

6 BACK TO THE FUTURE: ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES FROM THE NESHKAN COMMUNITY

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Homeward

In the late 1980s, we (Liliya and Eduard) returned to our native village after graduating from university and, whether we liked it or not, had to reintegrate into the community life in a new social role. This transition proved to be both straightforward and difficult. We were, after all, back in the hometown to which we belonged, yet our young family now joined the ranks of middle-aged villagers who constituted the backbone of the community. It was a new responsibility – one we still needed to understand and accept. This challenge was further complicated by the fact that the community itself was rapidly changing under the impact of sweeping events unfolding across the country. The USSR, to which the Chukchi had gradually and often painfully adapted over three generations, collapsed, leaving behind a fragile and uncertain political landscape. Like many across Russia at the time, the villagers were initially energized by the new opportunities of a free society; this distant, beautiful, yet uncertain future sparked high expectations. This optimism was short-lived. Store shelves emptied and prices soared. Inflation hit households so suddenly that villagers had no choice but to return to traditional subsistence practices – once a source of beloved childhood foods, now a vital means of survival. The community was shaken to its foundations, leaving us little time to navigate our shifting roles. Suddenly, we found ourselves in leadership positions, responsible for the community's survival. To make sense of these changes and seek solutions, we kept diaries, wrote sketches, and recorded videos. Some were published in the district newspaper; others remain in our family archive.

What we knew then, what we learned over the years, and how we made sense of it

In the 1990s, we engaged in practices that we later recognized as participant observation – observing everyday life, reflecting on social interactions, and adopting local safety practices essential to the community survival. Decades later, we revisit our field notes and memories through retrospective ethnography, treating them as objects of systematic analysis (Ferreira and Almeida 2017). During this period, Neshkan stood at the intersection of several historical eras, each generating its own distinct cultural forms. Retrospective ethnography allows us to capture this multilayered reality, which we interpret as consistent with the Chukchi worldview, characterized by intersecting temporal and spatial dimensions.

Viewed from this temporal distance, our analysis is informed by decades of subsequent social transformation. This perspective enabled us to examine social processes from a different historical vantage point and to reconstruct the complex realities of Neshkan during a time of profound transition. Historical change reshaped the very experience of time in the village. The illusory promise of a Soviet “bright future” gave way to the collapse of the planned economy and the rise of capitalism, paradoxically pushing villagers toward renewed reliance on subsistence practices associated with the pre-Soviet past. These intersecting temporal layers transformed both the cultural landscape and the geography of everyday life, prompting renewed engagement with tundra and sea spaces and reshaping local worldviews.

To understand the coexistence of different times within the same social space, we draw on Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope, in which “the signs of time are revealed in space, and space is understood and measured by time” (1986: 122). In Neshkan, revived traditional dwellings and modes of transport – *yarangas*, semi-underground houses, and reindeer and dog sleds – reconfigured everyday landscapes. At the same time, contact with people, goods, and ideas from beyond the former Soviet sphere introduced new temporal horizons. Within the village, individuals shaped by different historical experiences encountered one another, bringing contrasting norms, beliefs, and expectations into contact. Community space thus became an arena where meanings from multiple historical periods coexisted and interacted. As the village adapted to these conditions, its residents themselves were profoundly transformed.

Tlacheivune’s etudes

From Stage to Shelves

In the mid-1990s, the village club was temporarily closed after its heating pipes burst in the cold. After a year of unsuccessful attempts to secure funds and materials for repairs, the village head personally boarded up the windows and hung a large lock on the door. From that point on, the store became the only public place where people could meet and talk during the winter. (Tlacheivune, 1996b)

Tlacheivune, who at that time managed the store, often found herself an involuntary witness to routine conversations, “philosophical” discussions, heated arguments, and even family secrets.

During these difficult years, the villagers’ enduring character traits – previously smoothed over by the rhythms of everyday life – became especially apparent. The store seemed to turn into a theater with a single spectator, and through her daily observations Tlacheivune began to discern recurring behavioral patterns: struggles for personal dignity and status, self-praise, conflict, or, conversely, conformity. While discussing one such conversation over a cup of tea with a friend, she decided to write a series of sketches about the most characteristic visitors. The combination of fiction and ethnography seemed particularly promising, yet it demanded knowledge, skill,

and sustained effort. Tlacheivune had to return again and again to the store's dialogues to produce, in the end, just one or two pages that crystallized the distinctive character traits and patterns of relationships that shaped Neshkan in the 1990s.

Between Errands and Ideologies: A Conversation on Communism

The store had just opened when Pytko and Tymkyragtyna, both elderly women, stepped inside. Tlacheivune stood behind the counter, but the women either didn't notice her or paid her no attention. They went to the household goods section and began examining the merchandise. They moved unhurriedly, as if seeing these things for the first time. They unfolded ill-fitting underwear, then carefully put it back in place, sorted through useless city clothes, and leafed through notebooks.

