

# From Materfamilias to Dinner-Lady: The Administrative Destruction of the Reindeer Herder's Family Life

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## Abstract

The imposition of collectivization on reindeer herders industrialized their previous subsistence herding into a system of ranching, making the vast landscape into a giant open-air meat factory. Children removed to harsh and distant boarding schools now lack the skills or sensibilities to work with animals. The removal of women from the land and their placing into newly established villages forced them into quite separate orbits of work and movement from those of the male herders. As a result, the very existence of family life is now threatened by alienation, alcoholism and suicide. This article follows the different destinies of three herding families among a community of Even in the northern Sakha Republic (Yakutia), from the early days of *perestroika* into post-Soviet times. It reveals a spectrum of adaptation or resistance to the state farm, and focuses on diverse possibilities of fulfilment (or its absence) for their women as an older model of integrated family matriarch is replaced by that of a hired dinner-lady. It shows how people can become vulnerable in different ways because of small differences in their demographic and personal circumstances, but also suggests that significant improvements can be made by small adjustments to budgetary or schooling procedures.

## Keywords

Reindeer herding, Eveny (Tungus), family life, boarding school, GULAG, development, women's role

## Indigenous people on a vast landscape

Among the indigenous minorities of the Far North, Soviet modernization had a peculiar and drastic effect on gender relations. By playing itself out against a particularly challenging landscape, it has drawn men and women into orbits of work and movement which are so separated that many of them scarcely meet from one end of the year to the other. In this way it replaced an earlier complementarity between the roles of men and women with a relationship which was so distant that it has come to threaten any viable family life, and thus the viability of the community itself.

I shall interpret this situation as a local consequence of mainstream Soviet policies, and shall trace the effect of these policies from the time I started to visit these communities in 1988, through to the end of the 1990s, a decade during which I spent much of my time living there—that is, from the last swansong of Soviet stability and into the time when people were

flung unsupported into very diverse and contingent fates. I shall end with certain possible recent chinks of light in this generally dark picture. I have not been able to explore this last point in my own research, but believe that these offer some important, and possibly more hopeful, avenues for future researchers.

My focus is on three herding families registered in the village of Sebian (officially Sebian-Kiuel'), in the Verkhoiansk Mountains north of Yakutsk.<sup>1</sup> This is a community of Even people (plural Eveny).<sup>2</sup> I have spent months living and migrating with each of these families over the course of some twenty years, and many more details of their activities and relations over this eventful period are given in my book *The Reindeer People* (Vitebsky 2005). I have also visited indigenous reindeer-herding communities of various ethnicities in other parts of the Russian North, and have learned much from my students and research associates who have lived for long periods in many more locations. Despite local variations, the overall picture is depressingly consistent: a crisis, induced by the interaction of policy and landscape, in relations between men and women in any given generation, and across generations between parents and children.

Sebian is a village of around 800 people. From their base in this village, a mere 90 men tend several herds of reindeer around a territory of one million hectares, about half the size of Wales (or the size of Delaware). This landscape is sharply mountainous, and their migration routes move constantly up and down valleys, along rushing stony rivers and over treacherous passes. Reindeer provided transport (by sledge in winter and saddle in summer) for an earlier, fully nomadic life based largely on hunting. During the Soviet period the number of reindeer was greatly increased to provide not only transport, but also meat. In 1988 there were some 20,000 reindeer, divided into between 12 and 14 herds, though today the number has dropped by around half.

The central position of the village in everyone's life (as well as its internal politics) has now become habitual. But all of this is a recent phenomenon: the village was founded in the late 1920s and its substitution of log cabins for nomadic tents did not really encompass many of the people until the 1960s. However, it has now radically transformed the relationship between people and the land. By its very lack of movement, the village changed the experience of space. When out on the landscape, one might still think of travelling as the old people travelled, indefinitely in every direction, as over a web. But back in the village one realizes how it commands the surrounding *taiga* (forest), so that space radiates out from the village in concentric circles. A new official terminology has come into being which reveals how the village is itself seen as lying at the outer edge of a far grander concentric space with its centre in Moscow. Villages like this were built throughout the Soviet North. Locations were chosen for ease of access to the outside world rather than to the reindeer pasture, and villages were designated as "points of population" (*naselënnnye punkty*), as if no population could exist without them or beyond them, and "points of supply" (*punkty obespecheniia*), as though supplies could come only from outside and not from the land itself.

