

# SURVIVAL ECONOMY AND CORE-PERIPHERY DYNAMICS IN THE TAIMYR AUTONOMOUS REGION, RUSSIA

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## Introduction

This article explores the ecological, economic, and political factors related to recent change in a remote and strategically important region of the Russian Arctic, the Taimyr Autonomous Region. I present the viewpoints of indigenous residents on recent changes in Russia, elaborate on their idea of survival economy, and develop ideas for the relationship between individual actors and the Russian economic transition.

Anthropological studies of the transitional economy among Russia's rural populations are important for understanding the range of human processes in post-Soviet Eurasia. This work complements other disciplinary approaches and focal populations by adding information on local values underlying decision-making and analysis of conditional aspects of social behavior.

Recently, anthropologists studying the Russian transition have been examining U.S. and other Western economic aid programs designed to encourage free markets. Serious questions are being raised about the politics and implementation of advice, loans, and money payments. Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, alternatively, implicates Russian "culture" in Russia's stagnating economic reform.

Much of what we took for granted in our free-market system and assumed to be human nature was not nature at all, but culture. The dismantling of the central planning function in an economy does not, as some had supposed, automatically establish a free-market entrepreneurial system . . . The presumption of private property ownership and the legality of its transfer must be deeply embedded in the culture of a society for free markets to function effectively (The Wall Street Journal, "Greenspan is Skeptical on Russia's Transition," June 11, 1997).

Rather than focus on the nature-culture dichotomy, my empirical research assumes multiple levels of causation in testing the reasons for the current direction of change: namely, a growing non-market subsistence economy in the Taimyr's native communities and few, largely unsuccessful, new businesses. Accounting for relative levels of risk and uncertainty in the subsistence *and* market sectors of the economy, individuals are making the best and most logical choices they can. Since 1991, as Soviet-era economies of scale devoted to intensive production of renewable resources have all but disappeared, the conditions for small business have continued to be unfavorable. The diminishment of the formal economy favors kinship cooperation in production, non-market distribution, and communal consumption to ensure local survival. I believe that the growing importance of the subsistence economy is a reaction to the conditions of the economic transition, not the result of the legacy of communism or some deficiency among the people.<sup>1</sup>

Subsistence economies are developing throughout Russia in varying degrees. The growth of the belt of fruit and vegetable gardens surrounding Moscow in recent years and the popularity of mushroom and berry collecting are examples of this process. The growth of subsistence production in lieu of commercial production reduces the taxable market sector in the Russian national economy and limits resources available for

government investment or price control of key industries. The growth of subsistence production follows a rational, low-risk strategy, in the context of Russia's unpredictable market economy.

### **Geography and Ethnographic Background**

The Taimyr Autonomous Region of Krasnoyarskii Krai is home to five small-numbering, indigenous ethnic groups, who are now a minority of the Taimyr's total population. The Nenets span three regions of the Russian Arctic and mainly inhabit the Ust Yeneseisk County in the northwest Taimyr. The Enets traditionally lived along the Yenesei River, but their population has been assimilated over the past 50 years, and there are fewer than 100 Enets speakers left. The Nganasan traditionally lived across the central Taimyr tundra and forest-tundra transition. Currently, the majority of the 1200 Nganasan live in three permanent settlements. The Nenets, Enets, and Nganasan languages are related and make up the Samoyedic branch of the Uralic language family. The Taimyr Region borders the Evenk Autonomous Region, and Evenki bands traditionally lived in the southern areas of the Taimyr. The largest native group in the Taimyr is the Dolgan, who traditionally lived from Dudinka to Khatanga and in the northwest Anabar District of Yakutia. The Dolgan language is a creole of Yakut, a Turkic language, and Evenk, a Tungusic language and reflects the multi-ethnic origin of the Dolgan.

The Taimyr Region comprises 850,000 square kilometers, approximately two times the land area of California. The northernmost point on the Eurasian landmass is Cape Chelyushkin, at the tip of the Taimyr Peninsula. Dudinka is the capital of the Taimyr Region and has a population of approximately 35,000. Located on the Yenesei River, the Dudinka port handles up to six million tons of freight annually.

