

The *Obshchina* Movement in Yamal: Defending Territories to Build Identities?

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“I have heard about the *obshchiny*. They want to divide up the land, and this is bad for all of us.”

Anonymous

“We established the *obshchina* in order to increase our feeling of being masters of our land (*khoziaina svoiei zemli*), which is characteristic of the reindeer herders, fishermen and hunters who live and work in the tundra.”

Mikhail Nikolaevich, October 8, 2003

Throughout the Russian North, rights and access to land are thought to be essential if indigenous people are to strengthen and re-emphasize their identities. However, as the two introductory statements show, opinions vary as to how land rights and indigenous identity-building should be combined in the political and social restructuring of the Russian North. The indigenous community, or *obshchina*, has become a major instrument enabling indigenous people to reposition themselves within recent processes of transformation.



The northern Russian minorities have been subjected to increased political, economic and academic interest since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This is a result of global processes, of which the Russian North has now become part. The resources buried under Siberia's vast expanses of permafrost have become the backbone of Russia's economic growth since the late 1990s. In particular, oil and gas income accounts for a major part of the Russian budget. Approximately 90% of Russia's gas is extracted by hundreds of thousands of industrial workers from the west Siberian Yamal-Nenets autonomous *okrug*¹ (herein-after: YNAO), which is the regional focus of my discussion here.

However, this region, more than twice the size of Germany, is also the home of 25,000 Nentsy. 15,000 of them are nomads who manage the largest domestic reindeer herds in the world (almost 600,000 animals) on the pastures of the YNAO. And lying directly under these lands are giant gas and condensate deposits, such as in the Bovanenkovskoe, Kharasaveiskoe, and Tambeiskoe fields, which are likely to be developed soon.

Against the background of these diverse and conflicting interests in the Yamal tundra, the Nentsy search for ways to strengthen their identity as an indigenous people. The herding of domestic reindeer serves as a critically important marker of this identity, not only among the nomads themselves, but also among those Nentsy who live in villages or towns. It is even a marker for the identity of the entire region, 93 percent of whose population consists of incomers. This means that the organization of the reindeer herding communities (*obshchiny*) has practical relevance not only for the nomads out in the tundra, but even greater importance for their representatives in the villages and towns, that is, in the local and regional political arena.

In the view of both indigenous politicians and Russian legislation, the *obshchiny* are seen as ideal umbrellas for collective action by indigenous people in the spheres of land rights, native economies and local self-government (Fondahl 2003, Gray 2001). Nenets tundra nomads perceive themselves as part of a broadly defined environment that consists of both natural and social components. Humans, animals and all natural and super-natural beings are part of this environment, and the relations between these beings are based on an intimate knowledge of each others' behavior. My aim in this paper is to analyze how the *obshchina* as a concept is suited to combining these inclusive relations between the nomads and their tundra with a policy of defending access to land and forging a new approach to land use as a part of indigenous identity building. The idea of cultural brokers, as introduced by Paine (1971), helps in understanding the role of indigenous activists as mediators between a nomadic life on the tundra and a sedentary life subject to laws and rules. This analysis raises some general questions about the nature of indigenous institution building and processes of identity construction in the Russian North. I shall present the case for making a clear distinction between an essentializing traditionalistic discourse in the political arena, on the one hand, and the analysis of the flexible and constantly changing nature of indigenous communities in the tundra on the other.²

Background of the *obshchina* concept

Since the beginning of the 1990s, communities with the name *obshchina* have become so prominent in many regions of the Russian North that they are now the leading institutional structure employed in the post-Soviet reorganization of indigenous tundra or taiga dwellers in those regions (Sirina 1999, and this volume). However, I believe that the widespread assumption used in the political discourse – that this is a truly indigenous concept – is at the very least doubtful. This applies especially to those *obshchiny* with the adjectives *rodovaia* or *rodoplenaia* in their names. These are meant to suggest a direct link between an assumed ancient “clan organization” (rus. *rod* – kin, clan) and today’s existing communities. The existing research on *obshchiny* in the Russian North has hardly questioned it as an indigenous institution (e.g. Sirina, 1999, Fondahl 2003). Only Gray (2001, footnote 5) notes that at least under the law, these communities are not currently restricted to indigenous people.

In fact, however, communities called and registered as *obshchiny* are a rather recent phenomenon in the Russian North, whereas the concept is rooted in the history of Russian peasantry, from a time well before northern peoples even adopted large scale nomadic reindeer herding 350 years ago (Krupnik 1993). The very word *obshchina* is a general term in Russian that can be used for almost any community. This makes it somewhat similar to the Soviet institution of the *kollektiv*, the roots of which Humphrey (2002, 166), referring to Buriatia, traces back to pre-Soviet times. I suggest, therefore, that we should not think of the *obshchina* as being “more indigenous” or “more traditional” than the *kollektiv* in a *sovkhos*, or Russian state farm. Many people in the North today call any kind of community of tundra or taiga dwellers an *obshchina*. This lumps together the *obshchina* as a category stipulated by Russian law and those communities that, in the 1990s, were registered under different legal categories, such as peasant farms (*krest’ianskie fermerskie khoziaistva* hereinafter: KFKh).

Platonov (2001, chapter 47) traces the *obshchina* back to the middle ages and sees in it one of the main differences in the ways Russian and western peasants lived. The ancient Russian *obshchina* was based on self-administration. Already back then, access to land was a key problem. Entitlements to the land by peasants were always on the basis of temporary use rights, and lasted as long as the peasant was able to work the land with his own hands. However, these principles, according to Platonov, were considerably undermined by the Stolypin reforms, which are blamed for having caused considerable damage to the great Russian national idea. In a less ideologically biased publication, Lourie (1999, 2) provides evidence for the early Russian *obshchina* as a “simultaneously religious and social

primary unit,” in which the land “was not the property of the *obshchina*,” but the peasants felt as if the *obshchina* “was the real master of the land.” This “as if” is called a “self-deception” by Lourie (1999, 2). Along the same lines, one might say that post-Soviet politicians adopted this “self-deception” and applied it to indigenous peoples: first, the *obshchina* is promoted as an indigenous idea, and second, many think of it as a unit of territorial organization.

