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## Nationality and 'Aboriginal Rights' in Post-Soviet Siberia

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### INTRODUCTION

One of the hallmarks of the post-war period has been the growth of identity politics in most, if not all, states. It is as if the constellation of forces which drew battle lines across continents have also forced at least three generations of citizens to look inwards to define the boundaries of their selves. Northern aboriginal societies arguably have been at the forefront of this process. The circumpolar region is well-populated with complementary idioms of self-government, primary and secondary 'first' nationhood, assertions of moral and territorial integrity, and calls for the revival or purification of tradition. It would be hard to deny that the last forty years have been a remarkably creative period for Northerners with some of the most interesting new models of the relation between person and territory being pioneered in Arctic environments. A few of the best concrete examples would be the comprehensive land claim agreements of Canada, international wildlife management boards, international political fora such as the Saami parliament or the Inuit circumpolar congress, or subtle autonomous enclaves such as Nunavut, Greenlandic Home Rule, and the autonomous districts of Siberia. Recently, northern indigenous political models have once again drawn the attention of political philosophers (Kymlicka 1995; 1999; Peterson 1998; Taylor 1994) reminding one of an earlier period when they informed the political philosophy of Montaigne, Rousseau, Locke, Marx, and Engels (Brandon 1986; Johansen 1982; Grant 1998; Grinde and Johnson 1991).

There need not be anything mystical behind the rise of the North in world politics.<sup>1</sup> Since the settling of scores in 1945, northern landscapes and northern peoples became strategic sites for the articulation of the power of nation-states. One of the fascinating products of this intensified interest of the fatherland or of 'the Crown' in the lives and allegiance of northern peoples has been the wide acceptance of the concept of aboriginality. In the period following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and with it the morally-tinged battle between competing ideological blocks, the intertwined concepts of aboriginal rights and nationality have now become two of the most powerful counter-weights to the laws governing the flow of commodities and of capital.

The purpose of this paper is to give an anthropologically grounded critique on the notion of 'aboriginality' with special emphasis on Siberia. I will argue that as anthropologists we must be careful not to take the concept of aboriginal rights as self-evidently appropriate but that we should use our ethnographic and interpretative skills to situate it in broader conceptions of social power. Through the example of the rapidly developing and *new*

discourse of aboriginality in Siberia, I will try to identify the ways in which the concept may or may not be helpful for rural northern people there. By extension, this critique will also be carefully applied to other contexts primarily in Canada but also in Latin America and Australia. From the outset, however, I would like to be clear about what I am not arguing. I am not arguing that the concept is inappropriate. Quite the contrary I see it as important both in Siberia and in other places. Nor I am arguing that anthropologists should shun it as we often shun concepts such as race. However, as with the development of ideologies such as market capitalism or of socialism, the time seems to be ripe for the consideration of 'varieties' of aboriginality which may be more or less strategically appropriate in different regions. What I am arguing is that we must situate claims of aboriginality in historical and ethnographic contexts such that we do not assume that the same 'bundles' of rights (such as claims to territory or indigenous status) flow as easily as commodities do from Canada, to Latin America, to Siberia.

### SITUATING 'ABORIGINALITY'

There is no shortage of literature on the meaning of aboriginality in world politics (Archer 1991; Bedford 1994; Beteille 1998; Gray 1997; Paine 1984; Ingold 2000). For the most part there is a cautious consensus that this concept is more useful strategically than other relational concepts, such as kinship, sentient landscapes, or 'mixed-blood' identities, which are universally found in rural communities. In this chapter I would beg to differ. In my studies of identity in Siberia and Canada, as well as in my readings on circumpolar societies worldwide, I see a lot of genius in local metaphor which is not necessarily reflected in definitions of aboriginal rights read by rote from official documents published by the International Labour Organisation.

My interest and sometimes worry about the concept in the Siberian context comes from observing its rapid rise in popularity. When I first travelled to Leningrad as a language student in 1987, and there came into contact with a group of skittish Khakas nationalists bravely trying to forge a "cultural" association of Southern Siberian peoples, I was told many times that there were no aboriginal peoples in Russia ('only Siberian nationalities'). It was usually emphasised that these nationalities were not nationalist but that 'they only wanted to talk about culture'. Thus the pages of the *samizdat* typewritten journal 'Tuun' [the First Ones] edited by the association were filled with pictures of Khakasian or Tuvian culture, legends, and the odd article about how interesting it was that aboriginal people in the United States had their own law enforcement systems. Within five years, and following the crumbling of the Soviet Union, it was not hard to find ethnically-based political associations erupting throughout the Russian Federation (although they usually denied that they were 'nationalist'—a designation which is still highly negatively charged in Russian). At this time the first Federal congresses of 'less-numerous' or 'sparse' nationalities were held in Moscow to work together on federal laws to protect language, the environment, and to improve the well-being of 'sparse peoples' (Association 1990). Then, as in 1987, most leaders would confess a sense of kinship for native peoples in *Amerika* but would rarely call themselves 'native' partly for their pride of being a people-proper and partly not to offend local Slavic

settlers and in-laws who considered themselves to belong to Siberian communities. However, about this time, leaders and ethnologists cleaved off the demeaning suffix in 'nationality' (*narodnost'*) and began to call themselves demographically disadvantaged 'less-numerous peoples' (*malochislennye narody*). As conditions worsened across Russia with the successive monetary crises, the phenomena of systemic non-payment of pensions and wages, and the collapse in the supply of essential goods and services, a new term appeared in most designations—*korennoi* 'native'. The term is most often added in just after the adjective which indicates demography (*malochislennye korennye narody*). It has rapidly gained official status in the titles and texts of several important recent Federal laws passed in compliance with the UN decade of aboriginal peoples.<sup>2</sup>