The reason for the port in Dudinka is the city of Norilsk, and its mining and metallurgical combine, Norilsk Nickel, the world's third largest producer of nickel. Norilsk is administratively isolated from the Taimyr Region, and its quarter-million-plus population reports directly to Krasnoyarsk. Norilsk Nickel was privatized in 1994 through a series of voucher and cash auctions. Uneximbank in Moscow controls most of its stock. Weak or non-existent pollution-control technology for the last 50 years has led to the devastation of large areas of the tundra surrounding Norilsk, as well as of Lake Pyasina and the Pyasina River. In 1995, the combine released 24 million tons of waste, according to Taimyr regional authorities.<sup>2</sup> Also, since the enterprise's privatization, many long-time workers have left or retired. The combine is replacing them with less costly contract laborers from other republics of the former Soviet Union, such as the Ukraine.

Ust Avam, with a population of approximately 670, was the focal community for 12 months of my research. Ust Avam is approximately 400 kilometers northeast of Norilsk by river, and about the same distance by air from Dudinka. Ust Avam is home to two indigenous populations: the Nganasan and the Dolgan. The socio-demographic structure of the community is skewed toward the younger age categories.<sup>3</sup> Just under half of the population is 18 years of age or younger. Only ten percent of the population is over 47 years old.

The Nganasan, as semi-nomadic reindeer hunters and shamans, are better known in the ethnographic literature. In Ust Avam, 221 individuals are registered as Nganasan.

The Dolgan are not as well documented in the West. Traditionally, they were reindeer herders, but some were also merchants, and others sedentary trappers and hunters. There are 292 individuals registered as Dolgan in Ust Avam.

In addition to several Evenk and Nenets from other areas of the Taimyr, Ust Avam has 24 registered Russians, and several people from Kirgizia, Kalmykia, and Azerbaijan. There are 122 individuals of mixed ancestry in Ust Avam and more than 90 percent of these are under the age of 18.

Beginning in the 1930 rural native populations in the Avam tundra, as in the rest of the Taimyr Region, were incorporated into the Soviet agro-industrial complex through the formation of collective farms and, later, state farms administered by the Agricultural Bureau in Dudinka and the Ministry of Agriculture of the R.F.S.F.R. Construction of the contemporary settlement of Ust Avam began in 1971.

Part of the Dudinka city administration, Ust Avam has been tied to Norilsk economically since 1971. In 1971, by order of the Soviet of Ministries, a large tract of tundra was separated from the Joseph Stalin State Farm, centered in neighboring Volochanka, to create the government hunting enterprise "Taimyrskii" (*gospromkhoz*), administered through Krasnoyarsk (*kraiokhotupravlenie*) and the Ministry of Hunting of the R.F.S.F.R. As one of several *gospromkhoz* in the Soviet Union, Ust Avam had unique status among the Taimyr's native settlements.

The *gospromkhoz* Taimyrskii brought a new level of economy of scale to hunting, fishing, and trapping in the Taimyr. The main purpose of the enterprise was to produce meat, fish, and fur for industrial workers in Norilsk. The region's 17 state farms (*sovkhos*) contributed to Norilsk's food and fur supply, but not at this scale. Up to 50,000 caribou were slaughtered annually from 1971 through 1991 in the three subdivisions of the *gospromkhoz* (Avam, Kresty, and Agapa subdivisions). Non-native sports hunters on working vacations shot the majority of these caribou.

The native population of the Avam tundra gradually moved to the permanent settlement Ust Avam beginning in the early 1970s as the *gospromkhoz* constructed apartments and offered jobs. The Ust Avam subdivision had the highest proportion of native workers in the *gospromkhoz*. The enterprise assigned most of the territory in the Kresty and Agapa subdivisions that was closer to Norilsk to non-native hunters and mass slaughter brigades. These lands were still widely used by the Dolgan and Nganasan through the 1960s.

As Soviet workers, the Dolgan and Nganasan in Ust Avam still practiced some traditional activities, albeit with the benefits of modern implements and under production quotas (plans) assigned by the state. Partially as a result of settlement and the mechanical intensification of hunting, reindeer herding was completely phased out by 1978. Living standards for native hunters and workers in Ust Avam, as in other northern native villages, were relatively high throughout the 1980s. Native hunters were generally assigned territories in the Avam subdivision, and the enterprise paid good salaries and supplied tools and snowmobiles, non-local food, and fuel. Many women were included in the state enterprise, producing crafts and tundra clothing for brigades. They also worked in administrative and other budgetary posts. Educational opportunities and access to consumer goods improved throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The economic and cultural development of the 1970s and 1980s stands in stark contrast to the stormy period of

collectivization and collective farm amalgamation that took place between the 1930s and the 1960s in the Taimyr Region.

