

Domesticity, Gender, and Change in Northern Kamchatka

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Abstract

This article seeks to trace how gender transformations have occurred at Kamchatka's northeastern shore. Taking as its point of departure an incident that occurred in the mid-1990s in a reindeer herding camp in Kamchatka, it asks how gender transformations are marked, and what kind of historical developments have contributed to their production. In following historical and anthropological scholarship interested in a European-centered civilizing process, I suggest that in particular one register, domesticity—by which I mean both a relation to “the home” and a relation to power—has shaped gender relations in the present. I ultimately seek to understand how state-induced processes of gender transformations have contributed to frequently difficult situations for women and men. In this vein, this article contributes to discussions of gender and change in the Russian North and beyond.

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I want to begin my discussion of gender-related issues in the Russian North with a protracted scene of writing. It is May 1991, and the members of the reindeer herding brigade—Number Four Reindeer Brigade—are busy and on the move. It is the calving period, which is usually very short, with most of the calves being born in two weeks in spring. Although it is a joyous time, it is also a stressful time for those who live within the context of the brigade and in its camp. The men are busy guiding parts of the herd to new pastures; it is mostly the two women who work in Number Four that stay in the camp: cooking, washing, mending tears in clothes, making sure that things run smoothly and generally keeping things going. The younger one of them—let's call her Nina—is in her early thirties (the older woman is about sixty-years-old); she seems aggravated and wound up. In the camp she is known for her rash temper and the way in which quick-tempered words come easily to her. Nina has two children, a nine-year-old son who lives in the *internat* (a boarding school) in the village, and a three-year-old daughter who stays with her in the camp. One evening in May the girl seems especially agitated and loud. Nina blows up. She yells that she is “fed up,” and strikes the girl with a wet towel. The slaps are there for everybody to hear. That evening, most members of the brigade are around and witness the scene. Nobody, including this anthropologist, intervenes. The girl cries. A deadening silence hangs in the tent. Nina leaves. Once she is out of people's earshot, one of the brigade's members comments how “terrible” she is. As if in agreement, almost everybody nods.

It may seem neither respectful, judicious, or culturally astute to begin a discussion of northern contemporary gender relations with a scene that is marked by a certain amount of violence—and, in particular, a form of violence emitted by a woman and not a man. In fact, I have asked myself for a long time if I should tell this story, especially in a public form. In personal communications I have mentioned it to colleagues, wondering if this event would throw a particularly bad light on indigenous forms of living in the Russian North and feed into

stereotypes that exist about native peoples, especially women. It seemed to me that Nina's reactions to her child would easily appear as too excessive and extreme, and thus open her up—as the herder's comment indicates—to disparaging judgment. By and large, my colleagues encouraged me to relate this scene but they, like I, believe that the above-related situation points to one of the more difficult aspects of indigenous living. As I witnessed it from the beginning to the mid-1990s, everyday life in northern Kamchatka was marked by a certain amount of violence (Rethmann 1999, 2000), although for particular reasons this fact has often constituted an ethnographic taboo. In this article I want to open up the discussion to an examination of ethnographically difficult themes, and in particular to an examination of the conditions that may have provoked Nina's reaction. What generated Nina's strong reaction? Was it just the fact that, as one of the brigade's members seemed to indicate, she was a "difficult" person, or do there exist broader structures through which Nina's reaction can be understood and read? What, if anything at all, produces forms of violence in the Russian North? Although the above-related scene can also be read through the diagnostic lens of mistreatment or a child's abuse, here I argue that important shifts in gender relations have helped to produce the anger and frustration palpable in that scene, even if they are not the only factors. In particular I suggest that one social and historical register—domesticity—is of importance here if we are to understand the cultural transformations that have occurred at Kamchatka's northeastern shore, and beyond. In this analysis I follow anthropological and historical scholarship interested in a European-centered civilizing project and the impact of the state (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992; Ssorin-Chaikov 2003) by focusing especially on social configurations of gender and work. Ultimately, what I seek to understand is how state-induced processes of gender transformations have contributed to a (sometimes) difficult situation for women and men.

Several studies have focused recently on the question if the Soviet Union was and can be understood as a colonial state (Hirsch 2005; Martin 2001). At stake in this debate is usually the question how, and to what extent, the Soviet Union controlled and repressed expressions of nationalism and national identity. In the main, arguments waver back and forth between those who understand the current resurgence of nationalist movements and passions as one consequence of national or cultural identity repressions (Suny 2001), and those who argue for the earnestness of Bolshevik and—at intervals—Soviet efforts on behalf of an ethnic particularism (Slezkine 1994: 415). Yet what is often lost in these debates is the everyday and gendered nature of the Soviet project. Social and feminist historians (Wood 1997; Clements 1997) have pointed out how "the home"—as both place and precept—was a crucial focus of Soviet efforts to "domesticate" the Russian Far East, in particular to instill a certain nuclear model of the family. Here domesticity becomes integral to the project of sovietization (Dunham 1976; Attwood 1999), including the development of a distinct domestic domain associated with women, specialized tasks, the raising of children, and the "private." Although Soviet ethnographers rarely focus on "the house," they nevertheless provide insight into domestic gender relations with their emphases on the achievements of Soviet modernization: the kindergarten, the dairy farm, the garden plot (Antropova 1971). In addition, oral narratives of elders, especially women elders, provide insights into Koriak social and gender structures before "the power" (*vlast'*) came (Rethmann 2003). I want to be careful, though. It is not my intention here to present a "woman's points of view" (as if that were possible) resting on easy assumptions that argue that women always speak from the gender identity of "woman." Neither will I focus on gender as an isolated category that exists in neat segregation to other analytical prisms, as illustrated in much of the literature on women, colonialism and ethnicity. Rather, I want to examine Koriak community