The elaboration of a new aboriginal identity can be felt not only in the dry text of documents but in interactions at international meetings and in local communities. In my own brief participation in international meetings of aboriginal peoples in Russia, and through the lessons learned through several development projects in collaboration with Evenki, Yakut and Cree and Dene peoples, I have become fascinated with the strong kinship felt between these circumpolar peoples.<sup>3</sup> The delegations which travel between the Canadian and Russian North feel a strong bond in terms of deprivation whether that be the common effect of residential schooling or being inserted into hierarchical systems of status at the lower tiers. However they also find a certain degree of envy for each other's situation. Canadian First Nations people identify a certain authenticity of tradition in Siberia which they do not see among their younger generation. It is not uncommon for them to remark upon the fact that 'traditions are strong' when they see people living in caribou skin tents or tanning skins in order to make winter clothing. Central Siberian peoples, on the other hand, crave the political confidence and respect hard-earned by political activists in western and northern Canada. They tend to be as impressed with the overt performance of medicine rituals in public places such as band councils or healing circles as they are with the quality of buildings, clothing, and vehicles enjoyed by northerners. In these meetings there is an infectious sense of 'appropriate' or 'timeless' unity which is expressed first and foremost in metaphors of kinship ("that person reminds me of my grandmother", "we are like cousins") but inevitably as part of the aboriginal situation ("we understand your problems", "we will pray for your struggle"). It is within this frame of experienced unity that concrete institutional messages tend to be transferred such as the benefits of 'devolved' [decentralised] administrative practice, land-claim agreements, or (in the other direction) the power that higher education can bring to native intellectuals, or the value of certain traditional 'professions' such as reindeer herding.

The use of the term 'aboriginal' in concrete settings such as these is on the whole positive.<sup>4</sup> In both Siberian and Canadian communities there is a tangible sense of pride which comes from discovering that in the face of common obstacles that native Siberians and First Nations Canadians have managed to discover different but complementary strengths. However, following the first flurry of meetings in 1992, there has been a gradual slippage in discourse, in Russia at least, in which certain standard political accommodations (such as claims to exclusive territories, or higher educational quotas) are experienced to be 'naturally' part of one's identity. As I will argue here, this uneasy shorthand contradicts both the creative

way in which identities were managed in the Soviet period and the special way in which the aboriginal identity is wielded in concrete negotiations today.

Following the lead of Harvey Feit (1991), I have found it helpful to identify what aspects of the 'colonial situation' (Balandier 1970) contribute to the formulation of an evocative notion of 'aboriginal rights' which so easily embeds within it exclusive demands for territory, jurisdiction, or autonomy. As Feit demonstrates for Algonquians, the specific political context of US Allotment Policy in the early 20th Century created a forum of ideas in which notions of private property seemed somehow inherent to the human condition. Entire anthropological debates, if not the boundaries of specific Indian reservations, were inspired not so much by what people said, but by an enchanted quality to the idea of primal property ownership which carried arguments forth in the public sphere. However, as Feit observes, this specific constellation of ideas and assumptions had ambiguous effects on Algonquian peoples. On the one hand, the stereotypes of how the *sauvage noble* had an unquestioned connection to land protected certain spaces from agricultural encroachment. However, this situationally defined concept was also blinding since the idea of a 'natural right to possess' did not carry the moral message of 'how one should relate' to land or to animals.

Similar processes have been underway in Siberia since the start of the Soviet period. To a great degree early Soviet policy towards the 'sparse peoples' reflected a sense of competition with North America in how best to treat native peoples. Lenin's concept of a non-capitalist path applied to people who were 'already communal' (and thus pre-adapted to socialism) employed in equal measure a certain romanticism of tradition and a certain political consciousness that a socialist state was obliged to rain subsidies upon people in a more generous way than the Capitalist West. However, since the fall of the Soviet Union and the passion with which Russia is embracing a very ambiguous notion of *demokratiia*, the bundle of rights thought appropriate to Siberian peoples has changed. In an odd reversal of the previous pattern, in 21st Century Siberia the Russian state is taking great pains to 'give the taiga back to the people' by cutting off all sources of subsidy for transport, education, health-care, heating and food. On the other hand, foreign non-governmental associations are in a great rush to forge contacts with peoples who 'are of course' aboriginal peoples. This recent amplification of aboriginal status within the new identity economy of international non-governmental organisations and bilateral agreements, however, also carries a negative effect. As with the Algonquian case, the rush to draft lists and carve out spaces on the internet for political associations deafens people to the subtle way that Siberian villagers actually wield their identity to make moral claims. If we accept that claims to aboriginal identity, as with property rights, are embedded in particular political and historical situations, then it follows that we should be wary of transferring them easily around the world. At the very least, we should be sensitive to the existence of a variety of aboriginal situations and thus a variety of approaches to making claims to rights.

A very quick review of places where claims to aboriginal rights have been made suggests that although there are common histories of exploitation by minority settler groups who have interests in alternate uses for land and labour, there are also great differences in how idioms of aboriginal identity are applied. In exploring the context of claims to aboriginal rights in Canada, Siberia, Latin America, and Australia, in a series of seminars with senior

undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Aberdeen, we found it interesting to fracture the aboriginal rights idiom into the way that the person ('self') was defined and the way that landscapes were defined. In each setting it seemed that although relation between person and land was calibrated differently, in each case the relation was reduced to a case of 'aboriginal rights'. Thus the rights discourse in areas of British colonisation tended to revolve around liberal-democratic notions of the rights of the individual (esp. the controversial notion of 'pure' and 'mixed' status) while institutional collaboration with the state tended to focus on identifying blocks of land over which settlers or First Nations had exclusive control. By contrast, in regions of Iberian colonisation, there was a much greater emphasis upon the cultivation or 'civilisation' of the person both by intrusive states but by local communities who often created complex 'mixed' *mestizo* identities to capture their kinship with settlers. In Russia, there was an almost complete eclipse of the rhetoric of individual rights replaced with a complex discourse of nationality and citizenship wherein gradations of status and power could be articulated without much reference to territory at all. The lesson of this broad overview for me and for the students was that certain 'common-sense' categories, such as the troubled Canadian government category of 'status' and 'non-status' Indian, were not always necessary in order to make complex claims on resources and rights. Indeed the Latin American and Russian cases tended to show that different forms of identity than those wielded in Canada, such as being a hyphenated citizen ('Evenki-Russian') or a *mestizo*, might in fact yield great power and prestige. By extension, we learned that models of identity and autonomy founded upon a proper British 'land base' need not always be the primary goal of 'aboriginal' peoples in other parts of the world.

