

ABSTRACTS

Part 1 – Origins and Early Initiatives

Stephan Dudeck and Liivo Niglas

At the Threshold of Perestroika – Khanty Ecological Testimony and Estonian Eco-Nationalism in Lennart Meri's Sons of Torum.

This contribution examines the role of Estonian researchers – especially visual anthropologists – in their encounters with Indigenous Siberian communities during the *perestroika* period. As a case study, we focus on Lennart Meri's film project *The Sons of Torum*, based on expeditions in 1985 and 1988 and released in 1989 as a Soviet-Estonian-Finnish co-production. The project reveals the intertwined trajectories of two struggles: Estonia's push for national independence and the Khanty's efforts to assert cultural and environmental rights. We argue that these movements influenced each other. For Estonian filmmakers and intellectuals, kinship with Finno-Ugric peoples of Siberia offered both inspiration and a framework for ecological resistance against Soviet industrialisation and cultural assimilation. For Khanty activists, cooperation with Estonian anthropologists and filmmakers created new opportunities for visibility, solidarity, and empowerment. These encounters show how Baltic and Indigenous actors jointly shaped new cultural and political possibilities that reached beyond the Soviet Union. Methodologically, we draw on visual anthropology, which highlights personal encounters, collaboration, and aesthetic expression as forms of resistance. Using film materials, archival sources, and personal recollections, we explore how such collaborations reflected and influenced wider transformations of the *perestroika* era. While focusing on Estonian-Khanty exchanges, we also situate them within broader Finno-Ugric networks. The chapter highlights how shared cultural imaginaries and ecological concerns fostered fragile but important openings for alternative histories, allowing both Estonian and Indigenous Siberian voices to articulate visions of belonging, critique, and autonomy in the late Soviet period.

Anna Shibarova

From "Friendship of Peoples" to "Major Problems": Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples of the North in the Early *Perestroika*-period Soviet Press – Towards an Annotated Bibliography.

This pilot annotated bibliography identifies, archives, and indexes key Soviet newspaper materials in which the lives and concerns of the Indigenous small-numbered

Peoples of the Soviet North, Siberia, and the Far East become visible. Drawn from publications appearing between 1987 and early 1989, the assembled collection of sources helps reconstruct how the experiences and challenges of Northern Indigenous peoples gradually broke through official ideological constraints and entered the public sphere during *perestroika*. The sources encompass a broad and diverse range of genres: short news items, editorial notes, field reports, book reviews of works by Northern authors, and reports on meetings of the *RSFSR Writers' Union*, among others. Their thematic scope is equally comprehensive, spanning the erosion of minority languages, cultural heritage, and ethnic identity; socio-economic challenges; and environmental degradation affecting various Northern peoples. Alongside these textual materials, the bibliography incorporates visual documentation – photographs and illustrations depicting everyday life in Indigenous communities. In the preface, A. Shibarova, the author and compiler, introduces the sources, analyzes key thematic trends, and identifies the main participants in the public discourse, while also outlining the selection criteria and the structure of the annotations. Ultimately, this pilot project establishes a foundation for an ongoing bibliographical series dedicated to Indigenous communities' media presence and the public discourse surrounding them.

Boris Chichlo

The First RAIPON Congress in the Context of *Perestroika*.

This article examines a landmark event that took place within the liminal historical space between the Soviet Union and the “new Russia,” commonly referred to as *perestroika*. It demonstrates that the First Congress of the small-numbered peoples of the North (its official designation), made possible by the reforms of *perestroika*, also exerted a considerable influence on the course of *perestroika* itself. Virtually all accounts of the organization of the Congress have highlighted the exceptional role played by initiatives originating within Indigenous communities, particularly among their literary and intellectual elites. At the same time, the contributions of specialists – anthropologists (including ethnographers), sociologists, demographers, biologists, and environmental scientists – have generally been overlooked or ignored. Yet their research and publications undoubtedly stimulated and helped shape the activities of emerging leaders within local Indigenous communities. The author of the present article was among the very few Western scholars invited to attend the Congress. During the proceedings, he was able to record the statements made by delegates in the presence of Soviet leaders Mikhail Gorbachev and Nikolai Ryzhkov. These leaders were compelled to listen to candid and often painful testimonies from peoples whose very names had previously been unknown to them. To draw attention to them once again excerpts from these speeches are published in the present article.

Oran R. Young

**East Meets West in Arctic/Northern Social Sciences:
The Story of the 1991 Joint US/USSR Academies Workshop in Moscow.**

In April 1991, a group of 13 American researchers and 20 Russian researchers gathered in Moscow for a weeklong workshop designed to compare and contrast approaches to understanding the human dimensions of Arctic/northern affairs and to explore opportunities for cooperation in future research in this area. Jointly sponsored by the US National Academy of Sciences and the Soviet Academy of Sciences, the workshop was a response on the part of the scientific community to the general spirit of *perestroika* prevailing at the time and to the rapid rise of interest in international cooperation relating to a variety of Arctic issues. The workshop not only stimulated a number of specific cooperative projects; it also enhanced understanding on both sides regarding differences in the organization of scientific research in the two systems. Circumstances prevailing today have made cooperation in this field much more difficult. But a lasting legacy of the 1991 workshop is a realization of the importance of building and nurturing a sense of community among members of the research community that can survive political ups and downs and facilitate cooperation when times change.