differentiations, and the tensions that emerge out of them, with a view on history and life in both tundra camps and settlements.

I begin my analysis with a short discussion of historical processes that contributed to the making of domesticity—although, for reasons of space, I will sketch regional developments only in terms of a few principles. By domesticity I mean both a space and a relation to power. As is evident from the ethnographic and historical record, the Soviets understood themselves not only as members of a revolutionary vanguard but also as harbingers of European-based models of propriety and civilization. I trace how the motif of domesticity manifests itself in the ethnographic record and how Soviet desires to “improve” indigenous conditions of living led to changes in gender relations. I then move on to an examination of how life in the settlement—largely via the lens of gender—is structured today. As has frequently been noted, since the 1990s the Russian North has undergone a series of tremendous social and political changes, and here I am especially interested in the ways these transformations extend beyond the realm of the economic into the realm of gendered and generational relations.

The final part of this analysis will consist of a description of the social composition of Number Four Reindeer Brigade, with particular attention to the situation of Nina. In my discussion I take community differentiations and not homogeneity as my point of departure, paying particular attention to discontent and conflict. This is a perspective that does not necessarily sit well with much of the anthropological literature on indigenous life in the tundra and in the camp. Ethnographic descriptions of tundra life often take place within a story line of “traditionalism,” with the land conventionally understood as the locus of tradition, a morally and socially good life, and continuity with the past (King 2002; Pika 1999; Rethmann 2004). In contemporary anthropological scholarship in the Russian North, the tundra has emerged as the spatial and metaphorical nexus of social justice and hope, a space that offers social betterment and health, creates and sustains cultural identity, and provides the grounding for cultural rights and indigenous self-determination. I want to be clear that my intention in this article is not to argue against the economic and spiritual significance of indigenous activities on the land, and traditional and emotional attachments associated with them. To do so would constitute a serious assault on the struggle for indigenous peoples’ rights, in which autonomy and sovereignty are tied to the interconnections between humans, animals, and the land. Rather, my intention is to bring women’s perspectives into view.

The analysis offered here grows out of 15 months of research in the tundra of northern Kamchatka and two settlements in 1992 and 1994. During this period, I spent three months of living in a reindeer herding camp in an area several hundred kilometers north of Tymlat, and stayed for lengthy periods of time in different tundra camps. It also emerges directly out of the gendered nature of my fieldwork. A critical amount of my knowledge about and understanding of Koriak women and men and their relationships among each other emerges from my relationships with younger and older Koriak women. Therefore, what I know about Koriak women’s knowledge and experience of cultural forms of living at Kamchatka’s northeastern shore is due to our mutually acknowledged similarity of gender and the orientations it provides. But in an equal way, my position as a—then—relatively young female foreigner in northern Kamchatka structurally denies any congruence of what I know and they know as women—a point that emerged clearly at several important occasions during my research. Koriak women’s interpretations of the land is “gendered” in the sense that it is produced and framed by particular forms of labor and experience that points to social and cultural differentiations, yet at the same time it is important to note that there exists also much overlap between women and men’s

interpretations of labor and the cultural values associated with it. In addition, while Koriak women may spend a great deal of time talking to each other, they also discuss with and listen to the discussions of brothers, husbands, fathers, and uncles.

This article is also about gender insofar as a woman's perspective is a marked perspective, both because it presents a particular view on community life and because these views are generally marginalized. The analytical status given to Koriak women's experiences here is not meant as a supplement to Koriak men's perspectives and views. Rather, I intend some of these perspectives to critique and nuance existing accounts that exclude day-to-day gendered practices when discussing human-human and human-land relations in Siberia and other parts of the Russian North. In theory, men's views are as partial as women's. But in practice, men's views are not perceived as partial in the same way women's are in some quarters of the anthropological forum. If, at times, this chapter frames women's voices as the Koriak perspective it does so (1) to clarify the continuing impossibility of such representation, (2) in spite of the fact that I note the complex overlaps, conflicts, and contradictions of various identities summarized as female, and (3) because in some instances women's views are the Koriak voice as it is presented to the non-Koriak world.

