

“SOMEHOW, SOMETHING BROKE INSIDE THE PEOPLE”: DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS AND COMMUNITY ANOMIE IN CHUKOTKA, RUSSIA

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ABSTRACT

Demographic records on population movements in the Arctic tell compelling stories about community change, especially when combined with health statistics and qualitative data. Chukotka went through several dramatic demographic shifts during the twentieth century: influx of newcomer populations during the Sovietization of the Russian Arctic, large-scale village relocations during the Cold War, and labor outmigration after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The new demographic regimes had wide-ranging effects on social cohesion and community health. Focusing on the spillover effects of demographic change on local communities, this article contextualizes displacement events using demographic data, health statistics, and oral histories.

ALL THAT REMAINED

The only two things that can satisfy the soul are a person and a story; and even the story must be about a person.

—G. K. Chesterton

Chukotka, 1998. The Siberian tundra is spread against the horizon. Rolling hillocks are lost in vast scenery, no longer measurable in human paces. Rocky outcrops occasionally interrupt the low shrubs covering the ground. Constant frost tears the earth and turns it into a pockmarked landscape. A restless wind sweeps over the rippled ground; its continuous presence makes the silence all the more desolate. The sun clings ponderously in a cold blue sky as if struggling against setting. Now, its rays are just touching the distant hills, and the snowfields on the steep slopes reflect for the last time the radiance of the setting sun. A dark and heavy cloud is gathering in front of the descending fire. Night's frost is creeping over the cold, deserted plain. In some rocky places the ground is still warm, and it feels like wandering through different chambers—from cold to warm, from warm to cold. In a discouragingly short time the single cloud has turned the whole sky into all-

consuming blackness. The silence gives way to the roaring of the gale, driving snowflakes through the air.

It feels like sleepwalking—strangely detached, stumbling through a storm without feeling the cold. The storm should have pressed down and the dazzling snow barrier should have taken away the sight, but the perception is disembodied. The tundra has been turned into a snow desert by the encroaching fierce blizzard, and the horizon has drowned in a maelstrom of ice crystals. Darkness blurs the dimensions. Out of the indistinct darkness a faint glow appears. A tent, half covered with snow and the canvas pressed down by the wind, glows from inside. The cords can hardly keep the wind-torn tent on the ground. Dimly lit human shadows dance on the tent wall. Suddenly the canvas is thrown back and a figure emerges from the entrance. It sinks deep into the snow cover. The released canvas flutters furiously in the gale. Light streams out of the tent and illuminates the body. A fur mitten is torn from its hand and disappears into the blizzard. The man stumbles forward, frostbitten fingers covering his face to ward off the piercing ice. The figure

disappears into the night, finally swallowed by the blizzard. All that remains is the howling of the gale.

They find Anatoliy the next morning, his body stuck in the snow, slanted, frozen stiff; hands rigidly outstretched, as if they had wanted to grasp something unreachable; coat open and filled with snow; face frozen, open eyes staring into space, astonished. The people say Anatoliy lost his mind while out hunting and simply ran out of the tent on that winter night. Rumors speak of suicide—some of heavy drinking that led to this tragic accident. What remains is another violent death.

Chukotka, 1997. Night has come to the coastal town of Lavrentiya. The storm rages outside; inside the concrete building calmness persists. The force of the storm, which pushes on the double-paned windows, can only be faintly surmised. Down on the dimly lit alley the street lights dance in solitude. This evening, I am invited to the apartment of Boris Kimovitch. Another guest has just arrived: Anatoliy Mutarev, the head of the state farm, or *sovkhov*, of Uelen. It is warm in the kitchen, and even the scant furnishing of the apartment radiates a sense of security tonight. We are sitting on stools around the small kitchen table, focusing our attention on the gift the rare guest brought. Anatoliy has come with fresh whale skin. He gently places the forearm-length piece on the table. The pure colors of the gray whale skin give it an almost artificial appearance. Over the pearl-white color of the blubber lies the fine gray tissue of the outer skin. Anatoliy draws a long knife made of crude steel and concentrates on cutting thin pieces of the portion. I scrutinize his dexterous movements. The sharp blade cuts through the two layers with ease, and I am almost worried the incision might make the colors run. While I observe the smooth movements and faint clicking sounds of the knife, Anatoliy begins to talk animatedly about the political and economic change in Chukotka.

Anatoliy is a small, middle-aged Chukchi man. Twenty-five years ago, he arrived in Lavrentiya as an agronomist. He carried with him the dream of starting a reindeer breeding enterprise. Unfortunately, that vision was quashed, as it was much too individualistic and would have undermined the socialist collective. A shaking of the head is his only comment on that dream of so many years ago. When he took over the management of Uelen's *sovkhov* during *perestroika*, men like Anatoliy were needed in great numbers. However, these kinds of people

are rare in a country that systematically collectivized every form of private initiative.

Anatoliy now dices the fine strips of blubber. He does it with the same precision and patience displayed by a surgeon.

Currently, a third of the reindeer herds along the coast of Chukotka are in private hands. The rest still belong to the state farms, which have been transformed into corporations without stockholders. However, since the state has removed itself as the main buyer, state farms are constantly in the red. As the manager of such a *sovkhov*, Anatoliy is in a dilemma. On one hand, he is obliged to a market that has ceased to exist; on the other, he is indebted to the dependent workers of the *sovkhov*. Workers expected to be supplied by the state farm beyond their regular pay. Yet, since the shipments of food and commodities have been severely reduced by the central government, Anatoliy cannot afford to distribute goods to the farm workers any more. The workers feel let down by the farm and abandoned by Moscow, which obviously has chosen to forget its border regions.

Meanwhile, Anatoliy looks satisfied at the heap of diced blubber in front of him and starts salting it.

Almost all of the professionals in Chukotka have left for the European-influenced region of Russia in search of better working and living conditions. The departure of engineers and energy technicians is a problem for communities that heavily depend on working power stations and service technology. In the past, 170 persons worked in the state farm of Uelen; today only 70 remain.