Earlier nomadic life required a full family, with men and women carrying out complementary tasks and training the next generation of children. Though there are many reasons why informants may sometimes idealize a former way of life, it was a fundamental principle that families—father, mother, children, and elders—lived and nomadized together (Alekseev 1993). Family relations were linked to what people call *taiga* values based on

taciturnity and discretion, in which one would sense the feelings and needs of others through an extreme sensitivity which encompassed the moods of human companions, animals and landscape.

Soviet reform, being sharp-edged and modernist, was impatient with such values. Communist missionaries saw the Siberian natives as primitive nomads who needed to be rescued from backwardness. They started to “civilize” the native peoples, not only by building them permanent wooden villages, but also by providing basic schooling and medical facilities, introducing state bureaucracy and teaching them communist values (a process brilliantly described by Slezkine 1994). This approach was well-meaning and brutal at the same time: the regime gave prizes to housewives for the cleanest tent while it also imprisoned or killed the indigenous peoples’ spiritual support, the shamans who linked them to the powers and spirits of the land.

Despite the inroads of the fur trade since the seventeenth century (Armstrong 1965), the previous economy had still operated largely at a subsistence level and was not very “productive.” The move to collective farms (*kolkhoz*, changed in the 1960s across the North to state farms, *sovkhos*) imposed a model designed for peasant areas of western Russia with little modification to hunting and herding communities with quite different economies, cultures and landscapes. Since the herds of reindeer were generally far from the new villages, reindeer herders were re-structured on the model of Russian industrial workers when they were similarly far from their residential base. Experimental models imitating industrial shift work (*vakhtovyi metod* or *smennyi vypas*) were tested in the northwestern areas of the Soviet North and then extended to the rest of the country (Filippov et al. 1976; Anufriev 2001: 242-243). In effect, reindeer herding was industrialized, and its emphasis changed from subsistence to ranching as the landscape became a giant open-air meat factory. This new-found productivity of meat was linked to the consumption needs of the growing settlements of Russian miners across the North, a process which was greatly accelerated with the development of hydrocarbon extraction and the advent of helicopters in the 1960s. And so in much of the North there arose a dual economy separating indigenous people and newcomers, in which the occasional crossovers (Habeck 2005; Kwon 1993) stand out all the more strikingly.<sup>3</sup>

### **Enforced Separation of Men from Women**

Yet the indigenous animal economy and the white man’s mineral economy had at least one thing in common: they created concentrations of male workers deprived of the company of women. Only the men who tended the herd every day were considered to constitute “the able-bodied population directly concerned with reindeer herding, for whom nomadism is essential” (Lashov 1973:94), and were kept on the land. But the women who cooked, sewed, and collected berries and herbs, as well as providing laughter, affection and partnership, were dismissed as “not directly involved in reindeer herding.” Being “unutilized labor resources,” they were removed to the village and given typical Soviet female occupations, freshly invented for the newly established village, such as cook, nurse, administrator, accountant, teacher and cleaner. In addition, “civilized” but loss-making forms

of farming were introduced to keep them occupied, like rearing arctic foxes in cages to provide fur, and looking after cows which could not survive without hay and shelter for nine months of the year. It took two generations to drain the women off the land. By the time I arrived in the late 1980s, just one woman was left in each brigade as a paid “tent-worker” (*chumrabotnitsa*) to cook for the male herders—no longer a wife, mother and partner in reindeer management, but a hired dinner-lady.

The men also suffered a further fragmentation. The herders were organized into “brigades,” which were supposedly recruited not by family connection but by decree of the farm administration. The male head of a herding family was replaced by an appointed “brigadier.” Meanwhile, more and more men also moved into the village to take up administrative and technical positions. These men at least would not be deprived of female company. So by 1988, I could perceive two class systems in operation: the universal Soviet distinction between members and non-members of the Communist Party, and a specific local distinction between villagers of both sexes and male herders, in which the herders formed a depressed underclass, the foundation of all productivity but still despised for their forest existence and excluded from the administrative decisions made in the village during their almost permanent absence.

