

Dimensions of Identity

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The present volume is Number Three in a trilogy edited by Erich Kasten on central and much-debated themes that have arisen during the last decade of anthropological studies on Siberia: land use, cultural property, and identity. I feel honored to be the contributor of the introductory chapter to this third volume. It gives me the opportunity to round off and summarize an important part of the discussions he and I have been involved in during fifteen years in the same “field,” even if this “field” consists of communities thousands of kilometers apart in various remote regions of the Russian Federation. Like other anthropologists who work in Siberia, the Far North and the Far East, we have come to appreciate the exceeding diversity and the high speed of change – the remarkable spatial and temporal dynamics – of this vast region, which makes it at times a doubtful task to write anything anthropological about “Siberia in general.” However, such general traits exist; and they also exist in the ways Siberia is described by anthropologists. One of these characteristics is the subject of this paper: there has been a strong commitment to the examination of *ethnic* identity, as if ethnicity were the prime aspect of identity in Siberia. Hence my question: is the rebuilding of identities confined to proceedings and negotiations about ethnicity? If “the ethnic” is an important quality of identity, are there other qualities, and if so, what are they? What I mean by the term “quality” can be described as an *aspect* or a *core*, an *expression* or an *essence*, a *performance* or a *property* of someone’s identity, depending on where one feels at home theoretically and discursively. I personally prefer to discuss these qualities in terms of *dimensions* of identity, and shall explain this choice in the course of this text.

This chapter has three sections. The first section attempts to explain how it came about that, with regard to anthropological research on Siberia, identity is almost always discussed implicitly and yet predominantly along the dimension of “the ethnic.” To put it more bluntly, I want to explore why Siberia is so much about ethnicity. My explanations draw on the existence of diverse trajectories of scholarship in Russia (the Soviet Union) and other countries, although there are similarities in key issues of interest, as well as in issues that have escaped scholarly interest. The first section will close with a short description of what I see as a renewed convergence of scholarship in the 1990s. In the second section, I shall use a small sample of findings from my fieldwork in the north of the Komi Republic in order to provide examples of dimensions of identity other than the ethnic one.

Questions raised in this context are: can a town (or, more generally, a place) have an identity? How do collective identities articulate with individual identities? And which dimensions of identity are most important for people in particular contexts? Finally, in the third section, I shall discuss more generally how the terms identity and ethnicity are used in anthropological literature.

I take full responsibility for the random way in which I discuss authors, schools of thought and ideas in the following sections. Dealing with the concepts of ethnicity and identity and the history of anthropology itself in just a few pages, one cannot hope to cover even a small portion of the relevant literature. What follows, then is simply an essay about some of the works that have influenced my own way of thinking over the last decade.

The primacy of the “ethnic”

Let us try to identify the conditions in social science research on Siberia that have led to “the ethnic” being the predominant angle of analysis. Very helpful for this short and by no means exhaustive review are Schweitzer’s study on the history of anthropological research on Siberia (2001), Slezkin’s account of Soviet social scientists and politicians in their interactions with native inhabitants of the Far North (1994), and various contributions by Soviet and Western anthropologists presented at the Burg Wartenstein Conference in 1976, edited by Gellner (1980).

The most obvious reason for Soviet scholars’ interest in ethnicity is surely to be found in the very name of the trade, *etnografiia*, which developed alongside, and in more or less intensive exchange with, *social anthropology* and *cultural anthropology* in English-speaking countries. The primacy of “the ethnic” is explicit in the term *etnografiia*, as well as the French *éthnologie* and the German *Ethnologie*, yet it was in the Soviet Union after World War II that “the ethnic” gained its greatest weight (Slezkine 1994, 310 and *passim*) and became one of the most elaborated concepts in the study of human populations.