"It is important to chew the blubber well," says Anatoliy. The whale skin has a delicate taste, a little like walnut oil. Its effect is in the stomach: a warm, pleasant feeling gradually spreads inside of me.

Since the breakdown of the Soviet Union, Chukotka has severely lacked the necessary modes of transport to bridge the long distances between individual settlements. Prior to the 1990s, helicopters supplied the most remote bases and camps. However, since gasoline has become a scarce resource, a helicopter commutes only once a week between the two provincial towns of Uelen and Lavrentiya. Apart from that, people depend on the *vezdekhod*, provided there is enough fuel, as the heavy, tracked, all-terrain vehicle has extremely high energy demands. Sluggish like a dinosaur, this relic of Soviet times churns through the muddy tundra, leaving a black track of disturbed soil behind it. Unfortunately, without these vehicles, supply-

ing the outposts is almost impossible. Accordingly, the *vezdekhod* is highly valued. The state farm of Uelen has two in their vehicle pool, just like the local military outpost. Two more *vezdekhods* are now in private possession.

The heat of the whale blubber has expanded through my body and the pleasant warmth draws my attention away from the details of the conversation. I take another piece of blubber, chew slowly, and gaze out of the window. It is still dark outside and the storm pushes with restlessness against the panes. The conversation continues, but I am lost in thought.

Abruptly I am torn from my daydream. My absence has been noticed and in order to draw me back into the conversation, I am questioned about my opinion on a burning local issue. Tomorrow is the first day of September, the cutoff date for a 300 percent increase in the price of bread. I cannot think about any better comment than that from now on, Lavrentiya will be one of the most expensive villages in the world, at least as far as the price of bread is concerned.

Anatoliy laughs, sharpening his knife to start on a second round of whale blubber: "If you can't afford to buy bread, you should at least eat whale. That is still free!"

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1997, when I visited Chukotka for the second time, I got stuck for two weeks in the small town of Lavrentiya. The weekly flight out of town was completely overbooked and no other plane was available. During that time, I made the acquaintance of Boris Kimovitch. He was an ambitious Russian, having just started producing a local TV channel. With a couple of different jobs and a self-made enterprise, he had adjusted more or less to the tremendous changes the past ten years had brought to Russia. He had great visions, dreams of flying, to start his own bush plane service for tourist and business travelers. He liked to talk about his plans. I liked to listen and was invited a couple of times to his small apartment on the fourth floor of a run-down concrete apartment complex. One evening, Anatoliy Mutarev, the head of the former state farm of the nearby village of Uelen, came over for some business and a chat among friends at Boris' home. I was impressed by his lively character and at the same time shocked by the desolate picture he drew of the current economic situation in Chukotka. For the first time I began to understand the economic predicament of north-

ern Russia. We talked for hours, and it was late at night when I returned home.

Back in Lavrentiya the following year, I met neither Boris nor Anatoliy. Boris was probably out of town, doing some business in Magadan or Vladivostok. I could not find any trace of Anatoliy until I heard the story of his violent death. Was it an accident, a suicide, or an alcohol overdose? There were only rumors; nobody could tell me what really happened. For two reasons, I find Anatoliy's story worth sharing. First, I do not understand writing merely as a technique of communicating facts, but also as a mode of thought that gives meaning to experience (Rapport 1997:45). Thus, verbalized impressions and recollections of Anatoliy serve as ethnographic material. Second, as an anthropologist, I have the peculiar aspiration to try to understand others' lives and, in this special case, their deaths. The violent death of Anatoliy is not an isolated case. Between 1970 and 1980, every second death among the indigenous population of Russia's North was attributed to violence (Pika and Prokhorov 1999:xxxvi).

I define violent death in this article as all forms of death that incorporate a violent component, including suicides, accidents, and homicides. I choose this broad definition to show that suicide in Chukotka is part of a wider environment of deadly risk that also includes accidents, alcohol overdoses, and homicides. I also decided on this broad definition to address the ambiguity of causality inherent in suicide. As exemplified in the opening vignette, many questions remain after a person's suicide: Was it a suicide or an accident? Why did he do it? Was it an alcohol overdose or an alcohol-related accident or a suicide? As Janne Flora has shown in her work on suicide in Northwest Greenland, Native interpretations of suicide differ from Western ones in the role causality plays. Where in Western explanations causality plays a paramount role (the reason why he/she did it), in Greenland, Flora shows, knowing and unknowing both play parts in the conversation about a person's suicide (Flora 2012).

I use a fictionalized account, a collage of different parts of my field notes, to describe the post-Soviet reality of the region and to place Anatoliy's death in a broader cultural context. Violent death is something vague, but nevertheless deadly. There are different ways of approaching such an issue. One possibility is to examine and evaluate mortality statistics. This approach, though, risks missing the immediacy and reality of death in a forest of numbers. Another approach is to dwell on personalized accounts,

which risks losing the overall perspective in idiosyncrasies. In the case described here, the primary data to which I had access consisted of stories, rumors, and gossip. To retain the ambiguous quality of the material, I present it in a narrative style and balance it with supplementary material, which forms a meta-text to the narrative.

This article combines quantitative and qualitative material of different scales. Demographic data on population dynamics are supplemented by data on internal demographic shifts within the region and paired with personal accounts of village resettlements and closures. Similarly, health statistics are coupled with individual stories and field notes to explore the various dimensions of violent death in Chukotka's Native communities. I did research in Chukotka in 1996–1998 and 2008–2009. During the second period, I mainly focused on the effects of state-enforced village resettlements during the Soviet period. The qualitative backbone of this article are life-history interviews that I conducted in the communities of Provideniya, Novoe Chaplino, Yanrakynnot, Lorino, Uelen (Fig. 1), Inchoun (Fig. 2), and in hunting camps along the coast. I also incorporate local Native accounts of village resettlements that have recently been self-published (Sal'yak 2008; Tepilek 2008). My main goal is to correlate a set of historical events, i.e., state-enforced village closures and community relocations, with health indices such as life expectancy and suicide rates. As other researchers have

noted, the village resettlements in Chukotka during the 1950s and 1960s coincided with a sharp rise in suicides, alcoholism, and violent death in the affected communities (Pika 1999:127–128; Schweitzer and Gray 2000:23–24).

