

## Preface

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This is the second volume\* in the series “Pathways to Reform in Post-Soviet Siberia.” Most of the chapters are revised versions of presentations made at the conference *A World of Cultures: Cultural Property in Anthropological Perspective*, which I convened jointly with Deema Kaneff in Halle on 1–2 July 2002. The conference was not restricted to the circumpolar north and we agreed to divide the papers for publication purposes. Most of those with no focus in the circumpolar north will appear in 2004 in a special issue of the European Journal of Anthropology “Focaal” (Volume 44) edited by Deema Kaneff. It should also be noted that issues pertaining to culture and cultural knowledge were discussed in the first volume of this series (see especially the chapters by Krupnik and Vakhtin and by Ingold), the main focus of which concerned political and economic transformations and how far postsocialist reforms were able to strike a balance between exploitation of Siberia’s natural resources on the one hand, and concern for environmental impacts and the survival of local people on the other.

The principal theme of this volume is the commodification of culture as a form of property, i.e. the ways in which culture is nowadays celebrated, but also manipulated and reified. Native groups are reshaping and claiming possession of symbols, not only in the Russian North and other circumpolar regions but worldwide. In addition to material objects and practices, knowledge itself is increasingly claimed as the exclusive heritage of a specific group, whose members then assert privileges on this basis. Negotiations over the “ownership” of such goods depend on changing legal frameworks, but also on power relations and above all the role of the state at different levels. Culture as property is a product of complex processes of identity construction. Native groups in the circumpolar North, although sharing similar natural environments, have experienced very different political histories. Although the main focus here is on Siberia, case studies from other parts of the circumpolar North are included to offer comparative insights. In terms of theory, the volume engages with three central concepts of contemporary anthropology: culture, property and indigeneity.

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\* Volume 3 will be devoted to “Rebuilding of Social Identities.” For Volume 1, “People and the Land” (2002), and more online publications on the Russian North see <http://www.siberian-studies.org>

The opening chapter provides an overview of key issues and trends in dealing with culture as property among Native peoples in the circumpolar North. I argue that it is possible and necessary to reconcile the need to protect certain kinds of indigenous knowledge vis-a-vis outsiders with a general norm of open access to knowledge, because only the latter encourages cultural creativity and keeps traditions alive. Particular attention is given to the issue of authenticity and its manipulation.

Frequently, authenticity is promoted to substantiate claims to (commodified) culture and as legitimization for exclusive practices. The following section of this volume explores this topic from various angles. Barbara Bodenhorn argues that, as a form of cultural property, “Being Iñupiaq” for the Natives of Barrow in Alaska is only loosely connected to cultural practices; it is more an imagined ideal state, which does not inhibit the full incorporation of others into the group. Alexander King provides an example from another area of the North Pacific Rim, from northern Kamchatka. Claims to authenticity are here rendered explicit in competitive contexts between Native artists (dance troupes). Aimar Ventsel gives a somewhat contrasting view for the Sakha republic, where various layers of popular music culture are discussed in connection with Sakha ethnicity. He points to the fact that insiders are able to value creative constructions of “creole identities” as nonetheless genuine representations of their “traditional culture.” Finally, Trond Thuen explores dilemmas in Saami ethnopolitics, which promote exclusive use of certain cultural properties and privileged access to (allegedly) ancestral lands for that ethnic group – whereas in reality traditional Saami social organization and historical experiences emphasize the sharing of economic resources and property with outsiders.

The next section deals with legal concepts and practices to protect indigenous knowledge. Silke von Lewinski presents a thorough analysis from a lawyer’s point of view, concluding among others that non-binding instruments rather than treaties may be a useful and realistic device to protect cultural expressions, because they leave room for negotiated agreements between interested user groups and indigenous communities. The next chapter by Andrew Wiget and Olga Balalaeva provides a concrete example of how legal concepts are being applied through newly drafted legislation designed to protect Native folklore in Western Siberia. Alona Yefimenko then reports on recent efforts to identify sacred sites in northern Russia, with the goal of preventing inappropriate use and damage to such places and protecting ritual, sacred knowledge.