Looking deeper into history and context, the students were particularly interested in that ironic aspect of the colonial situation wherein oppressed peoples become oppressors. According to the standard geneologies, the idea of aboriginal rights was created through the struggles which arose when European absolutist states 'expanded into' the 'New World' and bumped up against people who were already there. Within the English language literature, moralistic tales tend to be told of the expansion of Gallic, Hispanic, Dutch, Danish, or British power. The metaphors of conquest are varied. Within British contexts, the justification of expansion tends to be a kind of Protestant urge to instil productive value on lands which are seen to be vacant (Asch 1984; Cassidy 1992; White 1981). Hispanic and Gallic expansion, however, tend to have had a concern for conversion or improvement of infidels (Pagden 1993; White 1997). In both cases, commonly accessible to English-speaking readers, the most intriguing part of the story lies not so much in the way that declarations of sovereignty were proven,<sup>5</sup> but instead the fact that the method of oppression was oddly similar to that which ruthless empires had suffered at the hands of others. Historians of ideas argue that European notions of natural sovereignty seem to have been forged in earlier battles when English or Spanish leaders themselves made claims against the expansion of Gallic or Moorish power (Dickason 1979; Green and Dickason 1989). Russian models of paternal protection through the enforced exchange of furs bear much in common with Mongol models of tribute. This idea, while made at a very high level of abstraction for anthropologists, did seem to open the door to making 'aboriginality' a common discourse for all, rather than a text which should be read only by members of a certain narrowly defined minority group.

Tim Ingold (2000) connects the ambiguities created by the aboriginal appellation to the dominance of 'genealogical thinking' recently stamped directly into legal definitions such as the ILO Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples. He associated this with certain assumptions made by primarily in the European scholarly tradition on how identity, descent, and belonging are linked such "an identity that lies in [an aboriginal] people's belonging to the land reappear[s] as a property that belongs to them" (p.132). The contradiction for anthropology, according to Ingold, is that this link of descent and exclusive ownership violates the rich store of metaphor generated our own ethnography of rural, hunting peoples. Thus we are placed in the odd situation of writing complex ethnographies of relationships between people, animals, and places where people use non-linear and non-possessive idioms of 'respect', 'awareness', 'belonging', 'gifting', but then find ourselves in different venues asserting that rights flow directly from a person's descent from indigenous forefathers. For our purposes, what is key about Ingold's idea is his challenge to write politically evocative ethnographies which articulate a 'progenerative' model of identity as 'a continual unfolding of relationships between people, animals and places' while defending the political spaces in which these relationships can flourish. Instead of working with arboreal metaphors of descent, he instead suggests the metaphor of a rhizome (or fungal mycelium [p.426 n. 7]) to represent the tangled and complex way that being is felt to come forth into the world in many hunting contexts. Rhizomes, tubers, or mushrooms are probably not the best metaphors of identity for a circumpolar hunting or herding camp. However his point about placing the stress on how people themselves use metaphor to express their being and becoming is quite clear. In this light, the lineal descent models of indigenous argument seem rather constricting when compared to the elaborate kinship strategies of 'mixing', which are seen by some commentators as the key to politics in Latin American or in Canadian Metis rural communities (Gow 1991; Hill 1996; Peterson and Brown 1985; Plaice 1990). Moreover, metaphors of belonging to, aware of, or of being responsible to land (and animals) are much richer ways of describing relationships than to treat parcels or animal populations as possessions (Anderson 2000). Perhaps most importantly, the idea that one can feel that one has a 'mixed' identity (rather than a pure identity) or feel obligated to the land (rather than defensive of it) can be seen to be proactive strategies for engagement with outsiders rather than weaknesses brought about by assimilative pressure by settlers, or worse, the lack of a certain moral fiber.

The lessons learned by a thumbnail history of aboriginal rights claims, as well as recent theoretical analysis of the term itself, lead one to doubt whether the typical formula of 'rights derived from primary descent' represents all of the richness in northern rural communities. It would be a sad irony if exchange and communication among Siberian scholars as with aboriginal political activists would lead to replicating models of the self of the landscape forged on other battlefields. Again, this call is not one about restricting contacts or discussions, but a call of caution in assuming that 'of course' there are aboriginal peoples in the Russian North as in any other part of the world.

## UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY, TERRITORY AND POWER IN A RUSSIAN CONTEXT

Siberia shares a geography and a history very similar of that of other circumpolar settings, such as Hokkaido, Canada or Greenland. Like these territories, Siberian communities were shaped by long-term colonial contacts with empires concerned with extracting primary resources such as fur and fish in previous centuries and oil and gas in this century. Trading monopoly companies effectively ruled Siberia for centuries. Finally, as was quite common in the early colonial period, military considerations of alliance and conquest grew into more complex civic models of governance. It is at this level that the commonalities end and the specifics of the colonial situation come into play.