Suicide, as well as other forms of violent death, is a “multidimensional malaise” (Leenaars 1996; Shneidman 1985) with its own psychological, interpersonal, cultural, and historical dimensions. For the purposes of this article, I focus on the historical dimension. Recent research on suicide in Native communities has stressed the importance of the psychological dimension, by focusing on strong emotions and emotional dysfunctions in everyday life as triggers for suicides (Leineweber and Arensman 2003; Rasmus 2008). For instance, various accounts from Alaska Native communities hint at a significant relationship between suicide and extraordinary emotional states (i.e., love, jealousy, boredom, and loneliness) (Rasmus 2008; Weingarten 2005). Although no comparable data exist from pre-Soviet times, early ethnographies from Chukotka suggest that suicide was a relatively common practice among the historic Chukchi (Bogoras 1904–09; Lester 2006). Comparative studies of suicide among Native people, mainly based on the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF), indicate a very high prevalence of suicide among the Chukchi during the nineteenth century (Ember and Ember 1992; Masumura 1977; Palmer 1965). The reason for the one-dimensional historical ap-



Figure 1. A fall storm on the coast at Uelen. People from several coastal communities were relocated here in the 1950s.



Figure 2. Graveyard at Inchoun.

proach taken here, with all its possible shortcomings, is simple. While I did research in Chukotka on the topic of village relocation and contemporary hunting culture, it was never my intention to explicitly investigate violent death. Therefore, I lack the ethnographic and qualitative data to thoroughly investigate the cultural and psychological dimensions of suicide. Much more research is needed on that topic, but I nevertheless find it imperative and too important to ignore.

DEMOGRAPHY OF CULTURAL CHANGE

For Russia, the twentieth century was a period of deep-seated changes, revolutions, and systemic collapse. Especially in the North, centuries-old traditions and subsistence practices were replaced by new cultural and economic patterns that accompanied and implemented the Soviet Union's master plan of a new society for all of its citizens.

Chukotka went through several demographic shifts in its recent history. Tsarist Russia started to expand into the territory of the present-day Chukotka Autonomous Okrug (Chukotka AO) during the mid-seventeenth century, first establishing a trading post and fort (*ostrog*) along the river Anadyr. Chukotka's remote location at the eastern fringes of the Russian Empire, combined with chronic supply shortages and frequent clashes with local Koryak and Chukchi tribes, made control and

settlement of the land a difficult task. Russian settlers and Cossacks probably numbered in the hundreds during the eighteenth century, while the Native Chukchi population was estimated to be between 8,000 and 9,000 (Forsyth 1992:150). The first major demographic regime shift commenced after the Russian Revolution with the systematic Sovietization of the North, which pulled thousands of party workers, teachers, engineers, and laborers from the central regions of Russia to the remote corners of the Soviet Union. The first national census of 1926–1927 recorded a total of 12,364 Chukchi; the second census in 1939 counted 12,111 Chukchi, while the incoming Russian and Ukrainian population had risen to almost 6,000, i.e., 27% of the total population. In 1959 the number of newcomers had increased to more than 30,000, or 68% of the total population. Ten years later, in 1970, the number of immigrants had more than doubled to 87,780 (Leontev 1977:13). By 1979, the Native population of Chukotka was largely outnumbered by Russian newcomers, comprising merely 10% of the total population of the Chukchi National Region (Forsyth 1992:367). Ten years later, in 1989, shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the percentage of Natives had dropped to a mere 7% (Fig. 3).

The ratio between Native and newcomer populations changed dramatically after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Pushed by a crumbling infrastructure and economic system, and at the same time pulled by prospects

