

Epilogue

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Sitting at the conference table and listening to the presentations upon which this book is based, I had from time to time to blink twice to assure myself that I was not actually dreaming. Here I was, amidst a substantial group of anthropologists from Russia, Europe and North America, all of whom could report on recent fieldwork in the Russian North. And much of what they had to say hinged, in one way or another, on the problems of reindeer herding. Thirty years ago, when I returned from my first fieldwork among Saami reindeer herders in north-eastern Finland, such a thing would have been utterly inconceivable. At that time the entire Soviet North was all but closed to anthropologists from the West, the work of Russian scholars of the Soviet era was virtually unknown, and the great classics of pre-revolutionary Russian anthropology – by such pioneers as Bogoras, Jochelson and Shirokogoroff – had been quite forgotten. For an anthropology that liked to pretend that systematic fieldwork began with Malinowski, it had been convenient to write them out of the picture. As for reindeer herding, once the focus of an intense debate between evolutionists and diffusionists, it was now definitely off the agenda. To be sure, it was customary for conferences on the comparative anthropology of pastoral societies to include a token paper on the reindeer nomadism of the Saami. But these people, apparently adrift in the snow with their herds of half-wild animals, and lacking any semblance of tribal organisation, scarcely counted as pastoralists at all. They remained an anomaly so far as mainstream anthropology was concerned. And so did their ethnographers. It took me many years to shake off my image as the anthropologist with the antlers on.

For me, the studies represented in this volume show just how far we have come since then, and particularly in the decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union, as a result of renewed scholarly contacts between East and West and the opening up of the Russian North to ethnographic fieldwork. We have, I think, reached a watershed in the comparative study of societies across the northern circumpolar region as a whole. No longer marginal to

the anthropological mainstream, the North could become a focus for the future development of the discipline in just the same way that sub-Saharan Africa was a focus in the heyday of structural-functionalism in the 1950s and 60s, or that Melanesia became a focus, in the 1980s, for a fundamental critique of the allegedly 'Euro-American' biases of modernist anthropology. Today, anthropologists of the North are once again in a position to shape the disciplinary agenda. But if this is an opportunity, it is also a challenge, for we have to ask ourselves what form this agenda should take. And in this, I believe it is essential to take a long view. In a world that seems to be changing so fast as that of the present, it is all too easy for anthropology to allow itself to be swept along in the tide. Together with the legions of sociologists and political scientists, anthropologists could become purveyors of analysis 'on the hoof', churning out state-of-the-art and up-to-the-minute interpretations of events as they unfold, dressed in whatever currently fashionable hyper-reflective idioms grace the pages of academic journals. Indeed a cynic might remark, with some justification, that the difference between journalism and academic writing is that the former is readable whereas the latter is not.

At moments like this, we need to remind ourselves of what anthropology is about. Our purpose is not just to write up other people's lives, still less to turn these literary essays into exercises of self-reflection. It is rather to take the creative tension between our comparative and theoretical reading and our experience of what life is like for the people among whom we have worked as a springboard from which to explore some of the more enduring aspects of the human condition. From the very beginning, anthropologists have been interested in such questions as: how people relate to the land and to animals in the procurement of subsistence, as in hunting or herding, or in their cosmological understandings as manifested in the practices of animism and totemism; the role of property (or its absence) in the formation of social relationships; the constitution of kinship and the relations between kinship, locality and personal or collective identity; the play of morality and strategic self-interest in the give and take of everyday life; the growth of knowledge and its codification as either 'science' or 'tradition'; and the conditions that lead to the establishment or dissolution of structures of social inequality and political domination. What makes the anthropology of the North so exciting, and underlies its agenda-setting potential, is that while charting contemporary events it is also taking us back full circle to these issues that

preoccupied the founders of our discipline, while recasting them in a genuinely new light. At the same time it is looking out towards new forms of engagement, with residents of the region (whether of 'native' or 'settler' origin), with science, administration and business, with governmental and non-governmental organisations, and of course with other traditions and disciplines of scholarship. The studies included in this volume are exemplary in all these respects. In the following paragraphs I shall sketch just a few of their recurrent themes, which seem to me of particular significance in pointing to directions for future anthropological research.