Pytko approached the shelf with laundry detergent and, as if speaking to herself, said, "Do you remember how we 'built' communism? We went to rallies and celebrations with flags and banners, sang songs... the bosses organized *subbotniks* (volunteer workdays). We were told that communism would come any minute: universal equality, prosperity, and, most importantly, everything would be free. And now it's gone. The newcomers who had promised us communism had left, and here we are, walking through an empty store and living without it."

After a pause, her friend replied unexpectedly, "Maybe it did come after all... it just went to America." – "Why America?" – Pytko wondered. "Because everyone says the Eskimos live well there." – "Well, yes," – Pytko laughed. "After the *subbotniks* we would get drunk. So communism must have arrived on one of those Saturdays, looked at us – so cheerful and noisy – and thought, 'They're doing just fine without me,' and went off to the American Eskimos." (Tlacheivune, 1998)

The woman's bitter irony and seemingly playful, yet thoughtful, observations sounded so natural and logical that Tlacheivune felt as if she were in a theater. As they shared stories and reflected on their own experiences, the villagers engaged in conversations that revealed their worldly wisdom and their ability to maintain optimism even in times of profound hardship. These approaches underpinned the foundation of their strategy for adapting to rapidly changing circumstances and sparked in Tlacheivune an irresistible urge to write down everything she heard.

Kergytagyn's notes

The post-Soviet crisis elevated local leaders who used the *sovkhos* (Soviet farm) to maintain community cohesion. They faced a rupture of time: traditional practices could not yet replace the collapsed state, while capitalist relations remained foreign. The notes of the director of the *sovkhos* Kergytagyn from the 1990s capture this delicate balance between despair and hope. He wrote, in particular, that most attempts to preserve subsidies and explore market niches in biopharmaceuticals (reindeer panty) and services failed. Geographic isolation and dependence on traditional livelihoods

made economic growth – and long-term stability – nearly impossible. With a heavy heart, he noted that reindeer herding families suffered most. Food, transport, and wages disappeared, leaving only those who returned to traditional subsistence and customary law to survive. Of eight brigades at the crisis's outset, only three remained by the decade's end, as survival strategies replaced earlier ambitions. His notes indicate that chronic food shortages shifted the community toward marine hunting, making hunters central to the local economy. Җergytagyn identifies three overlapping temporal regimes: the Soviet "eight-hour workday," the capitalist principle that "time is money," and traditional subsistence cycles shaped by wildlife. Villagers blended old habits, new strategies, and ancestral knowledge. The crisis ultimately fostered adaptation and produced leaders who turned traditional subsistence into a foundation for social stability and food security in Neshkan.

The visual archive

While visual ethnography (Van Den Scott 2018) expanded the scope of our participant observation, it was initially limited by the material realities of the 1990s. Shortages of film and developing chemicals made photography difficult. A turning point came with the acquisition of a video camera. Despite the amateur quality of the recordings, they allowed us to capture the vivid textures of village life, particularly during community events. Among these recordings is the first community-wide celebration of marine hunters – a hybrid event combining the traditional Chukchi maritime festival of *Keretkun* with contemporary Russian holiday practices. The celebration centered on traditional athletic competitions, including skin-boat races, the triple jump, and wrestling. In this transitional form, however, ritual sacrifices and the hunt itself were absent, temporarily reducing the sea's role as a sacred space. Yet the traditional context remained dominant. The layering of practices from different eras and cultures contributed to the resilience of the socio-cultural identity of contemporary Neshkan. Our recordings also documented everyday life – from celebrations after successful walrus hunts to scenes of reindeer slaughter. Revisiting this footage decades later reveals the multiple spatial and temporal contexts shaping village life during this transitional period. Watching it again produces a sense of displacement as we found ourselves no longer as active participants, but as external spectators of our own lived history.

Analyzing local newspapers

Fiodor Tynekeu [reindeer herder]:

For us, the inhabitants of the tundra, it's difficult to understand what's happening in the country. Before, everything was simple, familiar, and understandable. But now [...]. At first, they talked about *perestroika*. They promised us: we would live differently, better, everyone would be their own master, but now we don't hear anything about *perestroika* anymore. And things haven't gotten better. There are few

food and manufactured goods in the stores, and in some places, there are none at all. Everything is expensive. People are unhappy. The USSR has split into separate states. This is very confusing. (Kuziakin 1991)

Newspaper archives are valuable primarily for revealing the ethos of an era. To reconstruct the context of the 1990s, we examined the district newspaper *Zaria Chukotka* (formerly *Zaria Kommunizma*) and the regional newspaper *Krainii Sever* (formerly *Sovetskaia Chukotka*). During the late 1980s and 1990s, the press developed a more independent voice. Although not fully pluralistic, it reflected a broader range of opinions than had been possible during the Soviet period. All available articles from the late 1980s – 1990s related to Neshkan were digitized and coded by topic, year, and source. Analysis revealed several major thematic blocks:

- Economic crisis: decline of traditional subsistence activities, rising unemployment, chronic wage delays, and disruptions in the supply of food and household goods.
- Political and social transformation: the emergence of new formal and informal self-governing institutions amid persistent everyday hardships, including housing shortages and power outages.
- Social problems: alcoholism emerged as a central theme, associated with domestic violence, increased infant mortality, youth suicides, and the involvement of villagers in the illegal alcohol trade.
- Identity and cultural revival: discussions of whaling restoration, ritual revival, and traditional sports such as skin-boat regattas and dog-sled racing.

