Reindeer Herders’ Culturescapes in the Koryak Autonomous Okrug

ALEXANDER D. KING

Chukchi are one of a few ethnicities who are the butt of jokes in Russia. I was told many Chukchi jokes in Kamchatka, mostly by Chukchi and Koryaks themselves. Rarely were Koryaks identified in these jokes, but I was told one ‘Koryak joke’ during tea where my wife and I were the only whites present:

A Koryak is sitting out in the tundra guarding the herd. He hears a voice calling, ‘People! People!’ [liudi]. He runs toward the sound over the hill and sees a Russian man at the bottom in the snow. The Russian calls out ‘People! People! Help me!’ The Koryak says, ‘Oh? In the tundra we are people. There in Tilichiki we are just Koryaks’. 1

Everyone laughed, and a Koryak woman sitting next to me commented, ‘Yes, in the tundra we are always people’. The tundra is the locus of native culture in Kamchatka. Everyone in Kamchatka regardless of ethnicity or length of residence agrees on this value, but the other meanings associated with tundra spaces and native peoples vary from the differing perspectives of Russians, native elites, and native non-elites.

In Palana Russians and even some native elites (characterized by higher education and white-collar employment, usually in a larger town) associate spaces in the tundra with ‘wilderness’ and oppose them to ‘civilization’. This nature-culture divide allocates Koryaks to the wilds of the tundra, which is outside the European understanding of ‘culture’ and ‘civilization’. In civilized places, as the joke points out, they are not quite ‘people’, but something less, mere ‘Koryaks’. Native people who participate in a way of life connected to the tundra can make a ‘wilderness’ versus ‘civilization’ distinction if led in that direction by the conversation. They are familiar with European values, but they do not express these values when talking about themselves on their own terms, ‘on their own turf’. As one can infer from the joke, native people understand the tundra as their ‘own’ space and oppose the tundra to the town as a ‘Russian’ or ‘other’ space. This landscape of self and other can be
used to mark boundaries or define groups; it references different, often contradictory, sets of values, different cultural patterns.

Before I present the local symbols associated with the landscape and the most relevant social relations, an etic orientation for the reader is warranted. Kamchatka is a peninsula in the far northeastern corner of the Russian Federation. It separates the Sea of Okhotsk from the Bering Sea and the Pacific Ocean. The Koryak Autonomous Okrug is an administrative territory occupying the northern two-thirds of Kamchatka and some of the adjoining mainland. The okrug is bordered on the north by the Chukchi Autonomous Okrug, by Magadan Province to the northwest and by Kamchatka Province to the south. The indigenous people of this area are enumerated into several cultural groups in the standard anthropological works: Itelmen, Koryak, Chukchi, and Even. Sometimes Koryaks are divided into Chauvchu (reindeer herders) and Nymylan (town-dwelling hunter-fishers), but this economic (or praxis) distinction can be extended to all the indigenous ethnic groups in the area. While people in Kamchatka sometimes distinguish ethnic groups from one another in this way, they most often distinguish mestnye (locals, natives) from priezzhie (incomers), especially when they are discussing cultural differences (whether practices, beliefs, social relations, etc.). The group priezzhie is not monolithic; priezzhie include Russians, Ukrainians, Buriats, and others, but mestnye pointed out to me that these distinctions meant nothing when describing how these elites related to and talked about native people. Although my discussion here focuses on reindeer herders and their relations to the landscape, both in White imagination and in native people’s own terms, my generalizations could be extended to hunter-fisher people, as well.

This paper contrasts two ways of speaking about the landscape and native culture in the Koryak Autonomous Okrug (KAO), which I identify as ‘European’ and as ‘native Kamchatkan’. Contrasting ways of speaking about the landscape mark someone as native (mestny, korennoi) or non-native (priezzhi) in Kamchatka. My term, ‘culturescape’ is an attempt to connect culture to the landscape in a way evocative of Appadurai’s (1996) ideas of ethnocapes, neighborhoods, and locality, which are best understood as activities or processes, not entities. My usage of ‘culturescapes’ is also part of an attempt to return to a more old-fashioned anthropology, one that values such information as toponymy and narratives about trees and hills. As Basso (1996, 109 ff.) and Descola (1996) have argued, thinking of the landscape as existing ‘out
Reindeer Herders’ Culturescapes

there’ independent of humans reflects a European worldview. The landscape is best understood as simultaneously a background for a cultural worldview and constituted by that same worldview (Feld and Basso 1996, 14 ff.). This follows native Kamchatkans’ ways of talking about place; it is a physical landscape, which is enacted and expressed in terms of social relations and activities. My usage of the term ‘culturescape’ is an inverse of Appadurai’s ‘ethnoscape’. Instead of a de-territorialized network of people, identities, and ideas, I emphasize the rootedness of daily life and people’s understandings in a particular place.