The “Russian-ness” of the *obshchina* reminds us that we should beware of reifying culture as a single organism instead of looking at the components that make up people’s lives at a given time in a given place. Neither should the *obshchina* be monopolized as a Russian or northern indigenous concept. Going back to the past for a justification does not make the *obshchina* more “traditionally indigenous” or more Russian than the *sovkhos*. What is of interest here is less the origin of the concept and more how indigenous people in the North make use of it today for political reasons, or to reinforce their own identity.

The earliest research on the *obshchina* and other collectives for indigenous peoples, following the demise of the Soviet Union, was focused on the Republic of Sakha (Belianskaia 1995, Sirina 1999, Fondahl 1998, 2003), where the *obshchina* movement has the longest institutional tradition. After the passage of a regional law in 1992, the *obshchina* in Sakha became one possible successor to the *sovkhos*, and enterprises would function in similar ways regardless of whether they were *sovkhozy* or *obshchiny* (Sirina 1999). For the Evenki, Fondahl (2003, 28) sees the *obshchina* as a way for them to return to their pre-Soviet notions of territoriality. She introduces *obshchiny* as the “basic indigenous territorial unit during the pre-Soviet period,” for all indigenous northerners (1997, 77), and does not mention that it is, in fact, a concept used by Russian nationalists.

Anderson (1998, 80–2) shows for the same ethnic group in Taimyr that they tend to adopt a defensive rhetoric about land when confronted with the post-Soviet threat of privatization, although their own notion of the land is one based on inclusive ways of knowing. Also for Taimyr, but among the Dolgan and Nganasan as well, Ziker (2002a, 2002b) shows that people practice “social boundary defense” (Cashdan 1983, Casimir 1992) on a broader scale and do not tend to claim “family-clan holdings.” However, people in Taimyr try to defend exclusive territories in the vicinity of cities or industrial zones (Ziker 2002b, 130). A different picture is drawn by Gray’s study on the Chukotka peninsula (2001), where the problems are more about self-determination and coping with the remoteness of the place, rather than land use. There, most members of the *obshchina* did not even realize that they were part of an *obshchina*.

A legal umbrella with diverse expressions

All this regional diversity developed under a federal umbrella-conception. The formulation of regional and federal legal agreements in various spheres is an important part of the current repositioning of the indigenous minorities. This has far reaching implications for the three crucial aspects of identity construction, land rights and the strengthening of local self-government. Russian legislation is structured into competences at three levels, the federal (Moscow, i.e. the Kremlin), the regional (e.g. YNAO laws), and the local level of the municipality. Important recent federal legal acts include the “Law on guaranteeing the rights of the indigenous people” (30.04.1999, No. 82-F3), the “Law on general principles of the organization of communities [*obshchiny*] of the indigenous peoples” (20.07.2000, N 104-F3), the “Law on the territories of traditional nature use of the indigenous peoples” (07.05.2001, N 49-F3), the “Federal land code” (25.10.2001, No. 136-F3), and the “Law on the turnover of farmland” (24.07.2002, No. 101-F3).³ The first of these laws (N 104-F3) sets the framework for contemporary indigenous ethnic identities. Only those groups numbering under 50,000, living on their traditional territories, perceiving themselves as members of an independent group, and preserving “traditional economic activities” related to the land, can claim to be legally recognized as indigenous peoples in Russia (N 104-F3, Art 1). The other laws deal with aspects of this complex separately, e.g. with the specifics of land, economic activity or self-determination.

If territories are to be used for “non-traditional” purposes (for example, the construction of gas drilling rigs), according to the land code this must be agreed upon by their current users and/or inhabitants in a referendum (No 136-F3, Art. 31, § 3). Of particular importance for the regulation of land rights is the law on the traditional use of nature. However, due to a lack of regulations on how the land should be taken away from the current land users (normally the *sovkhozy*), no such territory had been registered in Yamal by the end of 2002. The new land code states that for the Indigenous Peoples of the North, special legal regimes can be introduced for their land use (Art. 7 § 3). Art. 34 of the Land Code makes the regional and local administration responsible for working out a procedure of land turnover. According to the “Law on the turnover of farmland” (24.07.2002, No. 101-F3), reindeer pastures cannot be privatized, but they can be rented from the state by citizens or communities (Art. 10 § 5-6). This means that land ownership as a means of enforcing indigenous identity in the North is not allowed by law.

Thus, even though the above-mentioned federal laws have provided a framework, the key issue has not yet been solved: reindeer pastures, which

occupy most of the northern territories, are not referred to as a separate category in land legislation, but only as a subgroup of agricultural land (*sel'skokhoziaistvennye ugodia*), or of forests (*lesnoi fond*). On the other hand, since late 1997, in the YNAO the *obshchiny* are at least mentioned by a law and given the right to obtain land. The YNAO law "On the regulation of land relations of the living places of the indigenous peoples" (No. 39, 14.10.1997) mentions the *obshchina* as a voluntary union of indigenous citizens, and mentions their right to obtain land for their "traditional activities" (Art. 3, Art. 9 § 5).

In spite of this considerable legislative activity, many questions remain open. Gray (2001) has described the political struggle behind the scenes, which resulted in the word "land" (*zemlia*) and the important question of its ownership being excluded entirely from the federal law on *obshchiny*. Of the three aspects – land, the economic activity of *obshchina* members, and self-government – only the latter two remained covered by the law.

In the following analysis of the *obshchina* movement in Yamal, I shall suggest that, even though federal legislation excludes the question of land, it still remains a major reason for, and focus of, indigenous self-identification. In Yamal an *obshchina* is a social unit that helps strengthen the collectivity of an indigenous community when it becomes an administrative body and seeks to claim land against another actor that is already (or potentially) more powerful. Some early examples of officially registered *obshchiny* in the oil-producing Purovskii raion [district] point in this direction: Each defines itself as an organ of self-administration (*organ mestnogo samoupravleniia*) and acts as an institution in negotiations with the oil- and gas-extracting enterprises that operate on its territory. In other cases, communities of indigenous people, which people in everyday life refer to as *obshchiny*, initially became legally registered as farming enterprises (*krest'ianskie fermerskie khoziaistva*). Later, after the federal law on *obshchiny* was passed, some of those communities, which were founded mainly for economic reasons, registered as *obshchiny*. Although the law does not permit *obshchiny* to engage in commercial activities, it does allow the sale of the products of its members (Law from 20.07.2000, N 104-F3, Art. 17 § 3). As social and non-commercial economic units, *obshchiny* do not have land rights of any sort, but their charters still show the important connection between land and the indigenous identity. The beginning of one charter says:

"The form of self-organization, of the indigenous numerically small peoples of the North, who live on the territory of the autonomous *okrug* is the tribal clan community (*rodoplemennaia obshchina*). It is

considered to be a unit of common territorial self-administration by the indigenous numerically small peoples of the North at their living places within the territory of a municipal formation (*munitsipal'noe obrazovanie*)” (Art. 1,1, Charter of the *obshchina* “Ety Iala,” Tarko-Sale, revised version, December 1998).