Another key narrative concerned historical memory and identity. Investigative articles addressed the victims of Soviet repression and the trauma of forced relocations. In this context, the work of Chukchi writer Yuri Rytkeu became particularly significant. After the collapse of the Soviet system, his writing shifted from projecting a communist future to reflecting on a dramatic past and uncertain present. Yet throughout both periods, his portrayals of characters' inner worlds captured the deeper contours of social reality, making his literary figures an important lens for understanding the 1990s.

Shifting realms: Navigating the spatio-temporal transformations of Neshkan

Though documented since the 19th century (Nordenskiöld 1885), Neshkan emerged as a significant hub in the late 1950s following the forced collectivization and sedentarization of scattered settlements. Within generations, it became a “typical” Soviet Northern village, defined by standardized architecture (Malyshev, *this volume*) and state services that forged a uniform appearance across the Russian Arctic. Neshkan's economy relied on the industrialization of traditional subsistence activities, now man-

aged through the state agricultural enterprise (*sovkhos*). While the Village Council held formal local governance authority, practical control rested with the Communist Party Committee (*partkom*). Teachers and trade workers served as key ideological and economic conduits, aligning the community with Soviet norms. Traditional Chukchi social organization persisted through subsistence brigades, where extended families maintained strong kinship ties. However, “village” residents – those disconnected from tundra or sea activities – experienced a weakening of these bonds. Ultimately, Neshkan became a complex hybrid: a contested space where formal administrative mechanisms intertwined with customary law and Indigenous identity. By 2020, Neshkan’s population had declined to approximately 600 – down from nearly 800 in the 1980s. Some families moved through regional resettlement programs to Egvekinot, while others relocated independently to Lavrentiia and Anadyr. What exactly happened in the 1990s to trigger such a significant exodus? Why did so many in our community feel they had no choice but to leave? For us, the events that reshaped Neshkan remains a vivid memory of a time that profoundly transformed the village.

Regal spirits (Royal Prima Feinsprit), braga, and samogon (homemade Moonshine)

In the 1990s, alcohol permeated daily life in Neshkan. It was sold in the local store, brought in by visiting merchants, and traded by the residents themselves. People brewed homebrew or distilled Moonshine and sold it, using the proceeds to buy low-quality alcohol or, at best, vodka from other “sellers.” Some sold batches of alcohol from Lavrentiia or Egvekinot, only to drink away the profits by buying more Moonshine and homebrew. Lidia Taenom, from the neighboring village of Enurmino, recalled that they had to travel to Neshkan from time to time for business, but she greatly disliked these trips. With disgust, she exclaimed, “How can you live in this ‘city of sin’? There’s always someone completely drunk on the street.”

Kaminskii

Kaminskii arrived in the village to work at the local airport. Tall, with a pleasant face and refined manners, he immediately drew attention. Women noticed his ease in conversation, and he, as if playing with words, knew how to charm any interlocutor. His rich vocabulary and well-structured speech suggested that he was educated and certainly well-read.

Several months after his arrival, rumors began to circulate. It was said that he was living with Marina Pavlovna, a tall, stately woman who had once worked as an accountant at the collective farm and was now retired. People also whispered that Kaminskii was receiving shipments of alcohol for resale. He allegedly sold it to the villagers at a markup, sent the money to his supplier in Lavrentiia, and then spent the profits drinking with Marina Pavlovna, buying moonshine from local distillers. (Tlacheivune, 1993)

While alcohol was readily available, consumption surged on the days pensions and social benefits were distributed – virtually the only reliable sources of cash in the village. This influx of liquidity frequently triggered cycles of violence, theft, and even homicides. The arrival of a local police officer in the mid-1990s did little to mitigate the situation, as the law enforcement system was paralyzed by the broader institutional collapse and chaos gripping the country. The community sought to develop its own mechanisms for survival. A group of young villagers, with the support of the village council, revived the “people’s militia,” which initially succeeded in maintaining order at discos and was later called upon to intervene in cases of domestic violence. The practice was abandoned after an incident that exposed the volunteers’ legal vulnerability: a woman who had herself called the militia later filed a complaint against their intervention. The same family conflict ended tragically – during a subsequent quarrel, the woman shot her husband, and doctors were forced to amputate his leg. In this desperate struggle for survival, the community used every available resource. The village welcomed both representatives of temperance societies offering paid treatment and religious groups that brought people together into spiritual communities. The traditional way of life also played a significant role in this dramatic confrontation. The young reindeer herder *Nylet* jokingly referred to his time in the reindeer herding brigade, out on the tundra, as a “therapeutic labor sanatorium.” He confessed how difficult it was to live in a state of constant alcohol intoxication, lacking the strength to overcome his addiction alone: “I returned to the brigade at my parents’ insistence, reluctantly, but with enormous relief – finally I could sober up and regain my strength.”

