, variably, could be called "Progress," "Innovation," or, "Democratic Change."

In such a view of history Russia is at the center of national history, the kind of history that Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992) calls “hyper-real”. She defines the national centers of history as hyper-real because they refer, always and only, to certain figures of the imagination while their geographical referents remain somewhat indeterminate. That Russia works as a silent referent in the world’s historical knowledge itself becomes obvious in a highly ordinary way. The story of *The Bear* is rooted in national time. Most Koriaks feel a need to mediate and place their challenges in frameworks of Russian history; reporters, social planners, and social scientists do not feel the need to reciprocate. They produce their stories, narratives, and ideas in relative ignorance of non-Russian histories; indigenous visions of history do not concern too many. This is a gesture that Koriaks cannot return. They cannot afford an equality or symmetry of ignorance at this level without running the risk of perpetual disadvantage and deprivation. Because it is with reference to such ideas that they are, always and once again, imagined again.

What has the lizard to say to this? Quite a lot, it turns out. To conclude that the colonial age is over, or that the new times are solely marked by decay, is premature. It is crucial not to move too quickly, to curtain off once and for all critical inquiries on a historical movement whose effects still impinge on people’s lives. In the villages of northern Kamchatka the notion of historical ruptures and breaks is a distinctly pointless idea. With *The Bear* they see some surprising and complex continuities between the time of Soviet outreach and the late twentieth-century era of post-Soviet interventionism, and global expansion. In their efforts to question and argue the vision of political superpowers Koriaks encounter the financial spell of Japan, Germany, and the U.S., and, in the name of capital growth, they are likely to experience one ecological disaster after another: poisoned water, depleted fish stock, toxic soil, denuded land. The story of the Bear is situated in this context, but it is not rooted in its acceptance. He and others work hard to avert the effects of this.

In doing so *The Bear* does not draw his models, his power, and his vision from a cultural space outside the state; rather he locates and practices his politics within that state. Through his efforts to “do business” he creates his own vision of development and community survival. These efforts spill into others. Within the New Order politics of Russia, from village administration to the highest political level, Koriaks are constantly forced to negotiate democracy for themselves. They have to find ways to communicate to others their relationship to history and their land. Finding new ways to tell about these are, for them, central concerns: they

cannot take lightly the warning of the lizard but they – may be – can find, at a moment of crisis, ways to reassert themselves.

Note

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