I do not find analytical distinctions between space and place useful. Epitomized by thinkers like Heidegger (1977) and Lefebvre (1991), Western discourses about the landscape assume an independently existing, ‘natural’ topography (space), which exists out there, independent of human culture, independent of meaning (place) (see Heidegger 1977). Appadurai writes of the production of locality in a similar strain, as a colonizing enterprise, marking something previously unmarked or marked by others (1996, 183–4). I have found that Koryaks and other native Kamchatkans do not perceive space and invest it with cultural significance. Rather, the landscape is part and parcel of an open-ended symbol system; terrain and culture are not separate in practice, and they shouldn’t be separated in analysis. Native discourses about the landscape constitute and create their locality as a terrain of social relations and activities; relevant landscape is an enacted place. Native landscape is part of an interconnected symbol system where places reference people and actions; deer imply places; places require rituals; rituals occur in different kinds of places, and so on. This landscape is not bifurcated into wild and domesticated. Western taxonomies class parts of the landscape as ‘wilderness’, which is opposed to ‘civilization’ (Nash 1982). Wilderness is non-human, unmarked, raw; civilization is found in domesticated spaces, those which have been marked by humans. Wild spaces are processed and built up into domesticated places.

The Kamchatkan landscape provides dramatic and powerful imagery for both native and non-native people in the Koryak Autonomous Okrug and across Russia. Located on the edge of the empire, Kamchatka is a metaphor for edge and wilderness throughout Russia. Neglected by Russian government and commercial interests in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski and southern Kamchatka were then an
international crossroads in the North Pacific: indigenous people, long-time resident Russians, Japanese, Americans, Koreans, Norwegians, and others lived and traded with each other for furs, fish, meat, and manufactured goods. Kamchatka was not considered too distant for nations along the Pacific; a Norwegian-American fur trader operating out of Seattle made regular visits and maintained a permanent post on Kamchatka (Bergman 1927). Japanese fishing bases were distributed up and down the coast, canning salmon and caviar. American whalers and other traders regularly participated in annual native fairs, trading their famous Winchesters (and other things) for furs, meat, and ivory.

As the Soviet Union drew an iron curtain around the borders of its empire, it closed borderlands like Kamchatka to Soviet citizens as well. A nuclear submarine base across Avacha Bay from Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski was certainly a good reason for security and secrecy, but the main reason for Kamchatka's closed status was the need for empty space. The central part of the peninsula is the target area for testing Soviet (and now Russian) missiles, which are launched from a submarine near Archangelsk or the Baikonour Cosmodrome and tracked by several radar installations in central Kamchatka as they strike the earth. Thus, for the Soviet government, Kamchatka's perceived emptiness, lack of people, wilderness was its greatest asset during the cold war.4

As is typical across Siberia, the indigenous population is mostly rural, while immigrant Russophones dominate the more urban settlements of Palana, Ossora, and Tilichiki/Korf. What Russians see as civilization (Moscow, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski), natives see as European spaces (cities, towns). Russians in Kamchatka understand this point of view as one that puts native people not in civilization but in wilderness, and this makes native people 'wild', whether as noble savages or just as primitives.5 Koryak and Chukchi reindeer herders in the Koryak Autonomous Okrug talk about the landscape as different kinds of places. Naturally they make distinctions between domestic and not; they have small and large rituals marking places as domestic. These places weren't previously unmarked, however, but different, associated with other persons (human or non-human). Other kinds of persons inhabit other kinds of spaces — herd deer, bear, fish, and various spiritual personae.