The role of the men who remained out on the land as herders was fatefully changed by their re-definition as industrial workers. Their purposeful and responsive nomadism was dismissed as primitive rootlessness, while the factory metaphor transformed the skillful, self-sufficient hunter into a wilderness proletarian. In the Soviet heyday he could also earn bonuses and medals as a socialist hero of productivity, but under perestroika this compensation was rapidly disappearing. Furthermore, this commitment to labor had a very different meaning for different kinds of people. The Russian engineers and Ukrainian miners on whom the herders’ job description was modeled had deliberately travelled to remote northern frontiers for adventure or money, and would return home in triumph to their families elsewhere (or with local indigenous girls in tow). But for the reindeer herders, there were no exotic women to be had, and nowhere else to go: this was home, and they were condemned to a lifetime of near-celibacy.

The isolation of the men who remained on the land also had consequences for generational continuity. The tendency of the Soviet state to intrude itself into domestic life as a surrogate for the family and rival claimant of personal loyalty (Khlinovskaya Rockhill 2004, 2010) reached its extreme when faced with the reindeer-herding landscape. From the 1960s, children were taken away from their parents’ camp and put into boarding schools (*internat*), sometimes in the local village and sometimes hundreds of miles away, far from other people of their own ethnicity. By the 1980s, it was not only women (and male villagers) who were at the forefront of an intense alienation between the *taiga* and the village, but also children - in other words, everyone except a small but vital (and denigrated) section of the adult men. Those children who had close relatives staying with the reindeer herds (*stado*) would spend the summer holidays in the *taiga*, but the majority of children might never go there, and many of them had never seen a real reindeer. While Bloch (2003) and Liarskaya (2004) argue that the *internat* became partly assimilated into indigenous culture, my own data suggest that it was always associated with extraordinary harshness and misery, leading to an entire population traumatized in childhood (Vitebsky 2005:189-92; cf Nerkagi 1988). Around

1990, many boarding schools across the North were closed down and the children reunited with their mothers. This move was a response to public opinion, but I also interpret it as a tacit acknowledgement that the de-nomadization of women was complete, and that there were virtually no children left of school age whose mothers still lived out in the *taiga*.

By the time the *internat* was closed, gender relations had reached a crisis. In Sebian, like everywhere else, young men had become reluctant to work as herders. But this was not just for the more obvious reasons: a tough life, increasing consumerist expectations, and a boarding-school education that took them away from the land. Rather, it was because they knew they would be unlikely ever to marry—or that if they did marry, they would rarely see their wives and children. I saw how even the young men most devoted to reindeer herding were being torn between herding and a desire to marry, and that this could make them restless with their work and subject to bouts of rage and violent behavior (Vitebsky 2005: 207-211). The level of alcoholism, violence and suicide was very high, especially in the village and especially among young men (cf. Pika 1993).

Meanwhile, Eveny girls were increasingly marrying outsiders who came to the village for a while before going away again. These outsiders included vets, truck drivers and mechanics who might be Sakha (Yakut), Ukrainian or Estonian, men who sometimes take Eveny girls with them when they left, over the heads of local boys. With the introduction of cost-accounting (*khozraschet*) in the 1990s, direct air links from one village to another had been completely severed, and what few flights there were led only to the district capital or more usually the big city of Yakutsk (Vitebsky 2000). The village was now so isolated that young people were becoming too closely related to marry. Many of the older Eveny had migrated or married in from the territory of other villages as part of a way of life in which they rode regularly over hundreds of miles to other camps and communities, mingling at the great marriage marts of the spring festivals, showing off their skills in sewing, reindeer racing, wrestling and dancing to prospective partners and their parents. But most people under thirty, products of the *internat*, were so dependent on aviation that they hardly knew how to travel such distances across the land without dying on the way.

For the few women who remained on the land as *chumrabortnitsa*, the possibilities for living a fulfilling life according to their own ideas of womanhood were greatly reduced. Previously, the intimate space which women had controlled around the fire related not only to warmth and cooking, but also to childbirth and motherhood. By now, giving birth in the *taiga*, being a mother, even just being a wife, had become almost impossible. With the move into the village, many of the community's womanly activities were pooled—one might even say collectivized—as women became teachers, nurses and cooks for each other's children. Their only surviving function in the *taiga* was that of *chumrabortnitsa* who was there not as wife or mother but as a paid housekeeper.