Hunger

Alongside the surge in alcohol consumption, hunger took hold of the village. As shop shelves emptied, skyrocketing inflation rendered even a basic selection of goods unaffordable. Instead of the usual hundreds of rubles, villagers were credited with wages – though they remained unpaid for months – and the amounts climbed first into the thousands and eventually into the millions of rubles. In this new, harsh reality, it seemed almost surreal that only a few years earlier, village council committees had been preoccupied with curbing wastefulness, debating how to prevent bread from being discarded. Now, bread had become a precious commodity. It served as a critical source of carbohydrates, a necessary reprieve from the heavy, monotonous flavor of sea-mammal meat or fish, and, quite simply, a luxury. Children savored it even without the once-standard accompaniment of butter and sugar.

Lyamkontaņav

One day, Lyamkontaņav brought a group of her peers home and announced that she wanted to treat them to bread. The children stood in the doorway, silently watching her mother. Just as silently, Tlacheivune sliced the bread and handed it

to her daughter, who immediately distributed the pieces to her friends. From that day on, an unspoken tradition was established: every Sunday, the children would come to visit Lyamkontanav, and she would share flatbread or bread with them. Lyamkontanav later explained her decision: while visiting these friends, she had been fed “black soup” – a traditional dish of finely chopped walrus meat and dwarf willow leaves. Noticing there was no bread in their home, she decided it was only right to share what her own family had. (Tlacheivune, 1997)

The shortage of store-bought provisions radically transformed the villagers’ relationship with marine mammal meat. What had once been regarded as a traditional supplement – a kind of delicacy – shifted into the category of an indispensable staple, one that was itself increasingly difficult to secure. The resulting protein deficit was most acute during the summer months, when *okorochka* (chicken legs) were often the only store-bought meat available. As a result, the return of hunters with a successful catch became a joyous event for the entire village. Following ancestral custom, every villager held the right to come to the shore and receive a share of the harvest.

However, it seemed as though even the sea had turned against the community. During the summer, the sea often remained locked in ice, preventing hunters from launching boats to pursue walrus and whales. Winter survival depended almost entirely on the autumn cache of walrus meat, supplemented by tomcod and the occasional seal. Yet even then, the sea tested their limits; it felt as though the seals had deliberately vanished from Neshkan’s reach.

In such periods, the village typically relied on its unique geography – situated on the tip of a narrow spit between the open sea and two lagoons – to pivot toward fishing. Yet, there remains a memory of one catastrophic summer when the nets yielded nothing but jellyfish.

Notagyrgyn

I woke early, drinking unsweetened tea – the leaves brewed repeatedly until they barely colored the water – and eating a piece of flatbread. As I did every morning, I weighed a decision that seemed simple but carried the weight of my family’s well-being for the days to come. My choice lay between the sea and the lagoon. Should I head to the open lead in the sea ice, hoping for a seal? A single seal, even a small one, was a valuable source of meat and blubber that could sustain my family for days, yet the chances of success were perilously slim. Or should I go to the lagoon to jig for tomcod? There, I was almost certain to catch a dozen fish – enough to secure a modest dinner, but nothing more. (Kęrgytagn, 2005)

Notagyrgyn, a respected elder and master hunter, recalled that people in those years rarely died of outright starvation, but rather from the secondary effects of chronic malnutrition. A semi-starved existence withered the immune system, turning minor ailments into fatal threats. Every morning, *Notagyrgyn* faced decisions that carried the weight of his family’s survival. He relied on the knowledge of his ancestors.

The value of this wisdom was proven by a grim ledger: his family survived, while in other households, the elderly succumbed to influenza and common colds, their bodies too weak to fight back. By then, however, no one could subsist on a purely traditional diet; the community had become structurally dependent on store-bought groceries. The only reprieve was the village school and kindergarten, which provided children with a minimal supply of store-bought staples, though even there, the menu increasingly featured wild meat. In the darkest moments, some villagers were driven to scavenge the ruins of Soviet-era warehouses and fox-breeding farms, boiling porridge from the remnants of animal feed.