In Canada, the compromise between alliance and conquest took the form of treaties, the main goal of which was to identify parcels of land for settlers while reserving some lands for the traditional allies of the colonial state. Thus the parcelling of the landscape was the most pressing political concern. However the considerations on how to treat the landscape also led to a mechanism for treating the person. A unique quality of these treaties is the implication and often overt recognition of the autonomy of the First Nations as supported by a legal code of Indian 'status'. In Russia, many of the same themes existed but with different emphasis. Incipient solemn agreements recognising local autonomy, developed in 1822 under Count Speranskii, were radically transformed into a unique model of civic governance following the Russian civil war based on 'territorial formations', national identity, and conviction that a person had to 'gravitate' to one place and one community (Raëff 1956; Anderson 2000). These communities, which were not based on a radical vision of sovereignty, nevertheless were set within large territorial zones which were of special importance for the social development of northern peoples. These zones, which eventually became clan soviets and autonomous districts, were given a subordinate yet relatively autonomous status which was meaningful yet more ambiguously defined than the trusts of Canadian reservation policy. It would be difficult to say, for instance that any of the 'less numerous nationalities' had special rights of access to territory *in jure*, although in practice this is what happened. The reason for this followed from an *additional* extremely well defined and successful institutional level where social institutions stressed economic autonomy for northern peoples. Like in Canada, these economically based institutions were supported by a legislative charter of personhood known as 'nationality' (Anderson 1996). Unlike in Canada, they were also supported by an affirmative action programme of supporting national *kadry* adjudicated by the single party of government. To a great extent, the peoples of Siberia grew to know themselves as northern peoples and to feel their own strength through these state-led economic institutions of the Soviet period. Thus, in the British post-colonial context, it is commonplace to view aboriginal governance of the self as premised upon 'status', a 'land base', and a certain contract *vis à vis* the Crown. In Russia the accent was and remains upon the central regulation of social networks of exchange and communication implying, further down the line, certain territorial zones of influence and special markers of citizenship.

The differences in the way that the person and the landscape are regulated in Russia can be understood to spring from a unique set of social forces, which in turn shape the aboriginal



situation today. As is well known, Russian expansion eastward was driven by the search for tribute paid in fur (*yasak*) paid in yearly allotments through local intermediaries. There is a large literature on the history of the *yasak* system of social power, but I would like to focus on one important aspect—the patrimonial manner in which payments implied reciprocal obligation from the state (Bakhrushin 1955; Fisher 1943; Slezkine 1992; 1994). Although *yasak* is associated with harsh military reprisals, the taking of hostages, and so forth, it is also associated with attempts by the Russian state at limiting the influence of traders and settlers and on respecting the rights of regional power groups to administer their internal affairs autonomously. Thus for cynical or for solemn reasons, the fur tribute system did little to hinder the relations between northern hunters and the land. This patrimonial interest in regulating social networks continued through the Soviet period through the catalogue of various state economic institutions for which Siberia is now famous—the state farm (*gosudarstvennoe khoziaistvo*), collective farms (*kollektivnoe khoziaistvo*), etc.<sup>6</sup>

The intense link between economically evocative institutions and local rights is still very strong in post-Soviet Siberia. In my recent travels and meetings I am continually surprised by the prominence of what English-speakers would classify as economic models of autonomy and the relative lack of experience with liberal-democratic identity instruments like status or ethnicity. I argue that this reflects a fundamental difference in legacy between Canada and Siberia. In Canada, as the world over, British colonisers were obsessed with gaining access to territory and only somewhat interested in changing the person. The result are treaties which parcel out rights along with land and which legislated a rather inflexible, lineal charter of identity. In Russia, the state has always been interested at situating itself at the nexus of trade and social intercourse. Thus jurisdictional parcels and property law have always been fuzzy, but the rules governing the distribution of wealth are harsh, hierarchical and iron-clad. In the current transition, the state has fixed upon an ideology of a liberal market, but is implementing it in a variant which mandates the control of discrete sectors by quasi-government monopolies. This ‘mafia’-like structure is not that different from the central redistributive state. It lacks only the moderating and unifying influence of a single policy organisation such as the Communist Party. Therefore, rural peoples who now have adopted the banner of aboriginality to defend the rights of their kin are not necessarily defending age-old parcels of land or defending their status as such, but are often making complex moral claims to reclaim networks which have recently come under the control of outside power groups (Cf. Anderson 2002).

### WIELDING ‘NATIONALITY’ AS A MORAL CATEGORY

Although I have made the argument that understanding networks is the key to understanding the colonial situation in Russia, identity politics nevertheless serves as a powerful lever with which to alter the flows of influence, attention, and redistribution. Traditionally, the main category of identity has not been an ascriptive category of status, as in Canada and to a lesser degree in Australia, nor an ethnogenetic notion of purity, as in Latin America. The governing category has been that of nationality, until very recently when it seems to be being surpassed by the idea of being a ‘native person’.

I once wrote that national identity in a specific Evenki-Dolgan community could be understood as a possessive feeling of belonging to a nationality, a territory, and a productive community (*kollektiv*) (Anderson 1996; 2000). In those works, I tried to show how the feeling of 'nationalism', which surprised many observers of Soviet society, was entirely understandable as a useful strategic tool but was nevertheless tragic since it undermined richer understandings of how people related to the land (*tundra*) and to its sentient beings (one of which was the Soviet state). I still think that these three general factors are important when trying to understand how people use the new idea of aboriginality. However, the ethnographic trick seems to be to identify the right balance.

I already know that there is something wrong with the emphasis in my original interpretation mainly from the reactions to the Russian version of my book which I and a group of Novosibirsk-based sociologists bravely undertook to widely distribute to aboriginal communities in Eastern Siberia and to members of the aboriginal intelligentsia (Anderson 1999). It would be fair to say that the reaction of most people to the book has been an uncomfortable surprise both for the book's style and method but also for its subject. The main topic of the book was an exploration of how and why Evenki people felt themselves to be Evenkis, which was properly styled for English-language anthropology as an exercise in understanding national identity. However Evenki and Russian people reading this interpretation tend to find the book controversial for the fact that I label small everyday choices as building blocks of a 'national' identity. The main objection comes from the fact that *natsionalizm* remains a strong pejorative in Russia implying an irrational and fearful war of all against all. More structured interpretations tend to suggest (sometimes diplomatically, sometimes not) that the book is obsessed with one idea which is taken out of context. The diplomatic interpretation of Evenki hosts in the Evenki Autonomous District (to the south of Taimyr) tends to be "things sound really bad up there—I am glad I live here". One absolutely irate Russian review of the book, recently presented at a conference in Vienna, finds the focus on nationality so inappropriate that it could only be understood as a plot dreamed up by the CIA to undermine the brotherhood of peoples in the Russian Federation!<sup>7</sup> If nothing else this comment does confirm one of the main points of the book about the exaggerated power of ethnographic interpretation in Russia!