Etnos, which had emerged as an analytical concept already by the 1920s¹, attained solid conceptual status and central importance in the 1970s and 1980s under the aegis of Yulian Bromlei as the Director of the *Institut Etnografii Akademii Nauk SSSR* in Moscow. Bromlei and his colleagues treated *etnos* as “a definite category of objective reality” (1980, 152) and as the object of their studies. Commenting on Bromlei’s positions, Dragadze (1980, 162) describes Soviet scholars’ definition of their task as follows. “Man as a social being can be examined in a great number of ways, as can the collectivities in which he participates. Unlike other researchers,

however, anthropologists should specialize in studying man in his capacity as member of an 'ethnos,' the nature of these 'ethnoses' and their history." In short, other enquiries into human interrelations and identities were outside the realm of anthropology, and as such left to other disciplines, e.g. sociology and economics. In reality, of course, the study of *ethnos* proper intermingled with other fields of interest, which is also reflected in the considerable diversity of schools and theories in Soviet anthropology, for example ethno-sociology and ethno-psychology. However, some central tenets about methodologies and the "object" of study persisted. The assumption that *ethnos* could be studied as an objective category did little to encourage anthropological studies focused on the self, or respondents' self-reflection and their interpretations of ethnic and other identities. *Ethnos* was not amenable to deconstruction, and informants were not supposed to challenge ethnographers' categories of inquiry.

Another important trait of Soviet anthropology was its explicitly historicist character and its strong commitment to studying peoples in a diachronic perspective, e.g. throughout their development in history.² This tendency is also reflected in many researchers' sustained interest in *etnogenez* (ethnogenesis). Social evolutionism has been a powerful trend in *etnografiia* and it still is. The study of the history of *ethnoses* implied that those living in the "here and now" merely represent a surface phenomenon of a dynamic past, and that the bulk of evidence was to be found in archaeological specimens and archival sources, whereas face-to-face interviews and participant observation could illuminate only the uppermost layer of *ethnos* development. Here again, *etnografiia* was not so much concerned with rendering individuals' interpretations of their existence as with explaining the social organization of ethnic groups and peoples. The goal was to understand and facilitate social change and the envisaged transition toward communism as the (assumed) final stage of societal development (Slezkine 1994; Ssorin-Chaikov 2003, 44–53 and *passim*).³

Occasionally, self-reference to one's ethnic identity did constitute an issue, most saliently in the Soviet censuses and in studies of inter-ethnic marriage. However, the Soviet concept of ethnicity was characterized by a certain rigidity, which left little scope for multiple ethnic identities, let alone for individuals' switching among various identities. Ethnic identity was written in one's passport under the rubric of *natsional'nost'*. One could not officially belong to more than one *natsional'nost'*. Some individuals, the descendants of inter-ethnic marriages, had (and still have) the right to choose their ethnic identity at the age of 16. (Often the parents decide on their behalf.) In my opinion, the idea that ethnic identity may be freely construed according to individual preference is something quite novel

in the everyday life of the citizens of the Russian Federation. For many decades ethnic determinations had been officially made and approved by ethnographers. So, it comes as a surprise that in the 2002 Census some residents of Russia declared themselves to be Hobbits and Elves, probably as a result of their engagement with Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.⁴

The setting has changed, though, not only in terms of people's "ethnic" self-ascriptions but also institutionally. The *Institut Etnografii Akademii Nauk SSSR* was renamed as the *Institut etnologii i antropologii Rossiiskoi Akademii Nauk* in 1992, which indicates a shift away from *etnografiia* and toward *sotsial'no-kul'turnaia antropologiia*, a shift explicitly promoted by the director of the Institute, Valerii Tishkov. In the very first pages of his recent book, "Rekviem po etnosu" (2003), Tishkov launches a broadside against the basic concepts and tasks of *etnografiia*:

"... it is possible to radically widen the horizons of the discipline, leaving behind the niche of ethnicity (*etnichnosti*) and the group categorization of the object of scientific study ('only ethnos and nothing else than ethnos'). This is a far more promising way of acknowledging *the cultural diversity and the cultural meanings of human activity and the different social coalitions created by [humans]*, in comparison to the examination of discrete entities of anthropological (ethnological) analysis and their relations with each other" (Tishkov 2003, 7; his emphasis, my translation).

To put it succinctly, Tishkov is dissatisfied with the idea that his discipline is the "science about peoples" (2003, 24) as neatly defined ethnic groups. While I do not want to adopt Tishkov's occasionally polemical style, I do support his main argument: it is time to look beyond "the ethnic" and examine other dimensions of human life and cultural diversity. I would add that it is important to apprehend such concepts as ethnicity, way of life, or tradition not as objectively "given," but through the interpretation of the "objects" of study themselves. I am pleading not simply for the deconstruction of such concepts but rather for the examination of how actors "in the field" perform and more or less creatively employ such concepts (among which is identity).