Veķetcheyvyn and Taenom

Veķetcheyvyn, a hereditary sea hunter, recalled: “I have hunted all my life, and the sea sustained my family; however, even we of the older generation were unprepared to subsist exclusively on sea mammal meat. Having passed through the boarding school system, we had become accustomed to store-bought foods, let alone our children. On one occasion, I was forced to travel more than four hundred kilometers by dog sled to bring even a small amount of groceries from a neighboring district to my family.” Taenom, his wife, added an even more poignant recollection: “Our son would even faint – he couldn’t swallow another piece of seal meat. I literally swept the last of the flour and grains out of all the kitchen cupboards to cook him even a handful of porridge.” (Kergytagyn, 2016)

The 1990s were a severe test for the Chukchi community, but also a testament to its remarkable resilience. The crisis struck at the community’s very foundations, leaving damage that seemed nearly irreparable: it claimed the lives of the most vulnerable – elders, the keepers of cultural memory – and those who were never born, victims of alcoholism and the deprivation of their potential parents. Paradoxically, this period of hardship also revealed that the traditional worldview and its subsistence practices are not merely remnants of a bygone era. On the contrary, they proved to be the primary sources of social resilience and the long-term survival of the Chukchi community.

Grocery store

Shop and trading depot employees occupied a privileged position within the local social hierarchy. Their access to scarce food and “manufactured goods” (clothing, footwear, and household items) conferred a level of authority that neither Soviet nor post-Soviet administrations were able to erode. Even a shop cleaner was a respected figure – if only because she could avoid hours-long queues when scarce goods were “thrown up” for sale. The status of store and warehouse managers was unquestioned. It is therefore unsurprising that this sector was dominated by non-local workers: for example, at the Neshkan trading depot, only one of seven employees was Indigenous.

The collapse of the Soviet economy deprived retail workers not only of wages but, even more critically, of their exclusive access to goods. Under these new conditions,

there was little incentive to retain such positions. By the late 1990s, the last non-local employee had resigned and departed for the mainland. As in the *sovkhoz*, the vacant positions were filled by local residents, who assumed the enormous responsibility: supplying food to more than 600 people amid profound uncertainty and the near-complete breakdown of organized sea shipments. The survival of trade in Neshkan during the 1990s thus represents another manifestation of the community's resilience. While men at the *sovkhoz* assumed responsibility for sustaining sea hunting and reindeer herding, the task of provisioning the entire community fell to the seemingly fragile yet remarkably resilient shoulders of Chukchi women.

The Empty Warehouse

The ships that had annually delivered a year's worth of food and manufactured goods during the Soviet era ceased to arrive. Store shelves stood empty, and cash transactions became nearly non-existent. In response, the district trade center administration ordered that employees' wages be paid in whatever provisions could be delivered by winter all-terrain vehicles from the district center of Lavrentiia.

As spring approached, the head of the Neshkan trade depot informed local authorities that, aside from flour, only a few dozen sacks of grains – rice, millet, buckwheat, and barley – remained in the warehouse. Estimates indicated these supplies would barely last three to four months. The village head convened a council, where it was collectively decided to distribute the remaining grains equally among all residents, totaling a meager 150-200 grams of each variety per person. To ensure fairness, a household-by-household registry was compiled, and the distribution was executed with absolute strictness. The village survived that year, yet I still cannot fathom how we managed to endure until summer on such a meager amount of food. (Tlacheivune, 1996d)

Frozen Vegetables

On the eve of 1995, an all-terrain vehicle departed from Lavrentiia for Neshkan, carrying what was then considered a precious cargo: potatoes, apples, and New Year's sweets. En route, the vehicle broke down. As the driver labored to repair it in the bitter cold, the fruits and vegetables froze solid. By the time the vehicle finally reached the village – late in the evening, just as the store was about to close – the news had spread rapidly. Villagers lined up to purchase the long-awaited but glass-like, frozen potatoes, while children delighted in the icy apples, trying to eat them right there in the store. (Tlacheivune, 1995)

An EMERCOM Helicopter, Flour, and Villagers

Shortly after the New Year, a large Ministry of Emergency Situations helicopter arrived, delivering flour and imported rice. For the first time, villagers encountered packaging that differed sharply from the familiar Soviet standard: neat, clean sacks weighing only 22 kilograms – significantly more manageable than the customary 50-kilogram bags. Without any prompting, the entire village turned out

to unload the aircraft while its rotors were still spinning. The men formed a silent line, swiftly transferring the cargo onto sleds provided by the sovkhos administration. At one point, the discipline broke. One of the unloaders grabbed a sack of rice and bolted from the landing site toward the village, the bag slung over his shoulder. Tlecheivnye and Kylvyn immediately gave chase. Kylvyn caught up with the man, stopped him, and – without a word – reclaimed the sack. The man stood paralyzed, staring at the bag that held his family's survival for the coming weeks, before slowly trudging home in quiet defeat. (Tlacheivune, 1996a)

Reflecting on that period of our lives, we saw that the village store became a unique intersection of historical periods. Within its walls, these eras collided and transformed our understanding of them, creating a physical space that translated the global upheavals of Russian society into a distinct local interpretation. In this unique singularity, various temporal logics interacted: the tenacious inertia of Soviet-era shortages, the dramatic uncertainty of the 1990s, and the profit-driven commercial drive. Critically, none of these temporary forces was oriented toward sustaining the long-term well-being of the community. At the same time, when viewed as a center of communal life, the store revealed something else: even amid shortages and chaos, the community retained the capacity to organize mutual support. It did so by drawing on traditional mechanisms while also adapting more contemporary strategies for coping with crises. As a result, the store transformed from a purely economic space for the exchange of goods and money into a social arena where economic, moral, and temporal shifts reflected the community value system.