My analysis of the *obshchina* movement in Yamal begins with the paradox that having a legally registered territory is not a formal pre-condition for registering one's community with the administration. Nevertheless, most *obshchiny* define themselves not only as originally indigenous (*rodoplemennaia*) units, but also as territorial ones. Compared with the Sakha Republic (Sirina 1999, and this volume), Yamal stands at a relatively early stage in the development of its *obshchina* movement: As of the year 2000, only five *obshchiny* were known to be legally registered by the *okrug* administration. Three years later, there were more than 20. I shall show, however, that official registration is only the formal birth of an *obshchina*. This step is preceded by a longer process of institution-building, which is usually accompanied by a lively discussion about creating the *obshchina*.

How an *obshchina* is established

The initiative for establishing these communities comes in most cases from village- or town-based kinsmen who are not directly engaged in the “traditional indigenous lifestyle” (*traditsionnyi obraz zhizny*).⁴ They have a better knowledge of the institutional requirements than their tundra-dwelling relatives do, and in many cases have the necessary contacts to key people in the administration, which enhances the likelihood of success. The most common way of founding an *obshchina* seems to be that the village indigenous leaders collect signatures of agreement in the tundra and then found the *obshchina* according to the recently passed laws. A charter for the *obshchina* has to be written, and then a director and a committee are elected. After that, the *obshchina* can apply for registration, first with the administration of the *raion* and then of the YNAO.⁵ As Fondahl pointed out (1998), inhabitants of the tundra and taiga themselves are reluctant to engage in registration, paperwork and the drafting of charters.

However, indigenous leaders and decision-makers find themselves in the peculiar situation of having to bridge a gap between state-imposed policies and tundra-based nomadic life. Primarily, this results from the distinction between an approach to land that is directed to the defense of exclusive access and one that is based on the inclusive perception of humans as part of a natural, social and supernatural environment. To bridge this gap, the initiators of an *obshchina* are usually most successful in attaining recogni-

tion at the regional (YNAO) or federal level if they present their community as being founded on a basis of widespread grassroots support. Such an image may prove to be a particularly useful asset in trying to get financial support from the regional administration (here YNAO), as is foreseen under federal law (Law from 20.07.2000, N 104-F3 Art. 7). In this way, leaders of the *obshchina* serve as “cultural brokers”, who act as intermediaries, usually between native and western concepts. As defined by Paine (1971), they deliberately change the emphasis or content of a concept as they move back and forth between different groups of actors with different beliefs and ideologies.

Once it exists on paper, the *obshchina* can start applying for land rights. The formal procedure for this sounds simpler than it actually is. The decision is made by the land committee of the *raion*, on the basis of a written request of the *obshchina*. If the land is under the regional or federal administration (*zemli okružhnogo* or *federal'nogo znachenia*), the respective institutions have to be contacted. If the community leader has good contacts, he may get help from the local administration in doing so, or in the worst case he has to do it himself. Before that, the *obshchina* has to come to an agreement with the current land user (*zemlepol'zovatel'*), which normally is the *soukhoz* or its successor. This is, in many cases, the most difficult part. Whether an *obshchina* succeeds in getting land registered or not depends largely on the good will of all actors. Since, in the *obshchina* law, there is no regulation at all pertaining land claims, no specific territory is inscribed in the charters or founding documents of the *obshchina*. Land is subject to separate negotiations and processes of documentation.



The camp of two *obshchina* households in northern Yamal next to a gas drilling settlement. photo: F. Stammler

According to the YNAO Land Committee,⁶ the current practice is for *obshchiny* to receive land titles for 49 years on a lease-hold (*arenda*) basis, which in practice is free of charge. This is true for the *obshchiny* in the industrialized Purovskii *raion*, which have been established since 1996. The four *obshchiny* there have separate land titles in which their territories, and the conditions of their use, are defined. If a community, even though colloquially referred to as *obshchina*, was officially registered as a farming enterprise (KFKh), it must pay taxes after the first 5 years of its existence. However, this problem can be overcome by liquidating the KFKh after 5 years and then registering a new one. For an inheritable land tenure (*pozhitzennoe nasleduemoie vladenie*), the legal basis has been rather weak, since there was only one decree by president Yeltsin in 1992 that envisaged this, but it was never implemented.⁷

Case study: cultural brokerage and defending boundaries

In this case study, I shall present an ethnography of the first *obshchina* in the YNAO to be established after the federal law was passed in 2000. The *obshchina* unites reindeer herders and fishermen living in the northern part of the Yamal peninsula. During fieldwork in 2000–2001, I was able to follow closely the process of establishing the *obshchina*, as well as to interview people both before and after its establishment. Many nomadic members of the *obshchina* move in the tundra around Sabetta, a village of oil and gas explorers, on the east coast of the Ob' Bay. Others move farther south toward Seiakha, the center of the northern Yamal *sel'sovet* (village council). Around 80 people live in Sabetta, all of them non-native industrial workers, and Seiakha has slightly over than 1,000 inhabitants, whereas around 1,300 nomadic reindeer herders live in the tundra.

The *sel'sovet* is governed by the well-known and highly respected Nenets elder Nikolai Lachevich Okotetto, who is the longest working political administrator in the YNAO, a “veteran of work of the YNAO,” and an “honorary inhabitant” (*pochetnyi zhitel'*) of the YNAO. He enjoys a great reputation among the region's entire political leadership, up to the governor. The *sovkhos* in Seiakha has been in a rather weak position since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Unlike in other parts of the YNAO, in the northern Yamal tundra many of the private herds graze independently of any former state enterprise. Today they constitute a majority, with 80% of all reindeer in northern Yamal. As of the first of June 2001, there were only 60 people living in the tundra on the payrolls of the *sovkhos* and working at reindeer-herding.