In what follows, I shall briefly outline how anthropologists from "other countries" have described Siberia and its inhabitants. After 1945, scholars from other socialist countries such as Hungary (Diószegi, Hoppál, Uray-Köhalmi and others) were able to draw on materials from their fieldwork in Siberia, whereas scholars from Western countries usually had to content themselves with research in the museums and archives of Moscow and Leningrad. The example of West Germany illustrates this limitation. Such prominent anthropologists as Johansen and Paproth wrote extensively about Siberian peoples, shamanism and bear ceremonies without having

the opportunity to conduct fieldwork in the region itself. Turning to Britain, we find that these cases were paralleled by the experience of Ingold, who wrote his book on reindeer economies (Ingold 1980) with reference to data on Siberia that was collected by others. Thus, anthropologists from Britain, France, West Germany and the USA had very limited or non-existent first-hand experience “on the ground,” that is, with the people who were actually living there. The authors mentioned above had to take a somewhat historical approach to the materials presented, because they were virtually cut off from contemporary Siberia. In this sense, their works mirror the diachronic approach that was thought to be so characteristic of Soviet *etnografiia*.

There were very few exceptions, notably the early work of Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer and Caroline Humphrey. The US-based anthropologist Balzer wrote about “rituals of gender identity” as markers of Khanty ethnicity on the basis of her observations during a sojourn in Khanty villages in 1976. Her publication came out in 1981, at a time when “gender,” as a category to be problematized, had not yet appeared on the professional radar of her fellow Siberianists in either the West or East.

The British anthropologist Humphrey visited a collective farm in Buryatia as early as 1967. Her monograph (Humphrey 1998 [1983]) differs from Soviet ethnographers’ accounts in its multi-faceted description of everyday life in all its complexity. Contradictions and syncretisms in people’s attitudes and actions were not brushed away as relics (*perezhitki*) of a way of life that would gradually but certainly disappear with the “onward march of history” (Petrova-Averkieva 1980, 19). Humphrey’s account is almost playful, especially when seen in the light of *etnografiia*’s usual conceptual rigidity. She wrote about *kolkhoz* chairmen’s nightmares and informal practices (1983, 221) and presented “shamans as *bricoleurs* of the Soviet world” (1983, 402). This exemplified a style and a range of topics that were unmentionable in the *etnografiia* narrative, either because they challenged elementary ideological tenets, or because they raised issues considered to be too trivial, too routine from the Soviet academic point of view (cf. Boym 1994, 2–5; Rotkirch 2000, 9–11; Slezkine 1994, 321).

I cannot end this section without a few remarks on what may be called a renewed convergence of the various schools of anthropological research in Siberia. On the one hand, since 1989 the number of anthropologists from outside the Soviet Union/Russian Federation who have managed to conduct fieldwork in Siberia has rapidly increased (Schweitzer 2001, 259–64). As a consequence, there is now a much larger number of “foreign” anthropologists who share the “field experience” of their colleagues who are citizens of the Russian Federation. On the other hand, the latter have

acquainted themselves with a great diversity of anthropological theories and concepts that challenge and/or extend the “canonized” Marxist interpretations of society. These two developments, along with a growing competence in Russian and English languages, have led to increasing interaction and communication among scholars from various countries. The sense of sharing a common scholarly and conceptual language is perhaps most palpable at international conferences devoted to Siberian anthropological research, such as “Who owns Siberian ethnography?”, organized in Halle in March 2002 (Gray, Vakhtin and Schweitzer 2003), “‘Everything is still before you’: being young in Siberia today” in Halle in November 2003 (Habeck, in print), or “Generation P in the Tundra” in Tartu in October 2004. Over the last ten years, a certain sense of normality has emerged in anthropological debates on Siberia and its peoples. In my observation, this normality coincides with the tendency to see “the ethnic” no longer as the only frame of reference, and to be wary of essentialized concepts of ethnicity.