Community in transition: The structural metamorphoses

Although the traditional Chukchi community underwent profound and often violent transformations during Sovietization, the pace of socio-cultural change was much slower than in the 1990s. Notably, the Soviet system nonetheless continued to rely on the Chukchi's traditionally dominant economic activities – reindeer herding and marine mammal hunting.

By the end of the Soviet period, about 160 people in Neshkan worked in reindeer herding and around 40 in marine mammal hunting, not counting machine operators, veterinarians, livestock specialists, and general laborers involved in these activities to varying degrees. Together, they made up more than half of the village's working-age population. While this structure no longer reflected full reliance on the traditional economy, it did not constitute a radical break with the previous way of life. The 1990s brought a rapid transformation of Neshkan's socio-economic order. With the collapse of the Soviet model of "industrialized traditional subsistence" which had guaranteed full employment, labor demand fell sharply. Reindeer herding and marine hunting brigades shrank, leaving hundreds without work. The community underwent a painful dismantling of its established economic system, during which a new socio-cultural

reality emerged. Although this process involved no repression, its impact – driven by the speed and scale of change – was comparable to the upheavals experienced by older generations in the mid-twentieth century.

Reindeer herding

Pappylyo (Papule)

From the interrogation transcript of April 11, 1941.

“Why were you so angry at the Soviet authorities?” – “I thought the authorities would take my reindeer [...]” (Iliash, 1991)

In the summer of 1995, the fate of the *sovkhos* was decided at the Neshkan village club. Recent Russian legislation mandated a shift in legal status, requiring a transition to a formally approved ownership. One of the most contentious points of the community meeting was the naming of the new enterprise. While the majority favored the simple name “Neshkan,” this sparked immediate protests from representatives of Enurmino, the neighboring village also under the *sovkhos* umbrella. At the height of the debate, *Tynecheivun* – a respected local activist and seasoned reindeer herder – took the podium. He invoked the memory of *Pappylyo*, a legendary herder who had famously resisted Soviet collectivization in the 1930s. *Pappylyo*’s authority rested not only on the size of his herd but also on his ability to unite reindeer herders around him. *Tynecheivun* argued that by naming the enterprise after this historical leader, the community would honor *Pappylyo*’s legacy and his efforts to preserve the integrity of the Chukchi way of life.

From the biography of the arrested person: Papule, [...] born in 1889, [...] Occupation: reindeer herder [...] Social status: kulak. Owns 7,000 reindeer and 52 farm laborers. Before the revolution, he was a reindeer herder, had 6,000 reindeer and 10 farm laborers. [...] In the 1930s, he actively conducted counter-revolutionary agitation in the Mechigmen tundra [...]. (Iliash, 1991)

Commentary on the biography: The “farm laborers” in the interrogation report are reindeer herders, either single or with families, owning anywhere from a few to dozens of reindeer. According to Kolomiets and Nuvano (2017) this is a common practice among Chukchi with few reindeer, who would unite or join a larger herd until their numbers increased enough for the herder’s herd to graze independently.

The meeting responded to *Tynecheivun*’s proposal with silence. For villagers raised in the Soviet paradigm, *Pappylyo*’s story felt like a myth from a distant, unreachable past. Perhaps the community was not yet ready – or was still too fearful – to adopt a symbol of defiance as their official identity, reclaiming the reindeer that authorities had forcibly seized from their kin over half a century before. That year, the *sovkhos* retained its previous name. It was not until 1999, under the direction of an external

newcomer, that the enterprise was formally rebranded as “Zapoliarye LLC.” The lingering uncertainty of the 1990s acted as a buffer, allowing the community to temporarily preserve a familiar way of life and postpone the reckoning of inevitable change.

The pervasive uncertainty generated by the collision of disparate temporal and economic systems dealt a devastating blow to reindeer herding – the very institution that had underpinned the survival of Chukchi society for generations. This disruption was so profound that, even three decades later, reindeer husbandry in the area remains on the brink of extinction, having failed to regain its structural viability. In the 1990s, reindeer herding had lost its capacity to provide either food security or stable employment. The catastrophic collapse of herd numbers triggered a mass exodus of herders and their families: more than a hundred residents were forced to abandon their tundra camps and resettle in the village. This process fundamentally reshaped Neshkan’s social hierarchy. While a few former herders successfully integrated into marine mammal hunting or secured municipal jobs, the vast majority drifted into the ranks of the “hidden unemployed.” This group’s livelihoods rest on a combination of accessible forms of traditional subsistence and social benefits. Today, this group has become dominant, shaping the contemporary sociocultural landscape of Neshkan.