In April 1992, Boris Yeltsin issued a now-famous decree allowing Siberian natives to claim “family and clan” holdings on traditional lands previously allocated to rural state enterprises, such as state farms and the government hunting enterprise Taimyrskii.<sup>4</sup> The 1992 decree intended these holdings to be a mechanism for protecting traditional economic activities and territory. The decree came about in part due to the lobbying efforts of the Association of Peoples of Siberia and the published statements of some Russian ethnographers. Since 1992, one family/clan holding in the *gospromkhoz* Ust Avam subdivision, as well as three in the Agapa and Kresty subdivisions, have been formed.

As of January 1997, the majority of adults employed in Ust Avam “officially” still worked for the government hunting enterprise. Many of them, including the 55 professional hunters, had not received regular salaries for several years. But the maintenance of employment allowed the hunters to secure the increasingly meager supplies issued through the enterprise and to maintain rights to government pensions upon retirement.

Very few individuals, families, or clan communities have gone through the procedure to establish a family/clan holding in the Taimyr Region. Fewer than 50 were established from 1992 through 1997. Despite the new political and economic freedoms available after the collapse of socialism, land claims were rarely pursued, and many of those that were pursued are inactive. This lack of interest in land claims is a trend that begs further explanation.

#### **Methods**

My fieldwork in Ust Avam utilized series of techniques to document changing ecological, economic, and political relationships. This information was to be used to check the expectations of the models of social change I brought into the field.

On one level, human-to-land relationships, I documented production techniques and use of renewable resources. I generated data on time allocation, inputs, outputs, and location of foraging for 123 excursions. These data allow an analysis of predictability and efficiency for a number of foraging tasks. In interviews with professional hunters, I also generated production information for the socialist period, views on relationships to the land, and opinions about post-Soviet changes in local land tenure.

Within the community of Ust Avam, my inquiry was focused on the changing relative importance of the market and sharing economies. I conducted structured interviews of 79 household heads in Ust Avam on these topics, as well as family land-use history, sharing patterns, incomes, and consumption requirements. This information aided in my analysis of local explanations of their strategies for survival. I also recorded food-consumption patterns, documenting the composition of and participants in more than 1200 meals.

On a third level of analysis, I was interested in changing relationships between the local community and the larger economy, and to what extent these changes were due to some kind of grass-roots action vs. top-down decision-making. In interviews with hunters and archival work at the Agricultural Bureau, government archive, and other offices in Dudinka, I documented changes in land tenure, production for the larger economy, and supply of industrially finished goods to the local community.

### Models for Socio-Economic Change in the Siberian North

Pika and Prokhorov co-authored an optimistic model for socio-economic development of native Siberians.<sup>5</sup> The model, Neotraditionalism, implied that development of native north Siberians would lie somewhere between full autonomy, or nationalism, and full acculturation. The neotraditionalism model hypothesizes that mixed economic activities would favor a renewed, or “live,” ethnicity. The model assumes formal micro-economic principles in the exchange of surplus for new technology and information. It also assumes grassroots political action to support self-determined social, political, and economic development.

Of the expectations from the neotraditionalism model, I found evidence to support the growth of indigenous subsistence economies. However, relationships with the market were becoming less equitable, considering the long delays or freezes in payments, and the price gouging that took place in the sale of industrially finished goods. In addition, there was little new productive technology available for rural native populations. Decreased ability to purchase goods, through lack of cash and reduced availability, goes against expectations of the neotraditionalism model. Revitalization was virtually non-existent in the Taimyr native settlements, and superficial on the national level. The Association of Peoples of Taimyr and its national counterpart, the Association of Native Small-Numbering Peoples of the Far North, Siberia, and the Far East, have had little legislative impact since the 1993 dissolution of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation and institution of the new constitution.

As an alternative model, I adapted Pertti Peltó's description of socio-economic development of Saami reindeer herders.<sup>6</sup> In this Differentiation model, formal micro-economic assumptions of human behavior come into play with privatization of state-owned industries and decontrolled markets. Native communities experience increased external dependencies, as well as socio-economic differentiation and acculturation.