Part of being native in Kamchatka (as elsewhere in the Soviet Union) is coming from a village that doesn't exist anymore. At the turn of the twen-
Reindeer Herders’ Culturescapes

tieth century, there were hundreds of native villages and reindeer herding camps spread across Kamchatka, each within a one- or two-day walk of another. Soviet collectivization in the 1930s included closing many small and remote villages and consolidating the population in larger towns in locations more administratively convenient (not necessarily optimal locations for traditional activities). This trend of closing villages and consolidating populations continued after World War II up to 1984, when Rekiniki was closed. This experience is by no means limited to native Kamchatkans, or even native Siberians (cf Rasputin 1979).

Native people in Kamchatka are tied into global ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, and financescapes, which provide indigenous Kamchatkans complex perspectives on global continuities and differences. Priezzhie neighborhoods are tied into other virtual and local neighborhoods connecting Muscovites, Ukrainians, and others. Indigenous ethnoscapes also include a complex terrain of heterogeneous persons, including diasporic communities from closed villages, foreign anthropologists, priezzhie superiors, spouses and friends, shamanic tourists and adventurers, and Western businessmen looking to extract natural resources, from fish to platinum. The non-human persons, like kalaw (anthropophagous monsters), reindeer, bear, and sacred rocks or mountains, are equally important in indigenous ethnoscapes, but often invisible from Russian perspectives.

Kamchatkan mediascapes include the usual assortment of international video and audio cassettes and broadcasts on the national Russian TV networks ORT and (in most villages) NTV. People are aware of world trends, including giving offerings to the fire by native peoples in South America and elsewhere, the medicinal use of plants and animal parts (especially bear gall bladder) in various cultures, and the increasing importance of computer literacy in order to succeed in a global labor market. Cultural practices are centered in the everyday life of people in a community, and my Chukchi friends were aware that one can talk about these similarities and differences and use labels such as ‘Chukchi’, ‘Koryak’, and even ‘real Chukchi’ without reifying these distinctions into bounded groups which are discrete and autonomous. People move about, populations change, ‘everyone is all mixed up [ethnically]’, I was often told, sometimes as an explanation why there is no such group as ‘the Koryak’.
When Chukchis and Koryaks talk about their culture in town, it resides in the past and in the tundra, not the here and now. They negatively judge themselves as having lost traditions, and they judge current practices as a debilitated shadow of what their parents and grandparents used to do. A typical response to my statement of interest in contemporary Koryak culture in towns like Palana or Ossora was that there was no culture in town. Native culture is 'out there in the tundra', which, practically speaking, indicates either reindeer herding camps or seasonal fishing camps are where the culture is. One Koryak friend, who could never understand why I was interested in the lives of native people in town, scolded me the last week I was in Palana. He thought I had erred in not going to the local reindeer herd the previous winter, but instead 'wasting my time in town' in Palana. A year earlier, he had told me directly: 'There is no [native] culture in town'. During an interview in the town of Tilichiki with the head of Oliutorski County, the Russian immigrant administrator commented that he thought that native traditions were better preserved in Kamchatka than in Alaska. A native elite working in the county administration observed, 'Native people in Alaska live in towns, are more assimilated'. The county head chimed in, 'further from the land (zemli)'. In Kamchatka, even in towns of only 3,000–5,000, residents are often literally 'further from the land' by residing in five-story, concrete apartment buildings. Symbolically, 'further from the land' indicates a life-style of residence in European-designed housing instead of traditional skin tents, buying food instead of hunting, gathering, and herding, enjoying modern conveniences like TVs and VCRs instead of traditional entertainment.

Russian administrators consistently talked about native culture as primitive, backwards, irrational, and undeveloped, even though they admitted native people were the most familiar with the local landscape, and this is a highly valued asset. The head of the KAO section of the Russian Federation Land Committee wanted me to 'collaborate' with him in 'our' research. In his pitch for the importance of his organization's geographical expertise and my research on 'contemporary Koryak culture', he repeatedly emphasized the importance of land (zemlia) and native people's relationship to the land as the basis for ethnography. The ethnography is right here [gesturing at map of flora distribution on table]. Native culture is naturalized as an adaptation, separated from civilized land use, such as mining or towns. Indigenous land use is not qualitatively different from vegetation covering as a means for clas-
sifying separate areas on a map. Native Kamchatkans are praised for their successful survival in the harsh climate of Kamchatka without advanced technology, but this praise simultaneously denies their contemporary relevance in the modern, high-tech world.