Gender and age, work and play: Other dimensions of identity

In this section based on my fieldwork materials from the north of the Komi Republic, I shall give an example of dimensions of identities beyond the ethnic dimension.⁵ The very name “Komi Republic” indicates that the Komi are the titular nation on this territory. Up to the 1940s the Komi constituted the majority of inhabitants in the Komi Republic. The northern part of the Komi Republic was dominated by the GULAG from the 1930s to the mid-1950s. With the disbanding of the GULAG, the predominant majority of camp inmates regained their civil status. Those who stayed in the region came to be officially registered as inhabitants of the Komi Republic, for example in the coal-mining towns of Inta and Vorkuta (Skvoznikov et al. 2001, 85). The intensifying mineral resource extraction, industrialization and large-scale construction projects of the 1960s to 1980s brought a further influx of people from other parts of the Soviet Union, notably Russians and to a lesser extent Ukrainians, Belorussians and Tatars (Skvoznikov et al. 2001, 188–9). One of the towns that came into existence in this way is Usinsk, which, together with some surrounding rural communities, is the focus of my case study (fig. 1).

Usinsk is the hub of the oil industry in the Komi Republic.⁶ It is a comparatively well-planned, compact aggregation of high-rise apartment blocks plus ancillary public buildings and a large industrial zone. Officially Usinsk was founded in February 1970, although it physically emerged as a settlement some years earlier (Habeck 2005, 55–6). The founding of Usinsk has been described as the deed of brave pioneers who ventured to

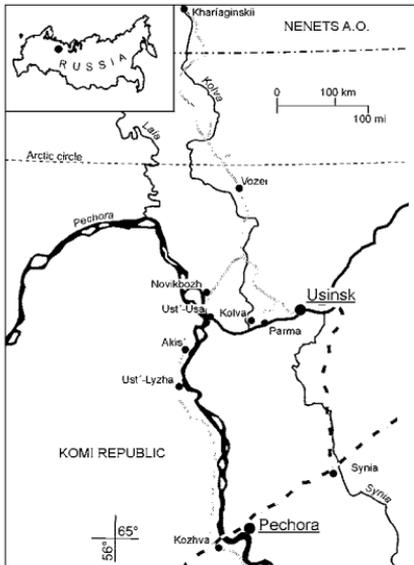


Figure 1.
Usinsk and surrounding villages

settle in what was supposedly a wilderness, and this description has been promoted and canonized as common knowledge through exhibitions at the local museum and articles in the Komi Republic's encyclopaedia (fig. 2). The almost mythical depiction of Usinsk's origin has created a sense of local identity (see below), yet it brushes aside other people's experiences of local history. From Usinsk, it is only 15 kilometers to Kolva, and 30 kilometers to Ust'-Usa, two places that earlier served as administrative centers and transportation hubs for the wider region. The long and complex history of Kolva has been discussed elsewhere (Istomin 1999); here I shall limit myself to describing Ust'-Usa and a small neighboring village.

Ust'-Usa functioned as a district center from 1932 to 1959, and its infrastructural and architectural heritage still display elements that typify a northern district center: standardized two-storey wooden houses arranged in neatly delineated blocks. However, these houses are in poor condition, which I believe is due to the decline of Ust'-Usa's administrative function after 1959. More recently, the village has seen the construction of three high-rise apartment buildings, which give Ust'-Usa something of an urban look particularly in comparison to other villages in the surroundings, such as Novikbozh. Usinsk, Ust'-Usa and Novikbozh are the three places that I shall describe and compare in this case study.

The architectural appearance of a place, I would argue, is an important element of local *identity*. Before I can proceed to illustrating how local identity is different from ethnic identity, I must first scrutinize the meaning

of local identity. A colleague once asked me, Can a town have an identity?⁷ Yes, I believe it can. Local identity is a dimension of individual as well as collective identity. The built environment of a place can be compared with a landscape – or, in fact, it is the landscape – in which an individual dwells and acts. Here I am following Ingold (2000), who has shown how the individual's active engagement with the environment, and his or her "target-oriented" browsing for affordances and opportunities is the condition for the individual's perception of the environment. The day-to-day ambit of action and kind of activity informs the individual's ways of learning and his or her experiences (Karjalainen and Habeck 2004). The daily walk from home to school or place of work, the daily activity in the factory or the forest etc. constitute reiterative, deeply memorized experiences that acquire great significance for one's biography and perception of oneself. It is in this sense that the built environment informs individual identity. This does not mean, however, that the individual perceives the built environment as independent from the natural or social environment; rather, they constitute a single sphere in the individual's perception. Moreover, the (more or less regular) presence of other individuals – the social environment – provides evidence that there are people who "share" the specific experiences, have similar experiential strings, or patterns, in their biographies, and are likely to see themselves in similar ways. The verbal and non-verbal exchange of experiences creates a sense of "we," and thereby a collective identity. The very sharing of similar experiences and the awareness of sharing are, in my interpretation, the constituents of identity.