When I ask young women why they do not want to live there, their first answer is fear of the cold, away from the warmth of the solid log cabins of the village. But I believe that this is not just about cold as such: they are also reacting negatively to the circumstances in which that cold is experienced. Life in the camps, they say, is not “civilized” (*tsivilizovannaia*) or “cultured” (*kul'turnaia*). These two words lie at the heart of the Soviet ideal of how one should live, and persist into post-Soviet consciousness. The continuum from wild to civilized, from wilderness to village to city, is reflected in all aspects of conduct, dress, and comfort

(cf. Habeck 2006). The frontier of metropolitan elegance lies, not between the city and the village, but between the village and the herding camps. In their short trips between house, shop and office, women in the village can pick their way through the mud in fashionable long coats and high-heeled leather boots, rather than the massive reindeer-fur coats and oversized boots which keep a herder alive in the open air for 24 hours a day.

The grandeur of the jagged mountains, the fresh air and reindeer milk, the smell as one spreads fresh larch branches on the floor, the meticulous packing of baggage for the next migration, and the competent life-or-death self-sufficiency with only the thinnest thread of radio or helicopter backup—all of these hold no attraction. These women see the herders as coarse and uncouth as they tramp into the village on their home leave in their dirty clothes and hit the bottle. The sight of a drunken herder in his home, surrounded by sober women, is made all the more painful by the knowledge that this is the twisted outcome of a systematic policy to undermine the family as the foundation of the economy. As the frontier model of the unattached male industrial worker continues to wreak its destruction, life in the *taiga* has become ever more masculinized and unattractive to women. The weighty brigadiers involved in planning and politics can speak for themselves, but their young herding lads are silent. Village girls say that they could not imagine marrying a herder, because of their lack of conversation. Television and magazines portray life as a torrent of words and easily revealed passions, and they come to desire this for themselves. Whether one thinks these passions are real or artificial, it would be hard to imagine a more opposite ideal from the *taiga* ethic which is still lived out by those who feel comfortable on the land. For these young girls, *taiga* values are inverted. To them, the men's communication with animals, rivers and mountains which make much speech unnecessary seems maladaptive. Rather than a talent, it is now interpreted as a deficiency. Young herders with their shy eyes are perceived as blank people and the *taiga*, with its finely-grained texture which only a few men can now read, as a space which is incapable of engaging their interest.

There is a further bizarre quirk in gender relations: scientific management and the rationale of productivity have affected the gendering of the *taiga* in contradictory ways for humans and animals. At the same time as reducing brigades of herders to a norm of one dinner-lady for every six men, the shift from small-scale transport to large-scale meat production has changed the gender composition of the reindeer herds in the opposite direction. The drive to produce new calves ensures that most male reindeer are slaughtered early in their lives, leaving only one good stud male for every 18 or 20 females. But male herders claim that female reindeer prefer to be handled by female humans, especially when being milked. So the *taiga* is filled with male humans tending female reindeer, both of them apparently wishing there were more female humans around.

### **Three Families and Their Destinies**

I have lived with or visited many herding brigades across the Russian North, but the three I know best are all on the territory of Sebian. In the system of the state farm administration they are numbered brigades 7, 8 and 10. Between them during the 1990s, they offered a spectrum of adaptation or resistance to the norm of the state farm. Though I have also witnessed the functioning of “weak” (*slabye*) brigades, these three brigades were among

the most successful in the official terms of productivity, though they achieved this with widely varying structures of family and labor—and with various configurations of satisfaction and suffering.

Brigade 10 conformed most closely to the official Soviet ideal, the factory model of several male herders who worked together as a team of workmates rather than as a family, under their capable, hard-working young brigadier Kostia. Their productivity, too, took place in the most officially approved form. A large proportion of their calves survived each year and they regularly won prizes for their high production of meat. Kostia, his deputy Arkadii and the other members of their brigade would leave their families in the village and go out to the herd in shifts for a few weeks at a time.