When I responded to the Land Committee chairman that my work was more along the themes of spiritual culture and the variation of belief among all the people in the okrug, he replied, ‘The natives have not developed their culture at all. They don’t have any higher education, and they have not developed their culture’. This was in the presence of my colleague Valentina Dedyk, who was writing her dissertation, and another native woman (one of his employees), who had a college degree in geography. When he launched into a lecture on the need of native people to ‘develop’ their culture and reinvent everything, including the way they work (a typical Soviet trope), Dedyk interrupted with the point that native reindeer herders know best how to tend their herds and that Soviet collectivization was the root of current problems. This Russian priezzi summarily dismissed her opinion:

No. They don’t have any socio-economic structure (uklad zhizni). They don’t have any laws or structures. [A long harangue on the ecology of reindeer moss followed, which I had difficulty understanding.] They need to figure out where the best pasturage is in order to carry out their work and privatize the land accordingly.

The director ended the meeting with advice I was to hear many times the following year, ‘The tundra, that is where Koryak culture is. You have to go to the tundra for ethnography. The town is nothing. It doesn’t have anything [native’]. This man is extreme in his racist and sexist dismissal of the educated native women who witnessed this discussion about native culture, but the symbolic identity of natives with the tundra, which is opposed to the town, was commonly expressed by non-native and even native elites. Native non-elites, however, who tend to live in smaller villages, did not usually make this contrast.

The landscape was not segmented into wild and domesticated by most native people, certainly not in the way Russians talk about it. The tundra and rivers were not marked as wild, but discussed as places where one herds deer, collects berries, and catches fish. Everywhere there are signs of people: tracks, garbage, fire rings, stacked firewood cached for later use, former tent
sites. There are lots of people along the river, too. As we were drinking tea during an evening of fishing in a place that seemed like the middle of nowhere to me, three or four boats went by as they descended from nowhere toward summer fishing camps and the village far down river. As we fished later that evening, three more boats stopped to chat with my hosts. I learned that not only did the bit of riverbank we were standing on have a name in Koryak, but also the smallest streams and most insignificant (to me) features of the landscape had names. Naming features provides a cognitive map of the terrain, indicating traveling distances, streams to cross or camp by, berry 'plantations', reindeer pasturage, fish habitats, and navigation aids (usually prominent hills). Like Western Apache toponyms, native Kamchatkan toponyms are not just about naming geographical features; it references histories and cosmologies. In Basso's terms, toponymy is part of native people's participation in the landscape (cf Basso 1996, 44 ff, 102). Among Koryak and Chukchi reindeer herders of Kamchatka, place names are most often associated with people. A good fishing spot is named for a man who set up a household there. A hill's name may be descriptive, but it also invokes the people who lived nearby, since the descriptive name relies upon viewing a feature (like a hill) from a particular, human (i.e., standing on the ground and not flying in a helicopter) point of view. This point of view and the name it generated invokes the household of people who lived there, viewing the hill and naming it. When I returned to Middle Pakhachi in September 2001 (almost two years after I first wrote this paragraph), I was told that some people in the village were referring to a sand bar on the river where my wife and I had camped with our Chukchi hosts for several days in July 1997 as the 'American' spit. It is not every summer that a young American couple spends several weeks in the small village, fishing, picking berries, and participating in people's ordinary lives, and so such an event is recorded in local topography as it is recorded in people's memories.

Indigenous people contrast tundra and town as native/our territory versus European or your/their territory. They express an understanding that differences in culture correspond to differences in locality; different people have different culturescapes. On one occasion when I was traveling with a group of herders, I was asked to help gather firewood. I hesitated, unsure of where to go, until one young man pointed to a likely stand of trees about a hundred meters off. Afterwards, he commented to me,
When you first look around, you don’t see any firewood. You have
to train your eyes. [pause] Don’t worry about it. We would get lost
right away in the city. Not even be able to find a stolovaiia [cafeteria],
or what is it? ‘café’?

Here, cities are European spaces, and as a European (American) I am at
home in such places. The snowy tundra was foreign to me; conversely it was
their kind of place, their stomping grounds, if you will.