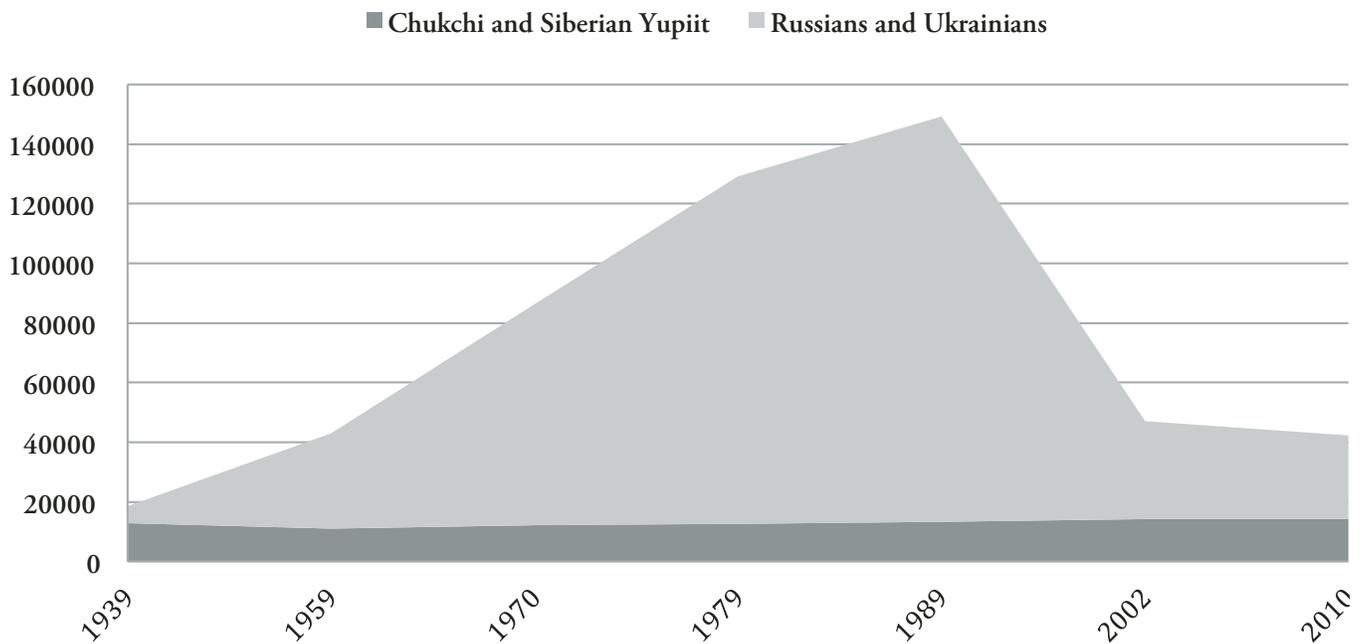


Figure 3. Population dynamics in Chukotka Autonomous Okrug, 1939–2010.

of better employment and new travel opportunities, many Russian and Ukrainian settlers left for the central regions of Russia or the new successor states of the former Soviet Union. As a result of this massive outmigration, Chukotka lost more than two-thirds of its total population between 1989 and 2002 (Thompson 2008:4–5). Yet, as an indirect result of this outmigration, the percentage of Chukchi Natives rose again to 23% of the total population. The latest census of 2010 showed a continuing population decline to 50,526, while the percentage of Chukchi and Siberian Yupiit rose to almost 30% (FSGS 2012a).

The influx of migrant workers during the first half of the twentieth century led to a series of problems. As a consequence of increased migration of workers from the central regions of Russia, a law was enacted in 1932 that differentiated between newcomers and Natives, dividing the population into two categories. The first category, the so-called professionals (administrators, technicians, police inspectors, etc.) received an array of state privileges (higher salaries, tax reductions, and earlier pensions). The remainder of the population could only enjoy these privileges if they came as workers to the North from other areas of the country. That automatically excluded the northern minorities and created a two-class society (Vakhtin 1992:16).

VILLAGE RESETTLEMENTS

The industrialization and Sovietization of Russia’s North was an all-encompassing endeavor, which deeply affected and changed Native and non-Native communities in a long-lasting way. In addition to the arrival of Russian settlers, major internal demographic shifts affected Chukotka during the twentieth century. The inhabitants of predominantly Native coastal villages along the Bering Sea were subjected to a relocation policy implemented by the Soviet state that left dozens of settlements and hunting bases deserted. State-enforced resettlement of Native communities, which peaked during the 1950s and 1960s, led to a creeping depopulation of the coastline, whose intricate settlement history extends back for thousands of years. On the Chukchi Peninsula alone, more than eighty settlements were abandoned or closed in the course of the twentieth century (Figs. 4, 5).

These relocations fundamentally changed the settlement pattern along the coast, as Stanislav Nuteventin, an old hunter from Uelen, recalled in 2009: “In former times the coast was densely populated. When you traveled by boat you could always visit the villages along the coast and seek shelter there in case of a storm” (Nuteventin 2009).

Generally speaking, two different relocation waves can be distinguished in Chukotka during the twentieth century. The first wave of relocations was primarily a se-