One theme that repeatedly emerges from the ethnography of northern societies is the centrality of stories. People, it seems, are endlessly telling stories to one another. More remarkably, the stories themselves seem to be without end. Or if they have endings, no-one has ever heard them. Introducing a chapter on the meaning of 'self-determination' for the indigenous people of the North, Natalia Novikova describes how old Khanty storytellers would keep going in the evenings until everyone else was asleep, so that no-one would ever know how they finished. As Novikova observes, the Khanty word usually translated as 'story' literally means a 'way' – not in the sense of a prescribed code of conduct, sanctioned by tradition, but in the sense of a path to be followed, along which one can keep on going rather than coming to a dead end or being caught in a loop of ever-repeating cycles (Kurttila and Ingold 2001, 192). Likewise the stories told by Orochon hunters of northern Sakhalin rarely conclude with the death of the animal, but rather elaborate on everything of interest observed along the trail (Kwon 1998, 118). Stories should not end for the same reason that life should not. Through listening to the stories of their elders, younger people learn to connect up the events and experiences of their own lives to the lives of predecessors, recursively picking up the strands of these past lives in the process of stringing out their own. But rather as in looping or knitting, the strand being strung now and the strand picked up from the past are both of the same yarn. There is no point at which the story ends and life begins. Or to put it another way, life is a matter of 'coming and going rather than starting and finishing' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 25).

Novikova's point is a profound one. It suggests that if self-determination is to be enacted on the terms of aboriginal people, then the concept of determination should be understood more as wayfinding than as regulation, more

as guaranteeing the resources that allow people to negotiate their own path through the world than as encoding a set of rules and principles designed to ensure the replication of a 'traditional' culture or way of life (Bjerkli 1996). It is of course in these latter terms – by attempting to 'traditionalize the traditional', as Bjerkli puts it (1996, 18) – that the state-sponsored protection of aboriginal cultures has always been conducted. Indeed as David Anderson points out, the very notion of aboriginality implies a corporate claim based on shared genealogical descent from the putative 'first occupants' of the land. Culture, then, becomes closed-off, like an heirloom handed down from generation to generation, rather than open-ended like a story that each generation takes up and carries on from the one before. This view of culture, Anderson shows, is quite congenial to the large corporate interests that underwrite contemporary structures of state power. The recognition that certain genealogically delimited 'small peoples' have claims on certain similarly delimited areas of ancestral land, on the grounds of prior occupancy rather than present use, is a small price to pay for the right to appropriate all the rest for the purposes of industrial development and capital accumulation. Nor are aboriginal people necessarily averse to this, if by converting a hereditary claim to culture as a political resource they stand to gain even marginally from corporate munificence. The day may come, as Krupnik and Vakhtin suggest, when bits and pieces of codified culture, from herbal remedies to hunting taboos, become potent counters of political gamesmanship.

The opposition between culture as a never-ending story and culture as a ready-completed heritage cannot, then, be simply mapped onto a contrast between 'aboriginal' and 'settler' perspectives. As studies of northern societies have repeatedly shown, the disposition to 'live life as a story' (Cruikshank *et al.* 1990) is common to people who draw their livelihood from the land, who are intimate with its places and paths and with its non-human as well as human inhabitants, regardless of whether they are of aboriginal or settler descent, or as is commonly the case, some mixture of the two. Conversely, educated elites of aboriginal descent, who no longer feel at home in the land, are often among the first to package the lived experience of their ancestors as heritable property, converting emplaced ways of knowing and doing into compendia of knowledge and customs indexed to a certain territory. Nevertheless, the opposition itself seems to be all-pervasive. Consider for example

the meaning of 'land'. In one view, land is a surface that can be parcelled up and appropriated in bounded blocs, with renewable resources of animals and timber above, and non-renewable reserves of minerals and hydrocarbons below. In the other view, however, it is not a surface at all, but a fabric of relationships *in* which, rather than *on* which, people lead their lives. This is the view that Alexander King evokes when he argues that the landscape, for native peoples of Kamchatka, is *constituted* by relationships to people, animals, rocks, trees, fishing spots and the manifold spirits that dwell in them (see also Anderson 2000, 124–5). I would add that whereas land in the first sense is something you can *occupy*, only in the second sense can it truly be said to be *inhabited* (Ingold 2000, 149).