Kostia was married with children, but Arkadii was a young bachelor and his mother Kristina cooked for all the men as *chumrabortnitsa*. A *chumrabortnitsa* is almost always middle-aged or elderly. She is often the mother of one of the herders who (unlike a younger wife) is free to return to the land after her children have grown up. For the older generation, the job allows a continuation of a family relationship which would otherwise be severed. But this also contains an acknowledgement of the absence of a younger woman. As Kristina put it, “I live out here because I can’t bear to think of my boy and his friends with no wife and no mama to keep them fed and warm.”

The herders might be out for 12 or 15 hours at a time without food. Whenever they came back one by one, chilled and exhausted, Kristina would immediately drop her washing, sewing or cleaning and serve them hot tea and meat. But like many *taiga*-dwellers, she preferred the hard work of the *taiga* to what she saw as the boredom of the village.

“I like camp life, I prefer staying here, the air’s fresh, everything’s fresh,” she once explained. “I like the fresh reindeer milk best of all. Even if the work’s hard, it’s good all the same. I milk the females, catch the calves and tie them up, boil the kettle non-stop, make the bread, cook the meals, feed everybody five or seven times a day...” Then she paused and searched her mind. “That’s it!” she concluded. “I rest only when I go to sleep.”

Though this was obviously linked to other tensions, the men of brigade 10 seemed to offer no overt resistance to the model of enforced bachelorhood or separation. Generally speaking, any attempts to sustain a family life in the *taiga* seemed possible only if it involved some form of opting out. The most extreme evasion was taken by brigade 7, who herded and migrated as one family, keeping themselves as far from the village as possible on the most remote pastures, sometimes 600 kilometres away. When I first visited them in 1990 they had been doing this for 18 years, and through selective slaughter of their reindeer stock they had built up an exceptionally strong herd, many of them owned by the family themselves (taking advantage of gradually liberalizing regulations) rather than by the state farm.

This was the nearest anyone could get in modern times to the gender relations and family structure of the nomadic way of life. The elderly matriarch of brigade 7, whom everyone called Granny, had worked hard all her life at the same tasks as Kristina in brigade 10, but she had a much stronger air of command. She had been a married partner in a family enterprise, and the authority which she radiated came not just from seniority, but from a lifetime’s habit of making decisions about the herd jointly with her husband, and presiding over a group of younger herders who were her own sons and associated relatives.

But the family's independent spirit, sustained by an even greater spatial isolation than that endured by herders in other brigades, cost them dearly. The price they paid was the permanently unmarried and childless state of their young adults, making their independence and family structure unviable into the next generation. It also led to a constant tension with the state farm administration. The director of the farm did not share Moscow's new-found enthusiasm for the creeping privatization of the farm's reindeer herds, and in 1990 this drew the family into a fateful conflict. A routine veterinary inspection of the herd supposedly diagnosed brucellosis in some of the animals. The director of the farm did not wait for the lack of successors in the next generation to do its work, but immediately ordered the destruction of the entire herd of 2,000 animals and the redeployment of members of the family in other brigades far from each other. It is a sign of the extraordinary resilience of the herders, and of this family in particular, that by the mid-1990s they managed to rebuild their herd and re-occupy their old territory.

The man who combined family and reindeer herding more satisfactorily than anyone I knew was Kesha, the head of brigade 8. He lived with his wife, his children, his parents and his father's father, making this four-generational camp the most complete herding family anywhere in the region. This unusual arrangement was made possible by the charismatic personality of Kesha's wife Liuda, who was not merely a *chumrabortnitsa* but shared the responsibility for the management of the herd as a family enterprise, as Granny had done a generation earlier in brigade 7, but unlike any other woman in this community of her own generation.

Liuda was not Eveny but Sakha (Yakut). She had come to this remote northern location from a distant veterinary school for a practical exercise, never having worked with reindeer, and had stayed. She handled the reindeer as if born to it: though Kesha was a good rider, she had won her way through a succession of regional competitions to become the reindeer-racing champion of the entire Sakha Republic. When I first visited them in 1992, their two children were below school age. This allowed Liuda the possibility of bringing them up in the *taiga*, and unlike most women of her generation she seized the opportunity, even continuing to live there with their newly-born third child. But by the end of the 1990s, their children were in school in the village, and the family succumbed to the inevitable: though they spent the long summers in the reindeer camp with Kesha, Liuda returned to the village for the winters in the pattern which compels even the most *taiga*-loving women to move away from their menfolk, and back to a space which they find oppressive, for at least half the year.

