

# **Televisions and Computers: Giving New Names to Old Tools in the Political Economy of Central Kamchatka**

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At one of the farewell parties marking the end of my fieldwork, I asked my host about the salmon caviar they had set out on the table. No one was touching it. It was early March, which means the caviar had been packed about six months earlier. For caviar to keep that long it must be fairly heavily salted and after months in storage it gets bitter and sticky. Nonetheless, I was a guest, this was a party, and caviar is considered festive.

Along with the caviar which no one was touching, there were salmon pies, fried salmon, smoked salmon, salt cured salmon garnished with oil and onions, various salads made from the beets, garlic and carrots which are stored in cellars, pickled tomatoes and cucumbers, salted cabbage, mashed potatoes and boiled potatoes with butter-fried onions poured over them. Later with tea there were four kinds of jam prepared from local berries. As if all of this wasn't enough, however, in the middle of the meal, when it seemed that there was no room on the table, a large plate of fried chicken was brought in and presented as a sort of center piece. The chicken was from the US. The American chicken legs which are sold in Russia are referred to as Bush legs, because they began to appear during President Bush's administration, and like so many other foreign products in Russia, they provoke a combination of intrigue, contempt and envy. They are said to be unhealthy, tainted with preservatives and growth hormones; they are said to be flavorless, ersatz, unsanitary - people tell stories of Russians dying from eating these chicken legs. At the same time, they are a common item in many households. American hot dogs, absent at this particular meal, are spoken of in the same way. Locally raised beef and pork costs three to five times more than the imported chicken legs, which go for about two dollars a kilo.

The family's patriarch, a 70-yr. old Kamchadal man, didn't touch the chicken, and even made a point of reaching for the salmon and grumbling about Bush legs. As his children and grandchildren laughed at him and quickly served up the chicken, I asked about the caviar. I had eaten with this family many times before and knew that they never served caviar, and that Pavel, the grandfather, ate little more than fish and potatoes. On nights when his wife cooked noodles with canned beef, or cabbage soup, or hot dogs, or chicken, she always prepared a portion of fish

for him. On a number of occasions she told me with a certain amused fascination that he eats fish every day. She had moved to Kamchatka forty years ago and still expressed a certain interest in the amount of fish consumed by her husband and some of his relatives. So when I asked him why no one was touching the caviar I was surprised to hear him tell me that he didn't like caviar. 'It's bitter' he said, and he told me again about how when he was a child his mother fed caviar to the chickens, "whole buckets!" His father ground caviar into a paste and used it to seal the windows in winter. Another woman told me that her parents had mixed it with pigment and painted thick layers onto the chimney of the stove in the family's kitchen. I agreed that it tasted bitter and asked about all the caviar which is sold in the local market. "Caviar! Caviar!" he started fluttering his hands in a gesture he frequently used to mock popular reverence for something. "All those people in Moscow, they don't even know what fresh caviar tastes like. They buy this orange stuff because they want to look rich. They don't even eat it, they just put it on the table."

This sort of eruption around the subject of caviar is typical for older Kamchadals. Caviar has become the main source of income in the region's post-Soviet economy. Even official figures for unemployment, which are underestimates, suggest that in Kamchatka about 25 percent of the adult population are now unemployed. Many workers in Russia are technically employed, and they do work, but are not paid for months at a time; and six to ten month pay delays were typical for the people I knew there in 1997 and 1998. One reason caviar rarely appears on peoples' tables is that most people only eat it fresh, and thus it is only available when the salmon appear. More importantly though, caviar is the principle source of cash income in many households. Depending on the time of year, it sells for between eight and twenty dollars a kilo, and compared with homegrown vegetables, wild berries and mushrooms, which are also sold in the market, caviar requires less work and commands much higher prices.

The caviar trade, from the fishing to much of the packaging and transport, is largely illegal, and as a foreign graduate student, it is virtually impossible to measure the yields in such an economy. However, most people were at least willing to concur with my guess that a 'typical' caviar poacher, in the name of efficiency and convenience, throws about a ton of perfectly good salmon meat back into the river. Strangely, while it is somehow legal to buy and sell caviar in the market, it is forbidden to sell fish, and while traveling home from the river, it is much easier to conceal a few jars of caviar than it is to conceal large sacks of fish. Thus, the fishermen

discard the meat, and with the profits they earn from the caviar they buy, among other things, frozen chicken legs. At the dinner table this was a slightly awkward topic because Pavel's five children, who were in their late twenties and early thirties, want to have chicken on the table. Most of the Kamchadals of this generation try to distance themselves from the stereotype which my friend Pavel was so proud of. They tend not to want to eat fish everyday. They want steady jobs with steady salaries and they want to buy their food in stores. They want to buy cars and rent movies and they want to travel. The last thing they want is to live by a subsistence economy, and this is partly due to the derogatory connotations of the word Kamchadal. For most people it's an epithet, a code for uneducated, lazy, simple, and poor. So when Pavel began again, as he had so many times before, to complain about the poachers, about the fish they throw away, the rapidly dwindling salmon populations, and to recount the incredible bounty which he remembered from his youth, his children respectfully quieted him down, poured a round of vodka and changed the subject because they wanted to avoid yet another critique of a lifestyle they themselves had embraced even as they regarded it with a certain ambivalence and even shame.

