

The Indigenous Political in the Post-Soviet Sakha Republic

by

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## **Abstract**

This research analyzes the socioeconomic and political structures, social and cultural networks, and forms of Indigenous mobilizations in a region where Indigenous political representation in the traditional sense is heavily circumscribed. Indigenous groups throughout the Russian Arctic are immensely affected by the state's prioritization of extractive activities. This privileging of business interests often de-politicizes Indigenous mobilization by delegitimizing claims-making, undermining Indigenous territorial rights, and increasing economic disempowerment. Yet, I consider the de-politicization process as not only an important strategy for exercising state power, reinforcing dominant ideologies, and restricting politics, but also as a force that inspires countering efforts that can shape alternative political opportunities, expressions, and mechanisms. The research inquiry reveals that even though local Indigenous groups distance themselves from the overt politicization of Indigeneity, they still produce alternative narratives and employ strategies adequate to certain de-politicized contexts. In this sense, the Indigenous activists reformulate the pre-existing cultural, economic, and political meanings, values, and practices, challenging and subverting the bureaucratic forms of domination and discipline. Thus, the dissertation project focuses on local unpredictable and at times contradictory narratives and articulations of Indigeneity at the intersection of regional, national, and global histories. This research engages with the growing literature on post-Soviet theorizations of Indigeneity and of Indigenous subjects, and with Indigenous activism, contributing to ethnography focused on Indigenous communities of Sakha Republic and their ambivalent position within the post-Soviet Russian state. The analysis is built on intensive academic and grey literature synthesis, on the yearlong ethnographic fieldwork in Yakutsk (a capital city) and the Olenyok district of Sakha Republic, integrating anthropological and Indigenous research methods, including participant observation in three villages and a collection of semi-structured interviews and life histories, and finally, on ongoing Internet facilitated communication providing feedback on the analysis, when possible, with selected Sakha Republic-based individuals from a variety of interest groups.

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to all my family, who always encourage my academic pursuits,  
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*Figure 1: View on the river Olenyek*

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Indigeneity is a thoroughly politicized subjectivity that can facilitate the promotion of socio-economic and political advancement. It can also serve as a powerful source of politicization in counter-hegemonic resistance. However, the recognition and the politics of Indigeneity as a politicized positioning is often shaped by certain national and regional narratives, historical and cultural legacies; and ethnic, gender, and other intersectionalities. This structuring of specific yet heterogeneous contexts can both ignite and circumscribe Indigenous struggles for social, economic, and political justice and for equality locally and globally.

The economic, political, and cultural challenges that have emerged in the Russian Arctic because of expansive resource extraction (and other massive modernization processes) have been well documented (Balzer 2015; Fondahl and Sirina 2006; Koester 2005; Pika 1999; Shadrin 2015; Tomaselli and Koch 2014). Scholars highlight the fact that Indigenous peoples throughout the Russian Arctic are intensely affected by severe economic and political change, experiencing a decline of living standards, high unemployment rates, growing food insecurity, and environmental instability (Berezhkov 2012; Etkind 2014; Hicks 2011). In addition, the state's prioritization of extractive activities often de-politicizes Indigenous mobilization, by constraining claims-making, undermining Indigenous territorial rights, and intensifying economic disempowerment. I show that strategically engaging with the de-politicization process can serve not merely as an important strategy for exercising state power, reinforcing dominant ideologies, and restricting political participation but also as a means of countering the very forces that seek to shape political opportunities, expressions, and mechanisms. This dissertation analyzes various social networks, forms of grassroots Indigenous mobilization, and political and economic structuring devices in a region where Indigenous political participation and representation in the traditional sense is heavily circumscribed.

The study reveals that local Indigenous groups distance themselves from the overt politicization of Indigeneity, instead mobilizing strictly within the state-recognized discursive frameworks. This tactic requires alternative narratives and strategies appropriate to the de-politicized contexts. Specifically, I focus on the unpredictable and, at times, contradictory local narratives and articulations of the political, and how they intersect with regional, national, and global histories. This research project seeks to contribute to further critical interrogations of Indigeneity as a discursive formation and as both a local and global phenomenon. It seeks to

shed light on the contentiousness of Indigenous politics in the context of the post-Soviet Russian Arctic. Engaging with the growing literature on post-Soviet theorizations of Indigeneity and on Indigenous subjects, I aim to contribute an ethnography focused on Indigenes of the Russian Arctic and on their ambivalent position within the present Russian state. The thesis also demonstrates how this literature overlaps and intersects with the politics of Indigeneity, with Indigeneity articulations and negotiations, and with the local and regional histories and global economic and political processes.

As a member of the Sakha group and an anthropologist, I was well-positioned to conduct this research from a unique perspective. The Sakha community is an ethnic minority of the Russian state, while the international community recognizes the Sakha as an Indigenous group of Sakha Republic. As a native of the region, I have close and long-standing ties to local Sakha and Indigenous Evenki communities and profound knowledge and awareness of the regional cultural, political, and socio-economic conditions. Born and raised in Sakha Republic (a former Soviet Socialist Republic), I grew up in a large Sakha family with seven children during the late years of the Soviet Union, and firsthand experienced the turbulent transformations of my native village and the Republic at large after the collapse of the communist state. Being a child of parents of lower socioeconomic backgrounds who did not receive higher education, the value and importance of education were instilled in me from my early years. I obtained my Bachelor's degree in Linguistics/English Language and Literature from the Sakha State University in the small mining town of Mirny. Afterwards, I received an IREX Young Leaders Fellowship to pursue a non-degree graduate study at the University of Pittsburgh, which became my first exposure to the global educational and cultural discourses. After an exchange year in the United States, I returned to my home village Nyurba. I was employed as a teacher for two years, reflecting on my past experiences and contemplating my future career. Since I always envisioned myself as an international scholar with diverse and interdisciplinary research interests, I pursued a Master's degree in Africana Studies at the SUNY at Albany, and a Ph.D. in Social and Comparative Analysis in Education at the University of Pittsburgh.

My further scholarly pursuits directed me towards a degree in Cultural Anthropology, a discipline I am particularly passionate about. I believe that - despite its disciplinary problematics (colonial past, lack of diversity and minority representation, issues of ethics and politics of anthropological research, overlooking of world anthropologies, limited meaningful and long-

term collaboration with scholars and communities from the regions like my own) – anthropology still has a lot to offer to the public, especially if it fully dedicates to decolonization processes, and prioritizes activist and applied research.

Now, I am one of the very few native anthropologists working outside Russia in collaboration with Indigenous communities of Russia. My positioning provides an opportunity to present uniquely nuanced epistemological, theoretical, methodological, and political perspectives on Indigenous issues. As a non-western, racialized and minoritized researcher, I am deeply committed to supporting local knowledges and transforming anthropological approaches by critically engaging with disciplinary methods and practices. As scholars such Scheper-Hughes (1995, 2009), Simpson (2014), Allen and Jobson (2016), Shah (2017) have shown, anthropology needs to be re-envisioned, rethought, and redesigned to include the voices of non-western scholars and to stay socially and politically relevant. In closely collaborating with Indigenous communities, I was careful not to impose my own preconceptions of anthropological theoretical frameworks and worked diligently to privilege the knowledge-making methods along with the concerns, critiques, and aspirations of the community members themselves.

The topic of extractivism in relation to Indigenous rights and Indigenous experiences deeply resonates with my own personal experiences; I grew up in the Nyurba village, which has been a hub for the Soviet diamond mining industry since the 1930s. My community's experiences intersected with the extractivist ambitions of the Soviet government in many diverse ways, but the interactions were largely oppressive and discriminatory. One memory particularly comes to mind. My sisters and I would often go to the local store to marvel at all commodities that were inaccessible to us (colourful toys, sweets and cookies, pretty dresses, etc.). It was a sparkling store, but it serviced only the mining migrant workers and their families. We would loiter in the store until large and loud *nuuchcha*<sup>1</sup> saleswomen would chase us out. Even as children, we were aware of our marginalized position that insidiously seeped into our day-to-day existence. When I travelled to begin my undergraduate studies from Nyurba to Mirny, I was again surrounded by extractivism. Mirny was famously the first mining town built around an

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<sup>1</sup> *nuuchcha* is the Sakha word for ethnic Russians, but we also use it interchangeably to describe all white people, including Russians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, and such, who were the predominant migrant labour force, involved in the local extractive operations in Soviet and post-Soviet period, and represented (and still represent) colonial and Soviet (and post-Soviet) oppressive dominant groups for many local Indigenous communities.

open-pit mine. Its population was entirely comprised of *nuuchcha* migrant workers, employed in the mining industry. The Sakha and Evenki students' experiences in Mirny were permeated by racism and marginalization. We commonly spotted *swastika* graffiti and *Russia for Russians* signs throughout the town. Nowadays mining industry and mining towns in the Republic are more diverse. There are many (mostly male) Sakha and Evenki employed by several large mining companies. My own niece and nephew are studying at the local universities hoping to succeed in the lucrative extractive economy.

### **Ethnography Musings**

This research project is concerned with politically, economically, and culturally marginalized groups as well as with the contentious politicization of Indigeneity in a resource rich region of the Russian Federation. Given the high stakes, it was imperative to employ a specific kind of qualitative research – namely a Public Anthropology approach - which not only facilitates inquiry and fulfills the primary goals of the research project but also endeavours to benefit research partners and further their causes. In their article on anthropological inquiry and discourses of power, Christian Hansen, Catherine Needham, and Bill Nichols (1989) liken ethnography, a primary essential tool for anthropologists, to pornography with its discourses of domination, of patriarchal power, and hierarchical structure. Mainstream anthropology continues to work within “impulses of desire”, “the desire to know and possess, to ‘know’ by possessing and possess by knowing” (66). In the Saidian tradition, scholars point out that ethnographic “realities” produce and reproduce systems of power and its restraints, constructing a “realism of a fishbowl”, which allows an experiencing and even fetishizing the Otherness from a spatial, temporal as well as theoretical distance. Johannes Fabian (1983) notes that anthropological representations and meta-narratives operate at a safe distance, with research objects positioned in a different temporality and spatiality than the researcher (i.e., often “the far north”). This works not only to construct a “primitive” distant Other, but also to construe ethnographic fieldwork itself as heroic, usually male, mythical, and exotic quest, and as a purely self-referential intellectual career-building experience.

To address this problem of exoticization and primitivization of those peoples and practices under this anthropological gaze, the contemporary Public Anthropological and interdisciplinary researchers increasingly advocate for critical theoretical inquiry and re-

envisioning of research practices, specifically practices of ethnographic research that first practically benefit the communities involved, and which take their theoretical cues from those contexts, rather than from Western traditions. Allaine Cerwonka and Liisa Malkki (2007), for example, argue that ethnography, which at its core is meant to operate by illuminating and employing local epistemological and ontological frameworks, is particularly imperative in developing and revising theories on power structures, social and institutional discourses, and human agency (14). According to them, ethnography has a promising potential to produce non-totalizing theoretical insights about local complexities and global processes. Moreover, ethnography, as situated, long-term, empirical field research, is understood as “simultaneously a critical theoretical practice, a quotidian ethical practice, and an improvisational practice” (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007, 164), which demands flexible intellectual openness, creativity, taking risks, making mistakes, rethinking, and reconstructing one’s questions and priorities (184). In this sense, ethnographic research involves constant improvisation and revision of research frameworks, resistance to the use of pre-conceptualized processes and pre-determined outcomes, and, most importantly, the creation of reflexive heteroglossic dialogue, the dismissal of false “objectivity” or distance and the destabilization of power structures (Hansen, Needham, and Nichols 1989, 78).

Building on this critique of traditional anthropological inquiry and knowledge production, the scholars of contemporary Indigeneity as well as Indigenous scholars urge for more careful and engaged scholarship “to recognize the paradoxes, limits, and possibilities of Indigeneity’s varied vectors instead of falling back into tired, monological brands of essentialized analysis and judgment” (de la Cadena and Starn 2007, 22). Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and Marisol de la Cadena (2008) call for the adoption of decolonization by defeating the persistence of the colonizer/colonized dichotomy through “a process which critically engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels”. de la Cadena and Starn (2007) point out that scholars need to remain aware of the profound asymmetries within collaborations, including “inequalities of geography, economy, race and gender” (24), which goes into the core of the knowledge production itself. Contemporary scholars of Indigeneity (or of any marginalized subjectivity) must seek to challenge and change knowledge production through “hybrid genres, simultaneously academic and non-academic, local and universal, and committed to blurring the boundaries between these spheres while intervening in the all” (de la Cadena and Starn 2007,

25). The ultimate goal of research involving Indigenous peoples should be to directly benefit Indigenous communities and to humanize and democratize the research process by prioritizing purposeful, collaborative, personal, and critical scholarship that provides concrete improvements in Indigenous peoples' circumstances rather than publications that provide accolades and career advancement of researchers – whether Indigenous or non- (Deloria Jr. 1969; Kovach 2009; Louis 2007; Rigney 1999; Tuhiwai Smith 1999). Ultimately, Indigenous research and Indigenous methodologies are critically important tools for Indigenous peoples themselves to contest misconstrued representations; create new political spaces; vocalize important grievances and issues; and analyze and make sense of their shifting and complex experiences, subjectivities, and realities.

Stressing the inseparability of knowledge and action during research, I inhabited the positioning of a critical insider activist ethnographer<sup>2</sup>. Being an activist researcher means politically aligning oneself with people (research partners) in their struggles, prioritizing their interests, voices and projects rather than my own, by allowing them to lead discussions and direct collaborative knowledge sharing during data collection and knowledge production, by engaging with individuals “across the aisle” rather than seeking out those voices to confirm my views, by ensuring verification and accuracy with rigour, and by prioritizing locally meaningful (rather than academic) networks in the dissemination of the results (Routledge 2013). This sort of work is not for everyone as it involves a certain amount of self-effacement. It is not for those who seek attention, affirmation, or accolades. As Zoe Todd notes regarding her research in Paulatuuq, Northwest Territories:

Learning *how* to fish, from skilled fishermen, was as critical to my understanding as learning *about* fish. Over the course of the year, three teachers – all women, from three different generations – generously shared their knowledge of fishing and the landscape with me. During these experiential learning sessions, which took place both in

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<sup>2</sup> My philosophy as an activist researcher, considering my own ambiguous position within the Indigeneity politics of recognition of the Russian Federation as well as complex and uneven (yet deeply reciprocal relationships of Sakha with Evenki communities), can be best conveyed by the following statement by Periyar E. V. Ramasamy (1879-1973), an Indian social activist, philosopher, and politician: "If a larger country oppresses a smaller country, I'll stand with the smaller country. If the smaller country has majoritarian religion that oppresses minority religions, I'll stand with minority religions. If the minority religion has caste and one caste oppresses another caste, I'll stand with the caste being oppressed. In the oppressed caste, if an employer oppresses his employee, I'll stand with the employee. If the employee goes home and oppresses his wife, I'll stand with that woman. Overall, Oppression is my enemy".

community settings and on the land, the hierarchy was reversed: I became the student (2016b, 202).

Similarly, it was imperative for me to become a student of my Indigenous mentors to learn and understand the foundations and intricacies of their personal and local experiences from their perspectives.

### **Fieldwork Details**

This project seeks to explore the state and corporate politics targeting Indigenous communities and understand how these politics might affect and shape Indigenous politics in the post-Soviet Russian Arctic, specifically focusing on grassroots Indigenous mobilizations in the Olenyok district of Sakha Republic. Sakha Republic, the far northeastern region of the Russian Federation, provides an excellent geographical site for exploring the conditions and mechanisms through which Indigenous peoples become involved in local (and global) politicized struggles and mobilizations. Sakha Republic, perpetually exploited because of an abundance of natural resources in the region, was developed as a colony by the Soviet state (for more discussion on Russian colonialism, see Interlude 2). Control of the region was viewed to be seen as imperative to overall “mastering” of the North and its resource wealth (Hicks 2011; Tichotsky 2000). This rhetoric justifying exploitation persisted after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Russian state retained control of the resource extraction industry, effectively excluding the local Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations from a share of the profits while nurturing political and economic anxiety within the region. Environmental degradation owing to the massive extraction activities and exploitation of natural resources, and the complete disregard of land rights further politically and economically disadvantaged the region’s most vulnerable communities, especially rural Indigenous groups (Hicks 2011; Maj 2012). According to Susan Hicks (2011), Russia maintains that it supports the Indigenous rights in theory, however, it also characterizes the issues of land and natural resources as “a problem of compensation and redress” (88). It pays lip service to rhetoric of cultural rights, while rejecting that cultural rights might imply political and economic rights.

An inquiry into the state and corporate politics targeting Indigenous communities and Indigenous politics in Sakha Republic generally and the Olenyok district specifically provides fertile ground for an analysis of complex Indigenous political discourses and experiences,

essentialized notions of Indigeneity, and the ways local articulations of Indigeneity interact with global power structures and practices. With little space for any politicized articulation of Indigeneity in the post-Soviet political sphere, and with state sanctioned norms for, and expectations of, recognition, I was interested in the ways the Indigenous peoples of the Russian Arctic were re-formulating both Indigeneity and Indigenous politics. To answer this question, it was necessary to explore local discourses and articulations of Indigeneity, explicitly focusing on Indigenous activism and its mobilization.