Part 2 – Coping with Rapid Change: Examples from Chukotka

Nikolai Vakhtin

Chukotka after Perestroika: Social Actors and Political Power.

In 2023, I published a paper “Social and economic uncertainty of the 1990s in Chukotka: a challenge and a resource” (Vakhtin 2023). The main research question of the paper was: Why in late 1980s – early 1990s, despite external support and powerful intellectual resources, the *Okrug* under Governor Nazarov returned so easily onto the Soviet authoritarian trail? Or, why was the governance system of Chukotka four to five years after 1989 so similar to what it was before? Why was the drive towards new market/democratic system “absorbed so easily into a transmuted form of the old order?” (Burawoy). In this paper, I further discuss the answers provided by Burawoy, Humphrey, Verderie, and offer a different one, based on my analysis of the social mechanism underlying the “transmutation.” I explain why this question is relevant today, and switch to the analysis of the Soviet economic system where power meant the right to (re)distribute resources. The society of Chukotka before and after the disintegration of the Soviet Union included several social strata; remoteness of the *Okrug* placed the top stratum in a unique position of absolute power. Attempts of self-organization of the indigenous (and other) population of the *Okrug* failed, in spite of the strong external support: the inertia of power proved to be stronger. I describe this process using the field data from early and mid-1990s, and then reveal the social mechanism that opposed the changes and brought back the authoritarian rule.

Liliya Zdor, Mark Zdor, and Eduard Zdor

Back to the Future: Ethnographic Notes from the Neshkan Community.

This paper explores how the small Chukchi settlement of Neshkan navigated the profound disruptions of Soviet *perestroika*. The reforms not only transformed economic and administrative structures but also reshaped internal hierarchies. Changes in social organization became both a response to external pressures and a driver of further internal shifts. During the crisis, residents turned to a pre-Soviet economic model grounded in traditional knowledge. Sea hunting re-emerged as a crucial means of survival amid acute food shortages, whereas reindeer herding proved less resilient: despite preserving part of the herds, it could not fully sustain the community. The return to the “past” thus functioned as both resource and limit. Drawing on diaries, essays, video recordings, and interviews, the paper shows how *perestroika* disrupted linear time. Socialist, capitalist, and subsistence systems coexisted across distinct spaces, shaping contemporary life. “Back to the future” captures this layered temporality.

Gavriil Malyshev

Dwelling Abramovich's Cottages: A Post-Project Analysis of Adaptation to Imported Architecture in Rural Chukotka.

My research examines the outcomes of the modernization project implemented in Chukotka during the 2000s, under the governorship of Roman Abramovich. At that time, large-scale architectural and infrastructural renovation was carried out in national villages inhabited mostly by Indigenous people, Chukchi and Yupik Eskimo. The study focuses primarily on how local communities inhabit and appropriate infrastructure imposed from above through an externally driven modernization project; on the social relations and everyday practices that emerge in this context; on how the renovation is interpreted by residents; and on how it reshapes social structure among villagers as well as their expectations of the state's functions. The research documents forms of grassroots technological adaptation through which residents adjust imported American-style timber-frame cottages to local climatic, social, and cultural conditions. My findings challenge the widespread assumption about local population as passive recipients of architectural modernization. Instead, I demonstrate that the Chukotka modernization project resulted in the emergence of an informal housing policy, in which responsibility for everyday maintenance is effectively taken by residents, while the state is expected to provide social support, guarantees of access to building materials, and periodic renewal of the housing stock. My observations have practical relevance for the development of future policies and planning decisions concerning the maintenance and development of infrastructure in Chukotka's national villages, as they may help explain why some technologies introduced from outside the community fail to take root, while others are successfully adopted and transformed.

*Part 3 – Reflections on International Collaborations:
Examples from the Russian Far East*

Elena Dul'chenko and Oleg Zaporotskii

**Indigenous Ecological Knowledge and Community-driven Activities
in Sustainable Economic Development in Kamchatka.**

This chapter examines the challenges and objectives of the Indigenous peoples of Kamchatka, particularly the Itelmen and Even communities, with respect to economic autonomy and cultural identity. The authors document the difficult transition from Soviet institutional structures to a market-based economy, a process frequently hindered by inadequate legal frameworks and restricted access to fishing and hunting quotas. A central focus is placed on the significance of traditional ecological knowledge, which is being preserved for future generations through international research collaborations and educational initiatives. Despite persistent ecological challenges and socio-economic crises, the sources emphasize the necessity of securing Indigenous land rights and strengthening local self-governance. Overall, the reports demonstrate that the conservation of biodiversity is inextricably linked to the protection of Indigenous livelihoods, cultural practices, and ways of life.