My goal in this short paper is to introduce a set of tensions and dynamic conflicts which have been exacerbated but not necessarily created by the post-Soviet economic collapse. Kamchatka's contemporary political economy has brought complex pressures to bear on the ways in which Kamchadal identities are articulated and determined. The remainder of this paper will offer a brief historical overview, and then concentrate on a paradoxical example in which fishing implements (which in many ways resemble the much older variants found in museums) have been specifically renamed (one is now called a 'television' and the other a 'computer') in a move that distinguishes contemporary 'subsistence' fishing from earlier fishing practices. Despite fundamental changes in virtually every area of their lives, fish and fishing are still sites through which Kamchadal identity and history are both produced and reflected upon.

The Kamchadals trace their ancestry to both the Itel'mens, who have inhabited the Kamchatka peninsula for over 10,000 years, and also to the Russians, Ukrainians and Americans who came to Kamchatka as traders, hunters and settlers. The Kamchadal ethnos, as it is presently understood to be distinct from the Itel'men, can be traced to the late seventeenth century, when Vladimir Atlasov founded the peninsula's first Cossack fort, near the mouth of the Kamchatka River. The Russians succeeded in establishing military authority over the native

people in Kamchatka, but it was not until the Soviet era that Russians achieved their goal of consolidating the dispersed natives into towns and villages and instituting agriculture as opposed to fishing and hunting, as the principle lifestyle. Today, Kamchatka and the entire Russian north is populated principally by Russians and Ukrainians who migrated to these remote frontiers in the 1960's - 80's seeking adventure and hardship pay. In the post-Soviet era, many of those who have not moved south are turning to the land as the subsidies which supported the Soviet north have dwindled and hunting and fishing represent the most viable endeavors.

The sense of slippage and developmental failure that has accompanied this decline is part of what appears to be a pattern of Russian exploration into the northern regions. For example, in 1830, writing about his travels in central Kamchatka, Peter Dobell observed that the Russians, "Instead of drawing the native to their mode of living and industry, neglect everything like civilization, and are themselves now quite as wild and uncouth as the Kamchadals, besides being infinitely more vicious" (Dobell:1970 (1830): 51). Later he concluded with ominous prescience: "I am persuaded the Kamchadals, nay, even the Russians born in Kamchatka, can never be weaned from their fondness for hunting and an uncivilized life, until the country shall become well peopled, and the fish and game much scarcer than at present"(74). A century later the journal *Ekonomicheskaja Zhizn' Dal'nogo Vostoka*,(1922-30) which was devoted to the economic development of the Soviet Far East, expressed a similar anxiety over and over again in articles suggesting that the Russian settlers in Kamchatka had adopted the native cultures as much as the natives had adopted Russian culture.

In 1927, in the spirit of the day, the Soviet government solved the problem neatly and definitively by distinguishing between the Itel'men, who were referred to as 'actual natives' and the Kamchadals "the population of the Kamchatka peninsula which calls itself Kamchadal, speaks Russian, and lives settled." (cited in Murashko: 1995) The real natives were subject to a changing array of cultural improvement schemes which were relatively consistent throughout the north (Grant: 1995), and the Kamchadals lived through the Soviet period simply as locals. This categorical distinction was retracted in 1991, and since then many Kamchadals have been struggling to ensure that they receive special access to natural resources as well as other increasingly elusive benefits which theoretically are the right of Russia's Peoples of the North. Talk of material rewards based on an elusive ethnicity have provoked a wave of claimants. This confusion about identifying Kamchadals has reached such a peak, and there have been so many

complaints of Russians and Ukrainians passing as Kamchadal in order to receive fishing limits, that there is a drive to foil imposters by registering all of the Kamchadals and entering all of their names into a computer. One archivist told me that people have offered to pay her to falsify records and produce a forged ethnicity certificate granting them native rights. Reflecting on the stereotype of the Kamchadal as reticent and withdrawn, one man suggested to me that the result of this registration drive would be a data base of people who were surely not Kamchadal. Supporting this ironic sentiment was a Kamchadal woman who told me that she was not going to register because she would be ashamed (*stidno*) to appeal to a Russian bureaucrat for proof of her own identity.