Domesticity and Modernity

When the early Soviet vanguard, political activists endowed with the utopian dream of development and enlightenment, embarked on their long—both spatial and political—journey to enlighten the minds of those they had come to see as backward and ignorant, they brought with them a set of received conventions that also played out in the gendered sphere. Those Koriak women and men who continued to live at the fringes of the empire—where, as one Russian historian once put it to me, one “could easily starve and freeze to death with no human being in sight”—needed to be made into proper subjects of the new state. The mission of early Soviet agents in the Russian Far East as harbingers of the enlightenment project of communism, as agent Stebnitskii (1931) argued, lay in their aim to “develop those bashful minds and teach them the glory of the revolution.” Almost immediately from the beginning, native women were caught in the cultural images assumed by almost all “culture workers” and Soviet agents. On the one hand, the Soviets professed the eradication of all homework (Wood 1997; Clements 1997) while, on the other, they were deeply concerned with the improvement of domestic conditions for native women. In an almost bifurcated way, one sense of the Soviet self spoke to their identity as radical revolutionaries, the other one to their identity as colonial settlers.

In the 1930s Soviet agents began to specifically address women as the “real and most authentic proletarians of the North” (Slezkine 1994: 231). Ever since they had arrived in northern Kamchatka, Soviet agents had regarded the position of women as one of the most objectionable aspects of native cultures. Their cultural position seemed particularly hazardous, and the never-ending work unusually cruel. Although it is almost certain that there existed important variations in actual patterns of camp organization and labor (Rethmann 2001: 71-93), the ideological struggle to “domesticate” the conditions of women was, from the beginning, also part of the Soviet endeavor to secure cultural hegemony. It was a struggle, as Grant (1995) has observed, that reverberated through the ethnographic discourses of its age. I use the term “domesticate” deliberately here. It refers to the restructuring of architecture (i.e., the process of creating houses around 1930 at the Kamchatka's northeastern shore) as well as to the particularly “appalling”

situation of women. Witness, for example, how in 1932 the political activist Kuz'mina (1932: 94) characterizes Koriak women as "victims" of entrenched social injustice and oppression:¹

It is morning. It is cold in the house. The fire went out a long time ago: some coal pieces still glow in the ashes. She does not want to crawl out from under her warm fur blankets; but today her husband has to travel far—[...]—and she has to hurry to make tea for him. The fire roars, the sparks fly. Clouds of smoke emerge. The smoke hole is slightly open, and a stream of cold air creeps into the house. [...] The fire is heating up. The tent is filled with heavy smoke. The interiors of the tent are barely visible.

The entire family still sleeps. Only the woman at the fire is busy with work. She has to take care of the water kettle; the spout will burn if the fire burns too hot. Only little ice has melted into water so far; but she also has to bring *iukola* (dried fish) and seal fat for breakfast; bake little griddle cakes, fetch sugar, get done with the boots that she did not manage to finish yesterday, and prepare food for the dogs.²

According to Kuzmina's view, Koriak life was not so much grounded in humanity as in bare survival and possibly linked to a certain kind of animality. If this is true, then this linking was not only the result of people's closeness to animals, especially reindeer, but also of the fact that many European activists and cultural workers perceived the Russian North frequently as a cultural (and moral) wasteland. And, for them, its inhabitants ostensibly shared its qualities. Unable to "control" their environment, they lacked all culture and history (see also Wolf 1982). In oral narratives elders point out that they were disparaged for "sleeping on fur," "covering themselves in filthy animal fat and skin" instead of wearing clothes, having a "bad diet," "uncouth birthing practices," "no sanitary practices," and "wasting in tents" instead of living in houses.³ In speaking of abominable conditions of living, at least in their eyes, early ethnographers reserved special opprobrium for native "proper" life—or, rather, its absence. In 1901 Vladimir Jochelson, for example, said to Franz Boas (quoted in Freed et al. 1988: 102) that:

[It] is almost impossible to describe the squalor of these dwellings. The smoke, which fills the tent, makes the eye blind. It is particularly dense in the upper part of the tent, so that work that has to be done in an upright position becomes almost impossible. Walls, clothes, and household utensils are covered with greasy soot, so that contact with them leaves shining black spots on hands and clothing. The dim light which falls through the smoke hole is hardly sufficient for reading and writing. The odor of meat, blubber is almost intolerable, and the inmates, intoxicated with fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*) add to the discomfort of the situation. The dwellings are infested with lice. As long as we remained in these dwellings, we could not escape these insects which we dreaded more than any of the privations of our journey.

By that time, the image of a "diseased, suffering Russian North" was taken for granted in European Russia, and beyond. Indeed, agent Bilibin (1933) was wont to suggest that northern Kamchatka was more than just "infested": its condition was downright the condition of the "stone age"—an age that especially burdened and oppressed women in unnecessary ways.

During the 1930s, thus, the Koriak world was changing from both within and outside. "The home" and its domestic surroundings, as both place and precept, became a crucial site of

Soviet efforts to modernize. Koriak women and men were not only identified as being in need of hygiene but—according to early ethnographic accounts—also in need of good manners and propriety. As elders point out, for example, still in the 1920s and 1930s the quintessential domestic unit was a polygamous household, although polygamy was in fact the preserve of the rich and powerful. This domestic unit subsumed all the elements of age and relationship, gender and generation, persons and properties, from which arose the social structure of “the Koriak world.” Not only did - at least to some extent - the polygamous household form the basis of the domestic polity, it was also seen as “natural,” respectable, and perhaps even “good.”