Sacred rocks and hills are sacred because of the regular performance of
small ritual offerings. Koryaks emphasize the activities associated with cul-
tural beliefs, while most Russians refer to the accouterments, the items one
finds in museums (sleds, hats, skin boats, parkas). Sacred spaces punctuate
this cultural map with powerfully charged landmarks, which are typically
large or unusual rock formations or hills.9 They have a history of special
powers associated with them, including locomotion, effects on human health
(positive or negative), and resistance to Western technologies. I was told
of one hill with a unique flat top in Oliutorski County, which had special
powers. The Soviets tried several times to erect a radio relay tower on it,
but the tower always fell down after a short time. It would never stay up.
Attempts to photograph or videotape this hill also fail. Native people talked
about the failures of modern technology to record or withstand the hill as a
result of the hill’s ‘will’. Native people interact with such sacred landmarks as
they do with other spiritual beings, and they give prayers (thoughts or words
of respect, positive wishes for the future) and offerings: money, tobacco, fat,
bullets. As herders tend their deer they move through a sacred space-time,
connected to the bio-spiritual health of people and deer. None of these areas
exist independently of people or deer. Good pasturage must be well managed,
not overgrazed, and kept linked with other pastures. Sacred sites must be
periodically visited and left offerings but not too often. For this topography
to remain alive, culturally Koryak, it must be not only remembered but
enacted (Basso 1996, Povinelli 1993). While I was ice fishing with a young
(in his mid-twenties) reindeer herder, my companion pointed out a large,
unusual, triangular-shaped stone far upstream, jutting above the humpy
tundra. As he handed me the binoculars, he explained that if it weren’t so late
already, we could have gone to visit, to see the offerings (supposedly interest-
ing to the Western ethnographer) and leave something for the spirit of the
rock (interesting to the rock and behooving the people). When we returned to camp, he mentioned to the rest that we had spied the sacred rock. The brigade leader asked me if I had ‘prayed’ (molilsia). I told him, ‘No, it was a little far off’. He scolded me, ‘It doesn’t matter if you are far away, you must always pray’. Sacred sites demand to be honored even if they are only barely within sight.

Sacred rocks, such as the one above, are more like persons than places because they have a will or autonomy, demonstrated through movement. Soviet authorities in the county center moved another sacred rock from its original location outside of town to the county center in the 1980s. They wanted to erect a monument to local World War II heroes, and the local party chief organized a team of workmen to drag the rock into the center of town with a large tractor. There it was set upon a concrete platform and affixed with a plaque announcing its Soviet function. According to my Koryak and Chukchi friends, the party boss and all the workmen associated with the sacred rock’s desecration and removal to town died or suffered some other tragedy soon afterwards. Townspeople lay boughs, wreaths, and flowers before the rock on holidays, especially VE Day (May 9). Natives often leave their typical offerings: tobacco, chewing gum, or maybe a coin. Most Russians think that is the Koryak way of honoring war dead, but they are actually honoring the rock itself. One young Chukchi woman in a nearby village explained how her mother instructed her to honor the sacred rock when she was flown to the hospital in the county center, ‘Mama told me to leave something there. At first I thought that she meant a rock in the forest, but she made it clear that it is in the center of town’. On the other side of the peninsula, in a village of hunter-fisher Koryaks (Nymylans), I was told of a similar sacred rock, which escaped the ignominy of being dragged off by Russians. A party of geologists identified this sacred rock as one that they wanted to study back in town, but when they returned with a tractor to drag the rock downstream to town, it had moved away and hidden itself from the Russians.

From the point of view of native people in Kamchatka, the landscape is a configuration of persons. If the topic of conversation was traditional native culture, my native interlocutors often brought up people moving through the landscape. After I talked to a grandmother about past practices associated with spring corrals of the private reindeer herd, she volunteered a previous
discussion she had had with a Japanese anthropologist two years before. She said the anthropologist had asked, 'If I am alone in the tundra, could I find the road to town?'

I answered him, 'Of course, because there are many roads to the village. We all know every little stream and valley, every hill, path and mountain. We know this tundra well. And if you go out into the tundra, we will know where you are. Even if you leave the village alone, everyone will know where you went, which way you were headed, and how to find you.'