Belonging to the same ethnic group may create a sense of sharing similar experiences, but so do other things: the place where one lives, as I showed in the previous paragraph; one's everyday activities and therefore one's profession; one's gender and age; one's consumer preferences and habits; one's hobbies and articulated aspirations and desires. All of these create various dimensions of identity that may be disguised or highlighted, played down or employed in one's engagement with the social environment, depending on the situation. Let us return to Usinsk, Ust'-Usa and other villages to see how ethnic identities articulate with local identities, profession and language, gender and age.

Usinsk's local identity is that of a "resource community" (Karjalainen and Habeck 2004). Even though not everyone is occupied in the oil industry and ancillary industrial jobs, the very existence of the town is justified first and foremost by oil extraction. Oil is the *raison d'être* of Usinsk and why people are there. Employment in the oil industry is prestigious not only for its high income, but also on a symbolic level. The assumed progressive character and pivotal economic function of oil extraction for the

entire country confers a particularly symbolic status on everyone in the oil industry, which surpasses and marginalizes the status of other occupational groups. The shared experience of mineral resource extraction in a supposedly harsh natural environment creates a sense of pioneer-like identity (figure 2) that transcends such ethnic categories as Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian and Tatar. Apart from this specific occupational dimension, Usinsk's identity also has an age dimension. It is a young town. Some of my informants proudly pointed out that their children are the first generation of "native" Usinskians. Others spoke about their experience of gradually getting used to the northern climate during the twenty or so years they had been living in Usinsk. Among the inhabitants there is a distinctive pride in being able, in knowing how, to live in a new and northern place, combined with a certain anxiety about not knowing whether Usinsk has a sustainable future (since the most intensive zone of oil extraction is gradually moving elsewhere).



Figure 2. "The beginning of history": Arrival of settlers in newly founded Usinsk (Source: Respublika Komi: entsiklopediia, 2000, vol. 3, p. 201)

The everyday language in Usinsk is Russian. Based on my own experience, the few places and situations where one can reliably expect to find people speaking to each other in the Komi language are particular bus stops at specific times, namely when the bus picks up passengers for Ust'-Usa and Novikbozh. With the growth of the oil industry and the construction of a

road from the town to the two villages, Ust'-Usa and Novikbozh are now part of Usink's commuter zone. This development has gradually changed the character, the local identity so to speak, of the villages, but to varying degrees.

Comparing Novikbozh and Ust'-Usa, there are not only differences in the built environment but also in the everyday use of language. Ust'-Usa's erstwhile function as a district center brought with it not only new housing projects but also an influx of Russian-speakers, which gave it an intermediary position between the rural, predominantly Komi-speaking sphere and the urban, inter-ethnic one.

Novikbozh's local identity is that of a reindeer herders' community, which is also acknowledged by people from other villages. Reindeer-herding households exist in Ust'-Usa as well, but there they are not as numerous as in Novikbozh. To work as a reindeer herder or tent worker⁸ creates a very specific occupational sense of identity: these individuals live under canvas in the forest tundra and tundra for about nine months of the year (Habeck 2005). Local inhabitants as well as anthropologists (e.g. Stammer, forthcoming) hold that reindeer herding is generally more than just an occupation – it is also a way of life. “Way of life” means a certain pattern of daily existence and activities that in turn, entail reiterative experiences with high significance for one's self-perception. (In the case of reindeer herders, “reiterative experiences” translate into practical skills and knowledge, while “significance for one's self-perception” translates into craftsmanship and expertise along with pride and trust in one's abilities.) Reindeer herding as an activity has a more complex significance for a person's identity, a significance that transcends the occupational aspect. Yet the reindeer herder's identity is not one and the same as local identity: it is not only reindeer herders, but other people as well who live in the village of Novikbozh; and reindeer herders live not only in Novikbozh but also in other villages and towns.

Nor is the reindeer herders' identity congruent with ethnic identity. To be sure, many of the reindeer herders have some kind of Komi ethnic identity,⁹ but only a very small percentage of all Komi have any connection to reindeer herding. This is important in the context of the discussion about ethnic identities, since many of those who represent the peoples of the Far North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation derive their ethnic identity from such “traditional ways of land use” as reindeer husbandry, hunting and fishing, on the symbolic level at least. Not everybody has to work in these spheres. For the tenet “traditional ways of land use” to remain as a key dimension of ethnic identity, it is sufficient that at least *some* people of the ethnic group pursue these activities and profes-

sions. As I understand it, the intended and unintended consequences of equating *ethnic identity* with certain types of activities – land-use activities in particular – constitute a more or less implicit, yet highly important, theme that recurs in many contributions to this book.