The civilizing gaze of early Soviet agents was symbolically representative of a state-centered commitment to progress, and governmental determination to sweep away the unhygienic, disorderly, and—again, in Soviet eyes—promiscuous nature of the Koriak world. Accordingly, houses were built, modeled on the ideal of a standard Soviet family. Where there had been formerly tents, there were now houses. Polygamy was discouraged. Families began to live more isolated from each other, and there were now clearly designated areas for specific tasks of work, such as the kitchen. Koriak women elders point to the fact that in houses there was never enough room for tanning or sewing or other forms for processing furs and skins.

The camp in the settlement

I first became aware that images of life in the camp as trouble-free were slightly askew when I lived in Tymlat, a settlement in the Karaginskii district, approximately 50 kilometers north of Ossora at the northeastern shore of the Kamchatka peninsula. Accommodating approximately 500 residents,⁴ the settlement is largely composed of Koriak families who identify themselves both as members of a larger Koriak community and in relation to particular settlement sites in the peninsula from which they were involuntarily removed. In the mid-1990s, Tymlat housed five distinct Koriak groups: the original families from Tymlat, families who moved in the 1950s from the village of Karaga, and the resettled residents from the villages of Kichiga, Anapka, and Rekinniki.⁵ What kind of identity a person chose in a given conversation or exchange was based upon the context of the conversation and the motivation of his or her identification. With a few exceptions, most of the Koriak women and men I knew had lived in the northern Kamchatka Peninsula since they and previous generations could remember, although they had always traveled extensively with the reindeer, visiting relatives and friends who lived further north. *Olen'*, reindeer, kept Koriak families in constant contact and flux, and, if not always in reality than at least symbolically, they continue to be at the heart of the Koriak communities that I know.

While the anthropology of the Russian North has made invaluable contributions to our understanding of human-animal relations (Anderson and Nuttall 2004; Ingold 2000), the idea that reindeer and the associated non-sedentary life in the tundra are key to understandings of Koriak ontologies and personhood is not necessarily as self-evident as it may seem. Although research has clarified that the term Koriak emerged in the anthropological literature approximately at the end of the seventeenth century (Vdovin 1973: 51), and can be traced to the etymon *kor*, meaning reindeer (Jochelson 1908: 406), it is also the case that both Koriak women and men tend to point to the dualistic nature of Koriak economy and ways of production. While the Maritime-Koriaks or Nymylans, lived along the shores of the northern Kamchatka Peninsula and Okhotsk Sea, largely subsisting on fish, mussels, crab, whale, and seal, and the Reindeer-Koriaks or Chavchuvens, lived in the interior of the peninsula, and herded reindeer, it seems

clear that Jochelson and Vdovin assume that the Koriaks' respective regional neighbors to the north, the Chukchi, or to the south, the Itel'men, used the ethnonym *kor* to designate all Koriak women and men. What's more, either the Cossacks (Steller 1974 [1774]) or the local Russians (Jochelson 1908: 406) then put the term to widespread use. In any case, most Koriak women and men I knew implied that economic production patterns created fairly arbitrary distinctions, and that production relations were not constituted in such a segregated way. Here I should perhaps point out that my research located itself mainly among Koriaks who traced their recent roots to the settlements Tymlat, Ossora, Rekinniki, Kichiga, and Anapka. Members of this Koriak subgroup are called and also call themselves Aliutor Koriaks or (in Russian) *Aliutortsy*. While, for example, fishing was also always important to those Koriak women and men who lived in the tundra, ethnographers (Antropova 1971: 22; Gurvich and Kuzakov 1960: 73-75) stress the fact that *Aliutortsy* were the only subgroup for whom shifting patterns of economy were of equal importance and cultural value.

At Kamchatka's northeastern shore, Koriak elders frequently pointed to the fact that because of a long history of sedentarization, animals had lost some of their significance as key markers of Koriak identity (Rethmann 2003). This was not necessarily so because people wanted to live in settlements but because political centralization and economic restructuring in the form of collectivization created new forms of identification that have sustained their force in contemporary Tymlat. Since the mid-1920s, the period in which Soviet state administration assumed power in the peninsula, the state has argued for the implementation of centralized government policies by arguing that indigenous peoples would fare better under its sponsorship. In changing the conditions of living at Kamchatka's northeastern shore—building houses, creating settlements, introducing paid labor—government officials maintained that they created social progress and economic growth. Moscow became the center of political potency that extended its rule outward to the provincial areas. In the geopolitical order of the state, a tremendous gap was thus created between *vlast'* ("the authorities") and *narod* ("the people"). Koriak women and men were forced to look up to the governing bodies that looked down at them. Yet the northern peninsula was also considered part of the state's periphery, of little significance in national power rankings. While for many Koriak women and men I knew this structure posed a fundamental political dilemma, ironically it also offered them the possibility to continue some of their own cultural practices. This was the case because as peripheral subjects, they were simultaneously inside and outside the hold of the state.