The same opposition reappears when it comes to the question of traditional knowledge and its transmission. It marks the difference, in Cruikshank's elegant formulation, between knowing as a verb and knowledge as a noun (Cruikshank 1998, 70). For those who inhabit the land, as Krupnik and Vakhtin point out, knowing is inseparable from the mindful observation, practised imitation, guided improvisation, sensory experience and – above all – the endless storytelling, that go on throughout life. Ways of knowing, in short, are embedded in people's relationships with the world around them, including the land and its creatures. Such ways are not really transmitted. They do not amount to a corpus of rules or instructions that can somehow jump from the heads of elders into those of novices. Rather, each generation *grows into* the ways of its predecessors through practice and training in an environment. No-one has put this point better than V. N. Vološinov, in his masterpiece of 1929, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Language, Vološinov argued, is not tossed like a ball from generation to generation. It endures, 'but it endures as a continuous process of becoming. Individuals do not receive a ready-made language at all, rather they enter upon the stream of verbal communication; indeed, only in this stream does their consciousness first begin to operate' (1973, 81). What goes for language, in particular, goes for knowledge in general: just as language, for Volosinov, subsists in the current of speech, so the knowledge of inhabitants subsists in the current of knowing. But this has not prevented those who claim to speak on behalf of inhabitants, in external arenas of research, development and management, from attempting to force such knowledge into the mould of an inventory,

consisting of bits and pieces of information that, detached from the current of activity, can pass from mind to mind independently of the contexts of people's practical engagements in the world.

The conversion of knowing in practice into acquired knowledge (see Lave 1990) takes place through the two steps of what Paul Nadasdy (1999) has called 'compartmentalisation' and 'distillation'. The first step establishes the several divisions of a classification, the second establishes the content of each division by severing the links that, in the memory of inhabitants, bind every element to its original narrative or experiential context. Thus the stories people tell are reduced to repositories of classified, decontextualised information. Indeed stories and classifications epitomise entirely opposed principles of integration. Every topic of a story (whether it be a presence or a happening) is identified and positioned by its relations with the topics that presently surround it, that preceded its appearance, or that follow it into the world. Each one has its place. And in the story as in life, it is in the movement from place to place – in following a *way* – that knowledge is integrated. This is why I have chosen to refer to the people who live in the land, in the sense outlined above, as 'inhabitants' rather than 'locals'. The inhabitants of northern lands know in the way they do precisely because they are so widely travelled, because their lives are *not* confined to particular places. Thus when Anderson questioned his Evenki hosts about the location of their original clan lands, he was told that in the past, people travelled – and lived – not somewhere but *everywhere* (Anderson 2000, 133–5). This is also why the severe curtailment of mobility that is presently being experienced by so many inhabitants of the Russian North, and which literally confines them to places, poses such a threat to cultural continuity. John Ziker describes how Dolgan and Nganasan hunters in the Taimyr, who used to travel hundreds of kilometres a day, now have to focus on nearby resources that they can reach by ski or on foot. Enforced localisation not only hampers the procurement of subsistence, it also *disintegrates* inhabitants' ways of knowing.

Unlike stories, classifications do not link topics or places. Rather, they link the *contents* of places – whatever may be discovered or observed there – in terms of intrinsic characteristics they may happen to possess, quite independently of their relations with one another and with the world. Thus classifications inevitably divide up what stories connect. Detached from the relational contexts of their encounter, the contents of places or topics are

reduced to data. The work of integration is performed, then, not through the passage from place to place, but through the incorporation of the data found in each within an overarching framework or schema that spans them all. Though the collection of data may involve movement, this serves merely to transport the investigator from one fixed site of observation to another, in order to gather material that is subsequently 'passed up' for integration within the overall scheme. It is as if one travelled everywhere by helicopter, as indeed has been usual for scientists, technicians and administrators in the Russian North, 'dropping in' on the land here and there, but never actually moving through it. Likewise, an anthropologist in search of the 'folk taxonomies' of indigenous peoples will sample native discourse on numerous topics, subjecting the resulting fragments to a kind of content analysis, without ever actually following through the narratives or conversations of which they are part. It is precisely in this rendering of stories as classifications that the ways of knowing of inhabitants are converted into naïve science. Or as David Koester puts it, with regard to the Itelmens of Kamchatka, 'knowing and living traditionally environmentally' is rendered as 'traditional environmental knowledge'.