*Figure 2: Location of Sakha Republic on the map of the Russian Federation*

Research data collection was comprised of two phases: the first phase was devoted to conducting participant observation, and a combination of semi-structured interviews and life histories. Life history interviews were a particularly valuable and useful research tool for examining the experiences of the Indigenous Evenki in Sakha Republic. Faraday and Plummer (1979) argue that life histories “reveal the inner experience of individuals, how they interpret, understand, and define the world around them” (776). Moreover, the life history method can serve as an emancipatory practice, which recognizes the complex, multifaceted, and dynamic positionalities of groups that are mostly invisible in governmental and academic discourses (Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf 2000; Lim 2011; Middleton and Hewitt 2000; Yow 1994). The second

phase consisted of limited archival research and collecting relevant artifacts. During the participant observation phase, I attended various government, academic and cultural meetings, talks, workshops, and other events, that were organized by and for Indigenous groups, organizations, and institutions. Since a great many of Indigenous organizations and institutions are located in Yakutsk, the capital city of Sakha Republic, I spent the first half of the fieldwork time in the city, relocating to the Olenyek district afterwards. The Olenyek Evenki National district is the north-west territory of Sakha Republic, a district established in 1934 by the new Soviet government. The population of the Olenyek district is predominantly Indigenous Evenki. The Evenki or Evenks are one of five regionally and federally recognized Indigenous groups in Sakha Republic. The total Olenyek population is 4,127, with the Indigenous Evenki's population totalling 3,117 (the 2010 Russian Census).

In the Olenyek district, I split my fieldwork between three villages: Olenyek, Khariyalaakh, and Djelinde. Olenyek is an administrative centre of the Olenyek district with approximately 2,273 people. Khariyalaakh is a rural village with a population of roughly 846 people. Here, the village residents practice a mixed economy, with most employed in wage labour and some involved in traditional modes of subsistence such as reindeer herding, hunting, and fishing. Djelinde is a rural village with a population of approximately 664 people. The village residents also pursue a mixed economy, the majority in wage labour and a few involved in traditional modes of subsistence as above. In addition to participant observation activities, I read daily local and regional newspapers, and monitored regional news programs on television and radio, explicitly focusing on news on Indigenous peoples and Indigenous affairs.

I supplemented participant observation data with a combination of 112 oral histories and semi-structured interviews with government officials, academics, supporters of Indigenous activism and politics, and members of the local Indigenous activist groups and collectives. In the initial stages of the fieldwork, I recruited potential research partners through word-of-mouth and snowball sampling, activating the extensive network I had developed during participant observation. I engaged in purposive sampling, attempting to make contact with a diverse cross-section of research partners with respect to class, gender, religion, and age, so as to achieve a good representativeness of supporters and activists in the area. I requested verbal as well as written consent to conduct and record interviews. Once received, I recorded interviews digitally, transferred them to a laptop for storage, and transcribed them for further analysis. During the

interviews, I encouraged my interlocutors to talk freely on local Indigenous histories and experiences, Indigeneity, Indigenous activism, the state and corporate politics, local Indigenous issues, and what was important to them. These conversations allowed me to gain a comprehensive understanding of the diversity of opinion and experience within Indigenous



*Figure 3: Map of Sakha Republic showing the Olenyok district, and map of the Olenyok district, showing the villages Olenyok, Khariyalaakh, Djelinde, and Eeyik*

communities regarding the political, economic, environmental, and cultural issues within the region. To further explore the regional history of the Olenyok district, I used the archives at the local libraries and administrative centres. I transcribed, scanned, and uploaded the data that I gathered through participant observation, interviews, and archival research, into password-encrypted personal computer files daily. Upon returning from Russia, I completed the verbatim transcriptions of the interviews, and sorted the data using the qualitative research data analysis software NVivo11. The data coding that is involved was an interpretive process where I identified and interpreted recurring patterns from peoples' responses to my questions, and eventually extrapolated themes.

I upheld strict protocols of confidentiality and anonymity throughout the project. In the writing, I employ pseudonyms for individual Indigenous people (unless they are public figures and do not object to their names appearing in the research documents). I use pseudonyms more to protect privacy than in fear that the individuals will face negative repercussions (individual, professional, financial, or otherwise) should their identities be exposed. The risk of harm is low.

## **Chapters Overview**

In the dissertation, I attempt to illustrate the complex and shifting sets of power relations that shape everyday existence in rural Indigenous communities. To understand power, it is necessary to understand local peoples' relations with the environment and territory, as well as their capacity for and practices of resistance, and the ways they choose to challenge and subvert the bureaucratic forms of domination and discipline. I inquire into Indigenous articulations of politics in Sakha Republic, looking at the ways changing discourses work to assist a making sense of realities that are generated in encounters between the local and the global. This chapter considers the future shape of extractive capitalism on Indigenous politics locally, focusing on local struggles and gendered forms of Indigenous resistance tactics and practices.

The second chapter focuses on the contradictory symbol of reindeer, actively exploited by both urban and rural Indigenous rights activists, as the ultimate symbolic representation of local Evenki Indigeneity and of Indigenous labour. The idea (and utilization) of essentialist and timeless Indigenous symbols (and of Indigeneity) can be problematic because cultural symbols, like cultures, are not static but flexible and in constant flux and transformation. Additionally, despite the widespread and over-exploited idyllic symbol of reindeer and reindeer-herding, the experiences of the reindeer-herding communities of the Olenyok district are far from ideal. In this chapter, I will explore the contradictions and unintended consequences of the symbolic politics framed around idealized images of Indigeneity generally and of reindeer and of reindeer herding particularly.

The third chapter examines three small objects - fish, potatoes, and the ATM, which I thought would assist in the understanding of pre- and post-conflict meaning-making processes in Djelinde. I discovered, however, that the underlying circumstances and village dynamics and politics presented a much more complex set of circumstances. In this chapter, I will attempt to retell a story of Djelinde resistance as informed by residents' remarks on these symbolically

loaded objects. The local discourses on the conflict between the community and industry highlight the ongoing struggle over limited resources, a local desire (and need) for infrastructural and industrial development, strategic deployment of essentialized nature-loving/worshipping imagery, and ongoing tensions in the internal district and village politics. I show that local narratives do not necessarily demonstrate strong opposition to the company and its politics, as much of ambivalence over the lack of any meaningful relationship (or better a lack thereof) between the local Indigenous community and the post-Soviet state. The community narratives reveal a recognition and perhaps capitulation to the necessity of collaboration (however unequal) with the company.

The fourth chapter addresses the subject of rumours and other collectively produced and shared fantastical narratives as a productive community space that people use to understand and experience history. I demonstrate that localized rumours and extraordinary stories offer a means of exerting a sense of control amidst uneven power relations between the local community, the extractive company, and the state. By producing and reproducing certain rumours, the village residents are able to externalize their fears regarding changing environmental conditions (especially, water pollution and radiation); their concerns over their health, and their anxieties surrounding their marginalized position in economic development discourses, their disproportionately low share of extractive profits, and the government's failure to consult with them on interventions that affect them. Precariously positioned, the Djelinde residents resist with the only resources they have access to, namely, rumours and other fantastical stories which provide a sense of temporary, if illusory, control, but which do not fundamentally alter the structural forces shaping their lived circumstances.

In the fifth chapter, I focus on alternative forms of Indigenous activism and argue that the diversity in local initiatives and different forms of local agency highlight the plurality of Indigenous mobilizations. I examine several forms of grassroots women-led community actions, including collectives focused on community issues, complaints, self-publishing, cultural and language revitalization projects, and the nomadic school. The women involved were predominantly older rural women who developed radical ingenious and productive initiatives. I argue that these initiatives can broaden our understanding of Indigenous politics and the gendered aspects of Indigenous activism in the Russian Arctic. Most importantly, this chapter emphasizes the agency of older rural women and shows how their narratives critically interrogate

local Indigenous politics within the specific context of the rural and somewhat isolated community.

Finally, in chapter six I present concluding thoughts on the research findings.

### **Interlude 1: De-politicization of Indigeneity in Russia**

Emerging global political, economic, and cultural crises are urging the creation of new modes of mobilization and organization as well as new spaces and mechanisms of dissent and resistance, particularly at the margins of central decision-making. Indigenous struggles occupy a significant niche in the broader context of politics at the margins. This is because they are often concerned with “survivance” issues faced by the politically, economically, and culturally vulnerable communities residing on economically important yet environmentally fragile lands (Eisenberg 2009, 2014). The term ‘indigenous’ has been reconfigured multiple times since the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century when it was introduced to identify people or products “born or produced naturally in a land or region; Native or belonging naturally to the soil, region, etc.” (Hodgson 2002, 1038). The Martinez Cobo Study provided the most widely cited “working definition” of Indigenous peoples as stipulated in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted in 2007:

“Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system.”  
(UNDRIP 2013)

A great number of scholars argue that this definition reflects the ambiguity of the universal concept of Indigeneity and universal Indigenous rights, simultaneously highlighting that they are neither exclusive nor necessary conditions for Indigenous identification and recognition (Hathaway 2010; Li 2000). The vagueness of the definition drew the attention of broad groups of deciphering marginalized groups, who built upon the concept, constructing their own subjectivities within a framework of a shared common struggle with Indigenous peoples elsewhere.

Although several nation-states officially reject the notion of Indigeneity, numerous groups welcome the global legitimacy that the UN definition provided, and actively claim and articulate their Indigeneities within this common ground framework. In this regard, Anna Tsing (2007) points out that marginalized groups’ increasing mobilizations “under the banner of

Indigenous cultures” or creating alliances with Indigenous groups in their struggle are those who, “have been left out of the benefits of national development. Being left out itself might be cause for solidarity - yet there are different ways of being left out, and these divide Indigenous perspectives” (53). Indeed, diverse literature on Indigeneity articulations shows that the adoption of Indigeneity discourses allowed many marginalized groups worldwide to strategically represent and promote their rights to land, natural resources, and self-determination, attracting the support of international human rights agencies, advocacy, and environmental organizations (Hathaway 2010; Hicks 2011; Li 2000; Sylvain 2002, etc.).

The Indigenous politics in the Russian Arctic similarly revolve around land rights, rally against the exploitation of natural resources, and include demands for their place to participate in decision-making at regional and federal levels as autonomous political agents (Balzer 2014; Fondahl and Poelzer 2003; Pika 1999; Shadrin 2015). However, according to Gail Fondahl and Anna Sirina (2006), the Indigenous groups in Russia usually lack the practical capacity to protect their rights legally because of a number of factors, such as poverty, language, geographical remoteness, and social isolation. Perhaps most importantly, they encounter barriers owing to the legacy of the Soviet educational policies, whereby Indigenous peoples were primarily trained to be teachers, and medical and cultural workers, rather than lawyers, economists, scientists, or businesspeople (132).

The patronizing and interventionist attitude of the Soviet state towards Indigenous peoples was intensified when the boarding-school system (*shkola-internat*) was introduced for Indigenous children to promote Russification and assimilation. Along with the modernization of Indigenous subjects through the educational system, the Soviet economic policies of collectivization *kollektivizaciya* and resettlement deeply affected the economic and social lives of Indigenous peoples (Bartels and Bartels 2006; Diatchikova 2011; Vakhtin 1992). For example, through collectivization policies, the Soviet government organized and forcibly included the reindeer nomads in the collective reindeer farms; while the resettlement policies of the 1950s forced approximately 232,000 Indigenous peoples into designated settlements, preventing them from pursuing and continuing traditional lifestyles (Koch and Tomaselli 2015). The Soviet governmental resettlement policy closely related to the presumed existence of ethnic “territories” or “homelands”, which facilitated the formation of ethnic districts, provinces, and republics with limited degrees of autonomy and self-administration, “linking peoples to territories and via

territories to rights” (Donahoe 2011, 402). This administrative confinement to territories facilitated the monolithic and static versions of ethnic categories and implied a constraining categorization of groups to essentialist ethnic characteristics:

The interesting fact about socialism is that it has created identities through its command principle, which redistributes goods to defined groups, supplemented by its other major principles based on class and evolution. Territorial-administrative units were set up to accommodate the government’s understanding of the relative status between these groups. The result is an inward-looking localism which is closely related to the ‘excluding others’ type of nationalism (Bulag 1993, as cited in Anderson).

Thus, the reindeer-herding mode of production became the central “cultural trait” identifying the Evenki, as an ethnic group, despite their many other traditional subsistence activities, not to mention their mixed and “modern” economic involvement (Anderson 2000, 193). The Soviet-led economic “modernization” of Indigenous subjects was a part of the Soviet goal to make the North “self-sufficient”, and this essentializing practice continued in different stages and formats throughout the Soviet period.

### **Legalizing Indigeneity**

The post-Soviet association of Indigeneity in Russia with resource struggles is not unique, as Tania Murray Li (2000) argues that explicit Indigeneity and resource politics go together and Indigeneity is less about the conscious choice of marginalized groups, but more about what *imposed identity categories*, or subject positions, are available to them. In the context of the Russian Federation, Indigeneity as a category was rarely referred to in the state policy prior to the Revolution of 1917, except in general terms such as *inozemtsy* “stray persons of different origin” (the Charter for the Management of Persons of Different Ethnicity 1822). The Russian imperialist government did not recognize Indigenous populations as citizens, viewing them instead as “Othered” people from different lands, who were to pay *iasak* (fur tribute) to receive protection from the Tsar. This non-interventionist attitude changed by the 19<sup>th</sup> century: *inozemtsy* became *indorodcy* (people of different birth) as well as *inovertsy* (people of different faith), engendering further confusion with other categorizations of outsiders and foreigners, and requiring a more specific status to differentiate “local” *inorodcy* and *inozemtsy* from other “Others” (Slezkine 1992, 52). The 19th-century cult of “progress” that captivated most of the superpowers internationally generated another category against which progress was defined,

namely “backwardness”, which was applied to Indigenous peoples across the globe including Russia:

The first large detachment of political exiles, the Decembrists, arrive in Siberia to rediscover the native peoples not as objects of scientific study but as romantic symbols. Thanks to Bestuzhev-Marlinskii, Chizhov and Kiukhel'beker, the northern nomads and their inhospitable country became an important part of the Russian literary landscape where children of nature fought and played, where lone rebels “wandered fearlessly around the shamans' graves” and where, as Pushkin found out from Kiukhel'beker, there lived the Tungus, “presently wild” ... The “savages” had become “noble”. Thus, they remained until the end of the Russian empire, legally known as “wandering aliens” (*brodiachie inorodtsy*) and metaphorically important to Siberian regionalists and traveling populists as symbols of wretched poverty and pristine innocence. (Slezkine 1992, 55-6)

After the Bolshevik Revolution, the new Communist Party employed several legal terms such as “native peoples and tribes of the Northern regions” and “small peoples of the North” to legally recognize around 150,000 of Indigenous peoples, mostly residing on the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions. These groups were targeted for particular state socio-cultural, educational, and economic policies and “protections”, yet denied full citizenship rights because of their “semi-savagery” or “outright savagery” (Donahoe et al. 2008; Donahoe 2011; Slezkine 1992). In this sense, the state logic in relation to Indigenous peoples was concerned with creating “worthy citizens” by imbuing them with the sort of moral and other capital the state valued – literacy, individuality, productivity, monogamy, linguistic homogeneity, and so on. All of this, of course, made these subjects easier to “administer”, track, and manage or control bureaucratically.

In this sense, the Soviet-era practices of increased intervention into Indigenous peoples' lives (see earlier discussion on education, Russification, and *kollektivizaciya*) were justified by “civilizing” and “modernizing” principles (Fassin 2007; Stevenson 2014). The category small peoples *malye narodnosti*, first employed in the 1924 mandate from the Soviet of Nationalities, served as a legal definition of nationality and determined “rational criteria” to classify the population and advocate their “civilization” and “modernization”. The Committee Assistance to the Peoples of the Northern Borderlands (the Committee of the North) was also established in 1924 and served to protect “small peoples” from various “capitalist predators”, by rapidly evolutionizing them into full citizens of the Soviet state (Slezkine 1992, 57). Later, the 1926 statute selected 26 groups as deserving the special status and state protection as small peoples

(Donahoe et al. 2008, 995). These groups were selected on the basis of specific ethnic markers such as language, religion, phenotype, the traditional mode of production, nomadic way of life, remoteness from local administrative and economic centres, and small population size (Donahoe et al. 2008, 995).

These state-determined and -authorized categories displaced and replaced the previous multiple “relational” identities and social relations of many Indigenous groups, informed by clan, environment, or profession rather than national or ethnic affiliations. Anderson (2000), for example, argues that the pre-Soviet Evenki, an Indigenous group in the Taymir region, maintained highly complex forms of social alliance and extensive intermarriages with neighbouring groups regardless of ethnicity, and most of the community members could speak multiple Indigenous languages; additionally, the Evenki travelled over much larger distances in their lifetimes and the Soviet (and post-Soviet) territorial boundaries made little sense for their ethnic self-determination.

The legal status of “small peoples” came to imply a lower level of social and political organization, and cultural “backwardness”, therefore, small peoples required special attention from the state because they came to be seen as “projects that needed to be turned into citizens through the benevolent guidance of the state” (Donahoe 2011, 400). This indigenization *korenizatsiia*, or “great transformation from savages to citizens”, was promoted by the Russian teachers, doctors, traders and administrators, who were “cultural revolut[ionaries] of a basic kind” and promoted assimilation via re-learning “how to eat, sleep, talk, dress, and be sick, as well as to assimilate a totally new view of the world and their place in it” (Slezkine 1992, 73). In 1928, the Central Executive Committee included the chapter on “Crimes that Constitute Survivals of Tribalism”, effectively criminalizing “backwardness”. According to Slezkine (1992), the state concept of backwardness included various forms of blood feud, some aspects of family and kin organization that legislators considered immoral, such as the practice of bridewealth or polygamy, certain religious beliefs, practices of shamanism and spiritualism, hence, anything impeding the imaged “progress” of allegedly exploited people, mired in the “swamp” of their own ignorance and backwardness (58). Simultaneously, the processes of *korenizatsiia* encouraged the reification of cultural differences, which illustrated both preservation of the previous imperialist categories by the Soviet (and later post-Soviet) government. This also demonstrates the state’s desire to distinguish itself in contradistinction to

the capitalist interpretations of backwardness that were framed in terms of racialized difference (Martin 2001, 126). Sergey Sokolovskiy (2013) notes that these Orientalist categorizations, which originated in imperialist Russia, were carried over and employed by the Soviet government. Deeply embedded in the post-Soviet Russian administrative and political structures, these ideas persist to this day in academia and public opinion (201), dramatically affecting the discourses of and on Indigenous peoples.