In the mid-1990s two sons of Nikolai Lachevich, Mikhail and Igor, established a rather small enterprise with their relatives in the tundra north

of Sabetta. Mikhail claims that they had land titles for this area, but there is no record of such a land user in the documents of the land committee in Salekhard. In discussions with the statistical committee of the Yarsale *raion* center, I was told that this enterprise, “Nesei,” was operating in a semi-legal manner. Their production was not listed in any records, although by the end of the 1990s they had become the largest producer of reindeer meat and antlers on the northern Yamal peninsula, with approximately 6,000 animals slaughtered per year and 30 tons of antlers.

In summer 2000, when I began my fieldwork, Nikolai Lachevich already knew that a law on *obshchiny* was in preparation, and told me how he envisaged such a community in north Yamal.⁸ His starting point was the conviction that in the North competition for land will increase considerably: “It is better that we grab the land (*prikhvatit’ zemliu*) now ourselves, before others do so.” By “others,” he meant the gas or oil enterprises. This was the main incentive for establishing *obshchiny* up North, and Nikolai, together with his relatives, wanted to do so before actual gas production begins.

Looking back three years, his son still sees this as the main incentive for establishing the *obshchina*: to defend the Nenets land against industrial intruders. In fact, however, there is a dual orientation involved in this institution building process. The first part is directed toward the present, addressing the problem that the *sovkhos* had become too weak to act as a reliable institutional umbrella for all reindeer herders of the region. The second part is directed toward coping with the future increase of oil and gas activities on the northern Yamal peninsula.

Back in 2000, Nikolai Lachevich told me that he envisioned founding a separate *obshchina* for each kin-group (Rus: *rod*, Nen: *erkar*) in northern Yamal. However, the Yamal Nentsy have always displayed great flexibility in their settlement and migration patterns with reindeer on the tundra. Soviet territorial restructuring had aimed to assign particular groups to particular territories (Anderson 2000), but this was often thwarted by the increasing coexistence of different kin-groups on one and the same territory. In some cases, in a deliberate attempt to prevent collective action against the Soviet leadership, unrelated herders were formed into a work team (brigade) and ordered to herd a specific reindeer herd. The statement at the beginning of this chapter shows well the concerns of reindeer herders, who are skeptical about dividing up the tundra into distinct units assigned to kin-groups. Nikolai Lachevich answered my question about the problems that derive assigning particular territories as follows:

“Before large-scale reindeer herding, we were all hunters up here. For this we had our established hunting territories, and the reindeer also

were on these territories. That's why we do not migrate all that much up here. These things have not changed very much. Sometimes, one person may come on the territory of an other, but this we will sort out ourselves."

Nikolai Lachevich, September 3, 2000

Territorial behavior in the northern part of the Yamal peninsula can indeed still be traced back to the settlement patterns of hunters, and large-scale reindeer herding was probably adopted later here than in other regions (Stammler 2005b, chapter 6). This makes the northern part of the Yamal peninsula different from the central part, where most herders migrate with their reindeer in long corridors, a distance of between 500 and 1200 kilometers, from the forest in winter to the arctic coast in summer. It is interesting, however, that Nikolai Lachevich, the grand old man of Yamal, deliberately refers to this earlier territorial pattern as a means of justifying the construction of new native institutions. Nevertheless, he admits that there is a need for some adjustment to present conditions, which is why he has considered establishing *obshchiny* as territorial units of differing size depending on the current number of people in each kin-group.



"Diadia Kolia" was rather skeptical to the idea of establishing *obshchiny* among northern Yamal herders, photo: F. Stammler

He realizes that such a decision may not be welcomed by the richer reindeer herders, since their territories would not be sufficient for their large herds. They would have to reduce their herds by slaughtering: "If four people have over 1,500 reindeer each and thus would have a huge territory, this also would not be right, would it?" Nikolai Lachevich thinks that the first step should be to establish the *obshchiny* informally, and on a small scale, right out in the tundra. Then, overarching these there should be a kind of "council of *obshchiny*," which would elect a chairman. In this way the "*obshchina* council" would be able to replace the *sovkhos* completely and, eventually take over the administration of the tundra, whereas the village council would be responsible for village administration. To handle the paperwork involved in realizing his proposal, Nikolai Lachevich was confident of being able to rely on his relatives and many influential friends in the *okrug* capital, Salekhard.

However, considering reindeer herders' migrations, this approach is too inflexible, because it does not accommodate the common fluctuations in the numbers of both reindeer and people in the tundra. As the numbers change, the territories of *obshchiny* of this type would have to be readjusted continuously. Therefore, organizing *obshchiny* as territorial units, as envisioned by Nikolai Lachevich, is more complicated than as social units, which can more easily accommodate fluctuations in herd numbers and flexibility in land use.

After talking to Nikolai Lachevich, I went out to visit his reindeer-herding relatives, the very people who would become members of any such *obshchiny* established in the tundra, and asked them about these ideas. Of the seven households I questioned in the tundra near Sabetta,⁹ six had never heard about such plans, nor did they have any idea what an *obshchina* was. However, they were very skeptical about the possible implications. They did not think it would be a good idea to divide up the land between different kin-groups; they all felt that this was their common land:

"The land is common. We shall not allow people to divide it into separate portions, because lichens are not everywhere, and also there might be icing over. Let us, the *tundroviki*, handle this ourselves. Everyone knows where he lives. Nobody has the right to chase somebody else away. Our elders have agreed who shall wander where, and we do the same."

Aleksandr Okotetto, November, 2000

However, two heads of household also expressed their view that outsiders such as industrial workers should be kept out of their territories. Since the gas company in this region is not far away, in the village of Sabetta, and all across the tundra there are drilling holes, this was a definitive statement.

This is the reason why village officials such as Nikolai Lachevich and his sons promote the *obshchina* idea. Nikolai shares the emotional attachment of his tundra relatives to the concept of common tundra pastures. They have the same convictions. The difference is, however, that village people are more aware of both the opportunities and the dangers being imposed on the Yamal Nentsy by changing external conditions. Their role as cultural brokers is to bring the two together:

“This is our land, and this land is common, state land. Therefore we should never allow it to belong to anyone. But now, after the [demise of the] Soviet Union, these bandits (*bandity*) have come and want to simply buy up our land. This, of course, we will not permit.”