I suspect that my Canadian background and initial exposure with Canadian First Nation politics did pre-incline me to interpret claims for respect and resources as something belonging within the box of political discourse. To a certain degree, anything composed in English would not be understandable if it were not styled in those terms. Within Russia, I now tend to suspect that discourse which is wrapped in 'cultural' identifiers is quite deliberately being camouflaged and linguistically marked as 'not-political' in order to make a much more subtle point of how relationships and communities might be better structured in a moral and aesthetic sense. Thus to 'call a spade a spade' by taking a nuanced and aesthetically pleasing speech about how people can live well together and to classify it as a power discourse is not only not distasteful, but it subverts the intention. To put this another way, to allow a discourse on social aesthetics to degrade into a game where nationalist claims and counter-claims are made implies that social relationships have already ended. This is not a hypothetical end point, but one which is not uncommon in post-Soviet Russia. Thus the

difference in our approaches is that with the cold view of an outsider I have tried to analyse a not-uncommon social process while from an insider's view I have drawn to a conclusion something that people deeply fear and which they hope will not happen.

So if a diplomatically-defined sense of 'identity politics' does not absorb the entire space of discourse, nor roughly one-third (alongside a sense of territory and social networks), what is its proper relation to social life? The most likely answer, which I tried to develop above, is that influence over how people form alliances and negotiate networks of mutual aid is first and primary, while exclusive and possessive claims to territory and to the self are definitely subordinate, and probably aesthetically silent.<sup>8</sup>

If this is our working hypothesis, how does the new claim to aboriginality fit? I suspect that when one claims to be a 'native person' in 21st Century Siberia, one is drawing attention to an imbalance in social relationships much like the claim of being of Evenki or Dolgan nationality did in the late Soviet period. I suspect that the claim is strategic since it attracts the all important attention of the international community at a time when most elders affirm that living conditions are worse than during the Second World War. I also expect that in a context of political brinkmanship, the claim inches closer to a nationalist-type declaration that all 'relations are severed and lost' but nonetheless retains an aesthetically pleasing refrain of being about 'language, culture, cuisine, and song'.

However, there are some sides to the claim to aboriginality which nonetheless may force participants along a road that they do not yet want to travel. The beauty of the claim to nationality in the Soviet period was that it was naïve to problems of purity. People often tease kin in Siberian communities, with some pride, about their blue-eyes or light coloured hair. Despite the teasing, these individuals still have a right to chose a Siberian nationality, and may elect to have it printed on their identity documents when they become adult citizens. What Siberian peoples call metisation (*metizatsiia*) is seen as a 'natural' process which in the cold view of epochal history turn their peoples into 'endangered' small-numbered nations "at risk of disappearing from the earth" but which in day-to-day life builds functional communities. There is a moralistic side to the discourse where young women are condemned for not having the foresight or strength to chose a partner from their own people (this was recently commented upon by Balzer (2000) among Khantys). Nonetheless should a *metiz* child want to become a hunter or a herder, there are no significant obstacles to his or her access to land and subsidies since these benefits are conferred by social institutions (like a collective farm, or more recently a clan enterprise) and not an ethnically stratified council.

The claim of aboriginality, however, is different. For example, within the Evenki Autonomous District at the start of this century there is a great deal of discussion about how the imagined benefits of gas and diamond exploitation might be divided amongst the people. In the recent Soviet past, mineral revenues were centrally appropriated by one arm of the government and nationality stratified benefits given out by another arm. In the post-Soviet economy, with the collapse or abdication of central ministries, people understandably wish to short-circuit this network. Next door, they see that the Sakha people have done extremely well by withholding a certain proportion of their mineral revenue as is their right as a republic. There is a strong constituency in the Evenki District which wants mineral revenues distributed directly to Evenki, Yakut, and Ket people. Their problem is how to forge a proper mechanism.

The most popular solution is to have the public aboriginal rights association control the monies. The association leader herself in political meetings in 1999 and 2000 made direct comparisons to the aboriginal peoples of Alaska and Canada to make the point about directed compensation. However in these presentations, and in private discussions, there is no clear vision of how the association would draw up a legally-binding membership code to replace the system which is voluntary and ad-hoc. Nor is there much awareness of how much trouble and pain the distinction between status and non-status native has caused in Canadian history.

This is not simply an open question for politics within one region. Central administrators, working in collaboration with UN organisations as well as the international Non-Governmental Organisations, have been actively helping associations draft schedules of what specific rights 'Sparse native people of Siberia' (more commonly known by the Russian acronym *MKNS*) can and should enjoy in Siberia. As in Soviet times, these special rights, which amount to promises for support in language, education, priority lands for hunting, etc are assigned to a register of appropriate nationalities which is held and updated by state ethnographers in the Russian Academy of Sciences. However, the new laws do not recognise a specific local or state institution for settling questions of membership (other than assigning a special role to ethnographers carrying special academic qualifications). The responsibility lies on regional groups themselves to prove their identity and their aboriginality to a court of ethnographers. However, if a local region such as the Evenki district were to strike an agreement on compensation and revenue sharing, and they were not happy for a branch of the local internal affairs ministry to register claims to nationality, they would have to establish a their own mechanism. The local committee, elected or not, would have to pass judgement on which *individuals* are part of the community and which are not making obvious and clear where the boundaries of community lie. It would seem that the forces of well meaning international pressure now mark the end of a period when a certain level of civic entitlement to land and to training was generally assumed and when aesthetically pleasing identity categories, like nationality, could be used to make ambiguous claims to respect.

Now, I do not want to suggest that Siberian people, state ethnographers, and well-meaning legislators have set out irreversibly along a path which will bring them in confrontation with models of identity and territory developed elsewhere. The fact of the matter is that the new law on aboriginal status has not become a practical lever for local action. Litigation using the model of rights is hampered by the fact that the law does not clarify how and in which court these issues should be discussed. In general, one sees in Russia a certain moral vacuum in the lack of a place where questions of the 'goodlife' can be debated and discussed. To a certain degree, the Party provided this place with its interpenetrating control and monitoring of who was hired and how they did their work. I am not suggesting a return to one party rule, however I think that as anthropologists we can identify non-formal settings where the moral dimensions of identity politics are active. As the next section will show, this is neither in the settings of autonomous jural districts nor in the category of aboriginality as one might expect. Instead, we can find it within new proposals for nationality-stratified quasi-economic communities which blend together that subtle mixture of aesthetically pleasing respect and mutual aid which I have argued is absent in the discourses of nationalism and of aboriginality.