The image of Indigenous people as “poor, marginalized, colonized, exploited, and [as those who] must be protected” (Shah 2007, 1807) is not unique to Russia. Yet, the globally circulating images of backwardness and marginality of Indigenous peoples are seen as especially damaging for Indigenous politics, since these ideas presuppose an inability to transcend such a situation, reinforcing fatalism and victimhood (Paradies 2006, 359). Moreover, as Nevzat Soguk (2011) notes, many Indigenous groups were portrayed as either “primitive” or “savage” peoples (living in a state of nature, incapable of civilization, having no government, and unaware of the benefits of modernization). They came to be seen, he suggests, as “captives of nature, unable to harness nature’s resources and land to their advancement” (39). The notion of failed Indigenous agency, Soguk (2011) argues, forces Indigenous peoples into “relations of ban” – “seized, dehumanized, and exposed”, meanwhile, a specific form of sovereign power “acquires its authority in successfully objectifying, externalizing and finally normalizing the relations it actively constructs and boundaries it busily builds” (41). The perceived powerlessness and a lack of agency of Indigenous peoples perpetuate the dangerous rhetoric regarding Indigenous politics. This has tangible consequences, including cultivating “essentialist ideologies of culture and identity” (Kuper 2003, 395), as well as certain hegemonic articulations of Indigeneity that are informed by an alleged exclusivity of primordial characteristics and claims of belonging to a place or territory. Adam Kuper (2003) argues that the term “indigenous” has become a euphemism for “primitive” in a similar way to “culture” becoming a gloss for “race”, for governments and organizations. The effect is to recreate the same problematic notions of “blood and soil” or primordial right to belonging (see also Geschiere 2009). Similarly, Beth Conklin (1997) demonstrates how the current environmentalist agendas recognize “forest peoples’ right to make a living using natural resources” and rely significantly on romanticized conceptions of Indigenous relations to nature which have hidden costs (728). Conklin contends that the strategic essentializations (cf Spivak) of western Orientalist interpretations of Indigeneity, cause

Indigenous activists to reify these stereotypes. They construct a distinct, relatively homogenous pan-Indigenous identity, that usually operates through construction of firm boundaries and through the policing of Indigeneity, both empowering and alienating Indigenous peoples within their own “prison-house of identity” (Paradies 2006, 356). This self-interpellation of Indigenous groups with stereotypical images and traits, persisting in the public imagination, academic and activist discourses, leaves little space for those who do not fit within the categories, resulting in accusations of inauthenticity, effectively writing them out of Indigeneity discourses through arbitrary bureaucratic as well as community-based political procedures (Miller 2003; Paradies 2006).

Moreover, scholars of Indigenous politics argue that the distinctions between “authentic” Indigenous and “inauthentic” Indigenous are far from straightforward. Articulations of Indigeneity are neither natural nor inevitable but largely dependent on various intersecting local and global processes and conditions (Hicks 2011; Li 2000, 2014; Tsing 2005; Yeh 2007). The conjunction between global and local is particularly important in Indigenous politics as they show more saliently various ways in which local practices intersect and become complicated by global power relations. This complex globality or transnationality of Indigeneity and Indigenous politics is believed to reflect a lack of bargaining power among local Indigenous groups to properly negotiate their terms and rights, especially those pertaining to the exploitation of natural resources, lands, water, forests, and so on. (Muehlebach 2003, 258). For example, Emilie Maj (2012) discusses the strategic deployment of cultural and religious heritage rights when claiming Indigenous status among the ethnic Sakha. This identity discourse is used as a means to enter a competitive international political arena. Emphasizing a dynamic process of identity representation, Maj (2012) argues that, for the ethnic Sakha, claiming Indigeneity fosters a sense of belonging to a broader community of Circumpolar peoples, while accentuating Sakha political, economic, and socio-cultural marginalization within the Russian Federation. The environmental issues and concerns relating to the exploitation of natural resources in the post-soviet Sakha Republic motivated heated debates and antagonisms towards the Russian central government that resulted in the development of politicized Indigeneity discourses. This discourse activity promoted the revitalization and reinvention of the pre-Soviet Sakha cultural traditions and spirituality, and traditional reciprocal relationships with nature, which in turn, facilitated the

re-imagining of Sakha Indigeneity shedding “primitive savage” motif in favour of “noble people” living in harmony with nature (Maj 2012, 213).

However, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) warns, global Indigeneity can become co-opted politically not only by perceived “inauthentic” Indigenes but also by the descendants of settlers:

... who lay claim of an “indigenous” identity through their occupation and settlement of land over several generations or simply through being born in that place - though they tend not to show up at indigenous peoples’ meetings nor form alliances that support the self-determination of the people whose forebears once occupied the land that they have ‘tamed’ and upon which they have settled. Nor do they actively struggle as a society for the survival of indigenous languages, knowledges and cultures. Their linguistic and cultural homeland is somewhere else, their cultural loyalty is to some other place. Their power, their privilege, their history are all vested in their legacy as colonizers (7).

Echoing this sentiment, Niobe Thompson (2003) explores the complex economic and political implications and interplay between two terms, *priezzhie* (incomers for “settlers”) and *mestnye* (locals for “Indigenous”) in Chukotka (Russia), illustrating how these terms reproduced the bounded-ness of Indigenous cultures and communities in diverse diasporic origins of the settler population (126). Thompson (2003) argues that *priezzhie* came to occupy the position of *mestnye*. This is because the Chukotka’s oligarch governor (from 2001-2008), Roman Abramovich, created modernization policies that targeted local Indigenous peoples, aiming to expunge the “human ballast”, or settlers, who did not legally fit within a federally recognized category of Indigenous or native. He was essentially contesting the very meaning of local belonging and opportunistic appropriation of an Indigenous subject position (138). Through the discourses of distinct northern identity based on attachment to the land and extensive kinship ties to local communities, the long-term settlers appropriated certain aspects of Indigeneity, benefiting from the few rights it afforded, without having to bear any responsibilities to land or other Indigenous people, nor any of its negative consequences. Thompson (2003) posits a dilemma, namely that if the descendent population of former settlers/colonizers can be recognized as Indigenous in the Russian Arctic, these claims and assertions of belonging may consequently threaten local Indigenous movements. He further clarifies, however, that:

Merely harvesting the tundra to survive - knowing how to shoot a moose - hardly compares with the rich engagement of a Chukchi reindeer herder or a Koryak hunter with the land, in which acts of consumption are only one side of a relationship of continual reciprocal exchange and animals, trees, and rocks are imbued with animating personhood. This

spiritual perception of the natural environment, or some variation of it, is the anthropological prerequisite for truly inhabiting a landscape and being its native person. Settlers, as natives in Chukotka sometimes remark, have little sense of the spiritual complexity of the landscape surrounding them (156).

This and other similar cases might explain the extreme and explicit rigidity of the legally recognized category “Indigeneity” in the context of contemporary Russia. The term itself was first mentioned in the post-Soviet Constitution of Russia in 1993, explicitly emphasizing differences between national and international understandings of Indigeneity (Stammler-Gossmann 2009, 70). The Constitution further introduced the term Indigenous small-numbered peoples *korennye malochislennye narody*, legally recognized by the Russian government on March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2000. The word *korennye*, derived from the Russian word ‘root’ (*koren*), was deployed to imply rootedness, autochthony (original, primal, and primordial right to belonging), and Indigeneity. In addition, small *malye* was changed to small-numbered *malochislennye*, which shifted the connotation from a patronizing to a more respectful attitude, reflecting the locally unique importance of population size for Indigenous groups (Donahoe et al. 2008, 997-98).

Presently, the Russian Federation legally recognizes only 46 groups as Indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East. According to the legal requirements, a group can be recognized as Indigenous if members meet four specific official criteria: (1) group members must reside in ancestral and traditionally inhabited territories (stipulation *where* people must live); (2) a group needs to maintain a traditional way of life (stipulation *how* people must live); (3) the number of members cannot exceed 50,000 (population maximum); and (4) the group needs to self-identify as a distinct ethnic community (Koch and Tomaselli 2015; Tomaselli 2014). The following outlines the rationale for 50,000 as the maximum population:

Using figures from the 1989 census, they [ethnologists and experts of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Russian Academy of Sciences - IEA-RAS] noted that the largest of the recognized *malye* groups, the Nenets, numbered just under 35,000. Thus, initially a population maximum of 35,000 was stipulated, but this was later changed. Ultimately, it was determined that the 50,000 threshold was high enough to allow the largest *malye* group some possibility for growth yet still far enough below the smallest non-*malye* Indigenous group (Altaians with a population of ca. 62,000) that their exclusion from the category would not be questioned. Tishkov [director of the IEA-RAS] and other specialists, many of whom were directly involved in the discussions leading to the above definition, insist that the 50,000 threshold was simply a convenient, provisional figure that was never intended to be written in stone. (Donahoe et al. 2008, 998).

The uniquely Russian numerical politics of Indigeneity recognition create considerable tensions between the small and larger Indigenous groups, as it presumes that some Indigenous peoples are more Indigenous than others, and that some groups can be written out of Indigeneity discourses, economically and politically disadvantaging them (Cruikshank and Argounova 2000; Miller 2003).

Formally, the Russian Federation has passed *the Federal Law on the Guarantees of the Rights of Indigenous Numerically Small Peoples (Indigenous Rights Law)* in 1999, *the Federal Law on National Cultural Autonomy* in 1996, *the Federal Law on General Principles of the Organization of Communities of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East* in 2000, as well as *the Federal Law on the Territories of Traditional Nature Use by Indigenous Numerically Small Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East* in 2001 (Xanthaki 2004, 78-9), guaranteeing the rights of Indigenous people to:

- freely use land and renewable natural resources in their traditionally occupied territories and areas where they engage in traditional economic activities (“On Guarantees”, art.8, para.1);
- establish self-government bodies where densely populated settlements are in place, and to form communities and other organizations (“On Guarantees,”1999, arts.11 and 12);
- revise their educational institutions in line with their traditional way of life (“On Guarantees,” 1999, art.8, para.9);
- obtain compensation in the event that their traditional environment is damaged by industrial activities (“On Guarantees,” 1999, art.8, para.8);
- consider customary law in court proceedings as long as it does not contradict federal or regional legislation (“On Guarantees,” 1999, art.14) (Koch and Tomaselli 2014, 5).

Out of these legally recognized rights, the right to land came to be seen as the most important aspect of Indigenous status, representing “the goals of defending age-old habitat and the traditional way of life, economy and trades” of Indigenous peoples (Fondahl and Poelzer 2003, 117). Yet, this legal clause (useful otherwise) implicitly stipulates that if the “traditional way of life” is not followed, an Indigenous group’s land rights can be revoked and discontinued. Thus, Indigenous peoples in Russia are allowed to maintain legal rights to land, however, these rights are recognized with the particular goal of preserving traditional modes of subsistence, such as reindeer-herding, trapping, hunting, and fishing. Gail Fondahl and Greg Poelzer (2003) define this legal trend in relation to Indigenous groups as “protection of traditionality rather than

aboriginality” (120), arguing that the Russian officials tend to constantly revise the laws pertaining to Indigenous peoples, making them as narrow and constraining as possible in order to minimize the number of beneficiaries of *l’goty* (privileges) to land and traditional subsistence activities (117). Even though many Indigenous peoples practice more than the stereotypical, or officially recognized “traditional way of life”, and many are involved in trading, wage labour (in the mining and energy industry), and other “modern” activities, the legally provided *l’goty* can be easily revoked if the Indigenous lifestyle deviates from its “authorized” and legally determined norms. Marjorie Balzer (2014), for instance, recalls an absurd incident when the Indigenous Nanai fishermen were deprived of their rights to the land because they had been using snowmobiles to travel between their base and village; the judge revoked their land rights stating that they should have used reindeer or canoe in a “traditional way” (6). Ironically, this specific Indigenous group has never owned or herded reindeer.

Bruce Miller (2003) argues that this sort of bureaucratic circumscription of Indigeneity is created and deployed by the states to control, manage, and contain Indigenous populations in designated areas; minimizing the threat posed by their assertions of difference, and necessarily causing a conflict between recognized Indigenous and would-be but not yet recognized groups. In this sense, narrow bureaucratic definitions, categorizations, and recognitions of Indigeneity ignore existing complexities as well as contradictions in Indigenous lived experiences. This benefits the state, marginalizes, and disregards Indigenous peoples’ rights, and diminishes their potential grievances and ongoing struggles.

It is imperative to note that despite some advancements in legal frameworks and in legal guarantees of Indigenous rights in Russia, there are issues that Indigenous peoples continue to face. Some of these include socioeconomic discrimination (differences in living standards, unemployment, disparities in wages and social benefits, etc.), a lack of participatory rights (for instance, there is no system for designating seats for Indigenous people in legislative bodies at regional and local levels which results in few Indigenous representatives), and a lack of a comprehensive framework for land rights (land is legally “public”, and owned by the state) (Xanthaki 2004). Alexandra Xanthaki (2004) notes that Indigenous cultural rights received considerable attention in the Russian Federation, however, Indigenous peoples themselves assert that the protection of land rights is far more urgent (99). Xanthaki (2004) contends that while the Constitutional legislation prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, language, and religion;

and other legislation promotes Indigenous cultures, languages, and lifestyles, Indigenous groups in Russia do not actually enjoy the rights guaranteed to them by the state because they are not evenly applied. The existing legislation is weak and more declarative in nature, and thus legally ineffective (105).

### **Politicizing Indigeneity**

Some would assert that the politicization of Indigeneity is a reactive response to experiences of oppression, dispossession, and marginalization. Indigeneity is viewed as a rhetorical device that can become appropriated in different contexts and employed as “instrumental ideological ammunition” (Beteille 1998, 191) by marginalized groups. In Russia, the political life of Indigenous was regulated by settlers (mostly Russians) and organizations, not political bodies at national levels. Settlers pushed their causes, and because they outnumbered Indigenous people, were considered more “politically relevant” to parties who relied upon them to be re-elected. State political actors only later manipulated existing legal rights to benefit the settlers (and indirectly, the state) usually at the expense of Indigenous peoples’ rights (Diatchikova 2001; Petrov 2008; Semenova 2007).

This situation changed somewhat with the emergence of international Indigenous movements, protesting both hegemonic neo-liberal governments, and the economic, political, and cultural marginalization of Indigenous peoples. Multiple Indigenous groups turned to global articulations of Indigeneity and engaged in a wide range of frameworks of re-constructing their post-Soviet subjectivities, which came to mean more than “pretty costumes, choreographed dances, and music ensembles” (Donahoe 2011, 404), the superficial trappings of multicultural performance. Gradually, Indigeneity became politicized because of its association with rights of access to, and control over, land, natural resources, self-determination, and sovereignty (Gray 2005; Koch and Tomaselli 2015; Semenova 2007; Silanpaa 2000). Furthermore, the 1990s *perestroika* and *glasnost* ideologies also played an essential role in the rise of post-Soviet Indigenous activism, providing Indigenous peoples with the capacity to participate in regional, national, and international policy-making processes directly pertaining to Indigenous rights (Gray 2005; Semenova 2007; Vakhtin 1992).

The largest Indigenous organization, the Russian Association of the Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples of the North (the RAIPON) *Assotsiatsiia Korennykh Malochislennykh*

*Narodov Severa*, was established as an umbrella non-governmental organization at the First Congress of Indigenous Peoples of the North in March 1990. The RAIPON's primary goal was "to protect the legitimate interests and rights of the Indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation" (Semenova 2007, 8). This included rights to land, natural resources, and self-government in line with both international standards and the Russian legislation on Indigenous rights. The establishment of the RAIPON and its attempts to transform the discourse on Indigeneity from a primordialist cultural discourse (employing tropes such as "primitive savage" or "noble savage") to a more nuanced political discourse changed how Indigenous peoples viewed themselves and interpreted their experiences within the post-Soviet socio-political sphere. The RAIPON and other small-scale Indigenous organizations urged a reconfiguring of the essentializations of Indigeneity. The new constructions needed to be in tune with the international Indigenous movement discourses and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of 2007. This way, the term could be instrumentalized for use in human rights claims. Therefore, the category of Indigeneity, originally constructed and employed to control and administer Indigenous peoples, came to serve as an important and successful source of self-determination, successfully resulting in an increase in recognized Indigenous groups from 26 to 46 between 1993 and 2000 (Donahoe 2011, 999).

The RAIPON was particularly successful in politically mobilizing the Indigenous groups and promoting Indigenous rights. Due to these politicized activities of the RAIPON and other Indigenous organizations, an increasing number of Indigenous groups defended their rights by filing lawsuits if their regional and federal rights were violated. Some were successful, some were not, depending on the governmental valorization of profitable economic projects, such as those in the resource extraction industries (Koch and Tomaselli 2015, 15).

Despite the considerable achievements of Indigenous activists, Indigenous peoples' living conditions continued to deteriorate throughout the post-Soviet Russia era (Koester 2005; Pika 1999; Tomaselli 2014). In addition to ongoing socio-economic and political marginalization, the environmental destruction brought by intense industrial development, and the destabilizing state economic policies continue to seriously threaten the livelihood of Indigenous peoples and their modes of subsistence (Fondahl and Sirina 2006; Hicks 2011; Tomaselli 2014). It seems that, along with the economic disempowerment and poor implementation of legislation on Indigenous rights in relation to land and its resources, the post-Soviet period engendered a new political

order, dominated by the powerful oil and gas, and other industrial corporations. The effect was to concentrate power in the hands of a few oligarchs (*oiligarchs* as Alexander Etkind (2014)<sup>3</sup> refers to them), creating a highly unequal distribution of wealth and power. For instance, in his ethnography of Khantaika, David Anderson (2000) describes the appointing of representatives of oil and gas industries to the local parliament of the “autonomous” Indigenous districts of the North. These new governing forces replaced Indigenous administrators with Russian outsiders representing private interests as allies of industry and government officials.