Aleksandra Urkachan, Raisa Avak, and Tjan Zaotschnaja

Local Perspectives on International Initiatives to Sustain Indigenous Cultures in Kamchatka.

This chapter documents German-Russian collaborative initiatives aimed at preserving the cultural heritage of Indigenous peoples on Kamchatka, the Koryak, Even, and Itelmen. Through ethnographic expeditions and workshops, Indigenous knowledge, local dialects, and ritual dance traditions were recorded and preserved using modern digital media technologies, ensuring their transmission to future generations. A central focus is the development of multimedia educational resources designed to foster pride in Indigenous identities and to counteract language loss in the villages of the North. At the same time, numerous exhibitions in Germany introduced international audiences to the artistic and craft traditions of these peoples. Overall, the texts demonstrate how the integration of traditional knowledge with contemporary documentation practices contributes to the revitalization of endangered Indigenous traditions. In this way, interdisciplinary collaboration and international exchange not only support the preservation of cultural heritage but also strengthen social cohesion at the local level.

Valerii Kravchenko

Beauty Protects our World: Indigenous Choreographic Culture in Kamchatka in Response to Western Contact.

The author highlights the impact of Indigenous dance traditions on the Kamchatka Peninsula as an important means of preserving the ethnic identity of peoples such as the Itelmen, Koryak, and Even. It traces the long-standing tradition of German–Russian scholarly collaboration, ranging from early eighteenth-century expeditions to the contemporary work of ethnologist Erich Kasten. Particular attention is given to cultural ensembles such as El'vel', which have contributed to the revitalization of ritual festivals and traditional practices. Despite the social and economic challenges associated with the *perestroika* period, these groups facilitated international cultural exchange, notably through performances in Germany. The author argues that such initiatives aimed at efforts to preserve intangible cultural heritage make a significant contribution to the survival and continuity of the small Indigenous peoples of the North. In this context, choreographic practice functions not only as a form of cultural expression but also as a political statement and a living testament to the resilience of Indigenous communities.

Erich Kasten

Anatol Donkan – A Nanai Artist's Life under the Impact of *Perestroika*.

Using the example of Anatol Donkan, a member of the Nanai people from the Amur River region, it becomes evident how profoundly the new ideas and the opening toward the West during the period of *perestroika* shaped both his artistic development and his later life. During his art studies in Khabarovsk, he developed a particular interest in the distinctive worldviews of the Nanai, as expressed in their carved wooden figures. He soon realized the importance of preserving this valuable body of Indigenous knowledge. Inspired by the compelling public appearances of Mikhail Gorbachev and his wife Raisa, he took up their ideas and translated them into his own initiatives, for which new opportunities had now emerged. He began collecting carved wooden figures and intricate ornaments for the small museum he founded. To preserve the associated Indigenous craft knowledge and practices, he organized craft projects for young Nanai. When he encountered increasing repression in Vladivostok in the late 1990s, he left Russia and continued his work abroad, without ever fully relinquishing his ties to his homeland.

Part 3 – Retrospectives

Anna A. Sirina

Siberian Ethnography in the Post-Soviet Period: A View from Moscow.

This article is devoted to the history of Russian Northern studies in the 1990s. It is based on literary sources as well as the author's personal recollections. A periodization of Russian ethnography over the past three decades is proposed, with particular attention to the post-Soviet period (the 1990s and early 2000s). Reflection and auto-ethnography are intertwined with conceptual conclusions and broader observations. The article argues that Moscow-based Northern studies underwent fragmentation in the early 1990s. The situation stabilized by the early 2000s as a result of various internal and external factors, including the development of international scholarly networks and collaborations since the 1990s. The results of both academic and applied research on the current situation among the Northern indigenous communities during the period of post-Soviet transformations is presented as well. Participant field observation and interviews reveal the ambivalent nature of this period: the severe consequences of economic reforms coincided with the revitalization of socio-political and ethnocultural life in local indigenous communities. Applied anthropology occupied a central place in the work of Moscow ethnographers, alongside such thematic areas as social transformation, religion (including shamanism), legal anthropology, and the history of science.

Erich Kasten

The *Perestroika* Years in the North: Crisis or Renewal in Russian Ethnography? Contrasting Eastern and Western Perspectives.

The author examines the development of Russian ethnography in the context of the tensions between the *perestroika* era and the increasing political isolation of the present day. Whereas the 1990s were characterized by extensive collaboration among Western and Russian researchers and Indigenous communities, contemporary research in Russia is once again subject to growing political constraints, state regulation, and implicit taboos. A central concern is the continuation of an engaged, community-driven anthropology that foregrounds Indigenous interests, including the preservation of sustainable livelihoods and cultural identity. The epilogue concludes with a warning that the current retreat into patriotic narratives and the increasing isolation from international scholarly discourse may result in a renewed stagnation and impede intellectual exchange and scholarly development. Ultimately, the author advocates for a return to open and collaborative research relationships in order to support the survival and well-being of Indigenous cultures through the effective application of scholarly expertise, much as occurred during the *perestroika* era.