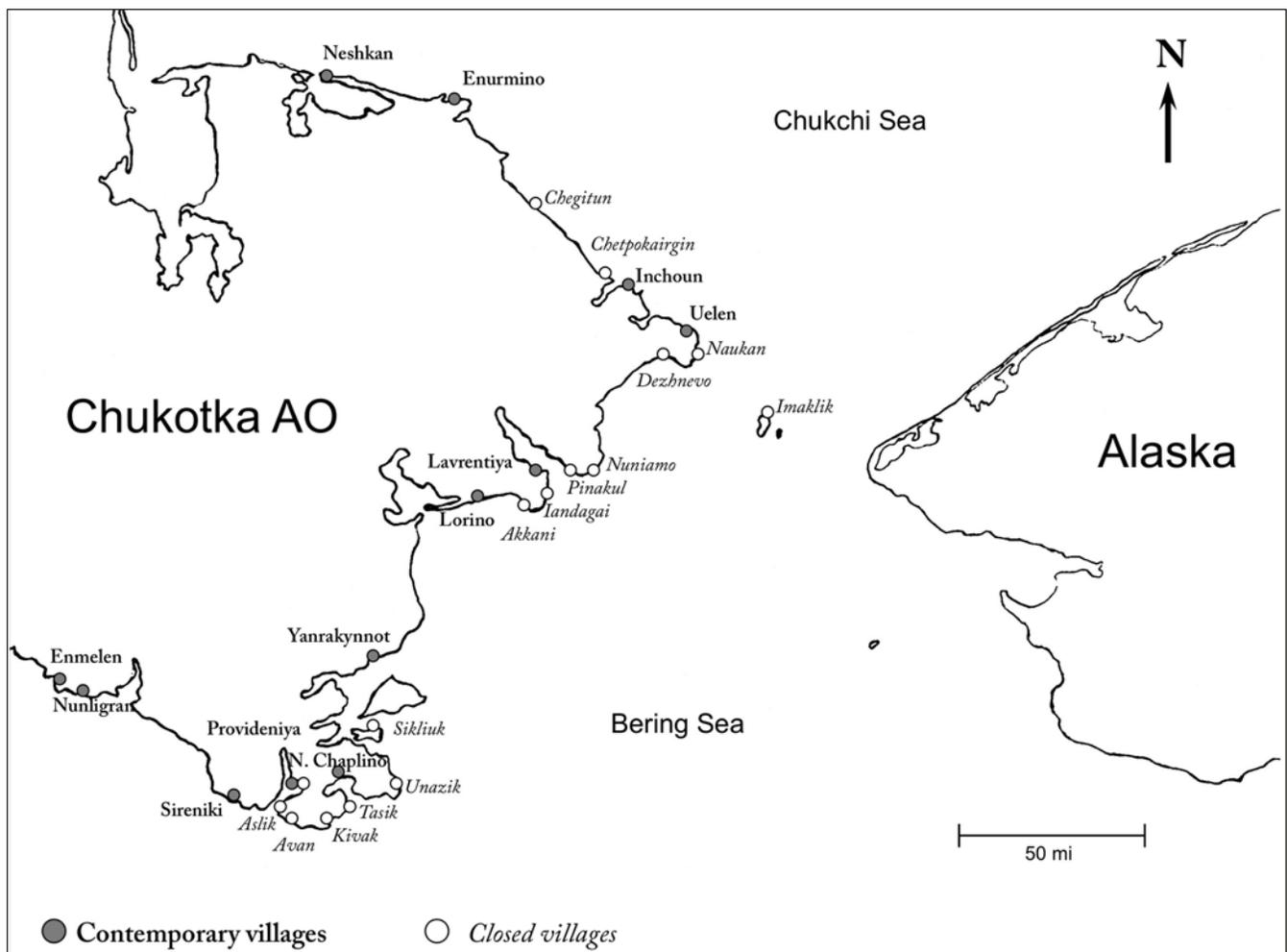


Figure 4. Map of Chukotka showing abandoned coastal villages and relocation sites.

ries of voluntary abandonments of smaller coastal villages and hunting camps. Pulled by new schools, stores, and medical facilities, most families opted to move to larger adjacent villages. For instance, the Siberian Yupik villagers of Kynlirak, Imtuk, and Angytykuk moved during the 1930s to Sireniki, completely abandoning their former settlements on a voluntary basis. The second wave of resettlements commenced during the 1940s and 1950s and was mostly driven by Soviet administrative decisions to close certain villages and relocate their populations to nearby settlement centers. The absolute numbers of forcefully relocated people were relatively low (approximately 2,000 people) in comparison to state-enforced resettlements in other regions, yet in the context of the small population, resettlements affected almost 20% of the Chukchi and Siberian Yupik populations of the entire *okrug* (Table 1).

Administrative rationales for village closures often contradicted local perspectives. For instance, what Soviet

planners identified as “unprofitable” or “economically unviable” village locations had supported whole communities for generations. In the case of Unazik, a Siberian Yupik settlement in the south of the Chukchi Peninsula, Soviet administrators had given regular flooding of the village as a reason to close the community in 1958 and relocate its population to the newly founded village of Novoe Chaplino. A contemporary witness of the relocation remembered:

Back in 1958 the authorities found a lot of arguments for the relocation. Apparently Unazik was about to be washed away by strong storms. Yes, once in a while the storms were severe, but that has always been the case and for many centuries our ancestor-hunters, who picked the place for a settlement, learned to retreat farther back along the spit. But when the bad weather had calmed down the people from Unazik returned to their dwellings again. The people did not fear the sea, they



Figure 5. The settlement of Dezhnevo, on the northeastern coast, abandoned in 1951.

Table 1. Chukotka village populations relocated during the Soviet era.

Village	Closure Date	Village Population (Census Date)	Relocation Site
Aslik (Plover Bay)	1958	150 people (1943)	Provideniya
Ureliki	1946	169 people (1943)	Provideniya
Avan	1942	77 people (1926–27)	Provideniya
Kivak	1952	92 people (1946–50)	Novoe Chaplino
Tasik	1947	32 people (1926–27)	Provideniya/Chaplino
Unazik (Chaplino, Indian Point)	1958–59	206 people (1946–50)	Novoe Chaplino
Sikliuk	1950	45 people (1926–27)	Provideniya/Chaplino
Akkani	1960	153 people (1926–27)	Lorino/Lavrentiya
Iandagai	1950s	117 people (1926–27)	Lorino/Lavrentiya
Pinakul	1970s	45 people (1926–27)	Lavrentiya
Nuniamo	1970s	131 people (1946–50)	Lorino/Lavrentiya/Uelen
Dezhnevo	1951	64 people (1946–50)	Uelen
Naukan	1958	254 people (1946–50)	Nuniamo/Uelen/Lavrentiya
Imaklik (Ratmanova)	1947	30 people (1940)	Naukan
Chetpokaïrgin	1950s	81 people (1946–50)	Uelen
Chegitun	1957	124 people (1943)	Uelen/Inchoun

respected it as a neighbor and lived on its shore. They enjoyed the sea, which fed and dressed them [...] yet here, where our native Unazik was located, only a polar station and a border guard post remained—and nothing bad happened to them (Sal'yak 2008:5).

Relocated populations were often forced to live in new locations that were picked for infrastructural convenience,

i.e., sites that could be easily accessed by supply barges or were already hosting state-owned enterprises. Indigenous concerns of losing access to prime subsistence sites were of secondary importance to the planners, as Luba Kutylina from Novoe Chaplino remembered:

There was a large gathering when they announced that [old] Chaplino would be resettled. The old peo-

ple said that the catch is bad [at Novoe Chaplino] compared to Old Chaplino. Some wanted to go to Kivak, because there is at least open water, but that was also rejected. During the fall you couldn't sleep at night in Chaplino, because you were afraid that the water was coming, that's why they closed the village. But at the new place the catch was bad and you had to bring the meat in from afar. The closest was [the hunting base] Inakhpyk, where you can get a good catch. At least we had a big refrigerator back then. Nowadays it is not working anymore and a lot of meat gets spoiled because of the long distances (Kutyliina 2008).

The Soviet focus on large-scale industrial operations left little space for indigenous economies based on traditional social units. These economies were termed "inefficient" and the corresponding localities, Native settlements near traditional key resources, were declared "unprofitable" (Slezkine 1994:340).