Under the normalising and bureaucratising acronym TEK, traditional environmental knowledge has, as Koester shows, become little more than an instrument of techno-rational management. As such, it is closely linked to other key terms of contemporary ecocratic management discourse such as 'biodiversity' and 'sustainable development'. Yulian Konstantinov, writing of the current circumstances of reindeer herding in the Kola Peninsula, argues that these terms, and the acronym-ridden language in which they are embedded, hijack the concerns of inhabitants in the cause of global political and economic machinations that they are powerless to influence or control. The concept of biodiversity, of course, presents the world of nature – or more precisely of living things – as one gigantic, all-embracing classificatory order in the sight of a universal, globally distributed humanity. And the concept of sustainable development turns out, in Konstantinov's analysis, to be a cover for the attempt to reconcile 'traditional' forms of land-use with the market mechanism of international capitalism. Just as TEK aims to bring inhabitants' ways of knowing into line with externally imposed regimes of biodiversity management, so sustainable development aims to bring their ways of living in the land into line with the objectives of capital accumulation.

Inhabitants themselves are left stranded, immobilised in externally delimited locales or territories, as pawns in a global power play between the forces of environmental conservation and industrial development.

Depending on the outcome, as Otto Habeck shows for the northernmost people of the Republic of Komi, an expanse of reindeer pasture may or may not become an oil field. The people themselves have virtually no say in the process: any initiatives to secure their rights to land and resources come from outside. Emma Wilson paints a similar picture for the indigenous inhabitants of northern Sakhalin, who are left on the sidelines as impotent witnesses while multinational resource extraction companies and environmental and human rights organisations slog it out in international arenas. From time to time, representatives of these companies or organisations might 'drop in' to local communities to consult with residents. 'They came and held a meeting', say the people, with a fatalistic shrug of the shoulders. Then they went away again. But in these consultations, community members themselves are powerless to make their voices heard, lacking the skills, legal expertise and information networks that would allow them even to begin to engage with outsiders on level terms. Finding all avenues to initiate their own development blocked, the tendency – as Wilson shows – is for communities to turn in upon themselves, to create a restricted domain in which they can live by their own moral conventions. Much the same, judging by Ziker's report, is happening among the Dolgan and the Nganasan. In their homelands of the central Taimyr economic collapse has left them more isolated than ever. They have had to revert to hunting, fishing and gathering for their subsistence, leading to the revival of moral expectations of informal sharing and communal land tenure. Indeed it could be said that only now, having been 'cast aside' by the forces of globalisation, and with their mobility compromised, are indigenous inhabitants of the North experiencing the kind of localised isolation from which they were once supposed to have been emancipated by modernity.

Surveying the future for the peoples of the Russian North, the chapters of this book give little cause for optimism. The picture is uniformly bleak, indeed harrowing. How can such a picture be reconciled with my prognosis of a bright future for northern anthropology? Is it right that we should construct an academic niche for ourselves on the back of the cold, hungry, miserable and alcohol-sodden despair of the peoples among whom we work?

Certainly not, if despair were to become the defining criterion of our enterprise. It would be as wrong to frame our inquiries by a perception that the people we study are in terminal decline as it was wrong of our anthropological predecessors to frame their inquiries by their perception of the people as primitive. Such framings inevitably lead to salvage ethnography. We should not, however, be carrying out fieldwork, writing ethnography, or engaging in anthropological analysis in order to save anything, least of all a nostalgic picture of a pristine, primitive past. As anthropologists, our concern must be to understand the conditions of human life, whatever the circumstances. And what we can do is *take forward* this understanding, towards a model of self-determination that could transcend the polarities of local versus global, tradition versus modernity, and society versus nature. In many regions of the circumpolar North people are presently living among the material wreckage of a grandiose vision of science and history driven by these polarities. This vision has failed. We need to come up with an alternative way of thinking about life: one that is open-ended, where the focus is not on destinations, finalities and end-products but on all that happens along the way, with its twists, turns and cul-de-sacs. The greatest tragedy that could befall the human inhabitants of this earth is if their stories were to come to a close, cut short by the foregone conclusions – or scenarios – of those empowered to enforce their predictions upon the rest of the planet. Our task is to ensure that this does not happen.

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