The cultural meanings of settlement life—its effects on Koriak women and men and on them as a social group—are verbally articulated by senior Koriak women and men through the use of social metaphors, of which the most lucid is perhaps *voniat* ("it stinks"). This expression can have many meanings, including the terrible material conditions related to economic collapse, unemployment, drinking and high-blood pressure that kills women and men before they reach their mid-forties. Yet the metaphorical twining of settlement and decay also happens because communities seem to fall apart (*raspadaiutsia*), people resort to stealing (*voruiut*), marriages do not seem to last, "too many children, here, without fathers," "too much anger (*gnev*)," and "people envy (*zaviduiut*) each other" the little they have. There existed a growing sense in Tymlat that people have become more selfish and think "only about themselves" (*tol'ko o sebe*). The problem with settlements, Koriak elders used to indicate, is that they are no longer communal places of living. "In houses, we are alone. We live for ourselves. That is how it is." The most visible sign of this isolation is probably the fact that people have begun to lock their doors.

Where and when does one begin to look for gendered changes that articulate themselves in the tundra and in the settlement? Especially in senior Koriak women's and men's talk cultural memories of living and knowing the land (*znat' zemliu*) emerge as an existential antithesis to "living in the settlement." Older Koriak women say that people had, in their words, "strong culture" in the days before "the power" arrived. Then the reindeer were plentiful, the air smelled good, and along with human-human relations also human-animal relations were marked by responsibility and respect. People still cared about traditions and ceremonies associated with the animals, looked after each other, and were healthy because of it. Reindeer races, drumming, singing, and dancing were put on to entertain humans and animals alike. Oral histories of older Koriak women emphasize how women cared for their children, tanned and sewed, took care of affairs in and around the tent, and took pride in their autonomy and independence. Divisions of labor existed along the axes of gender and generation, with men spending roughly more time with hunting and the herd, and women transforming the produce this work secured through their own labor into cooked food, tent canvas, and clothes. Children, too, began to perform such tasks at a very early age, although they usually stayed around the tent until they were approximately ten years old. There was none of the alcoholism or high blood pressure that many elders now say is tearing people apart.

If these activities in the tundra were characteristic of the days before Koriak women and men became confined to settlements, they were performed and are remembered by elders who were children when government decrees arrived. They still occur in some families who live in settlements, and in the tundra. Depending on the condition of snow for travel by dog sled, or the availability of helicopter flights, in the summer months, Koriak families move off the settlement and into camps located in the lands of the northern Kamchatka Peninsula. Here they live in the summer months in tents or self-made huts, fishing and hunting like they formerly did.

While from the perspective of older Koriak women it is the absence of the land in settlement that is at fault for all this "stink," from the perspective of younger Koriak women and men it is often the material lack of money, social opportunities, and sometimes parental guidance. Most Koriak women and men in their mid-forties and below grew up in the *internat*. While this experience is often not described in such negative terms as the one of those who grew up in the Canadian residential school system, or Australia's "lost generation," what is always emphasized is how many aspects of Koriak existence did change. There are, for example, the long periods of separation between husbands who work in the tundra and wives who live in the settlement for most of the year, as well as between fathers and children. Many items have been dropped from the diet and many technological changes have been incorporated into Koriak tradition-oriented practices. However, older Koriak women and men say that what has not changed is the desire to situate the camp as a central identificatory site of who they are. Yet articulations of these desires that continually arise in people's conversations also constitute sites of conflicts in younger people's eyes. While younger women and men acknowledge that reindeer herding still constitutes a meaningful practice, they also say that elders do not always understand junior Koriak women and men. Because they have been brought up in the settlement, younger Koriak women and men can find it hard to attach themselves to traditions that their elders continue to see as meaningful and worthwhile, while elders often associate their (mis)-behavior with Euro-Russian identity. "[We] have become like the Russians," one Koriak woman elder remarked when her twenty-year-old daughter flat out refused to visit her in the "mucky" tundra.

To non-Koriak observers, what is perhaps most striking about life in Koriak settlements, is that in a place of theoretically over 500 inhabitants—just by the look of it—the overwhelming

majority are women and children and not men. Working in Tymlat's *internat*, nursery, dairy farm (a farm that by the mid-1990s had already burnt down several times), local grocery store, *masterskaia* (workshop where women tan and sew fur), and kindergarten, women assumed a visible presence in the village. Like men—many of whom built roads and houses, and became all-drive vehicle (*vezdekhod*) and tractor drivers—women also dug and tended gardens. In Tymlat, thus, various employment patterns emerged with a particular perspective on gender differentiations. Older Koriak women often remark on how the composition of the settlement changed, with perhaps 50 percent of men living on the land, wives and lovers living in settlement, “children being born all the time” and old people dying. Although each birth is a reason for celebration, with people bringing presents and being affectionate with the newborn, older women also say that younger women “know too many husbands,” and “who is going to take care of all those children?” People, including younger women, also tend to carry their experiences from the settlement onto the land. It is thus not that easy to rid oneself of the hurt, pain, and tensions that have manifested themselves in one's life.