Nikolai Lachevich, September 13, 2000

After hearing the herders' skepticism, during winter 2000, Nikolai Lachevich and his son Mikhail sent out “their” people from Seiakha on snowmobiles to do some “agitation,” as it was called in Soviet times, for the *obshchina* idea. They explained to herders that they were in danger of losing their land to outsiders, if they did not protect it by joining the *obshchina*. They promised that in the actual internal regime of land use they would leave the decisions in the hands of the herders. Nor would they “recollectivize” any reindeer. Three convinced reindeer herders, alongside the two sons of Nikolai Lachevich, were enough to write and sign a founding document (*uchreditel'nyi dogovor*) for the *obshchina*, which they did on December 25, 2000. But, to make the *obshchina* a powerful actor to compete with local institutions such as the *sovkhoz* and the gas enterprise in Sabetta, they had to obtain additional members.

Throughout most of the 2001, Mikhail worked on the charter (*ustav*) of the *obshchina*, which required getting to know the details and complexity of how to use the existing laws. He knew that he could not specify in writing what territories belonged to the *obshchina*, and what kind of title they would have, but he still wanted to have “land” defined as an explicit topic in this charter. As his statement at the beginning of this chapter shows, the feeling of being the masters of the land (*khoziain zemli*) is important for indigenous self-identification. Several times we sat together over drafts and laws, and considered how certain paragraphs could be interpreted. I also accompanied Mikhail to the *okrug* administration in Salekhard to get copies of the charters of existing *obshchiny* in the oil-producing territories of the Purovskii *raion*. He used these as examples for his own charter. After my departure, Mikhail went to Moscow to get legal training on issues pertaining to *obshchiny* and territories for traditional nature use at the “Learning Center of the Indigenous Peoples (RITC).” These activities

enhanced his capability as a cultural broker. Finally, the charter was certified on October 8, 2001 by the general assembly of the *obshchina*. The charter states (Art. 4):

“The *obshchina* is founded on the basis of the common interests of the indigenous inhabitants for the joint tenure (*vladenie*) and use of the lands for traditional nature use [...]”

This makes clear that land serves as the crucial focal point for self-identification and is the reason for founding the *obshchina*. Article five states that the land CAN BE given to the *obshchina* and its members as a property right (*na osnove sobstvennosti*). These territories “form the basis of the life and activity of the Nentsy.” It was through such wording that they avoided being more explicit than the federal law allows.

An assembly consisting of an impressive 273 members from more than 90 households confirmed the name *Ilebt* for the *obshchina*, which translates as “the basis of one’s life.” Mikhail and his father succeeded in convincing the herders of the need to protect their land. They even let the reindeer herders draw their territories, including their migration routes, on maps. Looking back on this occasion, Mikhail recalls that the herders were really skeptical about this, but

“I told them that we just have to do this for our paperwork, and that there will not be any interference in their affairs with regards to the use of the pastures. All will be done according to our customs (*obychai*).”

Mikhail Nikolaevich, February 21, 2002

This is a good illustration of how a native cultural broker may manipulate an external concept (*obshchina*) to fit it to the needs of his own community. Finally, in October 2001, the *obshchina* was formally registered as a non-commercial institution at the *raion* level, obtained an account with the taxation office, and became a “juridical person (*iuridicheskoe litso*).” As such, it is eligible for state subsidies from the *okrug*, which decided to allocate funds to the *obshchiny* not only for meat production, but also as a kind of “seed money,” which was paid on a per-head basis for each living reindeer. Suddenly, the *obshchina* had to have its own reindeer, although the members would not agree in any way to transfer their herds to collective ownership. This delicate question, once again, could be sorted out because Mikhail and his father had good contacts with the speaker of the YNAO parliament Sergei Nikolaevich Khariutschi, who is also the president of the all-Russian Association of Indigenous People (RAIPON), as well as with the YNAO Department of Agriculture.

“During a session [in Salekhard], suddenly I was called out and asked, ‘Mikhail, hurry up and tell us how many reindeer you have in your *obshchina!*’ I said, ‘Well, I don’t know exactly, but I will give you the figure later.’ ‘No,’ he replied, ‘we need it now. You will get money for every reindeer you have.’ Well, then I said that I had slightly more than 30,000, which is what I thought I had. Later I found out that our members have even more than that. Now, I wrote down 36,621. Here, you see. But actually, it is even more. You know as well as I do that reindeer herders never reveal their full head counts.”

Mikhail Nikolaevich, February 20, 2002

Here we see how, for the sake of subsidies, the *obshchina* suddenly became a major owner of reindeer property. This is more reindeer than any *sovkhos* has in the whole YNAO. Still, the reindeer are the personal property of the household heads. It is not clear yet to me how they will calculate their reindeer ownership figures in the next reindeer herding report, and Mikhail, along with his relatives and friends, does not care about this. His role as mediator is to make sure to receive subsidies on the one hand, and on the other hand to ensure the herders that all reindeer will remain the property of the respective households, and not of the *obshchina*. In 2004, the *okrug* government changed its policy and started paying subsidies to the *obshchiny* not for live, but for dead, reindeer, i.e. per unit of meat produced. This reflects the positive development of the *obshchiny*, which are now thought to be stable enough as economic actors, and are no longer in need of “seed money” – for getting established.

In June 2001, half a year after the *obshchina* was officially founded, I was able to go back to the same herders in the tundra and ask them about their thoughts of having become members of the *obshchina* Ilebts. Their skepticism seemed to have vanished almost completely, and they echoed almost exactly what Nikolai Lachevich and his activists had convinced them to think: they have to protect their land from destruction by industrial development, and if the gas enterprise wants to drive its trucks and tanks through the tundra, then it should have to pay for this. This shows how the “agitation” of the cultural brokers succeeded in adding a layer of defensive thinking to the inclusive territorial behavior of the herders. Their self-identification does not normally run along such defensive lines. It is only with hesitance that they draw territorial boundaries on maps, as this does not reflect their way of identifying themselves with the land. They do so only because they see the necessity imposed on them by changing external conditions. Those reindeer herders who are on good terms with the *sel’sovet* leader support this development, because they respect Nikolai Lachevich as an authority.

“We don’t know all these things, but of course we became members when Nikolai Lachevich said we should protect our land. We always support his plans, because he knows all these village affairs, he is our main man in the village.”