### **Faint Rays of Hope?**

On a landscape where humans are scarce, samples for sociological analysis are necessarily small. Yet the general pattern is unmistakable, and issues of gender balance and family viability offer a particularly clear picture of the consequences of policies which are formulated far away and for quite other purposes. A close ethnographic study during a period of sudden instability reveals starkly how people can become vulnerable in different big ways because of small differences in their demographic and personal circumstances.



From a starting point of rationalization and the imposition of outside values of “civilization,” the administration has ended up creating a situation which offers a startling analogue of the GULAG camps which sometimes overlaid their landscape (Vitebsky 2005:221-30): ghettos of trapped, angry, self-harming men. The administration’s drive for geopolitical control of the North (Horensma 1991) led to an idea of a northern exceptionalism (*severnaia spetsifika*, Thompson 2008). In making the North fit for the playing out of a new white man’s agenda, the landscape was viewed not simply as an area where local communities lived in a state of appropriate adaptation, but a domain which was specially difficult, whose “harsh northern conditions” (*surovye severnye usloviia*) offered specially wretched punishment for prisoners and justified special hardship bonuses for favored newcomers. The natives who were already there could not be left untouched: they were drawn into a management style which responded to every situation by creating a specialized gang of unpartnered males, thereby masculinizing the landscape to a point where it became virtually impossible for women to function there.

Though in some regions of the North there are some positive examples of the incorporation of local knowledge into technical plans such as pasture mapping (Florian Stammer, personal communication), overall it would not be unreasonable to compare the negative aspect of collectivization with that in what is now called “development,” namely the imposition by technical experts of alien values of rationality and productivity which lead to huge, ill-anticipated social repercussions. In tropical countries the global institution of “development” has attracted a small but penetrating body of critique by anthropologists, who point out that it depends on an unequal power relationship which annihilates local knowledge among the developpees by re-branding it as “ignorance” (Hobart 1993; Vitebsky 1993) and creates severe “unintended consequences” of disempowerment by curtailing local agency and consolidating the grip of the state (Ferguson 1994).

What rays of hope can reindeer herders expect? All post-Soviet attempts at reform, whatever their basis in contracts (*podriad*), *obshchina* collectives (Sirina 1999), or other arrangements, have involved an attempt at restoring some sort of family life, and in particular wrestling with the seemingly intractable problem of how to enable women and men to live together while engaged in reindeer herding in the taiga.

Yet just as small differences in personal biography so far can lead to big differences in future personal fortune, so a small administrative change can have a dramatic effect. Since the financial instability of the mid to late 1990s the civil administration has often been the only reliable source of cash, since it draws on the budgets of federal and regional government rather than of the bankrupt state farms or their motley successor organizations. It is the government which pays pensions, and when workers in bankrupt farms are unpaid, their families live on the pensions of their old people. In the Sakha Republic, the wages of the *chumrabortnitsa* were transferred from the state farm to the regional budget in the late 1990s, not so much a salary as a “subsidy.” Suddenly, these women became the only people to receive regular payment for working in the *taiga*, and several more of them moved out to the camps to soften the herders’ lonely lives. This arrangement persists till today (mid-2010), and is fairly successful, at least in Sebian.

An ability to keep children in the camps till later in their childhood can also make a difference. Already in 1988, the Eveny in Sebian were talking about the ideal of nomadic

schooling (*kochevaia shkola*) as a substitute for the boarding school (*internat*) or the village school. Under this system, children would not be obliged to leave their parents' camp by the age of six or seven, but could stay with them for several years longer, receiving their lessons from teachers who also migrate with the herd. Though there is still no such system in Sebian, it is said to be functioning in several places in the Sakha Republic, funded by the republic's Ministry of Education. Some reports say that the "teachers" are merely herders' wives who may or may not sporadically educate the children in between other activities, and even that their payment does not really happen; but good results are claimed for the Evenki herders in Iengra, in the southern Sakha Republic, thanks to a pioneer project in which seven mobile teachers have now been engaged in teaching some 21 young Evenki.<sup>4</sup> In 2008 I visited Olenek, further to the north, and found this system functioning up to sixth grade (age 12). Though I was not able to witness the work directly, it was highly spoken of by herders, and even some village-dwelling parents were sending their children to the nomadic school in order to expose them to a lifestyle which they believed to be healthier, not only physically but also morally.