Of the expectations for the differentiation model, I have documented supply and demand, especially for non-locally produced consumer goods such as imported TVs. The residents of Ust Avam are of the opinion that most exchange now occurs through barter. This trend goes against expectations from the differentiation model, however. Cash purchasing of goods is now a supplementary strategy, whereas prior to 1991 it was the norm and the state strongly discouraged giving and barter.<sup>7</sup> Reorientation of economies of scale to private ownership has simply not occurred. In fact, many of the capital investments in the Avam tundra made during the socialist period have gone to communal use. The competitive consumption and consumerism occurring in urban areas in Russia has not reached the Taimyr's remote villages.

In long discussions with native families and hunters, I developed the idea of survival economy as an alternative model for socio-economic change in north Siberian native communities. Survival economy means that the actor is thrust into, and attempts to weather, an extended economic depression. People are not enjoying life, but simply trying to exist until conditions improve. In the words of one Dolgan hunter, “*Bihigi eredebenebit.*” He translated into Russian as “*My vyzhivaem,*” or “We are surviving.”

The following excerpts from letters I recently received underscore the unpredictability of the formal economic sector, and the reduced access to external goods and services.

18 August 1998

The navigation period has ended. They brought coal and diesel fuel. I and Valodya and the other hunters carried coal from the barge. They still have not paid us. It is not known if they will pay us.

It is bad that there is no gasoline here. They gave us gas, but it is badly mixed with diesel. Motors are breaking.

10 December 1998

Now the routine helicopter flight comes only once a month. And the tickets got more expensive. They promise that the An-2 bi-planes will fly. I don't know how much this is true. Changes in the settlement are still not exactly understandable. They are flying in sugar and flour on Mi-6 helicopters, but there is not enough for everyone.

The key concept in my model is the decrease in dependencies on the larger economy. In Ust Avam, these decreases appear to be a function of reduced access to government and services (despite the minimum fuel and emergency food supplies). Reliance on the local subsistence economy and sharing networks is the result. Cash exchanges with the larger economy are much reduced from previous levels and take on supplementary importance.

The costs of production relative to average salaries, especially in transportation and certain foodstuffs, have increased rapidly since 1992. Conversely, the value of goods native workers produce—reindeer meat, fish, and pelts—has decreased (to less than 20 percent of pre-1991 values for some commodities).<sup>8</sup> By 1991, the *gospromkhoz* mass slaughter was largely abandoned, and fewer than 2000 caribou were shot for the government hunting enterprise in the fall of 1997. While the native hunters of Ust Avam were peripheral participants in the mass slaughter of river-crossing caribou in the fall, some of the more important activities to them, such as summer fishing and fox trapping, have been “closed,” as far as the *gospromkhoz* is concerned, since 1993 and 1994.

In summary, evidence supporting the survival-economy model includes decreased external inputs and dependencies.

- Shipments of equipment, food, and fuel to Ust Avam are significantly diminished from their pre-1991 levels.
- Concurrently, economies of scale in production have collapsed. Less is being produced for the wider market.
- Proportionally more of what is produced enters the sharing economy.
- Within the local economy, one-way meat- and fish-giving occurs mainly between relatives.
- Relatives pool cash to purchase high-priced items.
- Two-way sharing of meat and fish with delayed returns appears to be operative for non-related, casual hunting partners and their households, appearing to reduce household consumption variance.
- The local code of “Give meat or fish if you have it” encourages provision of meat and fish to non-relatives, the elderly, friends, people that are incompetent, and even those

that are lazy. In Ust Avam’s dangerous environment, this kind of gift may also work as a long-term investment to reduce variance for old age or loss of life.

- There is some transfer of meat and fish into other currencies, such as alcohol, mainly through barter with non-residents of Ust Avam.
- Good hunters did not have higher political status in the settlement. In fact, hunters appeared to have lower status vis-à-vis budgetary workers, especially since their salaries were suspended several years ago.

**Subsistence as a Low-Risk Economic Strategy**

Why is it that a reliance on subsistence is part of the survival-economy model, and not massive migration to the urban centers? The answer lies in part in the unpredictability of the larger market economy, and the Ust Avam population’s minimal exposure to it. An other part of the answer lies in the nature of subsistence production. In my research I found that subsistence hunting and fishing is, in fact, a low-risk activity. Tables 1 and 2 summarize the data for 118 foraging excursions and 10 foraging tasks.