Natasha Khaverevna, June 12, 2001

Out in the tundra, however, there are still some questions that await clarification. One is what happens with *sovkhov*-employed reindeer herders who have their reindeer grazing together with those belonging to *obshchina* members. Oleg Irimboevich Vanuito is one example. He used to work in brigade No. 1 of the *sovkhov* Yamal’skii. He says that he was never asked to become a member of the *obshchina*, but in 2002 he left the brigade in order to take care of his own herd, which grazes intermingled with the herd of an *obshchina* member. When we spoke in March 2002, he himself was not sure, whether he was a member of the *obshchina* or not. He still doubts that this compartmentalization of territory is the right way to go. He is afraid that the *obshchina* could monopolize territory for its own use, pushing out others. If the territorial unity of the *sel’sovet* could be preserved, it would better fit his needs.¹⁰ This case shows clearly that only those herders who have been personally convinced by leading figures of the *obshchina* actually agree with new and more defensive approach to territory.

Today the *obshchina* Ilebts is a well-established economic, as well as political, actor. It has “almost official” agreements with the Sabetta administration on regulating the trade of reindeer meat, on renting houses during the reindeer slaughter in November, on allocating space and services at the slaughtering complex, and on paying for the electricity that runs the freezers for storing reindeer meat.¹¹ Mikhail Nikolaevich Okotetto uses his contacts in Salekhard to inform the broader public and portray these developments as a success story. As a cultural broker, he spreads the news about how the Nentsy have preserved their dominion over the land, how successful they are economically, and how they are now in a position to organize favorably their relationships with the industrial enterprises. The *obshchina* has even opened a website with a “news” section, it is exploring alternative means of transportation appropriate to the tundra, and it is conducting joint research projects focusing on the needs of the community.

For its second birthday, the *okrug* member of parliament and president of the indigenous peoples association “Yamal Potomkam,” Aleksandr Ievai, congratulated the *obshchina* for being “one of the most successful in the *okrug*.” Meanwhile, this example encouraged people in other villages to take a similar path, and in 2004 there were approximately 20 *obshchiny* in Yamal.¹² As Mikhail became more accustomed to his role as

cultural broker, he began to realize the untapped resources of culture and indigenous identity in politics and the marketplace. He established a film studio (studio Ilebts) specializing in commercial documentaries for local TV stations that focus on indigenous culture and the intimate relations that tundra people have with their land. These productions turned out to be in strong demand in the YNAO. The key to this success is the presentation of tundra life in a way that is digestible for the sedentary lay public, such as oil and gas workers who watch TV after a long working day. The work of cultural brokers such as Mikhail helps to make the indigenous lifestyle, even though it is economically marginal, a marker for the identity of the entire region.

Analysis: traits of the *obshchina* movement

I do not claim that the case of the *obshchina* Ilebts typifies the processes of institutionalization at work among indigenous communities in the YNAO or elsewhere. However, Ilebts exemplifies the importance of cultural brokerage under current political conditions. It demonstrates well how, under the ongoing political and social changes occurring in the Russian North, indigenous people attempt to balance the impacts of regional, national and global political discourse with the sense of belonging to the land that has long characterized tundra inhabitants. Although by law the *obshchiny* are not about land rights, but about indigenous self-administration and the non-commercial “traditional lifestyle,” they have become the main instrument of indigenous cultural brokers in their pursuit of a defensive territorial behavior. The three factors of land rights, “traditional lifestyle,” and native self-determination are so closely interrelated that their separation into compartmentalized laws – on the *obshchina*, (20.07.2000, N 104-F3), on “territories of traditional nature use” (TTP, 07.05.2001, No. 49-F3), and on guarantees for the indigenous people (30.04.1999, No. 82-F3) – is artificial. This shows that such legislation has been carried out according to a Russian étatist logic, and not to an indigenous mode of thinking.

It is also disputable whether the non-commercial nature of these communities is something to be prescribed by law. Why should the indigenous people not have rights to material benefits from their engagement with the land?

The example of the *obshchina* “Nadezhda,” led by Anna Nerkagi, a well-known Nenets writer and intellectual, shows that indigenous communities cannot be restricted by different laws. In 2001, “Nadezhda” was still registered as a KFKh but was generally referred to as an *obshchina*. It has

a contract with the YNAO on the production of reindeer meat similar to those of the *sovkhozy*. For example, in 2000 the YNAO Department of Agriculture had a contract to buy 20 tons of reindeer meat from the community.¹³ This made “Nadezhda” an economic actor of considerable stature. The same may happen soon for Mikhail’s *obshchina* Ilebts, if he wishes it to develop that way and does not sell all his meat to the gas enterprises.

At the same time, administratively Nerkagi controls her village and the neighboring territories independently. This makes her *obshchina* a unit of native self-determination that can even replace a *sel’sovet*. Sirina (1999, 18) suggested that precisely this kind of “melting together” of the *obshchiny* and the local administrations is likely to happen in the future. In the case of the *obshchina* Ilebts, a father and a son (Nikolai Lachevich and Mikhail Nikolaevich) embody just such melting together, since the father is the head of the *sel’sovet* and the son the head of the *obshchina*. Thus, the character of an *obshchina* today is neither exclusively territorial, nor economic, nor administrative; it represents a holistic approach to the organization of indigenous communities.

The successful examples of *obshchiny* in Yamal, such as Nadezhda and Ilebts, show how important it is to embed this process of institutionalization firmly in the broader political landscape. The social capital of Nikolai and Mikhail Okotetto was crucial to pushing their project through the important offices both on the *raion* level and on that of the YNAO. The high degree of respect, authority and popularity that they enjoyed among political actors were important assets in their competition with the *sovkhoz* and with the gas enterprise. They also understood that they could reach their goals best by forging strategic alliances with powerful actors. They had accumulated this social capital during the decades of their father’s experience as a local political leader.

Bourdieu (1986, 248) defines social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition.” I would argue that such social capital is of particular importance at the beginning of a movement like that of the *obshchiny*. It paves the way for a broader acceptance of indigenous institution-building. Prominent cases, such as Ilebts or Nadezhda, serve an exemplary function for interested indigenous people seeking to establish their own communities. Following these examples makes it much easier for new *obshchiny* to develop their charters and begin the process of obtaining official registration.