While her first sentence indicates that the foreign anthropologist would have no trouble navigating the landscape, she quickly points out that the landscape is known by its native inhabitants, and the anthropologist is safe only because they are with him or at least keeping tabs on his location and movements. Reindeer herders and other natives engaged in regular activity in the tundra cover large territories, often on foot, every year, and are as familiar with every little stream as most of us are with the streets and alleyways of our hometowns.

This Koryak landscape is gendered. This can be seen through the terms associated with different kinds of spiritual markers. Sacred rock formations with powers and other sites, such as a ritual post erected along the seashore to encourage ‘fish-bringing winds’, are referred to by the Koryak word apapel, which is a diminutive for grandfather. The diminutive for grandmother, anyapel, refers to amulets (small or medium-sized rocks sewn into special reindeer-skin bags and often decorated with beadwork) which are kept inside the house or tent. In more traditional domestic arrangements, the household’s most powerful anyapel was kept inside the interior sleeping tent. This maximally domestic (or feminine) space was where a nuclear family slept together. When one side was raised up during the day, it was also the place where people (especially men) liked to eat meals. Thus the tent or traditional home is not so much a domestic space opposed to the wilds of the tundra, but a feminine area complemented by the masculine area of the tundra. This traditional space, now less common as most people live in towns, was also dynamic, as the tent was moved from one part of the tundra to another. Former tent sites, however, were no longer feminine or domestic, but dangerous areas where malevolent spirits lurked. These ideas about places do not
reflect ideas of human inscriptions upon a blank wilderness, but of particular spaces being associated with particular persons, human or not.

This kind of cultural understanding of the landscape was an aspect of the spiritual culture that I was looking for in Kamchatka and which the Land Committee director in Palana denied Koryaks with their ‘undeveloped’ culture. The director essentially denied that natives had any culture at all. Non-native residents, especially immigrant elites, did not connect native people and the landscape in personal or spiritual ways. Many comments disconnected native people from the landscape altogether. I was party to the following exchange with a Russian technician in Manily, a medium-sized town with about half of its population Koryak:

What are your impressions of Kamchatka?
AK: Fascinating place. [intentionally vague]
Yes. The landscape is marvelous, but the people [pause] are no good.

During the man’s pause, I followed his gaze to a drunken Koryak man stumbling down the street in the early afternoon, a common sight in northern Kamchatka. For this and many other Russians, that lone Koryak was an accurate representative of his ethnic group. Just as many (most?) non-Indians in Seattle believe that they have an accurate assessment of the human worth of Suquamish, Spokane, Lummi and other Indians in the Northwest based upon observations of half a dozen drunk individuals in Pioneer Square, whites in Kamchatka believe that drunk, dirty Koryaks staggering down the street are typical (not stereotypical) of Kamchatkan natives. For this Russian and many others, the landscape exists independently of people. It is just ‘out there’, and people may or may not be stumbling around in it.

One evening two acquaintances of mine, a Koryak and a Russian friend of his who loved outdoor life, showed up at my apartment to drink and talk, and the Russian asked me what I liked about Kamchatka. Without hesitation I said, ‘the people’, and explained how kind and generous so many people in Kamchatka had been to me, exhibiting a hospitality greater than I usually received from my American friends and family. Then he asked me about my first impressions. I took a risk and told them the truth: in 1995 I had been taken aback by the dismal living conditions of most people. The
look on both their faces was one of disappointment, not at my judgment – they also considered most people's living conditions in Kamchatka dismal – but for my misdirected attention. The Russian man then told me what I took to be the correct answer:

When I was a young man, I served [in the armed forces] in Petropavlovsk. After finishing, I took a plane to the north [the okrug], and when I got off the plane, wow! The Nature (priroda)!

He struck a pose of rapture, arms outspread, mouth agape, and gaze directed at an imaginary horizon. He said that it was similar to a religious experience. 'I have stayed the subsequent twenty years and will never leave'. Although positively valued, this understanding of the Kamchatkan landscape is typically European in its opposition to civilization. Russians have similar conceptions of wilderness as Americans (see Nash 1982). Even when wilderness is positively valued (contra civilization), it is still conceived of as an absence of human beings. Conversely, among native ways of talking about the landscape, areas that do not include people are irrelevant; landscapes don't exist if there is no one to enact them.