Table 1 provides information on 11 foraging tasks defined from informant interviews. The table gives the number of observations of each type of foraging task and the proportion that were successful. I defined a successful foraging excursion as one during which some food item was produced. Based on these data, the majority of foraging tasks in Ust Avam are highly predictable. The chances that a hunter will return from a hunting excursion empty-handed are relatively low, except for arctic-fox trapping. The productivity of arctic fox varies greatly from year to year, depending on the rodent population. Even travel through the tundra provides some food returns.

*Table 1. The Predictability of Foraging (Ust Avam, 1993 through 1997)*

Task	Rate (%)	n	Success
On-water caribou hunt	8	100	
Ice-crust fishing	2	100	
Seine fishing	3	100	
Berry/mushroom hunting	6	100	
Open-water net fishing	12	83.3	
Ice fishing with nets	37	75.7	
Goose hunt		4	75
Burbot fishing with hooks	10	70	
On-land caribou hunt	10	60	
Arctic-fox trapping	7	28.6	
Travel, incidental hunting	19	5.3	

Table 2 provides harvest data for the 10 food- producing tasks and ranks the tasks in order of efficiency. The harvest figures are provided in units of kilograms per hunter-hour. I recorded the quantity of each species obtained in the foraging excursions I observed, as well as the time required and the number of participants. Average weights for each species were used to generate the Table 2 harvest data. The “on-land caribou hunt,” with a relatively low success rate (60 %), as shown in Table 1, is the most efficient task, producing more than 6 kilograms of meat per hunter-hour. This particular task is one of the most important for Ust Avam, since it occurs in the late fall and provides the community with winter meat.

*Table 2. Harvest per Unit Production Time (Ust Avam, 1993 through 1997)*

Task	Harvest	Product
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(kg/h-hr)

On-land caribou hunt	6.1		caribou
Ice fishing with nets	4.3		fish
Ice-crust fishing	3.23		fish
On-water caribou hunt	2.86		caribou
		0.07	fish
Open-water net fishing	2.13		fish
Seine fishing	2.06		fish
Burbot fishing with hooks	1.91		fish
Travel/incidental hunting	0.92		caribou
Berry/mushroom collecting	0.13		berry/mushrooms
		0.84	caribou
Goose hunt		0.11	goose
		0.13	fish
		0.01	ruff

The information in Tables 1 and 2 indicates the productive stability provided to households involved in subsistence hunting and fishing in Ust Avam. While they are no longer being paid regularly to produce meat and fish for the state, the hunters of Ust Avam are providing for their families and others in the community. Their recent experience with the formal economy suggests no such predictability.

The post-Soviet economy of the rural Taimyr stands in sharp contrast with the Soviet planned economy. Ust Avam residents summarized their view of the Russian government policy as “Live as you like” (*Zhite, kak khotite*). In economic terms, people make relatively less money, and thus pay fewer taxes.

### Conclusion

An initial burst of family/clan holding establishment in the Taimyr from 1992 through 1994 appears to support the neotraditionalism model, especially in the stated rationales of several holdings-heads that I interviewed. However, I feel that the formation of these holdings actually represents differentiation, especially between urban and settlement native populations. The majority of these 50 holdings are in close proximity to Dudinka or Norilsk. Some of these are attempting to make profits through contracts for meat and fish with organizations in Dudinka or Norilsk. The profits, if any, have been used to purchase new living quarters, hunting equipment, or other investments. This orientation is leading to increased dependency on external inputs and acculturation, as predicted by the differentiation model. Family/clan holdings in the more remote areas are generally inactive in terms of commercial contracts. Few new holdings in any area have been formed since 1996. This lack of recent interest in land claims underscores people’s understanding that there is little benefit in privatization and entrepreneurial activity, an opinion I gleaned from interviews in Ust Avam. Currently, there is little impetus for large-scale ethnic revival among the Taimyr’s indigenous populations contrary to the prediction of the neotraditionalism model.

For the vast majority of the native population in rural Taimyr settlements, individual evaluations of risk and uncertainty in subsistence and market sectors appear to be factored into cost-benefit analyses of various land-tenure strategies. The subsistence economy, with relatively good predictability for foraging returns and multiple strategies for sharing, provides community households with their major food resource—protein. There is no need, as of yet, to go through formal procedures to gain title to land. People are surviving as they can until the economy improves.