Between 1937 and 1953, the total number of villages on the Chukchi Peninsula was reduced from ninety to thirty-one (Krupnik and Chlenov 2007:62). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, twelve villages remained. Traumatic loss of homeland and the vanishing of tradi-

tional socioeconomic structures, which had replaced traditional ways of living, sent devastating ripples through the fabric of Native communities, with often disastrous effects on health and community cohesion.

Personal accounts of the relocations in Chukotka offer insight into the dramatic effects on traditional culture and individual lives. Igor Krupnik and Mikhail Chlenov, two Russian anthropologists who conducted interviews with relocated Siberian Yupiit in the region during the 1970s and 1980s, documented the extent of traumatic experiences during and after the relocations (Krupnik and Chlenov 2007). Some of the relocations were executed in such a hasty manner that most of the household items were left behind. In the majority of cases, the host communities were unprepared for the influx of dozens of families. Apartments provided for the relocated were mostly unfinished and people had to move into already occupied houses, which created considerable tension in the respective communities.

Slava, a former inhabitant of Nuniamo (Fig. 6) who was resettled to Lavrentiya in the 1970s, where a special apartment house had been constructed for those being relocated, remembered the time:



Figure 6. The settlement of Nuniamo, abandoned in the 1970s. Inhabitants were relocated to Lorino, Lavrentiya, and Uelen.

It was not easy; there was not enough space in the apartment. Everybody of my family had to cram in one room. It was a time of hardship and hunger. And, I can remember one thing clearly. It was one morning when suddenly all our dogs that we had brought from Nuniamo were dead. Over night, Russian soldiers had shot them all, for fur hats (Slava 2009).

In the majority of relocations, the new sites were inferior in terms of hunting possibilities, and most of the hunters had to forfeit their profession to work in the state collective farms. Promises that relocated people could still use their old settlements as hunting bases were not honored, and most of the relocated people were prevented from returning to their homelands.

In addition to the spatial dislocations, changes in temporal orientation fundamentally affected the Native communities. In particular, the integration of Native hunters into the so-called combined state farms, where fox farming, reindeer herding, and sea mammal hunting were administratively consolidated, led to major socio-economic shifts.

Compared to traditional hunting, where you work as a team on your own schedule, in the *kolkhoz* [collective farm] seven to eight people worked each shift and had to bring in an equal amount of walrus. And each person worked individually on one of the animals. These were often very long shifts, lasting up to three o'clock in the morning. It was very strenuous work (Eineucheivun 2008).

The loss of language, cultural practices, and hunting grounds were exacerbated by the unfamiliar living conditions in the new villages, where the predicaments of shift work, insufficient living space, and alcoholism took a heavy toll on the indigenous population. Depression and homesickness still reverberated strongly through the relocated communities more than twenty years after the fact (Krupnik and Chlenov 2007:70).

LIFE AND DEATH

During the mid-twentieth century a violent cycle of suicide, alcoholism, domestic violence, and accidental death ravaged many communities in Chukotka, a fact that is indirectly observable in the declining average life expectancy and in the changing causes of death. Between the 1960s and 1980s the average life expectancy in Native communities in the Russian North dropped by twenty years

(Slezkine 1994:375). The causes of death also changed drastically. From the 1950s to the 1970s the causes of fatalities among the indigenous people of the Russian North changed from infectious diseases to various forms of violent death (Bogoyavlinsky 1996:36). Between 1970 and 1980, 50% of all deaths were attributed to violent causes. This means that one in two deaths among the indigenous population was caused by injuries at home, accidents at work, or murders and suicides. The mortality rate attributed to suicides and murders can be regarded as a distinctive indicator of the severe situation for Russia's northern people: more than sixty suicides per 100,000 people and about thirty murders per 100,000 people (1988–1989). The suicide rate was three to four times the national average, and the murder rate three times (Pika 1999:161). Furthermore, violence was and still is the leading cause of death among young and middle-aged men.

Suicide and homicide in the Russian North are often positively correlated, indicating that similar social forces affect these forms of violent death (Lester and Kondrichin 2003:107). A correlation between the rate of violent deaths and alcohol consumption is also apparent, as the high mortality rate due to accidents, suicide, and homicide is closely tied to the increase in alcohol abuse among the peoples of the Russian North, especially in Chukotka, where during the 1970s 31% to 57% of violent deaths were connected to alcohol abuse (Avanaseva 1995). Similar causal relationships between alcohol consumption and suicide rates can be found in other circumpolar regions. For instance, comparing the suicide rates of three Alaska communities (Bethel, Nome, and Galena) from 1979–1990, Marshall argues that access to alcohol appears to be a major factor in accidental deaths and suicides in those villages (1995:4). Despite these correlations, the deadly cluster of suicide, homicide, accidental death, and alcohol abuse presents an “epistemic murk” (Taussig 1987:356) for the researcher. In many cases, as in the opening story, it is hard to differentiate between an accidental death and a suicide, or to determine the role alcohol played in a specific form of violent death.

During the early 1990s among the peoples of the Russian North, 73% of murders, 55% of suicides, and 64% of accidents involved heavy or moderate intoxication (Pika 1999:162). Although high levels of alcohol consumption among coastal Natives were reported as early as the nineteenth century, the situation deteriorated severely during the mid-twentieth century, coinciding

with the end of the era of forced resettlements. Politically unaltered fieldwork accounts by Soviet ethnographers, such as the description of alcohol-induced work breakdowns, offer glimpses into the extent of the crumbling social fabric of Native communities along Chukotka's coast (Sergeev 2005:192).

Not much has changed since the early 1990s. Economic and social collapse in the Native communities of Chukotka, combined with poverty, a deteriorating psychological state, and alcohol, have led to a steady increase in suicide rates (Gray 2005:188). In 1997 the suicide rate of the *okrug* was 43.5 per 100,000—double the Russian average (Lester and Kondrichin 2003:105). Data collected on suicide rates during the last all-Russian census in 2010 illustrate the dire situation of many Native communities, especially in Chukotka, where the suicide rate per 100,000 was 82.2 and 94.9 in 2008 and 2009 respectively, while the average Russian rate during these years was around 26 (FSGS 2012b). According to these numbers, Chukotka ranks highest in suicide rates of all the regions of the Russian Federation.