## HYBRID INSTITUTIONS OF REFORM THE EVENKI AUTONOMOUS DISTRICT

In his presentation at the ICNSA3 conference in Sapporo in 2000, Harvey Feit discusses the different ways in which identity is exercised by James Bay Cree people and by those who speak on behalf of the state. Feit emphasises that Cree idioms of identity are complex and often include in their models of community unexpected agents such as animals or landscapes. Moreover, he speaks of a sense of resistance to forms of identity which are 'nationalizing' or which express identity merely as a form of strategic interest. Instead they seek to articulate 'ways of networking collectivities within a fully socialized environment'. In my analysis of the way that rural Siberian peoples have incorporated the idea of aboriginality, I have argued that they have been wielding the idea in order to indicate a state of imbalance in society (not unlike the way that Crees evoke the idea of the cannibal monster in Feit's chapter). However, I have indicated that they seem to resist applying it in a confrontational way but instead use it to open up new ways of managing networks with settlers and with the state perhaps also in a way which 'socialises' their environment. In the aboriginal situation of Siberia today, these ways of applying aboriginality socially are not so much concerned with championing fixed notions of status, or visions of forming a 'land base', however to use Feit's terms, they also generate 'hybrids' which mix the categories of person and of landscape in ways which may seem unfamiliar to people literate in the way aboriginal rights 'are supposed to be'. In line with a long historical tradition of negotiating the way that trade and human intercourse is controlled in the Russian contexts, Siberian examples of aboriginal rights tend to be highly economic. Here, I will use some recent examples of hybrid thinking from the Evenki Autonomous District to suggest some concrete examples of how aboriginality might be understood and imagined in post-Soviet Siberia.

In discussions, I am constantly struck by the way that Evenki activists make sudden shifts from talking about territoriality and status to a focus upon the structure of economic institutions. In meetings with aboriginal rights associations, or with visiting delegations of Canadian Cree or Dene people, it is not uncommon for a dialogue or a meeting to begin by citing general principles of respect for aboriginal peoples and for Siberian culture and then immediately to shift into a discussion of prices on goods, access to hunting areas, transport schedules, taxation, and subsidies. After citing tabular lists of prices and wages, the discussion usually culminates equally unexpectedly with a reference to the need for special status and the need for exclusive territories 'just like in Alaska'. I understand this intermixture of trading terms, identity, and 'aboriginality' to be a distinctive product of the aboriginal situation in Siberia where nationality status is a way of making arguments not only about material well-being but also of how to build social networks in a broad sense.

The most significant quality of these discourses is the edge of desperation in the discussions. The remarkable rapid changes of the post-Soviet period have directly attacked and all but destroyed the public economic institutions where northern peoples worked, enjoyed their social guarantees, and felt the power and pride of their national pedigrees. This has been replaced with what is a radical notion of liberty wherein it is now permissible to speak of exclusive notions of sovereignty and property but it is difficult to speak of community. As in liberal democratic states world-wide, there is also now a considerable

pressure to mark out special institutions and other jurisdictional ruptures counterpoised to the rapidly developing 'market'. However, unlike in Euro-American states, these non-market spaces tend to be imagined in a way reminiscent of old Russian/Soviet forms of autonomy which place the accent upon networks and economic interdependence.

The primary model of economic interdependence inherited from the Soviet past was the idea of 'collective farms' and 'state farms' wherein 'communities of producers' (*kollektivny*) were nested within organic village units with responsibility for housing, heating, and lighting put on the shoulders of the single village enterprise. Most importantly, these units were a focus for civic identity since, by default, the majority of their workers were northern peoples and these workers more or less kept in contact with the places on the land with which they were familiar. For the most part, the highly paternalistic and centralised nature of these compact socio-economic 'total social units' was resented by Evenkis. Although the farms provided stable employment, most northern people began to feel great contradictions between their own traditions and the way the state forced them to use the land or spend their time. Thus, when legislation was introduced to privatise or eliminate state farms in 1992, people in Evenkiia approached the task with great vigour, eliminating all state farms but one and creating a landscape of small-scale clan societies and farmer enterprises which still exists today.

The idea behind the formation of 'clan communes' and the 'farmer enterprises' (which I understand as being the same) was for extended family groupings to take back from the state farms their share of reindeer and other tools and then to return to their 'traditional' lands and autochthonous lifestyle. The idea was a radical one in that there was no explicit provision for the provision of civic services such as the purchasing of fur or the forwarding of credit towards buying supplies, the supply of electricity or communications, or the repair and construction of buildings—all of which was provided free by the extinct state farm. There was also no explicit provision for a guaranteed income. The provision of central state subsidies through an artificially high delivery price on reindeer meat and fish was no doubt taken as a given by most of these organisers. They then felt that if northern people were left to their own devices in a heavily subsidised and state supported economy that they would do much better than as members of an institution with a high number of bureaucrats. The assumption that prices for meat and fish, and state subsidised transportation would be forever subsidised was of course a strategic error. Also, from a legislative point of view, in many places of Siberia these pioneers had no clear title to the lands upon which they moved since they took it from state farms in the form of a long-term lease which turned out to be an illegal form of land-holding under federal laws (Todyshev et al. 2000). Most of the clan societies and farmer's enterprises began to suffer liquidity problems almost immediately after their creation. Today, in the Evenki district at least, the popular view is that all of these entities exist only on paper. In reality, there are small groups of 'farmers' out on the land living a very simple subsistence lifestyle, earning enough money through the barter of meat and fish only to buy the staples and essentials that they need. The majority of the local population who used to work within the state farms have been migrating for the past five years to the district centres which are rapidly becoming centres of unemployment and rural poverty. This widespread dissatisfaction with the way that the market reforms have turned

out has led to an extremely volatile political situation wherein in 2000 and the beginning of 2001 there have been several aggressively fought-out electoral campaigns for control of office. Ironically, the most popular campaign platforms in Evenkiia, and in the neighbouring district of Taimyr, have turned out to be those which favour the disbanding of all forms of local autonomy and the merging of villages and districts with larger urban industrial partners in the metropoli of Krasnoïarsk and Noril'sk.