### **De-politicizing Indigeneity**

The multiple and intersecting inequalities experienced by Indigenous peoples have recently become hotly discussed topics in the Russian political arena. The ongoing political and economic marginalization of Indigenous groups forced the RAIPON and other Indigenous organizations to adopt a more critical stance on certain constitutional amendments regarding the protection of Indigenous rights at the national and international levels (Tomaselli 2014, 13). The Russian government’s response was to shut down the RAIPON between 2012 and 2013. In *Novaya Gazeta* (*New Newspaper* online publication), Dmitry Berezhkov (2012), a former vice-president of the RAIPON, argues that the organization was shut because of its active defense of Indigenous rights, its dissemination of information on the problems faced by Indigenous groups to wide international audiences, its participation in the international Indigenous movements, and finally, its cooperation with international organizations in developing laws pertaining to Indigenous rights. Berezhkov (2012) states that the powerful extraction companies, backed by the Russian government authorities, are violating the rights of Indigenous peoples to access and use their ancestral and traditional territories, and are creating conflict over land and its natural resources. The RAIPON was eventually granted permission to re-open in 2013 due to the campaign led by Survival International, an international human rights organization, supported worldwide by the Indigenous NGOs and leading experts on Indigenous issues (Koch and Tomaselli 2015, 6). The

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<sup>3</sup> In his work on post-Soviet Russia’s exploitation and dependence on extractivism, Alexander Etkind (2014) argues that the main reason of Russia’s arrested development is the oil curse, “a self-imposed condition, a contingent political process that depends on the unique choices of the authorities and the population” (161). According to Etkind, the Russia’s oil curse not only concentrates the power in a few hands of oil oligarchy (*oiligarchs*) and security apparatus, creating a highly unequal distribution of wealth, perpetuating deterioration of human capital, turning the population into objects of charity rather than producers of the state’s wealth.

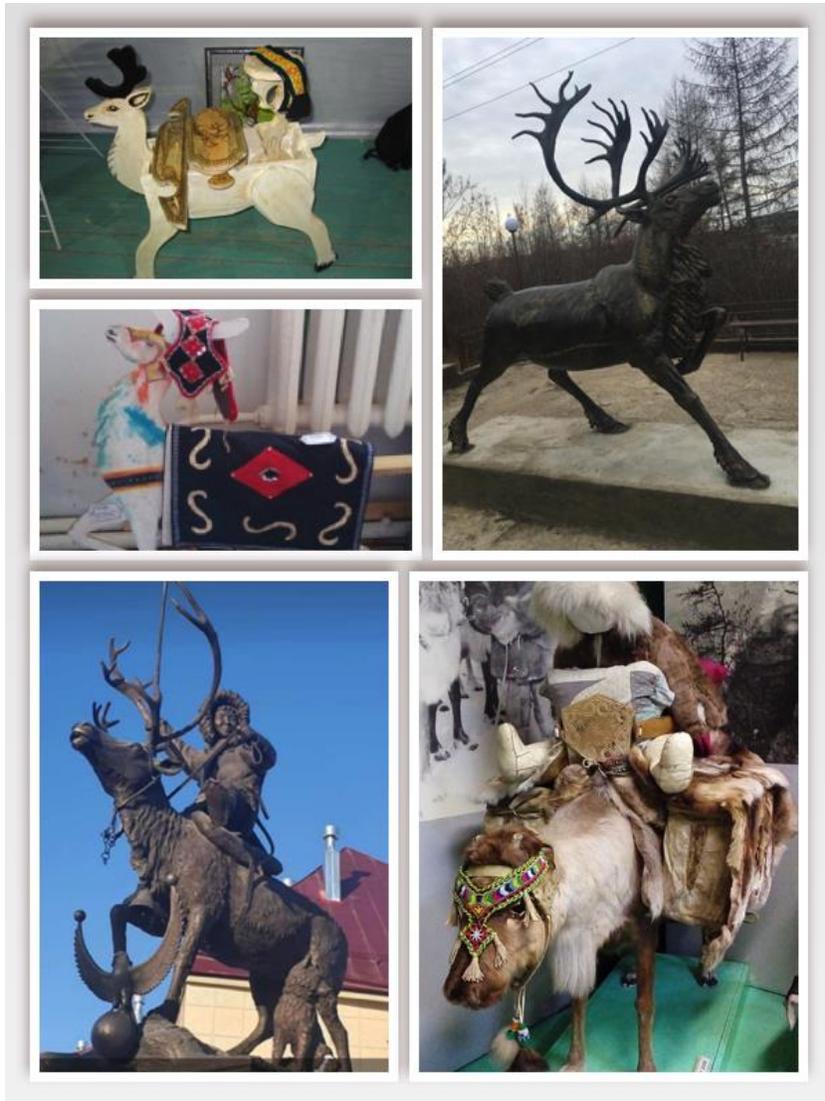
state administrative blockades erected to interfere with the RAIPON's operation, which is the only organization in the Russian political milieu powerful enough to represent 46 different Indigenous groups, is a clear example of Russian state authorities seeking to expedite Russian industrial and extraction projects (Berezhkov 2012; Koch and Tomaselli 2015).

These recent predicaments with the Indigenous organizations manifest the Russian governmental wariness about protecting Indigenous rights, especially rights to lands and natural resources. Such claims, if raised, could unearth major political and economic issues, explicitly threatening the state's control over the regions with economically critical natural resources (Berezhkov 2012; Donahoe et al. 2008; Hicks 2011). During the 2009 G-20 summit in Pittsburgh, USA, then Russian president Dmitri Medvedev participated in a question-and-answer session at the University of Pittsburgh. I happened to be there and asked a question on the rights of Indigenous peoples to revenues from the extraction activities in Sakha Republic, specifically mentioning the diamond mining industry in the region. Dmitry Medvedev responded as follows:

Yakutia is certainly a rich region, rich in mineral resources, including the diamonds you mentioned. However, my attitude toward this is rather different than yours. As long as we live in the framework of a single country - and I hope this will continue to be so as this is our shared wish - all underground resources on the territory of the Russian Federation, they are in essence, our shared property and it does not make sense to divide them into parts. It is another question, about whether or not a subject of the Russian Federation closely connected with the extraction of these resources should receive more in the way of revenue, say. That is a possible option. The question is about whether we relate to this soberly and take thoughtful action so that one region, where there are many enterprises, a significant amount of profitable industrial production, or many valuable underground resources doesn't live extravagantly, 'high on the hog', (*v shokolade*) as they say, while another subject, where there are no resources ekes out a meager existence. For this reason, the federal budget exists and redistributes income (translation by Hicks 2011).

This statement explicitly illustrates the Russian state's attitude towards Indigenous peoples and toward their claims to anything resembling Indigenous politics. In her analysis of Indigeneity claims by the Sakha, Susan Hicks (2011) argues that Dmitry Medvedev's rejection of preferential rights for differentiated minority subjects in Russia and his insistence on the shared Russian entitlement to natural resources contradicts the current rapidly increasing privatization of formerly state-owned resources by a few extraction companies. Thus, Dmitry Medvedev's statement reflects not only the Russian state's historical paternalism towards Indigenous citizens; moreover, it validates an aggressive prioritization of oil and gas extraction by dismissing

Indigenous claims appear to be impediments to industrial growth, which is the contemporary incarnation of the “progress” trope (Hicks 2011). Therefore, it is not surprising that the Central Russian government chooses to maintain the strictly defined category of Indigeneity, based primarily on stereotypical imagery of Indigenous peoples (Balzer 2014; Bloch 2004; Ssorin-Chaikov 2003). Any deviation from traditional practice is enough to invalidate a claim to Indigenous land rights. Similar to the US state-sanctioned blood quantum and tests, proving blood, historical and cultural continuity (Miller 2003), the administratively constructed anti-political mis-recognition of Indigeneity serves as a practical, “graspable”, and profoundly political strategy of the Russian government. First and foremost, these controls restrict the politicized articulations of Indigeneity at the local and federal levels. Yet, the deliberate identification of economically and politically marginalized Indigenous peoples of the Russian North with international more successful Indigenous movements is interpreted as a threat by the Russian centrists, and as political manipulation designed to wrestle control from the state over the land and its natural resources (Hicks 2011), rather than as an assertion of cultural “survivance”, which creates dangerous frictions between local Indigenous peoples and the state.



*Figure 4:* Collage of diverse representations of reindeer

## Chapter 2: Labour

### Introduction

Last fall, my friend Elena sent me several pictures of the new monuments erected in the administrative centre Olenyek, memorializing reindeer and reindeer herders. She noted that the unveiling of each monument was celebrated in an official yet festive manner and that the locals, especially those involved with the herding industry, were utterly excited and pleased to see the Evenki cultural symbol “reindeer” commemorated and herders’ labour finally appreciated.

Reindeer has an imperative meaning in the Evenki ontology as one of the essential representations of the Evenki culture, spirituality, and of the primary traditional mode of subsistence (Anderson 2000, 2006; Bloch 1998; Gray 2000; Slezkine 1994; Vitebsky 2009, etc.).

During my fieldwork, the locals pointed out this fact to me many times. “If there is no reindeer, there is no Evenk”, almost every person I either interviewed or casually chatted with would tell me. Various reindeer images were present in street and building decorations, in paintings on the walls of many institutions (kindergartens, schools, administrative buildings, hospitals, cultural centres), and as several monuments depicting reindeer erected by the local authorities. The local children’s dancing group was named after an Evenki word for a reindeer calf *Oronchikan*, and I admired an impressive quilt composed of different reindeer skin patches in the form of the Olenyek district map on one of the walls of the main administrative building of the village.

Reindeer was ubiquitous and its prominent status was undisputed. Considering that the symbol of reindeer and of reindeer herding is often used to culturally ground the Evenki, it is also frequently exploited by numerous Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations to represent the Evenki and other Indigenous communities locally and globally. However, the idea (and utilization) of essentialist and timeless Indigenous symbols (and of Indigeneity) can be problematic because cultural symbols, as well as cultures, are not static but flexible and in constant flux and transformation. In this chapter, I will explore the contradictions and some unintended consequences of the symbolic politics framed around idealized images of Indigeneity generally and of Indigenous labour specifically.

### Constructing Indigeneity

The term “indigenous” itself has gone through many changes since the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century when it, derived from the Latin *indigena*, was introduced to identify people or products “born or

produced naturally in a land or region: Native or belonging naturally to the soil, region, etc.” (Hodgson 2002, 1038). The current understanding and definition of “indigenous”, as stipulated in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted in 2007, reflects the ambiguity of the universal concept of Indigeneity, Indigenous culture(s), as well as of universal Indigenous rights, simultaneously highlighting that there are not exclusive or necessary conditions for identification and recognition as Indigenous (Hathaway 2010; Li 2000). This lack of restrictive and finite definition of Indigeneity made it possible for many groups to draw upon the international concept of Indigeneity, with various degrees of success, in constructing their own Indigenous subjectivities within a framework of shared common struggle with other Indigenous groups. Despite several state governments officially rejecting the notion of Indigeneity, numerous groups in Asia and Africa actively claim and articulate Indigenous backgrounds and identities. Gabrielle Lynch (2011), for example, points out that Indigeneity and the notion of Indigenous peoples are recent and quite contested phenomena in the African continent; while, in other locations, Indigeneity is often employed to represent original inhabitants who are marginalized by dominant colonizing powers. In the sub-Saharan African context, the term is used to identify “distinct cultural minorities” on the basis of both historical and territorial continuity, oppression and discrimination (157). For this reason, many local Indigenous activists maintain that the emphasis needs to be made on domination by others and on marginalized status, rather than residential continuity. And, according to the African Commission’s statement, Indigeneity is “a wider internationally recognized term by which to understand and analyze certain forms of inequalities and suppression”, referring to global movements for rights and justice for those groups who were left at the margins of development and discriminated against because of their cultures and ways of life (Lynch 2011, 158). In this regard, Anna Tsing (2007) accurately points out that marginalized groups’ increasing mobilizations “under the Indigenous banner” or creating alliances with Indigenous groups in their struggle are those who “have been left out of the benefits of national development” (53). Indeed, a host of literature on Indigeneity articulations shows that aligning oneself within and with Indigeneity discourses allowed marginalized groups to strategically represent and promote their rights to land, resources, and self-determination, attracting the support of international human rights agencies, advocacy, and environmental organizations (Hathaway 2010; Hicks 2011; Li 2000; Sylvain 2002, etc.). This very broad deployment of Indigeneity makes defining it

far from straightforward, as a result, a few anthropologists and others have attempted to examine the instances of how and why the category of Indigeneity comes into play and is deployed in a political sense, emphasizing a certain set of characteristics shared by Indigenous groups in different locales.

A plethora of literature on Indigenous politics notes the problematics of the limited strategies available for Indigenous groups to gain attention and support from the international human rights agencies and environmental organizations (Conklin 1997; Cruikshank and Argounova 2000; Li 2000, 2014; Warren and Jackson 2003, etc.). For instance, Beth Conklin (1997) argues that the Amazonian Indigenous activists' strategic playing off on western stereotypes of Indigeneity appeals to western aesthetics and reaffirms the same stereotypes, constructing distinct, homogenous pan-Indigenous identity and a community. This cultural reaffirmation also creates an opportunity to question "authenticity" and "realness" of those Indigenous groups who do not conform to enforced images and discourses, resulting in accusations of their inauthenticity, and effectively writing them out of Indigeneity discourses through arbitrary procedures of recognition. Moreover, the essentialized portrayals of "Indigenesness" often contradict and have little relationship to the realities of Indigenous life and limit the goals of activists "only to the extent that these self-definitions resonate with western ideological and symbolic constructs" (729). Within a diversity of contexts, both Indigeneity and Indigenous politics are believed to over-rely on the essentialized notions of authenticity, particularity, and marginality that necessarily connote a hegemonic state – "one that is over-arching and predominant" (Harris 2013, 11), positioning Indigeneity as "presupposed, singular and hegemonic" (Gomes 2013, 13-4).

Furthermore, the history of international Indigenous movements as well highlights extensive debates over authenticity and the exclusivity of Indigeneity – specifically who is and who is not Indigenous, its inner contradictions and complexities, as well as powerful external influences by the transnational NGOs and other organizations that sometimes exacerbate the same problematic particularities and contradictions within the movements (Conklin 1997; French 2011; Li 2014; Miller 2003). The global Indigenous movement was a key influence for multiple localized Indigenous mobilizations in different locations, however, it simultaneously created and imposed an international hegemonic model for Indigeneity. Virginia Tilley (2002), for instance, illustrates how the transnational Indigenous people's movement encouraged the Salvadorean

state to recognize Indigenous communities and opened the niche for local Indigenous activism, however, its Indigeneity definition hijacked the local articulations and created a new hegemonic discourse about Indigenous identity that, according to Tilley (2002), “has paradoxically made the Salvadorean Indigenous peoples’ political dilemma worse” (528). The El Salvadorian case of Indigenous politics is unique in itself as El Salvador had no significant or “genuine” Indigenous population; moreover, the self-identified *indigenas* did not fit the criteria for Indigeneity held either by local society or by most outside sympathizer groups. Tilley argues that Salvadorean Indigenous peoples had to manifest themselves as authentically “Indigenous” following the domestic and international standards of Indigeneity, imposed by the politics of authenticity of the funding organizations, academics, and “experts” (529). In this sense, Salvadorean Indigenous communities had to sacrifice their own experiences as Indigenous peoples and become “Indigenous” within the codified norms of hegemonic transnational Indigeneity - “the synthetic body of concepts, values, and related claims understood as definitive of what Indigenous peoples are, and of their political needs and group rights” (Tilley 2002, 553).

### **Consuming Indigeneity**

Similar to the Salvadorian *indigenas*, the Evenki of the Olenyek district heavily utilized certain positive representations of Evenki Indigeneity and of the local culture that primarily revolve around romanticized and exoticized images constructed by the outsiders, though not necessarily for politicized or advocacy purposes. In her book *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, Sara Ahmed (2000) critiques the stranger fetishism which she says “... invests the figure of the stranger with a life of its own”. This “cuts ‘the stranger’ off from the histories of its determination” (5) and exoticizes difference, producing an effect intended for consumption by outsiders. Adopting bell hooks’ (1992) argument “within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, or seasoning that can liven up the dull dish” (21), Ahmed contends that ethnicity of the Other is often constructed as “the exotic” through an analogy with food, “the exotic and strange foods are incorporated into the bodies of western consumers as that which is different, but assimilable. This incorporation of ‘difference’ to be associated with something that simply livens up the ordinary or mainstream diet” (117). As such, difference and Otherness are valuable as long as they are both consumable and palatable, thus capable of nourishing the broader social

body. In this way, Indigeneity is incorporated (and instrumentalized), while establishing the consuming subject in close proximity to the strange and different culture.

I want to use this analogy of food of the Othered as *authentic strangeness* to discuss the event that I observed and participated in the village Khariyalaakh. During my last week in Khariyalaakh, my host Mariya and I were having dinner, when she excitedly told me that a group of documentary filmmakers from Japan would visit Olenyek to make a film about the Evenki people and the Evenki culture. Several days before their arrival, the leaders of Khariyalaakh were summoned to the administrative centre and ordered to prepare the public performance of *sinilgen* (a traditional Evenki celebration of the first snow and the beginning of hunting season) for the Japanese crew to film. The whole Khariyalaakh was buzzing with excitement for several days; the women were mending their traditional outfits to wear and cooking traditional food to treat the guests, the men were responsible for setting up tents and campfire on the bank of the river 30 minutes away from the village; the local children's dancing ensemble was rehearsing their performances; there was even a reindeer calf brought to the village from one of the herds camping nearby. Witnessing the excitement of the whole community, I asked Mariya, my host in Khariyalaakh, if this was the first time the foreigners visiting the region, Mariya exclaimed, "Oh no, not at all! We have foreigners here all the time; in fact, this is not the first documentary crew in Olenyek; there were some Russian filmmakers here just this summer".