Palana native elites can romanticize reindeer herders as noble savages, but they usually don't reify native culture into material terms as non-natives typically do. Educated natives often contrast their 'assimilated' way of life with a more authentically native way of life found at the reindeer herd. One such man identifies himself as 'Koryak, but half of me is also Russian'. As he makes dramatically clear, he is not at home in the tundra:

The herders saw us, wondering what the hell we were doing on the cliffs, and several of the herders walked up to us. That was such a sight. Real Koryaks. That is their home. Here I am, cold, wet, miserable, crying for home, tears running down my cheeks. The herder walks up like he just walked out of his house. He is carrying only essentials: binoculars, tobacco pouch and knife on his belt. He looked grand, right at home. That is where the real Koryaks are, out in the wild places like that. Everything is ruined, assimilated in town. There is nothing left in Palana. In those wild places, the Koryak herder is master. He is his own master, his own person. Those herders looked like pure Indians, in the best sense of the word.
This was the conclusion to a long story during an evening of conversations about native Kamchatkan culture, world musical culture, politics, computers, a wide range of topics. Even though this story romanticizes native reindeer herders out on the tundra, and opposes that image to the one of the pitiful, college-educated Koryak lost in the tundra (and to the implicit one of drunk, pitiful Koryaks in Palana), it does not reify culture into things. The reindeer herder’s possessions (knife, tobacco pouch, binoculars) are not what defines him as Koryak, his disposition does, his ‘habitus’, in the jargon of currently fashionable anthropological theory. The idea behind this representation is that culture is embodied in people, expressed in the way they live, walk, interact, perform. It also connects different kinds of people to different kinds of places. Native elites in white-collar jobs explicitly and implicitly expressed the ideology that ‘real natives’ are found in the tundra; those living in town cannot be real Koryaks anymore.

The only other contrast between tundra and town evident in the way non-elite native people talk about the landscape is in the spiritual powers loose in the tundra. During a conversation about the practices and beliefs associated with cremation and the afterlife, a woman explained to me that in the house she could yell at her husband, but out in the tundra she was prohibited from yelling at him or scolding him excessively. Unnecessary yelling and crying was discouraged in traditional Koryak and Chukchi culture because it attracted the attention of kalav, dangerous, anthropophagous spirit monsters. She explained to me,

If I were really mad at my husband, the worst thing would be to send him away. I couldn’t tell him to get out. I would have to leave the tent and go to my family. If I told him to get out, then they [spirits] would think that he was unwanted, and they would come and get him [carry off his life force, leading to his physical death or disappearance].

People were susceptible to these and other malevolent forces when alone, less so in groups. Thus, walking the tundra alone was an indication of shamanic power. In town one is by definition never alone. Towns are defined as large groups of humans living in one place. I do not interpret this belief as a typical nature-culture distinction as a Westerner might see it, however. As among many hunting and gathering cultures, native Kamchatkans see
humans as only one kind of person in a world with many kinds of beings or persons, who have spiritual and physical components to their existence like people and which are usually stronger than humans in single conflicts but are overcome through groups of people cooperating (Descola 1996).

At the reindeer herd and in the tundra, which is not a wild (dikoe) place as it is for local Russians and foreign anthropologists, native people express a sense of culture which is rooted in the here and now. They understand that culture is embodied and can point out how people from different cultures express this difference through what Bourdieu calls ‘habitus’. The landscape is home and alive, and also fraught with dangers. Sacred places (rocks, hills, parts of rivers) require offerings and prayers to maintain the delicate balance of human life and prosperity. Russian and other priezbie productions of locality follow a logic of cultural inscription upon an independently existing, ‘natural’ topography. Wilderness, nature is marked merely as an absence, most notably an absence of white people. As Russians populate this wilderness with Koryaks and other native people in their collective imagination, natives become wild, part of natural history. Koryak and native Kamchatkan productions of locality do not speak of human figures on an environmental ground. Rather, the landscape is a figure as people are figures, and cultural differences are marked accordingly.