My main point is that individuals and collectives conceive of themselves not only in ethnic terms but also in many other ways. They conceive of themselves in ethnic terms only in specific situations, most frequently in the presence of the ethnic “other.” Different contexts and also different historical periods bring ethnic identity to the fore to varying degrees. To be sure, this is not a very new insight (see, for example, Eriksen 1993; Okamura 1981). “It may be that in some situations ethnicity is a relevant factor which influences the interaction of parties, while in other situations the relationship proceeds according to other attributes of the parties such as class, religion, occupation, sex, personality, etc.” (Okamura 1981, 455). Even in inter-ethnic situations, individuals (or groups) do not necessarily articulate their ethnic belonging; they may be unaware of it. Other dimensions (Okamura’s “attributes”) of identity may occupy “center stage,” while the ethnic dimension is somewhere “behind the scenes,” existent only as a *potential* for expression.

Most of the time my informants in Usinsk, Ust’-Usa and Novikbozh saw themselves and other members of these communities not as Russians or Komi but rather along the lines of kinship, social status within the community, gender and their belonging to corporate age cohorts, notably peers at school (*odnoklassniki*). Being from the same class or year at school appears to be a highly relevant frame for social relations; the shared experience of school education creates a strong sense of belonging. Similar, although less intensive, is the inclusive character of *rovesniki* (people of the same age). People cannot choose to be *odnoklassniki* or *rovesniki*: either they are or they are not. Other dimensions of identity, such as life style, may be dependent on such things as a person’s preference for particular styles of music. In a village farther away from Usinsk, one that is also considered by insiders as well as outsiders to be a “traditional reindeer-herding village,” I learnt that the local youth defined themselves as belonging to two antagonistic camps: those who admire Kurt Cobain and those who are fans of Eminem. Here we may assume that people have a choice as to which camp they want to belong to, or that they can choose not to belong to any camp. In another rural community, I came upon local youths talking about their fascination with role-playing games (cf. Barchunova and Beletskaia, in print); one of them identified himself with Gandalf, the wise wizard in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Regardless of whether one is Komi or Russian, it seems, an individual may enjoy a different identity in a parallel, imagined

life. Some people such as those who declared themselves as Hobbits and Elves in the 2002 Census (see above), even transfer such imagined identities into their “real” lives.

Individuals assert the inclusive commonality of the in-group (“we”) in diverse ways according to the situation and their intentions. They do so either by setting the frame of common reference wider or narrower, so as to include or exclude other individuals (Schlee 2002), or by switching from one frame of reference to another (Elwert 2002). That is, they emphasize or disclose a particular dimension of identity while downplaying or hiding another dimension. This is not to say that one can fully invent one’s identity; in most cases one cannot. Yet one can wilfully display and employ dimensions of one’s identity within a certain range of options, more or less wide. Some authors speak in terms of “relational identities” (Anderson 2000, 91) or hierarchies of identities (Schlee 2002, 14); I view these as choices along the “axes”, so to speak, of the multiple dimensions of identity. Local identity, regional identity, state identity and other forms of geographically definable identity appear to fall along the same axis, or part of the same dimension, and may be expressed as based on conscious choice.

Gender has been discussed as flexible and performative in social science literature (e.g. Butler 1988). However, it seems to me that most inhabitants of Usinsk, Ust’-Usa and Novikbozh have internalized rather rigid ideas about gender. Like other dimensions of identity, gender may be displayed in accordance with the situation, but the scope for wilful “variation” and ambiguity is very limited. To use Butler’s words, “those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (1988, 522). The gender-based dimension of identity comes to the fore not only in the presence but also in the absence of the “other,” and it comes to the fore in combination with both the occupational dimension of identity and in the context of the leisurely or “life-style” dimension. Most striking is the prevalent combination of gender and occupation: in both reindeer husbandry and oil extraction, men’s employment tasks are different from women’s (e.g. reindeer herders versus tent workers, oil workers proper versus accountants or cooks). In the reindeer-herding teams, the number of reindeer herders (men) is much larger than that of the tent workers (women). Moreover, the willingness to work with reindeer is greater among men than among women. In some reindeer-herding teams there are no women; their absence is strongly felt and frequently mentioned by the men. Other occupational spheres are gender-specific, too, for example the sphere of education. Examples from non-occupational contexts include the disco (where one might expect the separation of sexes to be overcome in casual ways), the communal bath-