On the day of *sinilgen*, Mariya could not go because of her worsened health, but she insisted on me attending the celebration, and made sure that I would be included in the list of attendees and transported to and from the event site along with the local activists and performers. The group I was in was picked up a bit late. When we arrived almost everything was set up, only the documentary crew was yet to arrive. While waiting for festivities to begin, I wandered around the camp, chatted with the villagers I was already acquainted with, took some photos, and assisted women with some cooking, and setting up the tables inside the tents. It was a nice warm day; it snowed a couple of days ago - the conditions were perfect for celebration. The film crew with two Russian interpreters arrived almost an hour late; the event started up with the dancing performances by *Oronchikan*, followed by the traditional ritual of feeding fire, praying for bountiful hunting, requesting blessings for hunters, and concluded with sport competition among local hunters. The Japanese crew filmed the performances; they were then invited to the main tent to test traditional foods and departed shortly after. The exoticness and difference were

properly consumed, the celebration was over. I helped the women to put away the remaining food, clean the tents, collect the garbage, and we headed home.

When I was thinking about this event later, I recounted my conversation with one of the women, preparing the traditional blood sausages long before the arrival of the foreign guests, and her comment, reflecting the politics of acceptability of strangeness. The preparation of blood sausage is not a visually pleasing activity and would not be enjoyed by someone even slightly squeamish or of sensitive disposition. Myself being used to how my own mother prepares the blood sausage, I became interested in differing techniques as well as ingredients used by the local women. While showing me how to fill and evenly distribute the reindeer intestine with reindeer blood, the woman commented, “We cannot show something like this to our guests”. Other women in the tent and I chuckled at that comment. Beth Conklin (1997) notes that there is a fine line between the exotic and the alien, “between differences that attract and differences that offend, unnerve, or threaten” (723). In her article, the Amazonian Indigenous activists construct profoundly strategic body images and body decorations to appeal to the ideology and aesthetics of the western environmental allies; for instance, Conklin shows how some traditional aesthetics of many Amazonian peoples (heavily oiled body, strong-smelled paints and ointments, plucked eyebrows, shaved scalps, etc.) as well as monkey-tooth bracelets and jaguar-tooth necklaces (implying an act of killing inappropriate to the idea of closeness to nature) were no longer used by the local activists, as they were deemed too harsh and graphic, offending western sensibilities (723). The women at the *sinilgen* proved to be aware of the necessity of playing to outsider audiences, and performed a similar politics of acceptability, ingeniously calculating what can be cross-culturally translated in an inoffensive manner to be exotic enough for consumption (for instance, traditional clothes, traditional dancing, and traditional sports) but not too strange or different to be rejected (for instance, a process of preparation of certain traditional foods). Despite all the local efforts though, some of the visitors later profusely complained about the local cuisine, lack of fruits and vegetables, and “barbarity” of the local consumption of reindeer on the social media, signifying the limits of what can be incorporated (and tolerated) into the global discourses of Indigeneity, and revealing the power imbalance between the consumer and the consumed, concealing the material aspect of this social and cultural asymmetry and harsh realities caused by it.

During my first week in Olenyek, I decided to visit the village shops to learn the local prices and see what sort of goods were available for sale; during my stroll, I stumbled upon an old building surrounded by a large group of visibly agitated villagers. Upon seeing my host Sasha in the crowd, I asked “What’s happening?” Sasha explained that the building was a state-owned store, and the crowd was in line to purchase vegetables (potatoes, cabbage, carrots, and onions) and fruits (apples, oranges, and bananas) delivered by plane from Yakutsk just yesterday. She also informed me that the state-owned store’s prices were significantly lower in comparison with other individually owned shops, and that the produce was delivered once a month and usually sold out within an hour or so. Considering that it was almost impossible to grow vegetables because of the local climate, and that majority of the villagers could not afford the overpriced produce from individual sellers, the agitation of the crowd was justified. That very evening, Vera, Sasha’s daughter, showed me a video of an angrily yelling crowd posted on Instagram - it was of the produce sale in the government-owned store. The video was shared many times by the local and regional Instagram users; the comments to the video were predominantly sympathetic as most commenters were aware of the produce shortage and its high prices in the Arctic districts. This and other events I witnessed reflected the complex and multilayered predicament of the local population and of the local politics. On the one hand, the communities actively reified the outsiders’ stereotypes about them deploying the symbolic codes of Indigeneity such as exoticism, spirituality, ancient wisdom, and idealized environmentalism; on the other hand, their efforts also concealed the oppressive realities they had to deal with day-to-day. In this regard, I was not surprised when a foreign documentary filmmaker about the Evenki people in Yakutsk attempted to assure me that the Olenyek residents were happy to live off the land and reindeer herding, clearly ignorant of drastic economic inequalities in the region and the conditions engendering them.

In his analysis of indigenism, Ronald Niezen (2003) states, “there can be little nobility, wisdom, or environmental friendliness where addictions are rampant, economic desires are unfulfilled, and political frustration pushes regularly against the barriers preventing violence” (186). This statement proves to be true in the context of the Olenyek district, where, despite an abundance of strategically essentialized currencies of noble exoticism, the local people remain unable to overcome their oppression or fundamentally alter the structural violence that informs their living conditions.

## **Indigenous Proletarians**

In her book *In the Shadows of the State*, Alpa Shah (2010) problematizes the downsides of strategic essentialisms in the Indigenous politics, focusing on the rhetoric of Indigenous people as “protectors of nature and preservers of environmentally harmonious cultural heritage” (109), showing a contradiction between the “eco-savage” image, created by the urban Indigenous activists and politicians in rural Jharkhand, about the *adivasis* and their deadly human-elephant conflict, where an elephant was constructed and imposed on the villagers as the symbol of local Indigeneity. Moreover, the local use of global Indigeneity discourses had reinforced the socio-economic inequality, which Shah considers erased within the politicized cultural-based identity discourses. Ultimately, she argues that instead of focusing on unstable and heterogeneously formed cultural constructions, the anthropologists ought to show “how representations of the environment are rooted in material reality and are situated in, and emerge from, the socio-political context of the relationships among people struggling over material resources for their livelihoods” (125). Indeed, to understand articulations of Indigeneity is to understand underlying socio-economic conditions, prioritizing the class-based framework of Indigenous mobilizations and of Indigeneity.

A body of scholarly work suggests that the local appropriations of global discourses of Indigeneity can contribute to an existing class system that can further marginalize already poor people. Rene Sylvain (2002), for instance, brings attention to the predicament of the Omaheke San group of the southern Africa, whose struggles for recognition as Indigenous peoples, previously operated within class-shaped conception of territorial identity, currently focus on the narrow definitions of culture in order to assert their rights. Sylvain (2002) points out that global Indigeneity advanced the politicized notion of “culture”, simultaneously de-politicizing and excluding “class” interests, compelling the Omaheke San to abandon political economic contexts and adopt the “traditional” (primordial) cultural survival and revitalization discourses (1079). This transformation of the San from “class conscious” into “traditional cultural beings” provided potential for exploitative relationships based on the Omaheke San activism’s imagery as “struggles to preserve an archaic lifestyle, a mere cultural anachronism” (1082), successfully hiding the underlying complex class struggles. In a different context, the paradoxical de-Indianized Indigeneity in Peru similarly reinforced socio-economic inequalities, excluding the rural and lower-class indigenes from Indigeneity discourses of the urban educated mestizo elites,

forcing them into the class-based and Marxist category “peasants” essentializing them as countryside agriculturalists (De la Cadena 2000). In her seminal ethnographic study on Mestizo Indigeneity, Marisol De la Cadena (2000) argues that the urban middle-class mestizos (persons of Spanish and Indian mixed descent) employed the notion of *mestizaje*, which came to be associated with cultured manners, middle-classness, and education, whilst “Indianness” was associated with rurality, illiteracy, and poverty. The elite mestizos produced, celebrated, and consumed certain symbols of “impure”, yet paradoxically considered “authentic”, Indigenous culture (language, performative versions of Indigenous dance, music, etc.) in attempts to purify Indigeneity of its negative stereotypes, simultaneously legitimizing racial and class hierarchies (304-5). Thus, de la Cadena claims that this conceptual shift to “class” and “peasant” rhetoric preserved and legitimized the ideas of the inferiority and primitivism of Indians, further culturally, economically, and politically marginalizing them.

The conversion of Indigenous subalterns into fundamentally cultural proletarians is not unique to the Indigenous peoples in Peru or elsewhere; very similar essentializing processes can be observed in the context of the Russian Indigenes. Yet, the state understanding of Indigeneity in Russia is idiosyncratic with its explicit primordialism, institutionalization in state policy, and requirement of the specific administrative terms and conditions, which ultimately serve to perpetuate the lower socio-economic position of Indigenous peoples within the Russian citizenship hierarchy (Sokolovskiy 2013, 2015). Jane Burbank (2006) characterizes this special form of the state dominant position, power, and practice as “imperial rights regime”, where differentiated collectivities “obtain rights only when the state appears on the social scene and grants rights to its subjects” (429), turning nationality or ethnicity into the fundamental component of a citizenship requirement for racially and ethnically minoritized peoples.

Similarly, Terry Martin (2001) links the creation of ethnicized or culturalized citizens to an understanding of nationality and ethnicity as intensely primordial concepts during the Soviet period, where the concept of national and ethnic culture was only applied to formerly oppressed and marginalized peoples, deliberately elevating the ethnic Russians into the “above-national” status – “first among equals”, “the most progressive among the progressive” (437). Martin (2001) refers to this process of legitimization of culturally determined citizenship as “a logic of affirmative action”, which involved the policies of indigenization *korenizatsiia* - an active promotion of the distinctive ethnic identity of the non-Russian citizens of the new Soviet state.

The indigenization policy included the formation of national territories, the education and professionalization of national elites, promotion of national languages and of essentialist ethnic markers of identity (folklore, museums, dress, food, costumes, poets, certain historical events, literary works, etc.), and the preferential politics in education, industry, and government (13). The preferential politics towards the minority nationals were justified in two ways, firstly, the salient Indigenoussness (*korennost*) – the notion and characteristic available to be deployed by all non-Russians, and, secondly, “cultural backwardness” (*kulturno-otstalost*) – available only to those groups who were considered “developmentally backward” vis-à-vis “advanced” nationalities such as Russians, Ukrainians, Georgians, Armenians, Jews, and Germans (23-4).

Additionally, by creating an Indigenous intelligentsia and recruiting them to the elite positions, the Soviet state intended to facilitate the Soviet administration and make it more comprehensible and relatable for its “newly arrived elements” (12); the native elites, who understood “the way of life, customs, and habits of the local population”, were meant to make the Soviet power seem Indigenous rather than an external imposition (Gray 2005; Martin 2001; Slezkine 1992). Martin points out that this orientalist East/West dichotomy was the illustration of the preserved imperial categories, and the aggressive promotion of the cultural difference and of backwardness purposefully implied the Soviet state’s goal to detach itself from the bourgeois racist interpretations of backwardness (126). The goal of accelerated nation-building for ethnic minorities was celebrated as the ultimate cultural revolutionary utopianism, for instance, the creation of the national territories, national languages, cultural institutions and elites for the Northern Indigenous peoples was hailed as ‘the creation of new nationalities out of tribes which had earlier never dreamed of national existence ... [and] their transition in just six years through all the stages of development, which for other peoples required thousands of years’ (155). Martin further notes that the primary theme within the Soviet essentialist propaganda (the Friendship of the Peoples, the officially sanctioned metaphor of an imagined multinational community by 1938) was the immense “brotherly help” the Russian people had provided for all non-Russian groups, who were expected to be grateful and express their admiration and love for the great Russian people and Russian culture, which further facilitated the forced assimilation, or as Martin puts it, “the Russian culture should in some important way become part of their national cultures. Pushkin should be their national poet’ (455, 461).

In this sense, this legacy of the Soviet reconfigurations of Indigeneity in Russia as a fixed cultural identity often prevents the application of the Marxist philosophical thinking in the contemporary conceptualizations of Indigeneity and of Indigenous mobilizations, even though the Marxist framework can contribute to effectively escape the “noble savage slot” trap (Conklin 2013, 77). Glen Coulthard (2015), for instance, employs the Marxist concept “mode of production” in its broader ontological application as a “form of life”, which “encompasses not only the forces and relations of production but the modes of thought and behaviour that constitute a social totality” (para. 32) to analyze the settler-colonial political economies, which operate on the destruction of the Indigenous modes of production as “antithetical to capitalist accumulation and even forms of hierarchical authoritarian power” (2014, 25). This conceptualization of Indigeneity as comprised of modes of production drastically differs from its previous Marxist interpretations as a case of “false consciousness”, based on its “ethnic” expressions, which further deeply disenfranchised Indigenous groups in different contexts (de la Cadena 2000; Nash 1979; Sylvain 2002). Within this framework, socio-economic inequality experienced by Indigenous communities in the context of Canada should not be confused with working-class exploitation since Indigenous peoples are not proletarians in a strict sense of this term. According to Peter Kulchyski (2016), there is a different dynamic of oppression, more precisely, “the imposition of a dominant way of life” (98) and “the destruction of a way of life through taking away the means of subsistence [and] access to land” (99). Therefore, it is not surprising that Indigenous wage workers, being active members in labour market and labour unions, still experience segregation, discrimination, and racism. In the Canadian context, Suzanne Mills and Tyler McCreary (2012) note that the aboriginal peoples’ articulations of Indigeneity, anti-colonial struggles for lands, resources, and rights for self-determination critically differentiated them from other workers and collided with majority of unionists’ visions of worker solidarity, which prompted the white workers to portray aboriginal workers as outside of the working class (120). Yet, Mills and McCreary argue that unions can learn new frameworks for solutions and potentially adopt alternative models and strategies of social solidarity from the aboriginal communities themselves, such as “the language of reciprocity, reflecting traditional practices of building and maintaining relationships through mutual exchange of gifts” (130), since both aboriginal and labour movements are concerned with equity and equality, opposing exploitation.

In the context of the Soviet professionalization of reindeer herding and proletarianization of Indigenous herders, the labour unions representing and supporting reindeer herders were particularly active up to the 1990s. During my visit in Khariyalaakh, I got acquainted with the former collective farm leader and an active member of the local labour union; I inquired about the history of the labour unions and their relationships with the Indigenous peoples in the region, he stated:

Everyone was a member of different labour unions then - reindeer herders, hunters and fishers, and other workers; they were very efficient and made all the important decisions, for instance, about *l'goty* for women and elderly, how to write collective contracts, how to negotiate wages, and such. Nowadays herders do not have unions representing them, I do not understand why, and it is frankly astonishing to me, it looks like other workers have unions, like teachers, administrative centre employees, doctors, but they do not. I know that their wages are very low, you have seen our high prices, one cannot survive with their wages here.

In his extensive research on Indigenous peoples of the Soviet North, Yuri Slezkine (1992) notes that the processes of proletarianization and professionalization of the Arctic Indigenous communities resulted in the Soviet construction (and post-Soviet re-construction) of a specific category of Indigeneity. The specialized category of *small peoples of the North* referred to the peoples who resided on the Arctic and sub-Arctic territories of the Soviet Union, who practiced traditional mode of subsistence such as hunting, fishing, and reindeer herding, and who were seen by the Soviet officials as the most backward and in the state of “semi-savagery and outright savagery” (52). The important strategies in combatting savage backwardness and creating a Soviet subject was elimination of classlessness and division of all Indigenous peoples into the exploiters and the exploited, i.e., “to draw the class line across the natives” (Slezkine 1994, 191). However, it proved difficult to easily identify the exploiters among the Northern Indigenous communities since there was no accumulated wealth and capital. Though some reindeer herds were larger than others, the method of merely counting reindeer was ineffective; for example, the inspection in Kolyma (Yakutia) discovered that 73 percent of the local Indigenous nomads were “kulaks or feudal lords” because of the counted reindeer they owned, essentially making them “the poorest and most exploited” people of the Soviet Union and simultaneously, “exploiters hopelessly attached to private property” (199). The native population themselves claimed that there were no rich and poor among them or stated that “all natives are poor” (200), making the

class differentiation even more ambiguous. Additionally, the traditional economic activities - hunting, fishing, gathering, and reindeer herding - came to be seen as “utterly backward” and “economically irrational” (205), which facilitated an introduction of collectivization, modernization and industrialization policies that aimed to transform local economies into more rational and productive enterprises, making the Indigenous people more efficient economic producers. The proletarianization of *small peoples of the North* (especially those leading a traditional nomadic lifestyle) came to be seen as the quintessential representation of the goal of the socialist realism and of scientific communism, or as Slezkine (1994) puts it, “Indians, savages, children of nature, and all sorts of former aliens emerged from the wilderness to stand beside the workers and peasants” (292).

Another governmental strategy that affected traditional economies was a demarcation of migration routes, which bounded the herds to a region near sedentary bases and settlements. Mark Dwyer and Kirill Istomin (2009) point out that the most drastic changes to the herders’ movements and of land use were affected by the Soviet forced resettlements and consolidations (*ukrupnenie*), where small cooperatives (*kolkhozy*) along with small villages that they were based in were liquidated, and the residents were moved to larger settlements (295). The social, economic, and political changes required herders to make more frequent visits to the settlements, which gradually reduced the length of their migration routes, therefore, changing the herding range. The administrative reconfiguration of territorial borders altered not only the migration commutes and herding routes of the nomadic Indigenous communities but ultimately disrupted their kinship links. Tatiana Argounova-Low (2012), for example, shows how two groups of people in different (neighbouring) Indigenous districts articulated their identities through narratives about roads connecting them and by creating and reifying an imaginary memory link to their relatives (193). In this sense, as Argounova-Low argues the roads “enable and correspond to wayfaring, accompanied by variety of social engagements, life events, and encounters” (197), which rebuild the previously fragmented and liminal identity.