The tensions which this history brings to bear on Kamchadal lives mirror certain tensions existing in contemporary anthropological debate. Theorists and fieldworkers have foregrounded phenomena such as 'deterritorialization', cultural hybridity and ever-shifting borders (political and cultural) in post-colonial contexts. However, political recognition and future access to natural resources for ethnic minorities such as the Kamchadals often depend on the projection of exactly the opposite, that is images of rootedness and cultural purity. Thus, for example, James Clifford can rhetorically, and skeptically pose the question: "What does it mean at the end of the twentieth century, to speak of a 'native land'?"(1988:275). Conversely, Talal Asad has warned that one of the unintended effects of over emphasizing hybridity and the proliferation of difference at the end of the twentieth century, is to undermine the authenticity of certain marginalized and disenfranchised groups. He writes that "it is a notorious tactic of the dominating power to deny a distinct unity to populations it seeks to manipulate, to assume for itself the status of universal reason while attributing to others a singular contingency" (1990:473). The confusion surrounding this ethnic database is just one example of what appears to be almost a global obsession with the Quixotic project of fixing ethnic and racial categories. In my work I have tried to tack between the positions outlined by Clifford and Asad above, that is, to manage the tension between a post-structuralist theory of shifting and unstable identity constructs and the material and rhetorical power which images of fixed identities command in the world of politics and economics.

To demonstrate this, I want to turn to an example in which Kamchadals have used ironic metaphors to rename tools of a trade which has been changed almost beyond recognition, and in doing so, have, wittingly or not, evaded the trick question of cultural authenticity which more

self-consciously nativist projects have fallen into. During my fieldwork along the Kamchatka River basin in 1997-98, the most prevalent fishing implements were a certain type of net referred to as a 'television' and a gaffing hook called a 'computer'. Both of these tools are illegal, and thus in the most straightforward manner, the fishermen have circumvented the debate over who is allowed to fish by persisting on such a vast scale that it creates an open secret. Everyone knows that almost everyone is poaching, and hardly anyone gets caught. In a more subtle fashion, this naming speaks to the prevailing conditions, and speaks to the changes which confront the Kamchadals and millions of other people in Russia today.

The television is easier to use than the computer and thus more common. It consists of a three to five meter length of iron bar, a similar length of net and about five floats made from styrofoam or wood. The iron bars can easily be obtained from the numerous abandoned construction sites which litter the landscape like instant ruins. The bar lies on the bottom of the river and the net is held vertically above it by the floats. It is important that the net is the appropriate height, because if the floats lie on the surface of the water they are easily detected by game wardens. A rope is tied to the bar and fixed to the bank, concealed under bushes or sand. The fishermen check these nets periodically, once a day, or every few hours depending on how the salmon are running. They remove any fish and toss the television back into the water. The fish are cleaned immediately and typically, the fisherman walks back to town with only the caviar, having thrown the carcasses back into the river. The game wardens destroy these nets when they find them, but for the fishermen a television is easy to replace.

No one claimed to know why these nets are called televisions, and when I asked, many people seemed to have never really thought about it. The first guess was usually based on the rectangular shape, suggesting that the name came from the physical resemblance. Further discussion often led people to remark on the ironic ways that the name is used, as an innocuous code word for the illegal activity, a code incidentally which worked perfectly as the unemployment rate was soaring and television was a principle activity for many.

The computer is an even simpler device than the television. It is made from a five meter wooden pole, usually an entire sapling, which has a length of rope attached to the thin end with two fist-sized treble hooks dangling at the end of the rope. The first time I saw these being used, there were five men lined up in along the river bank, roughly 15 meters apart and each was standing behind a tall blind made from piled shrubs. The hooks lie on the bottom of the river and

the men stand watching for a fish to swim over, at which point they quickly jerk the hooks up and in one motion haul the fish out of the water and onto the bank. Unlike the television, which is essentially a trap, using a computer requires great concentration and quick reflexes. As with the television, the specific origin or meaning of the name was unclear, but people typically guessed that it came from the fact that staring at the water resembled working at a computer, sitting still and watching a blue screen all day long.

The men I met on my first encounter with the computer all worked together doing plumbing and building maintenance and they joked about having gotten promotions, now they were working with computers. This is such a pointed remark precisely because the only people who actually do get paid well and on time at the organizations where they work are administrators and accountants. It is quite strange in fact to visit some of the ailing industries in the area, such as the collective farm, the chemical fertilizer depot, the heating plants or the timber mill, where deserted fields and machinery belie a bustling accounting department full of administrators and accountants, often sitting in front of computer screens and generally busy using the organization's resources to operate sideline business ventures. In light of their virtual unemployment, the wry renaming of what is essentially an old fishing technique offered these men endless opportunity to vent, with fairly bitter sarcasm, their sense of disenfranchisement and their anxiety about being left behind in the transition.

The point of this paper has been to outline some of the historical and economic pressures which the Kamchadals are currently negotiating and to describe specific points where the massive shifts in global political economy are creating conflicts and change in Kamchadal lives. It seems appropriate that the Kamchadal response comes through as an ambiguous dialogue which brings the past into sharp contact with the present. Pavel's story about his father caulking the windows with caviar was enough to startle his children into awkward laughter as the ambiguities of the transition were impossible to ignore. The innovative names which this paper has described serve as scripts or codes which comment on the post-Soviet transition, and leave room for the voicing of Kamchadal experiences without being self-consciously associated with ethnic revival in the way that dance troupes, textbooks and databases are.

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