Rovtytagyn

In the winter of 1994, the first reindeer brigade suffered livestock losses due to severe icing. These losses were not the result of negligence; neither the brigade leader nor the herders were at fault. The Neshkan tundra, located at the confluence of two oceans, is prone to sudden winter thaws that create impenetrable layers of ice over vital pastures. In a desperate bid for survival, the reindeer were hurriedly driven to new pastures, while the *yarangas* were left behind to save time. The herders moved with only a single tent and, upon arriving at the new site, were forced to crowd into a single cabin. In these cramped quarters, they rested, slept, cooked, and repaired clothing and equipment. Under such conditions, proper reindeer grazing became impossible.

Rovtytagyn, a seasoned reindeer herder and brigade leader, found himself powerless after failed attempts to salvage his operations. He was left to witness the slow, agonizing decline of the camp. Ultimately, the remnants of the herd were absorbed into another brigade. While a few herders followed the animals, the majority retreated to the village. Rovtytagyn and his family moved to the Kamakkai pass base and adopted the life of a herder without a herd: he survived by fishing and seal hunting, taking seasonal work at the state farm when available. (Kergytagyn, 1995)

Looking back, it seems clear that saving the brigade would have been impossible without a return to traditional Chukchi *yarangas*. But why did the *sovkhos* management, composed of experienced Chukchi, fail to take action in this direction? First, there were formidable material obstacles. Quickly erecting several *yarangas* was unrealistic: it required selecting high-quality wood, drying and planing the timbers, crafting leather straps, preparing fur coverings, and attending to many other details.

Constructing a single complete dwelling demanded months of painstaking manual labor. Even more significant, however, was the sociocultural barrier. A traditional *yaranga* is not a “mobile dormitory” but a family home, where each member occupies a designated place and carries specific rights and responsibilities. Even the hearth cannot be lit arbitrarily: it holds sacred significance and is passed down through generations. In other words, building *yarangas* alone was insufficient. They needed to be inhabited by “*yaranga*-oriented” families who preserved a coherent system of economic management, traditional knowledge, and worldview. A reindeer herding camp is not merely a collection of dwellings but a complex network of material and cultural infrastructure that sustains the community over time. The experience of the following decades confirms this conclusion: in the Neshkan tundra, only those brigades that maintained adherence to the traditional settlement model survived.

Marine hunting

By the late 1990s, sea hunting had effectively become the community’s only substantial source of food. Reindeer herding no longer supplied meat, store shelves stood empty, and the few available food items were out of reach due to a lack of cash. The villagers’ only hope was the sea. About 20 sea hunters from the struggling *sovkhos* provided meat for more than 600 residents during the summer and fall. When the hunting boats returned, anyone could come to the shore and receive a share of the catch – never abundant, but enough to meet basic needs. To stock up for the winter, villagers sought places on hunting boats, joined together to organize independent hunts, set nets under the ice for seals, and fished year-round.

Rinetegyn

An experienced sea hunter named Netepkyr needed a reliable partner for walrus hunts and often invited his son-in-law to join him in the boat. Rinetegyn was young, preferred life in the village, and felt little enthusiasm for going to sea. Everything changed one summer morning. The hunters spent several hours maneuvering among the ice floes in search of prey before spotting a group of walruses resting on a small floe. It was a quiet, sunlit dawn; the sea lay calm and smooth as glass. As the boat drew closer, the engine’s noise shattered the stillness. One walrus turned toward the sound, alerting the others. At the sight of the boat, the animals plunged into the water all at once. Rinetegyn was struck by the scene: warm sunlight, a dazzling white floe like a pedestal, and four powerful bodies arcing in different directions, like a great living bouquet. Later that day, the hunters took a walrus, but that fleeting image remained etched in his memory. Until then, he had preferred fishing and goose hunting; from that day on, the sea became his passion. “I’ve come to love this hunt. There is the biting cold, the exhausting search across the open sea, sudden storms, and the heavy labor of butchering. But the sea, the walruses, and the sustenance they provide for my family and fellow villagers make it worthwhile.” (Kergytagyn, 2016b)

Rosgynavyt

In winter, Rosgynavyt, like the other hunters in his village, caught seals with nets, relying on dogs and an ice pick for protection against polar bears. The animals usually kept their distance unless the hunter had already secured a catch, but that February morning was different. As he was hauling a seal from the net, a large bear unexpectedly approached the sled. The only items there were an ice pick and a homemade spear, and at first Rosgynavyt considered surrendering the catch. Then he reconsidered: the seal belonged to me, and in our family a bear had always been considered a worthy game. The hunter unhooked the dogs, and they immediately attacked the bear from different sides. Rosgynavyt grabbed the spear and, as if guided by some mysterious force, plunged it into the bear's heart. Silence followed. Silence fell. At that moment, he realized he had finally accomplished a spear hunt. The hunter turned the bear's body, so its head faced the ocean and began butchering the carcass. He then placed the bear's head on a separate small ice floe, fed it, and thanked the bear spirit, as his father had taught him. (Tlacheivune, 1996c)