The networks of social relations between people and other kinds of persons in indigenous cultures in the Arctic and Sub-Arctic landscapes have been similarly described for Evenks (Anderson 2000), Evens (Vitebsky 1992), Dene (Sharp 2001), and Crees (Brightman 1993). My use of the term culturescape is similar to Anderson’s concept of a ‘sentient ecology’ (2000, 116). Anderson describes Evenki relationships to the landscape as incidental or derivative of relationships to people, animals, spiritual personages like sacred rocks, and particular resources like trees or fishing spots (2000, 135–43). I have taken this position even further with the claim that these relationships are constitute of the landscape itself. Enacting relationships with deer, rocks, and the like imagines places as persons. It also assigns certain kinds of persons to particular places. This presents an important challenge to the utility of Appadurai’s concept of the ethnoscape. While this term is useful for labeling the complex social and identity relations among people who are scattered across such places as Middle Pakhachi, Palana, and St. Petersburg, it glosses over
the differences created by living in these different locales. Just as Koryaks are somehow not the same kind of Koryak after they move from Kamchatka to St. Petersburg, South Asian Indians also change their culture as they take up residence in London, Chicago or Dallas. If ethnicity is nothing more than a label printed on an identification card or carried like clothing, then it can move about the globe with impunity. I believe, however, that this is an impoverished view of culture, or a way of being a human being.

Notes

1 The Russian word liudi refers only to persons, as opposed to narod, which refers to ‘a people’ or a nation.
2 An okrug is a special administrative territory, most often established in 1930, for special indigenous ethnic minorities. It is variably translated as ‘area’, ‘region’, or ‘district’. In English publications, I use the English words ‘province’ for oblast and ‘county’ for raion, since these seem to be general usage.
3 See Levin and Potapov (1964), Jochelson (1908); Russian-language works share this framework (Antropova 1971, Krushanov 1993).
4 Fate drafted a man who would become one of my favorite high school teachers, Dr. Louis Graham, into the US Air Force, where he listened to these Russian missile tests from a spy plane in the 1960s. He knew about little dots on the map like Tilichiki and Manily that I would eventually visit. He also told me that the United States was good at getting all the data on those tests through these surveillance activities.

It might be useful to pursue the culturescape exemplified by Russians sending missiles from one end of their empire to the other and targeting their own terra firma, whereas Americans often launch missile tests to target areas in the ocean. The Soviet military operated very much under the premises of an extended land empire. Nuclear missiles, including ICBMs, are under the purview of the army, which was primarily concerned with defending against possible NATO attack. The Soviet and Russian Navy, like the Army, operated in a defensive posture, much like a coast guard. American ICBMs are under Air Force command, reflecting the nature of their deployment, and the American Navy was distributed across the planet in a global system of foreign bases, far from their mainland.

5 The reader may object that much of Russian culture is not urban, that the Russian soul (following thinkers from Tolstoi to Rasputin) is really located in the village, and that villages are far from urban. I maintain, however, that Russians are still typically European in this regard, where the human realm of the village is still opposed to the forest, or tundra, or steppes.

6 Tatiana Khelol (Palana Okrug Archive) has been studying the history of closed villages on Kamchatka and the possibility of re-opening some of them as part of
Reindeer Herders’ Culturescapes

the ‘native revival’. There were plans to re-open three native villages, but the economic catastrophe of the early 1990s wiped out the funds that had been allocated for the project.

7 Referring to Chukchi people living on the Chukchi Peninsula and speaking a language of that name, unlike Chukchi in Middle Pakhachi who speak Koryak.

8 I am aware that Basso’s analysis of Apache does not hold for all Apache groups (Farrer, personal communication, Samuels 2001), but I have found that Koryaks and other reindeer herders in Kamchatka do talk about the landscape in a manner very similar to Cibeque Apache as described by Basso.

9 This is true for Chukchi and Koryaks in Oliutorski County and also for many, but not all, Koryak (or Nymylan) people farther south in Tigilski and Karaga Counties. Sacred sites among reindeer and settled Koryaks in Penzhinski County seem to be a function of people having lived in that place. Aside from the sacred island Poitelo (Dobrazhansko), rocks and mountains in Penzhinski County are not persons among contemporary Koryaks as sacred rocks are farther south.

10 The ‘they’ in this statement may refer either to kalaw, who would eat the person’s spirit, or to spirits living in the other world (the afterlife), in which case they would be merely opening a portal between this and the other world and carrying off the man’s soul to their community, a less bad death, especially since the person’s soul would soon be reborn into a decendant.

References