The recent resurgence of interest in the concept of primitive accumulation emphasizes its importance in critically analyzing the commodification of land, and dispossession of rights to land, water, and other natural resources (Baird 2011; Federici 2004; Harvey 2003; Tilley, Kumar and Cowan 2017; Walker 2011, and others). However, in his seminal work *The New Imperialism* (2003), David Harvey also reminds that primitive accumulation, perhaps best exemplified by

colonialism, encompasses other processes of “divorcing the producer from the means of production” (Marx 1967, 714 cited in Harvey); most importantly the “commodification of labour power and the suppression of alternative (Indigenous) forms of production and consumption” (145). Harvey further defines proletarianization as “a mix of coercions and of appropriations of pre-capitalist skills, social relations, knowledges, habits of mind, and beliefs on the part of those being proletarianized... In some instances, the pre-existing structures have to be violently repressed as inconsistent with labour under capitalism, but multiple accounts now exist to suggest that they are just as likely to be co-opted in an attempt to forge some consensual as opposed to coercive basis for working-class formation” (146). In this sense, the labour-power of Indigenous reindeer herders, hunters, and fishers was co-opted into communist, then, to capitalist market relations rendering it commodified and embedded into the wage labour economy, simultaneously destroying self-sufficiency based on traditional modes of subsistence. Therefore, in the context of the Indigenous communities in the Russian North, considerations of wage labour must become more salient in attempts to analyze the local labour dynamics as well as reconfigurations of traditional subsistence activities; particularly in the Olenyok district, where the majority of the local population has already been propelled into dependence on the wage labour market. However, it is also true that the Soviet formulations of traditional identities still linger (see the earlier discussion on de-politicization of Indigenous identities); thus, it is not surprising that the post-Soviet Indigenous political discourses were dominated by primordialist and essentialist portrayals of Indigenous peoples and of their traditional modes of subsistence; ironically, some proposing to implement even stricter policies towards Indigenous communities in order to preserve their traditionality and primordial Indigenousness. During my interviews with activists, politicians, and academics in Yakutsk, one of the urban intellectuals stated:

It is necessary to apply the method of conservation if we want to preserve the traditional modes of subsistence like reindeer herding, it is important to financially support them but also make sure that herders spend money on herding rather than anything else; otherwise, you will have cases when the herders receive the government subsidies but, instead of investing them into their herding activity, they buy apartments in Yakutsk. No wonder that we end up with underdeveloped and forgotten herding industry that no one wants to be involved with.

A plethora of literature on the post-Soviet Indigenous communities argues that this sort of decontextualized view of Indigenous peoples as bearers of “traditional culture” with no reference

to the contemporary socio-economic conditions and predominance of wage labour (as well as local labour politics) contributes to their further marginalization (Anderson 2000; Bloch 2004; Gray 2000; Petrov 2008; Sokolovskiy 2013, etc.). Moreover, the persistent equation of Indigeneity to a specific mode of subsistence reproduces the unequal economic relations, discriminating and commodifying them in captivity of their own ethnicized labour. In her seminal work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Rey Chow (2002) notes that there are many different ways to conceptualize ethnicity, however, the majority of scholarly analyses do not necessarily focus on the relationship between ethnicity and labour. To fill this void, Chow analyzes the diverse experiences of migration, specifically exploring how immigrants become marked as ethnics and foreign outsiders - even with obtained permanent residency or citizenship status - by merely occupying socially and economically inferior positions as low-level labourers within a capitalist society. She argues that a labourer becomes ethnicized and treated as a foreigner not only because of differing race or class status, but also because s/he is “commodified in specific ways, ... has to pay for living by performing certain kinds of work, while these kinds of work, despite being generated from within the society, continue to reduce the one who performs them to the position of the outsider, the ethnic” (34). This process of *ethnicization of labour* (34) creates a very specific ethnicized population, the one that majorly contributes to the accumulation of capital yet does not benefit from the capitalist rewards.

In this sense, this process reifies hierarchical divisions of labour and most importantly presumes ethnicity as recognized and articulated through a specific type of labour. For instance, Tracy Ying Zhang (2013) employs the theory of ethnicization of labour to investigate the commodification of labour in the carpet industries of post-socialist Lhasa, where the Tibetan carpet weavers actively participate in politics of representation by essentializing the constructions of “carpet weavers” and Tibetan material culture along with “Tibetan-Nepalese carpet factory owners, carpet dealers in New York City, and various participants in Lhasa, including party cadres, international non-government organizations (NGOs), and overseas investors” (754). In Zhang’s account, Samgye, one of the carpet weavers, confirms the marginalized position of carpet weavers and devaluation of their labour, when she states that they are not seen as modern subjects, rather as those carrying out archaic, traditional, or ethnic occupation belonging to the Indigenous cultural sector, rendering carpet-weaving second-rate to

urban occupations and carpet-weavers inferior to urban workers (767). Like the Tibetan carpet weavers, reindeer herders, then, become ethnicized to their occupation and associated with a lower socio-economic class, viewed as less qualified and poorly paid, they are reduced to the status of outsiders within the neoliberal market economy of the post-Soviet Russia.

During my fieldwork, I was repeatedly bombarded by similar statements by government officials, academics, and urban activists regarding how imperative reindeer herding was for the Evenki communities, the Evenki identity, and the Evenki culture; the symbol of reindeer was overwhelmingly popular among the local Indigenous activists, and utterly ubiquitous in the Olenyok district. Yet, the reindeer herders seemed to be among the most economically marginalized strata of the working community in the district. Though it is also imperative to note that the local people were aware of this particular economic injustice, and openly blamed the government for neglecting both reindeer herding industry and reindeer herders' labour. My host in Khariyalaakh, Mariya, whose husband was a highly respected herder with more than 40 years of herding experience, and spent more than 10 years travelling with her husband and children, shared her frustrations:

You know when we herded the conditions were very harsh, we lived in the old Soviet time tents, using the Soviet time stoves, there was no electricity. Now the conditions are much better but still difficult and it is a not a well-paid job. When you read about some of government officials' wages, which can be more than 100,000 rubles, and when you think about herders' wages, which is only around 20,000 rubles, you become speechless. How can one survive on 20,000 rubles? Herding was not a prestigious job before and it is not prestigious now, herders were respected though because of their difficult job. They do not need to be honoured and praised for their hard labour; they simply need livable wages. And who becomes a herder now? The youth who had never herded before, who were not admitted to the university; they do not know the territory well and can get easily lost in tundra - there was one young herder who got lost this summer, fortunately, he was found alive.

Here, I argue that a reindeer herder is an ethnicized labourer; the proletarian herder was a product of the Soviet economic project of proletarianization, yet, the herder of the present is still differentiated as a primitive outsider, which legitimates his position at the bottom of the socio-economic (and cultural) hierarchy.

## Women's Labour and Reindeer

In the Soviet economic restructuring, one of the strategies to rationalize Indigenous economies, specifically reindeer herding, was to maximize the output, i.e. reconfigure from “nomadism as a way of life” (*bytovoe kochevanie* or *kochevanie kak obraz zhizni*) to “nomadism as production” (*proizvodstvennoe kochevanie*), which involved professionalization of herders (primarily male herders), and employment of few Indigenous women as “tent-workers” (*chum-rabotnicy*), while other women were employed on dairy farms, fox-breeding farms, government institutions, schools, hospitals, settling into a sedentary lifestyle (Slezkine 1994, 341). Other aspects of modernization, such as veterinary services, housing, medical care, education, and other social and economic opportunities, expedited the incorporation of Indigenous peoples into the Soviet project of “ideal proletarians” (Bloch 1998). The Soviet modernization of reindeer herding altered not only the mode of subsistence itself but also the social and gender relations tied to it. A few researchers argue that the reindeer husbandry reform, masculinization of reindeer herding activity, and introduction of a separate position of tent-worker limited the number of wage positions for women, and left reindeer herders living separately from their wives and families. The younger non-married reindeer herders suffered the most as young women did not want to be involved with low-status nomads and maintain long-distance relationships; moreover, the traditional nomadic lifestyle or family nomadism came to be seen as backward and non-prestigious along with the perceived position of women as oppressed within the traditional society, resulting in women's migration from tundra to villages (Slezkine 1994; Tuisku 2001; Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001). Nowadays, most Indigenous people are not directly involved in reindeer herding but are otherwise employed and mostly reside in rural settlements or urban centres. For instance, in the Olenyek district, the village Khariyalaakh had most of the reindeer herders (in fact, there were five herding familial dynasties, whose extended relatives participated in the reindeer herding industry this way or another), there were a few reindeer herders in Olenyek and Djelinde; all in all, there were 64 people employed as reindeer herders in the whole Olenyek district.

A plethora of literature on Indigenous reindeer herding in the Russian North exhaustingly focuses on herding labour, predominantly on the occupation of male workers (Anderson 2000; Gray 2000, 2006; Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001; Vitebsky 2009, and others), rendering women subordinate or even implicitly implicating them in the deterioration of reindeer herding

husbandry with their preferred shift to sedentary lifestyle. For instance, in their study on reindeer herding among the Eveny community in Sakha Republic, Piers Vitebsky and Sally Wolfe (2009) write, “Many younger women could be said to be ‘addicted’ to the comforts of the village, with their well-insulated log cabins and their electricity, television and videos (whenever there is fuel for the village generator). There is, however, more to it than this. Many women will add that life in the camps is not civilized (*tsivilizóvanoe*) or cultured (*kul’túrnoe*). In the camps, it is impossible to wear elegant leather boots and clothes flown in from the city. The well-groomed younger village women see the reindeer herders as coarse and uncouth as they enter the village in their muddy clothes on their occasional home leave and hit the bottle” (89); moreover, they note an increase in Eveny young women’s association with immigrant men, that seemingly reflect their changing values (92). Yet, what is missing from this and similar discussions is the contribution of women to the persistence of reindeer herding (and other traditional subsistence activities) both as female herders as well as wage labourers in settlements. During my extensive conversations with the Khariyalaakh and Djelinde residents, I learned that many women performed the same activities as male herders in herding brigades, though they were not identified as herders in the official documents; for instance, Mariya, my host in Khariyalaakh, told me the following story from her early years of herding with her husband:

There was an older woman herding with us; I was so surprised to see that she was working alongside the men in the brigade. She also told me that all the hard labour at the camp, for example, putting up and taking down *chum* (an Evenki traditional dwelling) was previously a responsibility of women rather than men. Apparently, it was also up to women to butcher the large and small game; it was so unusual to me because I am Sakha, and as you know in our culture women do not butcher meat, it is men’s responsibility; that’s why I told my husband from the beginning that I would not do that; but Evenki women, they did everything.

In addition to herding and camp labour, the Evenki women of the Olenyek district also frequently worked as *kayurs* for a great many geological explorative expeditions during the 1950s-1970s in the district and beyond. Anna, an elder from Khariyalaakh, born in 1940, worked as a *kayur* with her husband for several years; I asked her to provide details about the *kayur* roles and responsibilities:

Those expeditions involved very hard labour; it was always very difficult: during summers, there were so many mosquitoes, during winters, it was very cold making travelling very slow and dangerous. My husband and I were in charge of transporting

rock samples, equipment, foodstuffs, but also geologists on our reindeer; as such, we were travelling back and forth all the time between the village and the expedition locations but also between geological locations as well. You know, there is a book published about our *kayur* work, but so far, we do not get any assistance from the state for our contribution to the development of mining industry here.

Anna was only one of a great many of the residents who were employed as *kayurs* by the geological expeditions in the Olenyek district during the Soviet era. The book that Anna mentioned, *Long Way to Treasures of Ancient Frontier* (2010), was written by Natalya Sivtseva, a retired teacher from Olenyek. This book is one of a very few comprehensive historical descriptions of the Soviet state geological explorations in the Olenyek district, as well as of enormous invaluable contribution to its development and operation by the local communities. Even though the Olenyek residents' contribution to the massive exploration projects is recognized by the local and regional authorities, many of them do not receive any benefits or assistance either from the state or the mining companies. During my conversation with Maya, a former reindeer herder and *kayur*, she expressed a bitter disappointment in the government and industry politics towards them; Maya complained to me:

My current pension is only 17,000 rubles (~CAD\$290); of course, it is not enough with our high prices here. I worked for so many years at those expeditions, but when the companies show up here, they only give us some chocolate and paper notebooks with the company logo, nothing else. Does it mean that I worked all those hard years for a piece of chocolate and a notebook?! They used to give 85 rubles before, but only my husband was receiving it, I never got anything. I know that the local activists are trying to get us some money from the companies, but they have not been successful so far. I cannot even imagine how much profits these companies might have, and all those profits are based on our hard labour as *kayurs*; without us, they would not have found anything!

Even though women played key roles in many aspects of herding and *kayur* labour, their contributions are still neglected or dismissed, and their labour status is still marginal. These instances of gendered exploitation are not novel; the processes of primitive accumulation worldwide created the fertile conditions for the emergence of capitalist economies. In this regard, Silvia Federici (2004) points out, "Primitive accumulation, then, was not simply an accumulation and concentration of exploitable workers and capital. It was also an accumulation of differences and divisions within the working class, whereby hierarchies built upon gender, as well as 'race' and age, became constitutive of class rule and the formation of the modern proletariat" (63-4). This economic (and socio-cultural) marginality within the capitalist gendered hierarchy is also

evident in the neglect of women's wage labour and its interconnectedness with the persistence of traditional subsistence activities, such as reindeer herding. In her poignant piece on women's roles in food provisioning in Paulatuuq, Northwest Territories, Zoe Todd (2016b) notes that "income from waged employment also serves to support traditional harvesting activities, such that a new division of labour is developing both within and across households" (205-6). More precisely, "The successful harvesting household is often also the successful wage-earning household, as this cash income is used for purchasing harvesting equipment, and especially fast means of transport. This is the key means of resolving the time allocation problem, mainly for men, between wage work and harvesting" (Usher, Duhaime, and Searles 2003, 178 quoted in Todd 2016b). The similar interdependence between women's wage labour and traditional activities such as reindeer herding, hunting, and fishing of men was evident in the communal and household dynamics in the Olenyek district. For instance, Mariya, my host in Khariyalaakh, even though officially retired, was still employed part-time at the local school to pay for domestic expenses as her husband, a reindeer herder, did not earn enough money to support their children and grandchildren as well as all the expenses associated with reindeer herding and hunting activities. Mariya's case was not singular; I gathered from my conversations with other women, involved in wage work in the village, that most of them were responsible for taking care of the expenses in their households as well as supporting their husbands, since most of the unemployed in the Olenyek district were men.

## **Conclusion**

A plethora of scholarly work criticizes the relation between Indigeneity and the commodification of labour, for example, Peter Kulchyski (2016), likewise Glen Coulthard (2015), argue that Indigenous traditional economic and political autonomy (autonomous Indigenous modes of production) and difference necessarily conflict with the capitalist modes of production, becoming obstacles to the expansion of capitalist ideologies. The deprivation of the Indigenous mode of production implies dependency on owners of the capital and means of production, serves as the basis of exploitation, and separates workers from the sense of communal identity, which "provide[s] the moral basis for human action that goes beyond self-interest" (Nash 1979, 325). Therefore, the retention of the unique traditional substantive Indigenous economies reflects communal considerations and activities. These serve as important spaces for the development of

politicized consciousness and action (Nash 1979, 20). In this sense, Indigenous traditional modes of subsistence come to be seen as assertions of the right to difference within local and global modernization and assimilationist projects; unlike class-based protests, Indigenous movements come to represent new forms of mobilization, encompassing all marginal groups, that “transcend class structure, democratize the dynamic of everyday life and expand the civil versus political dimensions of society, and highlight new or formerly weak dimensions of identity” (cited in Nair 2006, 5).

Additionally, Indigenous mobilizations based on either class or cultural only formations can be limited and overlook the social and cultural constructions of class or as June Nash (1979) puts it, “the multiple, coexisting, and often cofounding identities that enter into a political consciousness” (234). In her book *We Eat Mines and Mines Eat Us: Dependency and Exploitation in Bolivian Tin Mines*, Nash (1979) herself presents a convincing case of Bolivian miners’ class consciousness, which is rooted in both pre-Hispanic cultural processes (the Andean symbolism, rituals, ceremonies, and kinship-based systems of mutual assistance) and their contradictory experiences of dehumanizing exploitation in the mines and dire dependency on the same mines as the only source of employment. The unexpected outcome arising from this complicated contradiction is more radical and militant collective protest of the Bolivian miners in comparison with their counterparts in other industrial nations. What is more, Nash urges a more sophisticated understanding of the intersection between class and culture, where culture is not only “something transmitted from the past to present and future generations” but transcends to “the generative base for adapting to conditions as well as for transforming those conditions” and becomes “a tool for analyzing processes of change rather than an ideology for confirming the status quo” (311).

In summer of 2017, I had a meeting with one of the well-known Indigenous activists in Yakutsk; I was looking forward to meeting him, he was from an Eveny (an Indigenous group) family of the traditional reindeer herders, grew up herding, and knew the inside-outs of the industry. We spent hours discussing different topics related to Indigeneity, Indigenous politics, herding industry, extraction activities on Indigenous territories, and such. When I asked him what he thought about the current situation with reindeer herding, he contented:

I think the perspectives are changing now, I observed in many places how the Indigenous youth did not understand their identity and perceived it as something archaic, like

something primordial and unchanging, they did not think seriously about their identities, and you know a person is empty without it. Our organization (the Association of World Reindeer Herders) initiated an exchange program with Norway for our herding youth to learn that one can lead a modern life and be a herder at the same time. One of our participants changed so much after the program that his community was asking us what we had done to him. He said to me: “I thought I was living in a wrong way, but it turned out I live a right way – we had been taught that our life was wrong all the time and we believed that, but now I want to live how I want without being boxed in certain category.”

I find this quote to be quite reflective of the evolving understanding of identity, culture, and current socio-economic conditions among the Indigenous youth in Sakha Republic; what important though is to determine how to avoid reifying essentialisms and convert these emerging understandings into contextualized political actions against economic exploitation and cultural marginalization.