In the fourth section, the authors analyze previous roles of museum collectors and recent collaborations between outside experts and local communities. In the latter case, the sharing of knowledge and expertise not

only contributes to fuller scientific understanding but can also enhance cultural heritage in local communities, where such exchanges may also stimulate the continuation of traditional cultural practices. First, Thomas Ross Miller examines the negotiation of material objects and performances as forms of cultural property, using as examples the collecting activities of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century anthropology, specifically those of Waldemar Jochelson among the Yukagir people. Julia Kupina then discusses how mainstream museums in Russia have been obliged to rethink relations between center and periphery. Corresponding new ways of “repatriation” – with regard to knowledge, and not necessarily of the objects themselves – have been explored in the course of several projects in Alaska since the mid-1990s; Sonja Lührmann reviews these and considers their broader impact on researchers as well as on local communities.

Section five focuses on cultural expressions as contested property in national and local ethnopolitical discourses. Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer touches on several case studies from Western Siberia and the republic of Sakha (Yakutia) in discussing the issue of contested homelands for Native peoples. She draws attention to the risks of political instability or even chaos if federal policies fail to pay sufficient attention to multiple and situationally variable ethnopolitical identities in these regions. In the following chapter, Tat’iana Argounova-Low expands on this theme for Sakha by focusing on the symbolic significance of diamonds, one of the economic key resources of the republic, against the background of shifting powers and minority-majority relations in Soviet and post-Soviet times. Similar manipulations of symbols of local and national identities are discussed by Thomas Hylland Eriksen from a quite different spatial context: controversies over the authorized use of contemporary Norwegian folkdress are shown by him to raise issues of much more general significance, including once again the nature of authenticity.

Finally, Chris Hann provides a summarizing discussion of some important ideas from all the foregoing articles of this volume, adding another perspective on conceptualizations of culture as property from a more distant spatial and temporal context, the European past. In closing, he takes a critical look not only at the current politics of culture worldwide but also at confusions surrounding the very concept.

The status of the concept of culture in anthropology has been hotly debated in recent years, e.g. at a Wenner Gren Symposium in 2000 (Fox and King 2002). Much of this debate hinges on the constantly recurring tendency to equate culture with ethnic group or even civilization. Chris Hann (2002) argues that culture should be demoted in favor of “sociality,” but it seems to me that this does not solve our dilemma. If culture

is understood only in terms of the social transmission of knowledge, this neglects cultural change and leaves out the key concept of “innovation,” i.e. the continuous creation of new configurations from (socially transmitted) indigenous and (usually individually acquired) exogenous knowledge. In other words, we need a dual focus: culture involves both social transmission and creative invention (cf. Tomasello 1999, 5). What troubles me most with “sociality” is that it leads us directly back to the concept of society, where we end up again in the same conceptual trap of a bounded entity.

The Siberian Project Group at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology had productive discussions around concepts of culture, since our heterogeneous origins included North American traditions as well as the influences of German and British Social Anthropology. Eventually, we reached enough common ground to use culture adjectivally, as in “cultural forms.” It seems to me that there is virtue in allowing our anthropological conceptualizations of culture to remain as flexible as culture itself, which always depends upon ongoing innovations and new amalgamations of various kinds of knowledge. To my mind the articles in this volume do not show that the concept of culture is no longer appropriate for anthropology, merely because it is interpreted differently by others, and used in pursuit of particular aims and needs. We have to accept that culture cannot be copyrighted by the anthropologist. But the anthropologist needs to be wary of Trojan horses, even in Siberia. Behind the “ethnic styles” or “village styles” promoted by native performers and by protagonists in competitive contexts of the increasing commodification of culture, outdated concepts of “bounded” culture are smuggled in once again, sometimes hidden behind elaborate contemporary academic theories. As Hann reminds us, it is important to be clear which “map” of culture we are using – that of our discipline, or that of particular groups with whom we work and with whom we may unwittingly have come to identify, at least to a certain degree.

### **Note on transliteration**

Two coexisting systems of Cyrillic transliteration will be used in this volume: the Library of Congress system for bibliographical references, and the system of the National Image and Mapping Agency (NIMA) for geographical and ethnic names. The application of two different transliteration systems in a single book, despite its inconveniences, is warranted for a number of reasons (see Krupnik and Fitzhugh 2001, xv). Above all, it facilitates a high level of consistency with most recent publications on the Russian north. However, the transliteration of non-Russian names and terms aims to reflect the actual pronunciation of these words in the given Native languages (for example, the bilabial voiced fricative *v'* = *w* in the Koryak language).

## References

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