These proposals sound highly ironic to an ear tuned to aboriginal rights discourse in other parts of the Arctic. Everywhere else, there is a strong movement to highlight distinctness (not assimilate it), to create home-rule territories (not liquidate them), and to encourage locally administered economic institutions (and not vertically integrated conglomerates). I would not argue that they represent a paradox. These 're-evolutionary' arguments for central regional control and paternally-guided investment in existing economic institutions are the product of deep experience with how large scale corporate institutions can contribute to building a stable community. They speak to the failure of these purely autonomist visions of reform where a highly centralised Soviet model of control over every action of a hunter and every reindeer out on the land has been replaced with a cold and indifferent model of radical autonomy where people are left with no institutional basis for mutual aid. To put this another way, the models of the state farms within 'autonomous districts', and their mirror images of radically autonomous communes, do not carry the 'hybrid' type of belonging that people seek within their vision of community. This rejection is reflected in these dramatic proposals for the liquidation of all forms of autonomy at every level. However, these proposals are nevertheless 'reactionary' in the sense that in their desperation to achieve some sort of new equilibrium they completely jettison some of the subtler legacies of the Soviet period such as the role of ethnically stratified labour collectives, an ethnically stratified policy organisation (the Evenki District Executive Committee of the CPSU), and even the notion of an autonomous district itself.

I would argue that some of the more interesting models for understanding aboriginality in Evenkiia are not to be found in the examples of institutions holding exclusive control over lands (such as the state farms and clan communes) but in examples which cross over the ideas of jurisdictional autonomy, special status, and economic autonomy. One of the most common but most underreported proposal for reform in the Soviet and post-Soviet period is for the designation of so called 'national villages'. These would be small built communities, with a high percentage of ethnically Evenki or ethnically Yakut people, where the regional government as supported by the Russian constitution would acknowledge some form of special land access rights and have special subsidy rights attached to it.

This proposal has a lot in common with those of contemporary Canadian land claims agreements in that land and rights are anchored to specific communities. They differ from land claims agreements in that the right package is attached to a public village structure without an explicit identifier of aboriginality. In theory, settlers could establish themselves and enjoy local access rights to land, but only if they were accepted by the community as a whole. In order to understand the thinking behind the proposal it is also necessary to realise Siberia's odd settlement geography. The majority of Siberia's population is housed in highly concentrated urban settlements, often with 8 storey apartment blocks and a highly developed

division of labour. Life in villages, on the other hand, is highly self-reliant with most residents hauling their own wood and water and often feeding themselves. In the current power juncture, outsiders may not be aboriginal, but they would have to live like Evenki and Yakut people.

At first glance, the proposal might seem to hark back to the type of structures common to the Soviet period, but there is one important difference—the central node of community is not an economically based institution like a state farm but a civic model of the village. As has been often noted in the analysis of Soviet rural communities, they only carried the formal designation of village since the real power lay in the monopoly economic institution in each place. The village office might keep census books, and help to distribute state pensions, but public works (electricity, heating, construction), planning, and often communications were in the hands of the state farm. Indeed, a lot of the discontent during the Soviet period was rooted in this imbalance of power, since most of the 'specialists' and 'experts' hired by the state farm were outsiders, who then set about designing the community in a manner which suited their expectations. Therefore, I understand these proposals for national villages to be a way of building upon that which already exists, but by reversing a power imbalance.

A major lever in re-establishing this balance is the vision of the rights which are due to 'sparse native peoples of Siberia'. However first and foremost in this proposal is a way to better the lifestyles of people by building upon the strengths of already existing communities. Second, it borrows from world debates on aboriginal rights by inserting a nationality term into the self-definition of a local community bringing entitlement down to the level where hunters and herders live. Finally, it offers a model of how to strengthen local ways of acting without setting up barriers to mixed-blood or in-married kin.

There is another proposal for reform which borrows more directly from forms which Evenki delegations have witnessed at work in the Canadian North. This is the model of a 'community development corporation' where an existing village institution (a collapsed state farm) would maintain its prominent role as the co-ordinator of economic activity but would be legislatively and jurisdictionally defined as being Evenki. In a way these proposals are the complements to the ones for national villages, since they also build upon pre-existing forms of autonomy but elaborate them through the prism of economic action. As with the proposal for national villages, these 'national' corporations add an aboriginal qualifier to a fairly common corporate form while preserving some of the public flexibility of the old form. The strength of the proposal comes from the uniqueness of the Siberian aboriginal situation. One positive side of the patrimonialist fur-trade economy of the Imperial and Soviet eras was the fact that 'traditional' occupations were supported and heavily subsidised by the state. Unlike in the Canadian North, where fur trapping has been a marginal enterprise for the last few decades, at the end of the Soviet period Russian trappers were considered to be quite well-off within the status ranks of Soviet society. Although this directed state effort at activating people to produce exchange value undermined some of the traditional ecological practices of Siberian societies, it did do a remarkably good job at encouraging people (including youth) to live on the land and thus, indirectly contributed to the strengthening of language and ritual. The problem with the system, at least in the eyes of some Siberian people, is that the public institutions of Soviet power were blind to nationality. This resulted in paradoxical situations,



such as having (for example) a community of 250 Evenkis and 20 Russians where all of the Russians were salaried hunters or trappers and many of the Evenkis worked as casual labourers. By adding on a qualifier, such as creating an institution for the employment and training of Evenki people specifically, the entity discriminates positively. It also, as a 'closed' agency, is not hampered by the common Russian (as North American) practice of having to have a recruitment policy necessarily open to all citizens.