My analysis has also shown that the *obshchina* is not an *emic* concept in Yamal, but adopted from outside. Therefore, their establishment should not be interpreted as a defensive approach to territories that underlies the

thinking of Nenets society. It is simply their reaction to external intruders, the logic result of having accepted the *obshchina* idea from cultural brokers such as Nikolai Lachevich and Mikhail, who are their mediators in relations with this external world. They reinterpreted an approach to the land that centers on the defense of exclusive access. And they did so in such a way that reindeer herders could relate to it without losing their own intimate relationship to their land, a connection based on knowing and interpreting the behavior of all beings in their environment, and one that is characteristic of many tundra and taiga people in the Arctic (Vitebsky 1992, Ingold 2000). These cultural brokers made the reindeer herders understand that defending boundaries is something to practice vis-à-vis outsiders such as the gas enterprises, which does not imply a compartmentalization within the life of the tundra. Many tundra people trust that such brokers will manage the lands for them.

Thus, we have an example here of what Casimir (1992) called social boundary defense, as opposed to spatial boundary or perimeter defense. Here, the nomads regulate access to land by restricting membership in a particular social formation, e.g. the *obshchina*. Being part of this community provides access to all the resources of the tundra. And so, it is within the *obshchina* that an identity that is connected to diverse practices of using the land and relating to the environment remains active.

The growing presence of competitors on the tundra, along with post-Soviet political restructuring, make it urgent for the indigenous population in Yamal and elsewhere to strengthen the profile of their identity (see Vitebsky 1992 for Sakha). They ask themselves what “being Nenets,” which means “being people,” is about, and how they can convey this message to the Russian majority in the YNAO. Being confronted with incomers whose identity is not related to the vast expanse of Arctic tundra, many Nenets realize how important their intimate relationship with the land is for their own identity. They accept this challenge, understand its requirements at any particular time, and respond to them flexibly by adopting the language of their surroundings.

A strong sense that they share a broad common stewardship of the land has nurtured the initial skepticism of many reindeer herders as they broke up into the smaller groups organized as *obshchiny*. They have only been convinced by cultural brokers to take this path under the threat of losing their remaining land rights to the industries of the incomers. Out of the 26 herders I questioned in the YNAO, 18 found it beyond their imagination to chase someone away from a territory, because there is no proper understanding of trespassing. Access to land has always been granted on the basis of a particular way of knowing the land (Anderson 1998). Knowing

the migration routes of reindeer herders, along with the fishing and hunting places, entitles a tundra inhabitant to take from these resources. The strong notion of collective entitlement to land does not mean, however, that there is no clear sense of belonging on the part of individual herders. Whereas five did not see themselves as having a particular place where they belonged, 19 had a clear sense of such belonging. This shows that both belonging to a particular group and to a particular part of the tundra is important for the self-identification of the indigenous inhabitants of the North today.

These findings have further implications for our understanding of the *obshchina* movement throughout the Russian North. The key characteristics of the *obshchiny* are negotiated mainly at the regional level, and the federal laws provide only a common guideline. On the political level, I would argue that the *obshchina* is an external concept that aims to reorganize the livelihood of indigenous peoples, just as the *sovkhos* was, and the peasant farming enterprise (KFKh) still is today. Whenever the *obshchina* was not yet sufficiently well established, indigenous people have adopted other concepts to strengthen their political position, for example *national'nye raiony* among the Eveny in Sakha (Vitebsky 1992). It is left to the regional and local intelligentsia to breathe life into these external ideas and render them suitable to the conditions of their region. In no case that I know of, did the actual land users in the tundra advance the idea of the *obshchina*.

This might make tundra inhabitants appear to be passive marionettes in political games that are externally dominated, or (to put it into a recently prominent theoretical framework) seem to lack a sense of agency (cf. Habeck 2005). This is not, however, what I am suggesting. Rather I see the influence going in both directions, from the political arena to the tundra, and vice-versa. Tundra inhabitants have considerable influence in shaping the face of indigenous institutions to accord with their own views and values. In the YNAO, for example, all reindeer herders whom I questioned, categorically rejected pooling any of their reindeer property together or transferring ownership to an *obshchina*. This is very different from the Sakha republic, where reindeer in the *obshchiny* are owned collectively by the institution, just as in *sovkhos* brigades. (Stammler and Ventsel 2003, Ventsel 2004, chapter 3.4).

Discussion

On the one hand, the *obshchina* would not have become an important instrument of indigenous revival without external political conditions that pointed in this direction. On the other hand, if indigenous people

had no sense of agency at all, their institutions would look much more similar right across the Russian North. The following section shows how the *obshchiny* in the YNAO reflect the local input of the Nentsy, which made an externally suggested concept fit better to their own conceptions of living on the tundra with animals.

The incentive for establishing a community, the size of an *obshchina*, and its main activities can all differ widely. Sirina (1999) describes how the *obshchiny* became important institutions involved in *sovkhos* reorganization in Sakha. Communities may also be directed against oil and gas extraction, as began to happen in Yamal, or they can be used to practice social boundary defense against incoming competitors for the same resources, e.g. hunters in Taimyr (Ziker 2002a,b). Fondahl (1998) and Ziker (2002a) have shown that distance from population centers matters for the establishment of *obshchiny* in a variety of respects. Whereas Ziker's material from Taimyr suggests that geographical proximity to centers makes establishing family/clan holdings more likely (because of the economic value of the land), Fondahl (1998, 104–7) argues that distance greatly increases the costs of establishing an *obshchina* outside the more populated centers, since information gets to remote places more slowly and transportation is difficult. Anderson (1998, 83) emphasizes to the contrary that it is more knowing “how to reach the market place” that matters, rather than distance that matters.

The example of the *obshchina* Ilepts confirms Anderson's view. Northern Yamal is very poorly linked to any larger settlements. There are no roads or railways. Ground transportation on winter roads (*zimniki*) is unreliable and slow, and the waterways can be used for only three months per year. Nonetheless, it was in this remote place that the largest *obshchina* in the YNAO was founded. The know-how to make this a success came from the social capital of the cultural brokers in the village. Mikhail and Nikolai Lachevich know whom to ask for information and assistance, and thus it does not matter that their village is 500 kilometers away from Salekhard or Yarsale, the *raion* center. Their knowledge of the best and cheapest ways to organize transportation helps them to overcome the distance to larger centers. Unlike Fondahl's case (1998), distance is no longer an obstacle.