Reindeer Brigade Number Four

How does one begin to describe intra-communal and gendered tensions among people who live on the land? How does one even begin to approach a subject that is not necessarily one that many indigenous representatives and anthropologists want to talk about, yet that contains broader significance for discussions on how social relationships in the tundra are shaped? Why is it possible that indigenous women and men experience certain aspects of being in the camp in different ways? And why is the land not always already an unambiguously good space? I seek some answers here.

In 1992, the state farm (*sovkhos*) “Tumgytum” (in Koriak “friend, partner”) in Tymlat consisted of twelve reindeer brigades. As David Anderson (2000) has pointed out, reindeer brigades in the Soviet Union were not romantic but constituted important economic units. As reindeer herding was considered an economically important sector of regional management, each full member of the brigade was a state-salaried worker who usually spent more than nine months of the year in the brigade. One part of what herders do is deliver fixed quotas of meat at a select place and time. Thus, during the period of the Soviet Union, reindeer herding had lost some of its tradition-bound associations since it was also treated as a form of paid labor and a “job.”

Number Four, too, had originally been devised as an economic unit but, especially after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, it began to assume a life of its own. Deeply divided between two warring factions, its architectural structure said perhaps more about inherent tensions than a first glance would reveal. Most poignantly, the encampment consisted of two tents, the first of which accommodated the family of one of Tymlat's most respected male elders, his wife, and his five sons. His two daughters lived in the settlement. This was a group of people reputed to be one of the most tradition-oriented families in the region, with everybody “even now following the old ways.” Every member of this family tried to spend as much as time as possible in the tundra, and almost all of the old dietary habits and animal-related rituals were still followed. Every year in December they put on a magnificent *khololo* —a ritualized celebration in which Koriak women and men traditionally give thanks to the sea-mammals but that is now frequently taken to express gratitude and respect for all killed animals—for everybody in the settlement.⁶ An impressive number of drum players were always present, and the *mukhomory* (*Amanita muscaria*, known in North America as fly agaric) particularly good.⁷ These were

people who were proud to be *tundroviki* (tundra people) and saw this as something that connected them to the land. It was also clear that they looked somewhat down on the inhabitants of the other tent. Tensions and bad feelings flew high, with both women trying—from time to time—to alleviate the situation.

In the second tent lived the rest of the brigade as it had originally been devised by the collective farm plan. Altogether, there were eight men, ranging in age from approximately 16 to 70, and two women—employed as *chumrabortnitsy* (loosely translated as “tent workers”).⁸ These were people who did not claim kinship relations with each other. While men stayed primarily with the herd, it was the job of the women to clean the tent, take care of firewood, mend men’s clothes, and in general to take care of all the affairs concerning the space in and around the tent. Among these people there existed different motivations for being in the brigade. While older herders tended to emphasize their connection to the land, younger men, too, might emphasize human-land relations, but some would also freely admit that they worked in the brigade because there was just nothing for them to do in the settlement or—like Nina—to escape the boredom and gossip in settlement.

Nina, for her part, felt that she was caught in one of the most typical situations that affect many young women in Tymlat. A woman in her mid-thirties, she was unmarried and the mother of two children, fathered by different men. In her late teens and early twenties she had attended the Herzen Institute in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) where she received a teaching diploma, but like other native women she had come home only to find herself unemployed. There she found herself alone and dejected. She also said that she was sometimes met with disparagement because she had lived in the city and adopted some of the ways of city life. It is noteworthy that she was often discursively framed as exemplifying the things that were wrong in settlement. In Tymlat, she had met first one man, and shortly thereafter another. She had always hoped that her “marriages” would work out, but both men had nothing better to do than “run away” from her when the children were born. This was a fairly common situation, but because her parents had died early Nina found herself without a steady source of support. Luckily there was an aunt in Tymlat who had suggested that Nina take up some work in a camp. And that is why she had come to Number Four Reindeer Brigade.

Together with other Koriak women and men, Nina also experienced the sharpening of poverty and financial worries in the mid-1990s when many workers in Tymlat did not receive salaries for months on end. Sometimes Nina could go unpaid for as much as eight or nine months. At the same time runaway inflation and the failure of government to agree on charges for even such essential products as tea and bread caused prices to spiral to unimaginable heights and left many in dire poverty. In this context, women were generally acknowledged as a group seriously disadvantaged by Russia’s process of economic restructuring; many Koriak women, for example, lost their jobs in settlement and felt that their husbands who continued to work and live in the tundra were better off. For Nina, this fear was doubled by structures of regional inequality that—at least then—advantaged Russian and Ukrainian women over native women (and sometimes men). For example, because non-native women were often well-connected to local decision-making individuals and groups, they frequently found it easier to keep their jobs in the settlement’s internat, kindergarten, and hospital. Nina’s work in the brigade still gave her an income, albeit one that was rarely paid. But the work, as Nina pointed out, also exhausted her. Cleaning the tent, cooking, taking care of firewood, mending men’s clothes, “it could just all be too much.” And then there was the matter of sneering comments and criticisms that Nina

sometimes had to endure: that she was losing her footing in life, erratic in her behavior, irresponsible with her children. Nina, so it seemed, always ignored contemptuous remarks.