In the specific example of the state non-profit Evenki corporation, which has recently been legally constituted as an agent of the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, this flexible status of being an economic entity with a policy goal cuts through several layers of post-Soviet administrative structure with hopeful benefit to local peoples.<sup>9</sup> As a legally constituted company, it has the right to take out loans and to deal directly in country products such as fur and meat (unlike a political association). As an 'arms-length' creation of the federal government, it is eligible for low interest credits from the federal treasury board. However, unlike a regular government department with a special charter it is 'free' to concentrate its energy on working directly with rural hunters and trappers of 'sparse native' nationality. Although it is unable to hold exclusive tenure of surface land (again unlike the government department that regulates state farms), in the opinion of its general director it has access to something more important—the possibility and ability to control social exchange networks to the benefit of local hunters and herders. Thus through the example of this unlikely post-Soviet institution we can identify a buttress of social networks with a policy goal imbedded in an economic goal, all subtlety directed by a moral vision to help particular nationalities.

The idea of aboriginal rights offers a lot of benefit to Siberian peoples. First and foremost it marks out an entire range of discourse and idioms by which rural minorities can keep out certain types of destructive development, like mining, while at the same time providing a locally controlled nexus wherein local people can control the distribution of resources coming in (subsidies, compensation, foreign aid). Second, the idea can encourage governments to work on legislation and contribution agreements which build on past relationships of respect, and can establish new areas for collaboration. However, in order for the term to be useful to local peoples it has to be thought out in the broad philosophical sense in which rights discourse itself was born. The very idea of rights, as the idea of liberty, arose from a context where enlightenment thinkers engaged conceptually with New World aboriginal thinkers. In post-Soviet Siberia we are witnessing the development of some variant of a liberal market state which must find a home for itself in a place rich with ideas about how to negotiate relationships between people, and between people and the landscape. By attending to the "aboriginal situation" we might 'hear' ideas of liberty articulated through the idiom of being 'native' or of being a 'first person' which is not necessarily linked to property or to ideas of lineal descent. Here I have suggested that in the Russian aboriginal situation, the idea of calling oneself native is a way to make political and economic claims of networks of social interaction. The concrete meaning of the idea, as the examples presented here suggest, lies in imagining hybrid institutional forms which cut through economic, civic, and status forms of belonging. To state this idea negatively, one of the worst things which could happen in Siberia today would be to arbitrarily carve out a small space just for

Evenkis where a new ghetto of post-industrial poverty would be created. In this chapter I have suggested that there is a long history of such subtle forms of alliance in the circumpolar North, and that they necessarily reflect the situation of post-colonial spaces. Aboriginal rights discourse in Siberia is liberating in that it lends an evocative way of splicing together images of the person and of the land. However in understanding these processes we have to be careful that our experiences in studying aboriginal rights elsewhere do not deafen us to the uniqueness of political and cultural imagination at the local level.

## NOTES

- 1) However, we should not deny the role of prophecy in these movements. The nationalist bio-social geographer Lev Gumilev (1990) is fond of tracing the bio-energetic careers of northern and southern peoples. Vilhelm Stefansson also held mystical notions of 'Articality' as attested by Gisli Palsson's recent research (2000). Finally, and most importantly, most native revivalist movements often are guided by a strong notion of prophecy as documented in Balzer 1993; Helm 1994; Mooney 1991; Treat 1996.
- 2) The most important laws at the Federal level are "On guaranteeing the Rights of the Native Sparse Peoples of the Russian Federation" (April 22 1999, Collected Laws of the Russian Federation No. 18 article 2208) and "On the General Principles for Organising Communes among Native Sparse Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East" (2000).
- 3) Here I would like to acknowledge the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for support from 1997-2001 to work with Evenki and Dene peoples on understanding the movements and management of caribou. I would also like to acknowledge the Circumpolar Liaison Directorate of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development for support in organising visits on the topics of rural health care, caribou management, and caribou marketing. The most intense set of meetings occurred in 1999 and 2000 through the support of two projects sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency to promote sustainable health care in Central Siberia and the transfer of Canadian models of aboriginal rights to the Krasnoyarsk Territory and the Evenki Autonomous District. Finally, the Fund for the Support of International Development Activities supported the visit of two Evenki linguists to visit Cree communities in Northern Alberta.
- 4) For the most part, Siberian activists and government people prefer the term 'native' *korennoi* to that of 'aboriginal' (*aborigen*) since the latter has a slightly negative, primitive connotation. However in English and in anthropology it has become more proper to use the term aboriginal.
- 5) Nicely evoking Bloch's notion of symbolic violence, explorers and *conquistadores* had exotic ways of symbolising possession such as the practice of uprooting groves or planting crosses to prove productive use (British and French), to hauling rocks back across the ocean to prove ownership (British), to reading out 'declarations' offering the opportunity of conversion before notaries before setting about pillaging a settlement (Spanish).
- 6) Perhaps it bears repeating here that the root word for these institutions—*khoziaistvo*—is very difficult to translate into English since it contains within it a difficult mixture of political and economic themes. It is not only economic in the sense of creating wealth, but it connotes a certain mastery of the environment and sense of order. Moreover, it implies a sense of providence.

- 7) I am probably not the best one to adjudicate this 'debate'; however, an objective summary of the presentation, my spirited defence, and an interpretation of the problem can be found in Vakhtin 2000 (in Russian) accessible on the internet.
- 8) On a similar topic in Southern Siberia, Manchuria, and Mongolia see Sneath (1993) and Humphrey and Sneath (1999).
- 9) The exact legal title is *federal' noe unitarnoe predpriiatie*. The concept of a *unitarnoe predpriiatie* is that a single civic entity like a village council directs a single economic agent. The fact that the entity is registered as an economic agent gives it the freedom to apply for loans or to work with cash transactions (unlike a pure civil office). The fact that it remains a civic creature makes the entity responsible to elected organs and not to share-holders. Since the spring of 2000, the number of *unitarnoe predpriiatie* in central Siberia has burgeoned.

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