Recent data show similar causal relationships between alcohol and various forms of violent death. The alcohol-related death rate among Natives of Chukotka is significantly higher than the death rate among the non-Native population. Native women appear to be especially vulnerable. In 1994, alcohol caused 19% of deaths of all women of the Chukotka AO (Kozlov et al. 2007:148). In a recent survey on living conditions in the Arctic by the Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Alaska Anchorage, 100% of the respondents in Chukotka saw unemployment and alcohol abuse as their biggest community problem, while 97% considered suicide to be the biggest problem (SLiCA 2007:3).

During my recent fieldwork in several coastal communities in 2008 and 2009, suicide, various forms of violent death, and heavy alcohol abuse were ever-present topics in conversations. Especially disturbing was a string of recent youth suicides that had gripped several communities. Nadeshda Posnyakova, a local community activist who had lost her husband and children in a house fire many years ago, recounted a story of her childhood friend who committed suicide at the age of twenty-one. This short story is similar to other reports I heard in the way family dysfunction relates to suicidal motivations:

As a young child she was severely beaten by her father. Her leg was crippled and she had a difficult

time walking. She tried to drown herself twice, walking into the surf of Uelen, where she supposedly saw her mother and sister in white, traditional clothing calling her. She eventually finished her life by stabbing a knife into her heart, still having the power to turn it around (Posnyakova 2009).

In many conversations I had on related topics, family problems and alcohol were closely associated with individual suicides. For instance, while I was visiting the hunting camp of Akkani, an hour boat ride from the village of Lorino, all the sea mammal hunters of the local cooperative were suddenly recalled to the village for gun inspection. Initially explained to me as the result of yet another unfortunate event, the management of the cooperative was in fact reacting to the recent violent death of one of its members. An older hunter had died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound and alcohol had played a pivotal role. During the ensuing discussions, where people tried to make sense of yet another violent death in their community, a triad of deadly forces constantly surfaced in their conversations: unemployment, boredom, and alcohol abuse.

SOCIAL REALISM

Early ethnographic accounts of Koryaks, Itel'mens, and Chukchi from the eighteenth and nineteenth century describe various practices that express different forms of ritual violence, from infanticide to "voluntary death" (Batianova 2000:150). Specifically in Chukotka, Waldemar Bogoras documented a seemingly widespread cultural practice of assisted suicide (Bogoras 1904–09:560ff). Prominent in those descriptions are instances of older people who seek voluntary death with assistance, mostly of close relatives. These practices were closely tied to cultural and cosmological attitudes towards death and accentuated what was considered to be a "good" death. A voluntary death was considered to be superior to a death from disease, a common form of fatality during the century of contact with Russian settlers and foreign whalers. Exploring the socio-religious mechanisms behind these practices of voluntary death, Rane Willerslev argues that among a Chukchi group in northern Kamchatka, suicide epitomizes the optimal blood sacrifice in a life and death cycle of soul renewal (Willerslev 2009:694–696).

I am hesitant to explain the prevalence of suicide in contemporary Chukotka along these lines for several reasons. First, one has to clearly distinguish between an assisted suicide involving ritualized violence and sacrifice

and a self-inflicted suicide that most of the time is bare of any ritual connotation. Bogoras noticed a generational difference between assisted suicides that were practiced exclusively among older people and self-inflicted suicides that were more widespread among the younger generation (Bogoras 1904–09:565). Bogoras distinguished the latter from the more ritualized form and attributed it to psychological distress, e.g., grief or the unwillingness to live (Batianova 2000:158). Second, for the high suicide rates in contemporary Chukotka to be associated with Chukchi cosmology, one has to assume that the value of a “good” sacrificial death is shared by a significant part of a community. During my stays in Chukotka, mostly in coastal settlements, I did not witness or hear accounts of assisted suicides nor did I hear references to a cosmology involving these ritualized forms. Although Willerslev as well as Batianova documented several cases of assisted suicide among Chukchi elders during the 1980s and 1990s, neither of them related first-hand accounts of these incidents. I don’t want to disregard documented cases of ritualized suicide, but they appear to be only a fraction of the more common self-inflicted suicides that occurred in the communities. In addition, cultural explanations do not effectively explain the dramatic rise in suicides among indigenous communities during the 1970s and 1980s in the larger circumpolar world. Such suicides also began increasingly to affect younger generations. Without completely disregarding cultural factors, I agree with Flora (2012:138–139) that a greater cultural acceptance of suicides among circumpolar people paired with socio-economic changes and relocations that led to the alienation of people from their own culture created a deadly combination that still ravages many communities in the circumpolar world.

In his classic study on suicide, Emile Durkheim argued that a strongly constituted society provides a reservoir of energy that individuals can fall back upon in time of need (Durkheim 1951:210). Thus, the more integrated and cohesive a society is, the more it structures the lives of its members, protecting them from suicide. On the other hand, Durkheim diagnosed a state of anomie as the result of social and economic changes resulting in a decline of social regulation. Anomie entails a sudden change, confronting people with new social conditions and rules. This initiates hopes and wishes that are often shattered by reality, ultimately resulting in frustration, depression, and therefore high suicide rates (anomic suicide). Durkheim conceptualized the suicidal tendency in opposition to

cohesive social forces (Pope 1976:18). High suicide rates therefore reflect the inability of a society to integrate its members into its overarching and protective structure. Alexandr Pika’s observations in the Russian North point in a similar direction; he argues that the large number of violent deaths among married people and those with children leads to the conclusion that the family, as the basic unit of social defense and psychological and moral support of individuals, cannot fulfill its protective function any more (Pika 1999:162).