Figure 5: The SBERBANK ATM inside the post-office building in Djelinde

## Chapter 3: Potatoes, Fish, and the ATM

### Introduction

I arrived at the Djelinde school boarding house late afternoon after the invitation of the retired teacher, who I conversed with the day before. The teacher insisted that I visit the boarding house because it was one of the few surviving in the Arctic region; there were many of them during the Soviet period, however, most closed down after the 1990s educational restructuring. Its importance for the local community was obvious as, according to the teacher, both the local school administration and the parents insisted (and assisted) in keeping the house open. The boarding house turned out to be the old building standing next to the new school that I had passed many times before. There were no students staying in at the time because of the ongoing fall break, but I met two house workers inside the building. They explained that the boarding house stayed open because of its high demand among the families of lower socioeconomic background and the families with many children, who at times could not afford proper nutritious foods and/or resided in overcrowded houses, which affected students' studying. Here, the students (the building housed between 20-30 students a year) stayed during weekdays and spent weekends at home; they were provided food, a quiet place to study, and even tutors if they needed academic assistance - all free of charge. The boarding house employees organized a lot of social, cultural, and academic events for students to keep them busy and motivated and to promote creativity and a sense of community among its residents. The boarding house served its primary purpose only during the academic semesters; however, it was equally busy during the summer months as its employees and other teachers offered diverse extracurricular activities for all children in the village.

During our long conversation about the recent conflict, one of the house workers showed me a YouTube video recently uploaded by the company, featuring the village residents. It was a promotional video clearly intended to manipulate the public discourse away from the problematics of mining in the district, depicting the company as a promoter of modernization and development for the local community, emphasizing their corporate social responsibility, and raising the company's virtuous profile. One of the house workers pointed out that many villagers found the video quite offensive and demeaning, especially the part where the newly appointed company leader was shown handing out cookies to the crowd of local children, shown in sync

with an upbeat music. “Gosh! she exclaimed, they made us look like mere beggars; it is so humiliating! Look at our poor children and that man throwing cookies at them, so humiliating!”

I shared her sentiments about the video; I would say that not only was it reflective of the company politics to mobilize more (local and outside) support for their prospective and ongoing mining activities, but, most importantly, it was also hindering the local community’s discourses of resistance that I had learned about during my stay in Djelinde. Having taken a helicopter from the administrative centre of Olenyek, the only mode of transportation available before the rivers freeze and create natural ice roads, I landed in the village several months after the official resolution of the conflict of the local community with the company Anabar-Diamonds. From early 2015 to late 2016, the local leaders and villagers were involved in widely discussed conflict with the mining company seemingly over the acquisition of a mining license and planning of the extractive activities on the territory close to the river Malaya Kuonamka without the required prior consultation and informed consent. However, as I discovered, the underlying circumstances and dynamics, as well as internal village politics, presented a much more complex drama. In this chapter, I will attempt to retell a story of the short-lived Djelinde resistance, based on the personal narratives of its residents on several elements, which seem to serve as a representative embodiment of the local lives and realities. The local discourses on the conflict present a paradoxical interplay between the constant struggle over limited resources, local desire (and need) for infrastructure and industrial development, a strategic essentialist reproduction of nature loving/worshipping imagery of Indigenous peoples, as well as tumultuous internal district and village politics. Moreover, as I show in this chapter, the local narratives present not necessarily a strong opposition to and critique of the company and its politics, rather they implicitly address the problematic and ambivalent relationship (or better a lack thereof) between the local Indigenous community and the post-Soviet state that ultimately coerced the opposition to collaborate with the company.

### **Diagnosing Power and Resistance with Small Objects**

In his seminal work *Peasants and Capital* (1988), Michel-Rolph Trouillot proposes to utilize *an analytic of small objects* in order to understand how seemingly isolated and remote places integrate into and are impacted by a larger socio-economic order and how the occurrence of this integration is concretized in various observable links between signs, objects, and living beings or

as Trouillot puts it “empirical elements of mediation” (199). Trouillot notes that spatially mobile or fixed elements of mediation, “characterized by their function at particular moments (rather than by their functional nature)” (199), are in active mutual interplay and intermingling that manifest the outside and facilitate a creation of local reality. In his own work, Trouillot identifies such objects - “milk, candles, matches, salt, kerosene, flour, canned food, and, topping the list, sugar and oil” - as among “billions of objects ... whose very presence testifies to the links between the apparently remote place where they are found and the rest of the world” (199-200), i.e., representations and signs of encounter. I believe Trouillot’s interventionist analytic of small objects can be useful in our understanding of the social, economic, and political life in Djelinde, revealing certain processes of the larger system at work as well as possibilities (and impossibilities) of change.

In this chapter, I will examine three small objects - potatoes, fish, and the ATM, which have a potential to provide an opportunity to see Djelinde beyond Djelinde, to explain local complex narratives, and to ask (and answer) questions about important during- and post-conflict processes. I also suggest employing an analytic of small objects to reveal the murky workings of social power or as Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) puts it, to diagnose power, i.e., to analyze a variety of creative forms of resistance to interrogate the forms of power and how people are caught up in them to illuminate specific strategies and structures of power. In her poignant piece on Bedouin women’s resistance, Abu-Lughod notes, “In some of my own earlier work, as in that of others, there is perhaps a tendency to romanticize resistance, to read all forms of resistance as signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated. By reading resistance in this way, we collapse distinctions between forms of resistance and foreclose certain questions about the workings of power” (42). Similarly, critical interrogation of the selected small objects within specific fields of power can help us to move beyond the simple binary of power/resistance and complicate the local narratives of marginalization and activism.

## **Potatoes**

A year after my fieldwork in Sakha Republic, I was perusing the regional news on the online platform *ykt.ru*, hoping to get more updates on Olenyek and their dealings with the company Anabar-Diamonds. While scrolling through the long list of news titles, I stumbled upon a short

article with a title *Thank you for Potatoes and Future Kindergarten*, where the residents of Djelinde, a remote village in the Olenyek district, were thanking the mining company for their initiatives in, at least temporarily, solving the long-existing problems of the village, such as food insecurity and a lack of important infrastructure. The article stated,

The company Anabar-Diamonds held a community hearing in the Olenyek district. It was clear that the company provides important social assistance to the local population. Each person who took the floor was compelled to thank the company representatives and Pavel Marinychev (a managing director of Anabar-Diamonds since 2015) personally. The speakers expressed their gratitude for delivery of vegetables, meat, and medicine, organization of air transportation for health and dental screenings, and assistance with construction of ice storage room (December 25, 2018).

The article was eerily similar to a great number of fillers that the local industrial companies publicize to promote their crucial status within the Republic and reify themselves as imperative socially responsible actors in the local economy. I did not think much of it first, however later, I came to see the symbolic representative importance of potatoes in the experiences of the Djelinde community. Throughout my visit of the remote village, I was invited to conduct interviews at my interlocutors' houses since it was convenient for many community members, especially the elderly. In every household, I was warmly greeted and asked to share lunch, dinner, or a simple cup of tea - I could not refuse fearing to offend the hospitable people of Djelinde and believing that the laid-back conversations over tea or food might turn out to be more productive and informative than official interviews. After a handful of household visits, I noticed a curious pattern - almost in every household, I was treated to potatoes and fish cooked in different ways. The very fact that I was offered potatoes and fish was not immediately significant to me, rather I was initially intrigued by the emoting pride and satisfaction on the faces of my hosts while serving them; they clearly wanted me to discern something more significant and meaningful behind their gesture of hospitality. Subsequently, I learned that the Djelinde community seasonally experiences acute food insecurity, particularly shortages of fresh produce. The administrative centre Olenyek and neighbouring village Kharyialaakh residents as well have to deal with nutritional deficits and the high cost of essential commodities, however, the residents of Djelinde were in especially vulnerable position because of their remote geographical location, higher rates of unemployment, and environmental damage caused by several mining activities in close proximity to the village on their territory.

The narratives of food security (or rather of food insecurity) are not uncommon in the global Arctic and the Russian North (Argounova-Low 2009; Bogdanova et al. 2020, 2021; Overland 2006; etc.). Food security is globally understood as “[a] situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World, Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN 2021, 190). Recently, food security has become a crisis of particular concern for various global and international organizations as requiring a rapid critical response or as the 2008 Global Risks Report of the World Economic Forum predicted, “[f]ood security, at the nexus of a number of issues from energy security to climate change and water scarcity, may be emerging as one of the major risks of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Long- and short-term drivers – population growth, changing lifestyles, climate change and the growing use of food crops for biofuels – may be shifting the world into a period of more volatile and sustained high prices. The consequences, particularly for the most vulnerable communities, may be harsh” (6). While considering the global trends of food security, it is imperative to historicize and economically and politically contextualize localized conditions and experiential variations of food insecurity.

During the Soviet period, the remotely settled Indigenous communities were regularly subsidized not only in terms of air, land, and water transportation, but also with a plentiful supply of diverse food commodities, particularly fresh produce, which were not readily available locally because of differing traditional consumption and harvesting activities, as well as climate characteristics that prevented self-growing. As I learned, in all three villages of the Olenyek district, there were very few households, which used the greenhouses to grow their own vegetables (primarily potatoes, cucumbers, tomatoes, carrots, and onions), which is common in the southern districts of Sakha Republic. The villagers explained that taking care of greenhouses and growing one’s vegetables are an arduous and, sometimes, thankless occupation, because summers here are short, volatile, and unpredictable. Interestingly enough the introduction of “Soviet” dietary elements (tea, sugar, tinned goods, noodles, porridges, various produce, potatoes included) into local eating habits in the early twentieth century, was a direct result of the civilizing and modernizing project targeting the small peoples of the North by the Soviet state. As Kozlov, Vershubsky, and Kozlova (2007) explain, “[the] process of getting the natives accustomed to a new diet was regarded as “imparting basic hygienic skills. No wonder that a

teacher, doctor or nurse who was used to Soviet cookery considered Indigenous ‘sour foods’ (reindeer blood fermented in a leather bag, stomach or paunch; ‘sour fish’; mattak) to be not just ‘queer’ but harmful. Such ‘savage’ ways of processing foods were deliberately condemned, ridiculed and sometimes even persecuted” (101).

Another important factor in dietary preferences change was an influential role of the boarding schools. Virtually all the older residents of Djelinde (and other two villages of the Olenyek district) spent time at the main boarding school in Olenyek, which offered very different foods from what they were used to consuming at home. The years spent in the boarding schools influenced the eating habits, food cooking and processing ways, and nutritional intake, solidifying the new diet, change in food composition, as well as new consumption needs (Kozlov, Vershubsky, and Kozlova 2007). Because of these (and other) factors, the state delivery of produce and other foodstuffs came to be seen as an essential contribution to the local food supply.

However, the collapse of the Soviet Union brought new challenges to the local communities in terms of both food production and food consumption. The decrease in the centralized food deliveries by the state and the overall 1990s economic crises culminated not only in higher costs of store-bought foods, therefore forcing preference to cheaper imported goods, but also more reliance on traditional harvesting activities and locally sourced foods. During my conversations with the older villagers who witnessed the Soviet economic collapse in the 1990s, I asked them to describe their experiences during that turbulent period. Surprisingly, a great many of my interlocutors assured me that those times were not too bad, at least in terms of availability of basic foods, primarily because they managed to procure necessary nutrition and ensure food security independently with traditional modes of subsistence (hunting, fishing, gathering berries, etc.), when the government restrictive regulations became more flexible or could be easily ignored. Zoe Todd and Brenda Parlee (2018) argue that practice of traditional modes of subsistence as well as readily available traditional foods are particularly imperative in the northern communities of the western Arctic, considering high costs of store foods and remote location. Moreover, food insecurity is “a lived experience that reflects the social, economic, and cultural realities of daily life, including the availability of food resources. For Indigenous communities, who seek to maintain strong traditional food diets and economies, food security is a concept interwoven with the complex histories of place, legal rights to access resources, as well

as the overall health and availability of those resources” (135). In this sense, Todd and Parlee suggest historicizing food insecurity as well as recognizing the significance of traditional food harvesting not only in physical health and well-being but also in understanding socio-ecological and communal relations. In the context of the Russian North, Susan Crate (2003) and Susan Hicks (2011) describe the similar shift to traditional subsistence activities – cows and kin model of subsistence - among the rural Sakha communities following the downfall of the Soviet regime; though with Hicks suggesting that this required economic transition accelerated marginality of the rural Sakha population and constituted new formulations of class distinction, “reinforcing binaries that link rurality and backwardness vis-à-vis urbanity and modernity” (40). The Djelinde villagers as well found themselves balancing their dependence on the state and an intense marginalization in the post-Soviet reality; however, as I show later, they also ultimately succeeded in utilizing the discourses of their rural marginality (and their newly forced reliance on traditional modes of subsistence) and creating new avenues to negotiate with the intruding mining companies, particularly Anabar-Diamonds.

As the most remote village of the Olenyek district, Djelinde annually experiences the long periods of food insecurity, particularly during fall and spring when transportation is virtually impossible because of limited infrastructure and difficult climatic conditions. During one of my first strolls around the village in October of 2017, I visited the local market (with a few little shops owned by local business savvy people) and the state-operated store. I surveyed the foods for sale and local prices to get a sense of what is readily available for consumption to the local community and an overall cost of living. Most of foodstuffs accessible and somewhat affordable at the shops were variety of tinned goods, no fresh produce except packages of frozen vegetables, plenty of carbonated sugary drinks, expensive sausages, and such. The state-operated store, in which prices are strictly regulated by the state, was partially stocked with various macaroni products, some rice, a row of vegetable oil bottles, and smaller items for cheaper prices. Both independent shops and state store did not have any dairy and meat products for sale. In comparison with Olenyek’s stores which offered more diverse commodities as well as fresh produce, though highly overpriced, the Djelinde store shelves reflected food insecurity of the local community as well as the lack of affordable access to healthy sources of nutrition. I raised the question of food supply and food affordability during my conversations with the residents;

the most poignant and representative answer I received from a group of *babushkas* (grandmothers) who invited me for lunch:

We experience food shortage every fall and spring till the ice road is accessible; every winter the independent sellers transport as many goods as possible by car, but you know that those goods are quite expensive, of low quality, and often expired, yet sometimes we have to buy them anyways. The YakutTorg (the state-owned store) sells the basic foods for cheaper prices; lots of people buy in bulk so there is not much left very quickly. Just recently they were out of sugar! Sugar is necessary to prepare jams and preserves, and I for one do not know what to do with berries I harvested this summer. The YakutTorg also requires the specific numbers of how much the village would need and of how much would be sold for certain, also requesting an estimate of earnings, which is highly unreliable. I have heard that the woman who works there sometimes orders less than people need to sell everything quicker. If you need something aside from basic foodstuffs, you have to go to Olenyek or even Yakutsk; you also have to find a place to stay there while shopping – it becomes very complicated. We get fresh vegetables and fruit rarely here, the YakutTorg transports and sells some vegetables mostly potatoes and cabbage but potatoes are usually of last year harvest. It is good that we have our own bakery though, we can at least consume fresh bread.

A significant number of the Djelinde residents expressed a similar assessment of the local stores and available foodstuffs, an intense ire with the post-Soviet market economies and market relations, as well as privatization of food security through emergence of local vendors, who profit by taking advantage of their own fellow villagers and their basic food needs, and the state negligence of its responsibilities towards own citizens. Hence, it was not surprising that many of them, especially elderly, nostalgically reminisced the socialist state and its direct and constant involvement in the local affairs. During my many conversations with those who grew up and worked during the Soviet period, I listened to many gushing stories about never-ending planes and helicopters flying in and out of Djelinde, delivering goods, foodstuffs (even grapes! forget potatoes!) and transporting people (doctors, teachers, veterinarians, herders, children, anyone who needed to go to Olenyek and back), higher living standards, a lively cultural and political scene, and the state extensive investment in local infrastructure since the 1950s when the government geological expeditions discovered the potential reserves of diamonds and other valuable resources. It is imperative to note that despite widespread misconceptions, the locals were actively involved in the geological expeditions and further mining activities (see the discussion of the local contributions to development of mining industry in chapter 1).

The nostalgic narratives in the post-Soviet era were discussed in a plethora of anthropological studies; in particular, an ethnographic gaze was turned onto Indigenous communities and their nostalgic memories of the Soviet past (Bloch 2005; Rethmann 1997, 2001; Ssorin-Chaikov 2016, etc.). For instance, Alexia Bloch (2005) analyzes the Evenki women's narratives about the residential schools during her fieldwork in the 90s Evenki Autonomous District. Bloch argues that the widespread nostalgic longing for the Soviet past and constant remembering of its exclusively positive aspects should be interpreted as "critique of the neoliberal logics emerging in Russia today" (535), specifically "struggling on a day-to-day basis; securing food and housing has become difficult, let alone arranging education for children" (536). Similarly, in her discussion of the processes of spatialization of time within particular post-Soviet nostalgic narratives, Svetlana Boym (2001) states, "[n]ostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective. Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future. Consideration of the future makes us take responsibility for our nostalgic tales. ... Unlike melancholia, which confines itself to the planes of individual consciousness, nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory" (xvi). As such, the nostalgic narratives of the Djelinde residents must be understood not as faulty memories of the utopian past but rather as the critical reworkings of the turbulent unstable present.