Although, at least initially, living in the tundra had offered release from the gossip and tensions in the settlement, Nina self-admittedly said that she had increasingly grown angry, and that she flew quickly into a rage. “But,” she said, “life could be tough,” and in spite of all her feigned indifference she did not easily shrug off the disdain of her fellows working in the brigade. However, she refused to give in. Nina was not the “terrible” woman that she seemed. The Nina I knew troubled herself with questions of why she could not take care of the children well enough. She also thought about the ways in which she could improve the family’s situation. Should she leave Tymlat and move to another place? Become a street trader, open her own kiosk, sell clothing, cosmetics, and other articles? In the end, Nina dismissed all of these options as foolish and absurd. Tymlat was her home. But, she said, it surely would be nice to see some betterment concerning general living conditions, a betterment that might also help her to take better care of her family and work.

Gender, Change, and the North

This article has attempted, albeit in rudimentary ways, to outline a possible trajectory for the emergence of contemporary gender inequalities in native communities in the Russian North. It has argued that the register of domesticity is instrumental in understanding gender differentiations, and it has sought to connect these differentiations to life in settlement and in the camp. The brief scene that I have related at the beginning of this article does not necessarily indicate that current shifts in gender relations are the only reason why the beating occurred, but it does point to the fact that these shifts are part of what aggravates younger Koriak women and men’s life. If younger women like Nina find it hard to stay unruffled and calm in situations marked by a variety of tensions—including the differentiation in numbers between women and men who lived in reindeer brigade number four, the extraordinary amount of work they have to perform, and the fact that younger men frequently leave their female partners when they have children - then this is also so because they often see no way out. Everybody I knew in northern Kamchatka was aware of this situation, and people talked quite freely about it. But in public discussions of which I know, the concerns of younger Koriak women are infrequently dealt with and addressed. Yet understanding and addressing such concerns may help us understand why tensions and conflicts emerge, and what can be done to tackle them in productive ways.

The social relations between indigenous women and men are usually framed in two ways in the literature on the North. First, the comparative situation of the sexes in indigenous societies, and how socio-historic changes transformed the position of women, has been one site of analysis. Or, second, gender relations are either downplayed or entirely omitted for northern anthropology’s predominant focus on community-oriented analyses of indigenous ecologies, with particular emphasis on hunting/gathering/reindeer herding practices and the interpersonal (and I include here animals and the land) relations created by them. Even analyses concerned with issues of land and property rights and privatization in the contemporary Russian North rarely ask how these changes affect or are experienced differently by indigenous women and men. In this article I have tried to bring analyses of the land out of the moral economy context in which it is so frequently discussed and show how Koriak interpretations of and motivations for being on the land are gendered—rather than treating gender as an additional layer of analysis in relation to existent studies on the land. If we are to understand social change in northern

Kamchatka (and beyond) in its complexity, we need more detailed and nuanced understandings of gender, as well as cross-cutting forms of power, authority, and political status.

I wish to be clear. In this context I am not calling for a renewed focus on traditional socio-cultural systems, or comparative analyses of gender in indigenous societies. More than anything else, such inquiries may have well been informed by European desires about the “nature of women” and, however well-intentioned, early feminist endeavors to save women. What is needed now, I think, is more of an emphasis on current negotiations of power and authority, and the cultural and political possibilities for both women and men to, for example, participate in these negotiations. The valorization of gender knowledge and competence, as well as the significance of different experiences of and positionings related to economic and social prowess are certainly critical in gendered and social relations between Koriak women and men. Examining this can help us in our own understandings of contemporary indigenous cultural and land rights politics, and the negotiations thereof.

In this project I join many other scholars who have argued that formations of gender differentiations are central to our understanding of local issues and everyday conditions of living. The conversations and everyday-life situations that I shared with Koriak women and men convinced me that they have distinctive perspectives and strategies of negotiation to human-human and human-land relations. Raising the question of gender in Northern Studies’ research requires attention to the complexity and specificity of social and cultural intersections. In this article I have argued for situating local commentaries and experiences—such as those of, for example, Koriak women and men who live in villages and on the land—within wider configurations of desire and intentionality while, at the same time, arguing for the recognition of local identity formations, problems, and the stakes people have in them.