This evaluation repeats a long-established cultural motif of the forest as a place of higher social, moral and spiritual integrity, which continues to correct the other image of it as a crude, male space. An interesting, optimistic corroboration of this comes from what is probably the first detailed study of the attitudes of children in a reindeer-herding community. From 2003 to 2005, Olga Ulturgasheva studied children's visions of their own future in Topolinoe, a village of Eveny in the Sakha Republic where she herself grew up (Ulturgasheva 2008; forthcoming). This study reveals a significant difference between children who spend the first years of their life in the village and in the forest. Ulturgasheva argues that each of these two inter-related but distinct cosmological and social spaces is associated with the formation of a different kind of person and the anticipation of a different life trajectory. Though all children end up in the village for schooling by the time they reach seven, children who have first been brought up in the forest are formed with a particular construct of time and space which is grounded in forest practices of sharing. The child's developing personhood is likened to that of a growing reindeer calf, at the same time as the child develops a strong sense of their own agency through taking part in useful tasks and constantly being called upon to exercise their judgment. The personhood of children who have spent all their lives in the village, by contrast, more directly reflects the community's despair, alcoholism and post-Soviet collapse of infrastructure and social welfare; in sum, it suggests a relative lack of agency. These contrasting constructs of agency are consistently carried forward to influence the child's imagined adult destiny as they tell stories about their own projected future: the forest-reared child imagines bringing the fruits of city education back to their family of origin to improve herding life, while the village-reared child imagines escaping to settle forever in the city. Though children from both backgrounds respond to the present in different ways, both groups agree on the desirability of reversing the alcoholism, poverty and broken families of their parental generation.

Ulturgasheva's village is only a few hundred miles from Sebian, and has many kinship links there. Her research was conducted several years after my main period of residence, and among a later generation. The rhetoric of extinction ("we are a dying people") which was so prominent among community leaders in the 1990s (Vitebsky 2002) and was

explicitly rooted in the toxic combination of the separation of men from women and the severing of continuity between parents and children, can be taken as an extreme expression of a lack of agency. It would seem that the next generation is not much concerned with this idiom of despair, and that both boys and girls are exploring a more hopeful sense of agency. But it remains to be seen how they will react to an inevitable dashing of these hopes in adulthood. Perhaps in anticipation of this the village youth, especially boys, continue to suffer as harshly as ever from violence and suicide even while they narrate their fantasies of redemption.

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Piers Vitebsky is Head of Anthropology and Russian Northern Studies at the Scott Polar Research Institute in the University of Cambridge. He studied ancient languages before becoming an anthropologist researching religion, psychology and ecology in Arctic Siberia and Tribal India. His books include *The Reindeer People: Living with Animals and Spirits in Siberia* (2005), *Shamanism* (1995), and *Dialogues with the Dead: The Discussion of Mortality Among the Sora of Eastern India* (1993), while his documentary films include *Siberia—After the shaman* (1991). He recently chaired the European Science Foundation's BOREAS programme of Arctic humanities and social science research. He can be contacted at pv100@cam.ac.uk.

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<sup>1</sup> Owing to differences in conventions of transliteration, these names often appear in atlases and other publications as Sebyan-Kyuel', Verkhoyansk, etc.

<sup>2</sup> It is necessary to use this Russian plural form in order to avoid impossible English constructions such as "Even men ride reindeer."

<sup>3</sup> In some areas there were also old Russian peasant settlers, while Thompson (2008) shows how Russian settlers in Chukotka appropriated indigenous peoples' rhetoric of identity and local belonging.

<sup>4</sup> Conducted by the French anthropologist Alexandra Lavrillier under a grant from the Rolex Foundation (Lavrillier 2000), see also <http://www.rolex.com/en#/world-of-rolex/philanthropy/awards-for-entreprise/alexandra-lavrillier/> (accessed 6 June 2010).