houses (where the separation of sexes is an established and accepted fact), and fishing as a leisure-time activity, in which men usually prefer to fish on their own, without women. At the disco, masculinity and femininity as expressions of gendered identity are displayed in the most obvious ways. Men see other men as potential competitors, and women see other women in similar fashion. By contrast, in the bathhouse masculinity and femininity are displayed differently, and give way to a diffuse and yet pervasive sense of commonality.

Identity and bricolage

The point of the previous case study was to show that people in a far northern region may see themselves, experience themselves, enact themselves and relate to others in very diverse ways. Only in certain contexts is *ethnic* identity highlighted and performed. In the individual's life, other dimensions of identity may be, and usually are, more relevant. Moreover, I maintain that, even though the number of options is limited in most dimensions (for example, in case of gender, or ethnicity), people employ these dimensions – and choose among various options along the dimensions – in a flexible and creative manner. However, having stated that I view identity as something multidimensional, I still owe the reader a definition and brief discussion of the concept of identity itself.

A suitable point of entry is Fredrik Barth's discussion of ethnic identity in his well-known introduction to "Ethnic Groups and Boundaries" (1998 [1969]). Barth discards an insular concept of cultures, according to which cultures exist, and have persisted, through isolation (and ignorance) of each other (compare Tishkov's dissatisfaction with *etnografiia* as the study of neatly defined ethnic groups). Barth sees ethnicity as being negotiated at the border, through multiple processes of inclusion and exclusion (cf. Eriksen 1993, 30; Schlee 2002). Ethnic identity – the belonging to any one ethnic group – is, therefore, about "self-ascription and ascription by others" (Barth 1998 [1969], 13). Leaving behind reified notions of ethnicity, he prepares the ground for the "interpretive turn" in the study of ethnicity, which starts from the informants' own interpretations of who they are rather than from a postulated scholarly classification of who they are.

The way in which Barth treats ethnic identity can be applied to the concept of identity in general. As I understand it, identity is the thinking and acting individual positioning himself/herself, and being positioned, in changing social environments. Identity is what individuals consider characteristic of themselves (Elwert 2002, 40); it is "the social ego, the surface, or the interface with others" (Schlee 2002, 8).

Referring to Ralph Turner, Cohen (1994, 11) writes that identity is the “basket of selves which come to the surface at different social moments as appropriate.” Although this statement correctly expresses the situational character of identity, the metaphor “basket of selves” sounds somewhat schizophrenic to me. It draws attention to the question of whether it makes better sense to speak about a person’s identity in the singular, or identities in the plural. For Cohen, identity is something singular that embraces a plurality of selves. I would argue, to the contrary, that a person is “one self” and expresses that self in identities that sometimes diverge. What individuals consider characteristic of themselves may change, and does change, depending on the other (the social environment).

Regardless of whether we think of single or multiple identities, any one identity is a complex whole, extending in several dimensions. Understanding identity in terms of dimensions enables us to account for the diversity and changeability of human self-expression. Among these dimensions are the local/regional/ethnic, class, gender, occupational and everyday activities, patterns of consumption, religion, and others. The various dimensions are articulated and expressed only in certain situations, while at other times, they exist in an unconscious “background.” Within these dimensions, individuals position themselves, and while there is ample scope for choice in some dimensions (for example, the local/regional/ethnic), in other dimensions (for example, gender) there is much less space for maneuver.

Individual identity does not exist outside the social environment. “I identify with a collective *we* which is then contrasted with some *other*” (Leach 1968, 34¹⁰). Collective identity emerges when people find that they share similar activities, opinions, or outward appearance. More or less consciously, people choose to highlight a common identity in order to achieve certain purposes. In many cases, a collective identity is created and maintained, provided and conferred upon individuals “from the outside,” by the central government, political organizations, academia, and other institutions. “The beginning of history” in Usinsk (fig. 2) may serve as an example. The inscription on the signpost reads, *oni byli pervymi* (“they were the first”), not *my byli pervymi* (“we were the first”). It reads as if it were written by an invisible narrator or historian. The people in the picture surely felt a sense of commonality, shared experiences and values, and of standing together against the adverse conditions of the natural environment. Yet the expression of this pioneering spirit was evoked and documented by an anonymous author, some collective force with the intention of – “building identity.”