Attention to gender-differentiated responses to, for example, the meaning of the land and contemporary conditions of living are instrumental in understanding not only Koriak women’s dilemmas, but the agendas, strategies, and debates of Koriak women and men. Women and men share similar problems, and one of the most significant issues in research on northern Russia is to make these problems matter. How they matter will differ considerably, given the disparity of regions. Neither does the call to make “gender matter” argue for the addition of women to classic ethnographic or contemporary ethnographic texts. Inserting issues of women into the ethnographic record does not necessarily tap or question the hegemony of allegedly gender-neutral descriptions. Rather, in the context of dominant ethnographic representations analysts are challenged to re-examine intellectual suppositions and think about and create new forms of descriptions. Breaking out of the framework of conventional descriptions, indeed, involves the creativity of making gender matter.

In this sense, gender is not an outlandish category in Northern Studies’ research, neither in the literal nor in the metaphorical signification of the word. One frequent objection against the study of gender is often that gender is not a meaningful category for the people with whom northern anthropologists work. In particular in light of the struggle for physical and emotional well-being, cultural rights, or self-government, indigenous representations of themselves to each other and the non-indigenous world are often best based on a logics of safety, that is, the airing of internal rifts and differentiations is

avoided. Yet, with regard to gender, this means to look at gender as an outside category instead of understanding how social formations are gendered.

The importance of studying gender lies in the need for a countervoice to the hegemonic frame of northern anthropology. When scholars interested in the political consequences of state encroachment and human action on and with the land continue to ignore gender differentiations, they not only contribute to the continuation of such analytical hegemony but, worse, to the discrimination of particular perspectives. Certainly, when, as in indigenous Russia, political and analytical stakes are high, representations may best be based on homogenous assumption. Yet this analysis raises questions about whether some of the most homogenous visions of cultural relations to the land can really lead to understanding or liberation, as long as analytical and political representation is based on the exclusion of some. If we address issues of gender and social differentiations we should do so to demonstrate (1) the equal significance and thus contemporary political mutuality of Koriak women and men, (2) that the dismissal of gender relations constitutes nothing less than a contribution to the de-legitimization of certain perspectives, and (3) that gender relations and differentiations are always about something more than those very terms, insofar as land relations are as well. Each register makes an argument about what politics and values are about, and how they are produced as well as how indigenous women and men experience power and change.

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Notes

¹ There exists, of course, also the possibility of reading the following passage as just an indication of women's hard labor. Similar descriptions, albeit with a focus on different forms of labor, can surely be found for men, especially in relation to the work on summer pastures when they frequently do not sleep for twenty-four hours a day.

² All translations, if not otherwise indicated, are by me.

³ Koriak women elders explain that in the 1950s they were often no longer allowed to live with their families and husbands in the tundra. Childbirth practices were of crucial importance here. Koriak women elders say that doctors justified this action based on their view that Koriak women and men lived without any sanitary practices and "slept on fur" and that their children "could easily catch a cold." Koriak women elders interpret and present such rationale as "nonsense."

⁴ Of a population of approximately 500 residents, roughly 70 percent are Koriak, and the remainders are predominantly Russian and Ukrainian, although members of other nationalities (Nenets, Armenian, etc.) also live there.

⁵ The village of Kichiga, situated between Tymlat and Anapka, was one of the first settlements to be closed at the northeastern shore. In 1956, it closed forever, and its inhabitants were resettled to either Tymlat or Ossora. In the same year, the old village of Karaga, until then the administrative center of the Karaginskii district, lost much of its political significance and in 1970, the entire population of Karaga was moved to the “new” Karaga, again directly located on the northeastern Pacific shore. In 1974, it was decided that the village of “new” Anapka was to be closed. The water, government officials explained, was too shallow during the tide: freighters and other cargo ships could not anchor in Anapka’s harbor. Production was not efficient in such a place. Anapka’s population, women and men, families and children, had lived there for approximately 20 years when they were relocated to the respective villages of Il’pyr, Tymlat, and Ossora. The first dislocation of Anapka’s inhabitants had taken place in 1952 when the “old” village of Anapka was looked at as economically non-viable because it was too far from the shore. The people of Rekinniki were relocated more often than anybody else in the region, namely on three occasions. Until 1947, their village was located in the northeastern tundra near the river Pustoe. The population still lived in tents. Transport was difficult, and goods needed to be carried to and from the shore across the land. In that year, villagers were resettled to a newly built Rekinniki, again close to the river Pustoe, but this time only 12 kilometers from the ocean. Ten years later, in 1957, the villagers were moved again, now to a location directly on the coast. This village was closed in 1980, however; and everybody was moved to either Tymlat or Ossora.

⁶ *Khololo* is one of the most salient animal rituals today. Taking place in the fall, usually in November, Koriak women and men congregate in the house of a successful hunter to celebrate both his prowess and skill, and the animal’s munificence. Skilled hunters know that it is not only their knowledge that allows them to make a kill; rather, their ability is based on the unselfishness of the animals that allow themselves to be killed.

⁷ For many older Koriak women and men I knew, *mukhomory*, also called “magic mushrooms,” constitute an effective means of both spiritual and physical empowerment. For a more detailed discussion see Rethmann (2001: 64-67).

⁸ See Vitebsky’s article in this issue for a more detailed description of *chumrabotnitsa*.

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