Village dwellers (poselkovye)

By the late 1990s, demographic shifts had profoundly shaped the village's modern social organization. Only a few dozen people were employed in sea hunting and reindeer herding, as well as in communal service, school, hospital, post office, and cultural institutions. Unemployment remained officially low, but in reality it reached up to 40% of the working-age population. Over time, unemployed villagers adapted to these conditions, developing survival strategies that combined social benefits with traditional subsistence practices. Reindeer herders and sea hunters refer to these people as "poselkovye" (village dwellers). The term is not derogatory; it is a spatial designation, indicating that their lives are centered in the village rather than on the tundra or the sea. Newcomers sometimes labeled them "parasites," puzzled by why the unemployed did not take the few available jobs. However, such judgments reflected a misunderstanding of the villagers' temporal logic. Their lives are organized not around the workweek but around natural cycles, and "urban" values serve merely as a means of maintaining a traditional way of life. *Poselkovye* also take part in subsistence activities beyond the village, though not as intensively as salaried reindeer herders or hunters. In the 1990s, for instance, many joined hunting crews during the brief, high-stakes autumn walrus hunt to secure their family's winter meat supply.

Notagrygyn Jr.

The hunters were preparing to depart for "Poliarka," the seasonal tent camp located on Cape Netten near Enurmino. Every autumn, walrus migrated within reach of the cape as they made their way toward the great haulout at Keniskun. A classmate approached Notagrygyn Jr., who was busy loading gear into the boat. The young man hesitated, shifting from foot to foot, before asking tentatively: "Do you think they'd take me out for walrus?" – "Don't be a fool," Notagrygyn Jr. replied. "You've

got a rifle. We're short on both iron and ammo – any boat would be lucky to have you. Get in ours.” (Kergytagyn, 2016c)

In the village's new socioeconomic reality, men once again took primary responsibility for subsistence activities, with success in hunting, reindeer herding, and fishing determining social status within the Chukchi community. At the same time, women became the main source of cash income, primarily through child benefits, and assumed key roles in managing household resources. This economic responsibility extended into the public sphere: women actively participated in village assemblies and meetings with government representatives, advocating for regular social payments and for goods and services that supported children's well-being. In this way, economic and political authority in the village was redistributed across gender lines, reflecting both continuity and adaptation in social organization.

Reflecting on our (Liliya's and Eduard's) memories, we observed that the community in the 1990s existed at the intersection of multiple temporal trajectories: the legacy of the subsidized Soviet economy, emerging market mechanisms, and long-standing traditional practices. These trajectories were not always in direct conflict, but they interacted in ways that reshaped daily life. For example, while government subsidies provided predictable cash income, reliance on subsistence activities remained central to both status and survival. Some aspects of the social and economic system – such as communal labor obligations – declined, while others – like participation in mixed subsistence-market economies – adapted, producing a complex hybrid of old and new practices. This hybridity illustrates how the community navigated change, combining resilience, flexibility, and commitment to identity to sustain both livelihood and social cohesion.

The gravity of the homeland

In 1998, after nearly ten years of tireless effort to help our family and community adapt to the new socioeconomic reality, we were faced with a choice between our commitment to our native community and our duty to the Chukchi people, to whom we belong. We (Liliya and Eduard) were offered positions in the Chukotka government, and after long and agonizing deliberation, we were forced to leave Neshkan. Under these circumstances, we left behind a modest household and the hard-earned possessions typical of a coastal Chukchi family – a boat, a snowmobile, and a motorcycle. Fellow villagers expressed hope that we might one day return, and their encouragement has remained a lasting source of strength, sustaining our continued connection to our homeland through ongoing engagement and research. Today, documenting and preserving the history and lived experiences of the Neshkan community, in dialogue with its residents, remains a central priority of our work.

The solitary hill near Neshkan, once a familiar landmark marking our return from subsistence expeditions, remains a powerful point of orientation in memory and

in the landscape. The houses of our childhood no longer stand; new dwellings now occupy its place, inhabited by a younger generation facing different challenges while looking toward the future with curiosity and determination. The primary audience for this work is the younger generation of our community. By revisiting the history of the 1990s, we aim to demonstrate how our people navigated distinct temporal layers and the disparate worlds connected to them. We believe these parallel realities – recognized long ago by our ancestors – remain perceptible today if one maintains the proper perspective. Ultimately, individuals possess the agency to choose how they inhabit these worlds. The “layer” in which one resides depends on a steadfast commitment to their chosen identity, as well as the resilience and flexibility required to navigate circumstances that, while challenging, are largely of our own making.

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