The policies of forced collectivization and resettlement destroyed the cohesive system of indigenous life, which integrated land, resources, and people into a functioning whole (Schindler 1992:57). Elena Tepilek, a Native woman from Naukan who was resettled to Nuniamo and only a few years later to Lavrentiya, expressed this social disintegration in her own words:

In the 1950s, the authorities saw in my native village a place without a perspective. They resettled us. They “closed” us. You can close a people and without thinking scatter its roots in the wind. But you can’t create a people. For the Eskimo from Naukan the resettlement was disastrous. It was an ethnocide in its physical outcome (Tepilek 2008:2).

Another example refers to the relocation of Unazik:

The most frightening thing was that somehow something broke inside the people. They lost their self-sufficiency [*samodostatochnost*]. They had to move into low-wage employment, which didn’t require any qualifications. Many became sick and died, many were knocked down. The people were suffering under the extreme stress, their life force diminished; they were overcome by the longing for the past life [...] Up to today nobody asked us about our longing (Sal’yak 2008:5–6).

High suicide and violent death rates among indigenous populations are not confined to Chukotka and the Russian North, but represent a rather common predicament of many circumpolar Native communities. Rapid social change has been identified as one of the major causes of the disproportionately high suicide rates among Native people worldwide (Morell et al. 2007; Rubenstein 1992). Alienation from land and a deteriorating social structure seem to constitute a deadly mix of forces that extort a prohibitive toll from Native communities.

In her study of the Ojibwa community of Grassy Narrows in western Ontario, Anastasia Shkilnyk illustrates how the move to a new reserve in the mid-1960s

triggered a change in the most common cause of death: prior to the move, 91% of deaths were from natural causes; by the end of the 1970s, 75% of the deaths were due to violent causes, including suicide (Shkilnyk 1985:11–18). Shkilnyk further argues that the fundamental changes in spatial and temporal orientation that went along with the relocation led to a deterioration of the traditional way of life. Combined with chronic alcohol abuse and mercury poisoning, with its vicious effects on brain chemistry, cultural dislocation exposed the community to hitherto unknown levels of risk, which were clearly visible in health indices.

Changes in health conditions and major demographic shifts affect the social body at its core. Dee Mack Williams, an anthropologist who worked on violent death in a modernizing pastoral society on degraded Chinese grasslands in Mongolia, argues that the individual human body is a palimpsest and battleground for competing local and global forces (Williams 1997:763). Thus, the body as the fundamental mediator among self, society, and world is the site of inscription. The transformations and injuries endured by bodies parallel the wounds inflicted on the land. Land and body share the experiences of violation and change. In Inner Mongolia, deepening poverty, combined with a cold climate and social conventions, have produced a pattern of injury and death. The rapidly changing physical and social environment is shaped by broader processes, as the deadly accidents do not typically involve random misfortune but are rather structured by changes that leave certain members of society prone to bodily damage (Williams 1997:781). A similar situation is observable in Chukotka, where outside forces, acting on land and people, have created an environment of risk to a greater extent than ever before.

CONCLUSION

The historic forces in Chukotka that intruded and shaped local space became corporeal. The hegemonic forces of Soviet colonialism increased rates of mortality and violent death, creating an environment of deadly risk. In Chukotka, where new demographic regimes had wide-ranging effects on social cohesion and community health, social forces thus reveal their corporeal effects by embodying alienation from the land in various forms of violent death.

However, highlighting one aspect of a culture (and in this case an extremely serious and negative one) runs the inherent risk of a one-sided treatment of a society. By

focusing on violent death, I chose to present a dark and often hidden side of Native communities in Chukotka. As shown above, violent death and especially suicide pose serious problems to Chukotka's Native communities, yet this does not mean that all individuals necessarily succumb to the social and historical forces that have fundamentally affected their culture and communities.

The transformations of the last twenty years also created room for agency. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, access to resources in coastal villages of Chukotka changed significantly. During the Soviet period, Soviet settlers and administrators were key resource brokers, while the Native population was at the receiving end of a very long supply chain. As brokers between the state and the indigenous population, Russian settlers were at the center of the economy. Yet, the retreat of the state and economic collapse in rural and remote Chukotka, exacerbated by the outmigration of many Russians, led to a socioeconomic inversion of this hierarchy. With the collapse of industrial sea mammal hunting and commercial reindeer herding, and in the absence of basic provisions, Chukotka's coastal communities witnessed a revitalization of subsistence practices. Sea mammal hunting and fishing were crucial for the survival of many communities during the arduous 1990s. Individual Native hunters and cooperatives thus became central players in a post-Soviet informal economy, and Russian settlers were suddenly in a position of dependency on local resources and facilitators.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and its infrastructure in remote periphery regions created new local opportunities as well. Formerly relocated and abandoned coastal villages became new foci for local hunters. After the failed experiment of large-scale social and cultural engineering, the depopulated coastal landscape with its abandoned settlements represents a new point of anchorage for a partial resettlement and for revitalization movements (Holzlehner 2011:1969). The logic of subsistence practices and a longing for lost homelands draw groups of people to the old sites, so that the former settlements are now almost continuously (re-)inhabited by rotating groups of hunters during the summer and winter (Fig. 7). Embedded in the landscape and local ecology, resettlement allows some people to escape the shattered utopia of Soviet modernization. Revitalization of old hunting technologies and camps and traditional forms of cooperation allow for alternative life ways that are diametrically opposed to the dire realities in the villages—hunting camps are dry places with respect to alcohol, and hunting and



Figure 7. A hunting camp in current use at Akkani, originally abandoned in 1960.

butchering expertise are actively passed on to a younger generation. Many hunters see these reoccupied camps and villages as places of healing.

In a reversal of the alienation and environment of deadly risk in Chukotka, the reclaiming of space and (re-)building of a homeland facilitate recovery from the wounds of the past. Whatever the outcome, these efforts show the importance of local space and highlight the crucial interconnections between self-determined land use and societal well-being.

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