Similarly, populations across Russia are relying upon their own production efforts to varying extents to ease the vagaries of the economic transition. This strategy has highly predictable results: production of food. But subsistence production and informal exchange reduce reliance on the market sector, which, when taken cumulatively, reduces Russia's income and the government's ability to manage the national economy. Thus, rational individual economic choices on the micro-level are adding to the difficulties Russia is facing in its transition to the free market.

#### Notes

I am thankful to my many good friends in Ust Avam and the Ust Avam Administration for their help and cooperation during my stays. *Üchügei bultanyy!* (Good hunting!) I am also grateful for the help of my colleagues and friends at the Northern Sector of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology (RAN), the Ethnography Department, Moscow State University, the Association of Small-Numbering Peoples of the Far North, Siberia, and the Far East, the Association of Peoples of Taimyr, the Agricultural Board of the Taimyr Autonomous Region, the Government Archive of the Taimyr Autonomous Region, the Regional Studies Museum in Dudinka, the Taimyr Center for Folk-Creative Activities, and the Boris Molchanov Memorial Museum.

This research was supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation's Arctic Social Science Program (Doctoral Dissertation Research Award No. 9528936; N.A. Chagnon, Principal Investigator). My 1997 research was supported by a grant from the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX), with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the U.S. Department of State, Program for Scientific Research in Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe (Title VIII). The research I conducted in 1996 was supported by a grant from the American Council of Teachers of Russian (ACTR), with funds provided by the U.S. Department of State, Program for Research and Training on Eastern Europe and the Independent States of the Former Soviet Union (Title VIII). Field research conducted in 1995 and 1996 was also supported by a Humanities/Social Science Research Grant from the Graduate Division, University of California, Santa Barbara. None of these organizations is responsible for the views expressed. *John P. Ziker, Institute for Social Behavioral, and Economic Research, University of California, Santa Barbara. Santa Barbara, CA 93106.*

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<sup>1</sup> Cashdan, Elizabeth (ed.). 1990 *Risk and Uncertainty in Tribal and Peasant Economies*. Boulder: Westview Press. Plattner, Stuart (ed.) 1989 *Economic Anthropology*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1989. cf. Verdery, Katherine, and Michael Burawoy (eds.) 1999 *Uncertain Transitions: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication from Vladimir Melnichenko, Head of the Taimyr Regional Committee on Land Use and Land Management; also reported in the Norilsk newspaper *Zapolyarnaya Pravda*, No. 317, 30 May 1996, "Ekologia i Ya," page 5.

<sup>3</sup> I generated the socio-demographic data from a community census conducted in conjunction with the Ust Avam settlement administration.

<sup>4</sup> Yeltsin, B. N. 1992 "Ykaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii o Neotlozhnykh Merakh po Zashchite Mest Prozhivaniia i Khoziaistvennoi Deiatel'nosti Malochislennykh Narodov Severa, No. 397" ["Decree of the President of the Russian Federation about Immediate Measures for

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Protection of Places of Residence and Economic Activities of the Small-Numbering Peoples of the North, No. 397”]. *Rossiiskie Vesti* (Moscow), April, No. 4 (50): 4.

<sup>5</sup> Pika, A.I., and V.V. Prokhorov 1994 *Neotraditsionalism na Rossiiskom Severe* [*Neotraditionalism in the Russian North*]. Moscow: Institute of National Prognosis, Center for Human Demography and Ecology, Russian Academy of Sciences.

<sup>6</sup> Pelto, Pertti J. 1987 *The Snowmobile Revolution: Technology and Social Change in the Arctic*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

<sup>7</sup> Ziker (1998:221-225) provides structured survey results for 79 Ust Avam households on their opinion of changes in the kinds of exchange before and after 1991. Ziker, John P. 1998 “Kinship and Exchange Among the Dolgan and Nganasan of Northern Siberia.” *Research in Economic Anthropology*, Vol. 19, pp. 191 – 238. JAI Press Inc.

<sup>8</sup> Ziker (1998:209-213) provides data on the relative cost of bread and Russian snowmobiles and the relative value of arctic-fox pelts and average salaries for 1981 – 1997.