In the YNAO, even though the *obshchiny* are not territorial entities under the law, the *obshchina* movement is intimately involved with the issue of land rights. However, I disagree with Fondahl (1998, 58), who claims that in pre-Soviet times “most of the northern peoples of Russia organized their territoriality in terms of such *obshchinas*.” This may have been true for some of the less mobile populations, especially in the taiga, where fishing and hunting play a more important role, and reindeer are

used, if at all, mainly for transport. A good example of this is the eastern Khanty, who identify themselves clearly with areas close to particular tributaries, where all of their day-to-day activity takes place (Jordan 2003, 251, see map). Nenets pre-Soviet communities, however, were of a very flexible nature and were not bound to a specific territory, such as the *parma* described by Brodnev (1959), Terletzki (1934) and Podkorytov (1995). They were social units established for the pooling of a labor force, not for defending territories. Even the old Russian *obshchiny* were more about social organization than about territory (Lourie 1999). Fondahl (1998, 59) also recognizes this lack of flexibility and thinks, therefore, that the “return to indigenous land tenure schemes is incomplete.”

As far as nomadic indigenous communities in the Far North are concerned, if we talk of the *obshchina* as a pre-Soviet concept, we should perceive it more as a social than a territorial unit, and herein lies the contrast to the present-day approach. I believe that the territoriality of the *obshchina* is externally imposed for political reasons, and I have shown that reindeer herders buy into this as a defensive concept when exposed to outside pressures, such as in Mikhail’s case defending against the gas companies and the *sovkhoz*. These confrontations with differing worldviews lead northern peoples to reassess and reinforce their indigenous identity as it is connected to their land.



Cultural brokers: The grand old man of northern Yamal and his son
photo: F. Stammler

Conclusion

The *obshchina* movement in the YNAO is more an invented reconstruction than a revival of pre-existing forms. It evolved out of an externally imposed pressure on the indigenous population to make clear that access to the tundra is crucial for the preservation of their nomadic way of life and their indigenous identity. In a way, this is the result of a collision of different cognitive maps of the tundra, and of the different approaches to territory that result from them. Whereas administrators and oil workers think of the tundra as bounded territories, nomads perceive the tundra as an open space structured by reindeer migrations, hunting and fishing grounds, and sacred sites. It is this way of seeing themselves as part of their environment that is important for their identity.

The *obshchina*, as an institution in the YNAO, is being used to bridge this gap between the two different approaches. I have shown how indigenous representatives can successfully become cultural brokers and adopt a defensive posture to protect their communities from outsiders, a strategy that Paine (1992) saw as most realistic for the promotion of Saami interests in Norway. The social capital of these cultural brokers is a key factor that largely determines their success among political decision-makers and tundra inhabitants alike. Influenced by these well-connected cultural brokers, therefore, reindeer herders in northern Yamal became convinced of the need to defend their land, and opt for restricting access to it through membership in the *obshchina*, an institution that developed among Russian peasants in the Middle Ages.

It is likely that the tundra inhabitants will retain their own more inclusive concept of land rights under the cover provided by the *obshchina*, just as they kept it under the cover of the *sovkhos*, or of the “peasant farming enterprise” (KFKh). Promoters of the *obshchina* idea in Yamal have always emphasized that flexibility will be retained by giving herders the freedom to continue their practice of pasture rotation and exchange. Thus, the *obshchina* is for the Yamal Nentsy neither more nor less than another way of dealing with claims and expectations coming from forces external to their own communities. The particular ways in which the *obshchiny* evolved in the YNAO, and how they differ from developments in other regions, show that, in spite of a federal Russian legal framework, tundra or taiga residents and local politicians actively influence the local face of these centrally designed institutions. This is why, in the YNAO, the *obshchiny* have been established mainly as a way of collectively claiming land, even though by law land is subject to completely different regulations.

The analyses in this chapter have shown that social boundary defense, as practiced by establishing *obshchiny*, is a mechanism for reinforcing indigenous identities. The Yamal Nentsy are urged to draw boundaries between their own identity and that of outsiders, a process that leads them to become more conscious about those bases of their livelihood that they wish to determine themselves. This is bound to become even more important in coming years, when the exploitation of northern Yamal gas deposits is likely to increase competition on the ranges of the Arctic tundra.

Notes

- 1 *Okrug* translates as region, an administrative subdivision within the Russian Federation. *Okrugi* have their own parliament and government, own laws, budgets and political life.
- 2 Fieldwork was carried out in the YNAO in 2000-2001, 2002 and 2004, supported by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology and the Academy of Finland. My view and analyses of indigenous communities have benefited greatly from discussions with my colleague Patty Gray, who also made important comments about an earlier version of this paper.
- 3 All laws are normally published within a week in the "Rossiiskaia Gazeta". They are searchable on the Internet at <http://www.systema.ru> (accessed January 4, 2004).
- 4 This became the main basis for formulating laws on the minorities of the Russian North, such as the *obshchina* laws of Sakha (Yakutia) (cf. Sirina 1999) or of the Russian Federation. However, the issue of tradition is discussed quite controversially in anthropology on the Russian Far North (Pika 1999, Schindler 1997, Gray 2003, Habeck 2005). Analysing the notion of tradition in this context extends the framework of this chapter, but I have outlined this argument elsewhere (Stammler 2005a).
- 5 I followed this procedure in one case on the Yamal peninsula, and another case was reported in an interview conducted in the Polar Ural Mountains by an *obshchina* director, March 2001. It also corresponds to Article 8 of the Federal Law (No 104-F3).
- 6 Information on the role of laws and the land committee was gathered in personal interviews with the deputy director of the latter, in Salekhard, July 4, 2001, and in a TV-interview with her, in the spring of 2001.
- 7 April 22, 1992, *O neotlozhnykh merakh po zashchite mest prozhivaniia i khoziaistvennoi deiatel'nosti malochislennykh narodov severa* (on urgent measures for the protection of places for the indigenous peoples of the North), in: Kriazhkov 1994, 199.
- 8 Personal communications, September 3 and 11, 2000.
- 9 From the Okotetto, Vanuito and Yaungad kin-groups.
- 10 Personal communication, March 12, 2002.
- 11 Telephone communication with the chairman of Sabetta, December 31, 2003.
- 12 See the *obshchina* website at http://ilebts.narod.ru/2_goda.htm, http://ilebs.narod.ru/edey_il.htm, accessed January 5, 2004.
- 13 Information from Evgenyi Yamru, interview from August 21, 2000, Salekhard.

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