Returning to the title of this volume, then, one of the salient questions we need to ask is, Who is “rebuilding identities?” Who is at work, and with what intention? Is it some “outside” or abstract actor who confers meaning

upon a place or an ethnic “state?” Or is it rather, the inhabitants of that place themselves? We may think of them as bricoleurs who have access to a certain stock of building materials and a certain range of choice as to what to build and how to build, but without the ability to change the master plan, which is provided by some higher authority. This metaphor is informed by the distinction between strategies and tactics (de Certeau 2002 [1984], xix). The bricoleurs may have no control over the “grand picture,” the strategic layout of the construction; but they apply their own tactics in the ongoing process of construction, which results in variation and flexibility. Then we need to ask, What is being torn down and what is being erected? Ethnicity has been described as a building (Horn 2002). If identities are buildings, who is supposed to live in them? Are the bricoleurs the actual inhabitants? And when will the next renovation be needed?

Now that the inhabitants of Siberia have begun to engage in “Cowboys and Indians” role-playing games (Barchunova and Beletskaia, in print), or to claim that they are Elves, anthropologists should examine how their informants themselves interpret identity, how they perform it, and to what purpose. To say that identity is not entirely about ethnicity is to say the obvious. However, considering the still very dominant discourse about ethnicity and *ethnos* in anthropological scholarship on Siberia, I believe that it needs to be said repeatedly, and with sufficient emphasis.

Notes

- 1 See the outline and application of the “theory of ethnos” by Shirokogoroff [Shirokogoroff] (1935, 12–25) and his discussion of “ethnic unit” in his 1929 monograph (7–10), which he uses in a synonymous way.
- 2 In this sense, Soviet *etnografiia* differed substantially from social anthropology à la Malinowski: “In Britain, anthropology took pride in its autonomy from history, and there even emerged the notion of the ‘ethnographic present’, the methodological fiction of a social structure or culture existing without a date” (Gellner 1980, x).
- 3 Having said that, the discipline of *etnografiia* itself underwent several major changes during the Soviet period, since academic scholarship, research and education themselves were subject to social engineering (cf. Slezkine 1994, 258–63 and 308–23).
- 4 In mid-October 2002, a number of news agencies reported on this and on similar cases of unconventional ethnic identities: for example, <http://riw.ru/russia4165.html>; <http://www.nr2.ru/perml/02/10/14/> (both webpages accessed January 2005). In the published results of the census, these occurrences are subsumed under “persons of other nationalities” (*litsa drugikh natsional'nostei*): see the various statistics on <http://www.perepis2002.ru/index.html?id=17> (accessed January 2005).
- 5 Fieldwork was carried out within the framework of two international, interdisciplinary research projects: The TUNDRA Project was supported by the Envi-

- ronment and Climate Programme of the European Commission (contract no. EN V4-CT97-0522, "Climatology and Natural Hazards"). The SPICE Project was supported by the INCO-COPERNICUS 2 Programme of the Fifth Framework of the European Commission (contract no. ICA2-CT-2000-10018).
- 6 Currently, the neighboring town of Pechora is seeing a rapid development of the oil industry and may take over from Usinsk the role of being "the hub of the oil industry in the Komi Republic."
 - 7 Katharina Gernet, personal communication, Halle, 12 October 2004.
 - 8 Reindeer herder (*olen'pastukh*) is the official designation for this profession, and it applies to men only, whereas women who work in reindeer husbandry are employed under the rubric of tent worker (*chum-rabotnitsa*). People use these categories mainly, though not exclusively, in an occupational context.
 - 9 Izhma Komi identity used to be a subcategory of Komi ethnicity, yet it has gradually developed its own dynamics and political status, as described by Shabaev (2003, 171–2). I do not discuss this process in detail here, because as of yet I do not have sufficient insight into this ongoing process and its political participants. I am aware, however, of the relevance of this process to the context of this paper.
 - 10 Leach's statement has also been quoted and discussed by Cohen 1994 and Epstein 1978.

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