Here, my generous Djelinde host, Nadezhda's case can serve as an accurate representation of a particular ire within the neoliberal economic restructuring experienced by many Indigenous peoples in the post-Soviet Russian North and particularly in Djelinde. Nadezhda was an Evenki woman in her 50s, born and raised in Djelinde; she showed me around the village, introduced me to her close friends, and generally was very helpful during my fieldwork. Nadezhda's mother passed away several years ago, her father abandoned his family with two young children, remarried, bore 11 more children with another woman, and passed away recently as well. Nadezhda was married 4 times, had 2 children – a son with a disability, who suffered physical and psychological injury because of her first alcoholic husband's violent outburst) and a daughter, who harboured intense animosity towards her mother; both of her grown children moved to Yakutsk many years ago. Nadezhda left Djelinde a handful of times but always came back. When we were introduced, Nadezhda was living in her small childhood

apartment, inherited from her mother, and she assured me that she would stay in Djelinde indefinitely (after my departure, Nadezhda left for a job as a cleaner at the mining facility, however she lasted only for a month as the job turned out to be too laborious for an older person like her). Nadezhda was a wonderful storyteller; we had long conversations when she recounted her life story that amused and at times utterly shocked me. I learned that Nadezhda spent years involved in physically and emotionally hard labour wherever she ended up in her travels; while a student, she worked at the local *sovkhos*, performing odd menial jobs, in the 1990s she was *chelnok* (a shuttler trader, a highly dangerous and risky occupation especially for women), her last job before return in Djelinde was a cleaner at the AIDS clinic in Yakutsk – she confided to me that she was very scared to work there but wages were good, that’s why she stayed. During her time in Yakutsk, Nadezhda ended up taking out several bank loans that she never repaid. In fact, Nadezhda told me that she came back to the village partly because she wanted to get away from the banks to which she owed considerable amount of money. When I asked why she had taken out so many loans, she explained, “you know, when you see all those shops and stuff for sale every day, and you know that you cannot afford them with your wages, it makes you want them more. And I wanted to have good things as well, I am *as good as any*”. It is evident from Nadezhda’s story that the post-Soviet economic restructuring brought along different experiences of economic exploitation and social marginalization to Indigenous women in comparison to men. The anthropological literature on gendered experiences of global capitalism is abundant. Moreover, the experiences of Indigenous women within the global economic restructuring have received particular attention (Crain 1991, 1994; Federici 2004, 2010; Hernandez Castillo 2010, 2012; Kuokkanen 2008, among others). However, discussions with an intersectional approach, which seeks to address Indigenous women’s experiences, knowledges, and perspectives in the post-Soviet Russian context, are inadequate at best. Here, looking at post-Soviet capitalism from the viewpoint of a rural Indigenous woman shows the patterns of intense labour exploitation and income inequality (Nadezhda’s only employment options being exhausting and low-paid manual labour) as well as consumption inequality (limited access to monetary income and limited availability of goods for consumption). Additionally, the economic development and social progress guaranteed by the newly arrived extractive sector was also exceedingly gendered; the economic benefits were available only to male workers (I will later discuss the labour exploitation experienced by the male youth employed by Anabar-Diamonds). In this sense, the

women of Djelinde became even more dependent on men's labour and wages, and the single (and elderly) women like Nadezhda –were even more economically vulnerable because of both gender and age.

Thus, considering Nadezhda's case, and I am certain a great many cases like hers, it is not unexpected that the Djelinde residents interpreted their lives as acute suffering. The local nurse shared with me:

We are all suffering here; even the mining development did not bring us any improvement. When Marinychev visited Djelinde, I was away, but I left a letter for him; in the letter, I explained our dire situation, and requested to provide financial aid to every resident from the mining profits because they are using our land, and to build a special store with cheaper foodstuffs particularly fresh produce. But they did not do what requested, the company threw us a bone with one *Zelenyi Reys* (Green Flight - the company delivered free fresh produce on their own helicopters and distributed them to the village residents; this event was described in the earlier article), but that produce was gone in a week (the produce was distributed among the families with children and elderly; every family was allotted 15kg of potatoes, cabbage, carrots, and other vegetables, and fruit).

The suffering and violence of everyday life are crucial to understanding the local socio-economic and political inequalities, particularly in relation to the development projects and extractive capitalism. But it is also important to underscore how the very same dehumanizing experiences can engender the re-assertions of one's humanness through practices of traditions and reinvigorate the communal relations and knowledges.

## **Fish**

During my third week in Djelinde, my new friend Aida invited me to her mother's house as her mother and two aunts had agreed to be interviewed for this research. I encountered Aida's mother, Anfisa, several times at the cultural centre where she was rehearsing with her singing ensemble. I also encountered her multiple times in the streets of Djelinde or in the local shops. Anfisa always looked busy yet energetic and cheerful. Anfisa was a widely respected retired reindeer herder, who spent most of life with her husband, leading a nomadic life, moving around the tundra, herding deer, and raising her many children and numerous grandchildren in the same lifestyle. Anfisa gave birth to fourteen children but three of them did not survive for even a year, and one of her surviving daughters had an intellectual disability - Anfisa believed that her

daughter's disability was caused by the particularly cold winter weather, which made her sick. I entered the big house and was warmly met by Anfisa and her sisters; they immediately seated me at the table filled with plates - the day before was one of Aida's sister's birthday and the family threw her a big celebratory dinner - and offered me a cup of hot tea. Anfisa was cheerful and chatty as usual, telling me the details of the birthday dinner; while talking, she put different fish dishes on my plate - fried fish, raw pickled fish, fish patties, frozen fish, fish pie. "Who caught all of these fish?" I asked Anfisa, and she proudly pointed at her sister, also sitting at the table, "Svetlana is our family fisher! She fishes all year round and knows everything about fishing, even more than the men in the village!" Svetlana was not the only skilled and knowledgeable woman-fisher in the community. A great many of Djelinde (and larger Olenyek) women were traditionally involved not only in fishing but also hunting (and reindeer-herding); some of them were decorated fishers and hunters, officially recognized by the Soviet government. For example, one of my interlocutors Liya from Djelinde told me that both of her parents were well-known and respected hunters, always hunted together, and used to cover a vast territory on foot and on reindeer with their children; or, Anna, an elder from Khariyalaakh, who worked as a reindeer herder, hunter, and meteorologist, who also shared, "I used to hunt with my parents from early age; I usually hunted squirrels, there were so many of them! I was given certain number of bullets for equal number of squirrels; you had to shoot through squirrel's head not to damage fur. I was an excellent shooter!"

There is a growing feminist ethnographic literature that unsettles the long-standing assumptions about gendered division of labour and roles of men and women in survival economies. For instance, in her seminal piece *Woman the Gatherer: Male Bias in Anthropology* (1975), Sally Slocum demonstrates the anthropological male-centric pre-occupation with perceived male-only harvesting activity – hunting, relegating women into a secondary, subordinated, and dependent position, ignoring the significance of women's gathering labour and their contribution in procuring food, and supporting their families. Most importantly, Slocum writes, "This bias can be seen in the tendency to equate "man", "human", and "male"; to look at culture almost entirely from a male point of view; to search for examples of the behavior of males and assume that this is sufficient for explanation, ignoring almost totally the female half of the species; and to filter this male bias through the "ideal" modern Western pattern of one male supporting a dependent wife and minor children" (49). Similarly, the literature focusing on the

Arctic traditional economies reflected the strong western male bias, or as Karla Jessen Williamson et al. (2004) put it “a situation where relatively little is known about Arctic women’s roles” with “little appreciation of women’s capacity to contribute to decision around hunting, or of their roles in the hunting economy, including group membership and location, and spiritual relationships” (188). However, recent studies on Indigenous subsistence economies challenge this historical marginalization of women and problematic gendered assumptions, and work on centralizing women’s experiences, narratives, and knowledges. What is the most exciting about this emerging ethnographic literature is that they have been produced by the Indigenous and women scholars, prioritizing participatory, community-based, and Indigenous feminist research methodologies. For example, Zoe Todd, a Metis anthropologist, extensively writing on complex dynamics of human-fish relations, shows how explorations of the role of Indigenous woman-hunter and woman-fisher in traditional economies can present a more nuanced portrait of Indigenous modes of subsistence as well as centrality of women in food provisioning and preservation of traditional knowledge and skills. Todd (2016b) contends that “women make a direct, and significant contribution to household food security. As we have seen, a woman may also serve as the family breadwinner, whose income enables others (often men) to hunt and fish. Gendered assumptions tend to leave us blind to countervailing evidence. If we wish to arrive at a more than partial understanding of household food provisioning and the environmental knowledge on which it relies, we will need to set aside our expectations and pay greater attention to women” (209).

Like the Indigenous women-fishers in Paulatuuq, Northwestern Territories (Todd 2016a; 2016b), the women in Djelinde also recognized the importance of fish in their present and future community life; in fact, fish became a crucial “site of negotiation and conflict” (Todd 2014, 226) and instrumental in claims of Indigeneity in short-lived anti-mining sentiments in Djelinde. According to the documents provided by the community leaders, in late 2015, tensions rose in Djelinde because of the company Anabar-Diamonds’ acquisition of the federal license as of 2014 for extractive activities on three locations close to the river Malaya Kuonamka and its tributary Maspaky. The Djelinde residents claimed that the company had not conducted the required consultation and public hearings with the community prior to planning the extraction projects in the Olenyek district as the Territory of Traditional Nature Use. Legally, the status of the Territories of Traditional Nature Use determines “specially protected nature territories, formed

for the purposes of traditional natural resource use and traditional way of life of the Indigenous numerically small peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East of the Russian Federation” (RF2001a, Article 1). As the federal law, it guarantees the Indigenous communities “the right to hunt and fish without license and to collect and control information about their territory, ... to initiate dialogue with non-Indigenous resource users (extractive industries) over issues of ecological damage, compensation, partnership, assistance, and so on” (Parlato, Fondahl, Filippova, and Savvinova 2021, 2). The Olenyek district was granted the status of the Territory of Traditional Nature Use in 2003. In March 2015, the company gave in to the community demands and held a public hearing; the transcript of the hearing showed that most of the speakers expressed concerns about potential environmental damage and its impact on the river and water life, specifically fish. As I mentioned before fish was the essential traditional food that ensured food security during hardships for many generations of the Djelinde community. The present residents also recognized their not only nutritional but also cultural dependence on fish; in interview after interview, my interlocutors stressed the significance of fish in their everyday survival: “we survive because of our nature, by hunting and fishing”, “we have food because of our nature, and our vital food is fish”, “we are too far located from the centre, there are many unemployed, a lot of people cannot afford store foods, reindeer have not crossed our territory for several years, so we rely on fish”, “we used to catch so much fish before but now we have very little fish left, and with the projected extractions, we can lose even that”, “water in the river became so dirty lately that fish has left, my husband and I used to get four full sacks of *tugunok* (freshwater whitefish) but now we barely get one bucket”. Indeed, fish came to embody not only a specific marginality of the Djelinde residents but also assisted in articulating certain form of Indigenous identification.

After the public hearing with the company, those attending unanimously voted to oppose the extractive project on the river Malaya Kuonamka, and the Olenyek district leaders commenced a year-long legal proceedings against Anabar-Diamonds. The legal documents utilized the Olenyek status as the Territory of Traditional Nature Use, highlighting the federally recognized Indigeneity status of the Evenki residents and their involvement in traditional modes of subsistence (reindeer-herding, fishing, and hunting); in this sense, the traditional harvesting activities – particularly fishing - came to be seen as a key factor in claiming (and recognizing) Indigeneity. Here, I consider fishing to be imperative in determining local Indigeneity, not only

because the conflict was fueled by the acute concerns over the local river, quality of water and water life making it politically significant, but also fishing was the traditional activity accessible and practiced almost by everyone in the village, whilst reindeer herding (and, at some degree, hunting) involved only a few community members and predominantly men. Fishing then represents a comparatively genderless and classless way to procure food, which also allowed participation of both community elderly and youth, “to create and sustain relationships with other people and with the environment, and to pass knowledge along to children and grandchildren” (Todd 2016b, 191). Nevertheless, in early 2016, the federal court denied the district claims on what a great many determined as a mere legal technicality; in the article covering the oppositional legal proceedings, Sasha Alexandrova, a journalist of *ykt.ru* news website, explains:

The federal law on the Territories of Traditional Nature Use of the Indigenous numerically small peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East of the Russian Federation stipulates the existence of the territorial zoning of the Territory of Traditional Nature Use by the federal government of the Russian Federation. However, as of now, there are no specific processes of zoning legally affirmed at the federal level. Therefore, these laws have no authority to regulate federally sanctioned actors, such as extractive industries with federally issued licenses. This inconsistency in the procedures and protocols over the Territories of Traditional Nature Use allowed the company to exploit the legal loophole and win the lawsuit. (December 20, 2016)

In this sense, an explicitly articulated Indigeneity on the basis of traditionality by the Djelinde residents and the Olenyek district leaders yielded no results and was unsuccessful.

In his article on problematics of pan-Aboriginality in the Australian context, Yin Paradies (2006) argues that the “prison-house of identity” (356) can result in essentialized Indigeneity, constructed around specific colonial fantasies of exclusivity, cultural alterity, marginality, physicality, and morality, and leave little space for those who did not fit within these standards, resulting in accusations of inauthenticity of many Indigenous Australians (357-58). Moreover, the emphasis on Indigenous marginality is especially damaging since it presupposes the impossibility to transcend such situation, reinforcing danger of fatalism and ‘victimhood’ (359). However, I suggest that the articulations of specific Indigeneity in the case of Djelinde were ineffective precisely because of unstable discourses and forms of Indigenous marginality rendering the logic of Indigeneity inadequate for particular claims within the federal legislative system. Marginality is better understood as the context of cultural, socio-economic, and political asymmetry, which embodies one of the constituting elements of the subject position as

Indigenous (Hicks 2011; Ssorin-Chaikov 2003; Tsing 1993), however the Djelinde Indigenous community (and other Arctic Indigenous communities for that matter) did not fit within the certain authenticity of marginality as explained in this interview excerpt with a university employee in Yakutsk:

My position on the question of Indigenous people is following. Sakha people are also Indigenous according to the international standards; and I do not understand why people who live under same difficult conditions in some rural area with poor infrastructure must have different rights and freedoms? For example, two students, Ivan is an Evenk and Sasha is Sakha from the same village, but the former receives a special stipend and can occupy a student housing without being waitlisted, and the latter does not receive extra funding and has to wait for a spot in student housing for months. We all understand that the Arctic districts are far, and it is expensive to live there, but why we prioritize only them but not some students from Suntar for example (a rural village in Suntar district, the west of Sakha Republic), who might also have problems with transportation? I personally do not understand this stratification if everyone leads similar lifestyle in the Arctic regions; I had many discussions with my Evenki friend on this issue, but I do not find his arguments and explanations that convincing.

This perspective of Indigenous communities notably in the Arctic regions is not an exception rather is indeed vocalized quite often especially in relation to perceived privileges that Indigenous people are believed to receive from the government. What I find of particular interest here is the perception of existence of certain standards and forms of marginality; according to this logic, the Djelinde residents were not ‘authentically’ marginal to be taken seriously by the company and the federal government, and their discourses of ire and dependence on traditional modes of subsistence (particularly fishing, which could eventually be altered by the extractive activities) were effectively dismissed. Later in 2016, the Olenyek administrative centre leaders and the Anabar-Diamonds managing director signed an agreement where the district complied with the federal license stipulation of extractive activities on the river Malaya Kuonamka, and the company representatives expressed willingness to contribute to the socioeconomic development of the Olenyek district ([yakutiakmns.org](http://yakutiakmns.org), January 2, 2017). One must note that, according to my interlocutors’ description of the conflict, the company used some “dirty tricks”, especially after the first public hearing. In the early stages of the conflict, the company announced that they would no longer employ anyone from the Olenyek district; this threat came through and several young men, mostly from Djelinde, were denied employment at the mining

facility. I was also told dramatic stories about harassment of reindeer herders and hunters as well as blocking deer herds from crossing certain areas, claiming the ongoing extractive activities.

These stories and rumours fueled the local antagonistic feelings towards the company at least in early 2016. The company itself underwent significant changes in mid-2016, which ultimately determined the successful outcome of the legal proceedings; the then managing director of Anabar-Diamonds Matvey Evseev, responsible for the initial acquisition of the license and commencement of the extractive activities which spurred the conflict, suddenly resigned from his position, and a new director was almost immediately assigned. Pavel Marinychev, a young up-and-coming business savvy Russian bureaucrat, promptly suspended the aggressive harassment of the village residents and initiated productive negotiations with the Olenyek district leaders, effectively incorporating discourses of business partnership, corporate social responsibility, and neo-extractivism (see Chiasson LeBel 2015). When I interviewed Sasha Alexandrova, a journalist who closely followed the conflict and wrote several analytical pieces on the Djelinde case, she shared her opinion on the matter:

I believe that to certain degree it was a hostile interpersonal relationship between the Olenyek leader Aleksandr Ivanov and the managing director Matvey Evseev that played a significant role in development of this conflict. I heard that the Djelinde village leader was in good relations with Evseev, and the company did not initially deal with the larger Olenyek centre. I think the Olenyek administrative centre and its leader became concerned with this arrangement and decided to intervene. Moreover, when I talked to the Djelinde residents for my article, I got an impression that the locals wanted to simultaneously sit on two chairs (*usidet na dvuh stulyah*), on the one hand they were concerned about the industrial impact on local environment, on the other hand, they also wanted to haggle the company and sell the territory for higher price. The reindeer-herders directly told me that they were not absolutely against the company because they used to assist herders with transportation, providing gasoline, and such. One older herder even said that there was no future in reindeer herding - there were not enough reindeer left, no youth wants to work as a herder - so there would be only mining industry left for potential employment. The locals seemed to be also very lost, they did not even know what they wanted, frankly speaking, if the company offered more benefits, they would readily accept it. Those vocally oppositional to the mining activities were only local *babushkas*.

Indeed, during my own visit of Djelinde, I too sensed a strong feeling of ambivalence among the villagers. The absence of transparent communication of the local leadership with the central Olenyek leaders did not help either; some of my interlocutors were convinced that there

was another legal proceeding going on at the moment and were utterly confused when I confirmed that the company and the Olenyek administrative centre had already agreed upon extractive project on Malaya Kuonamka. What happened in Djelinde after the swift defeat of resistance and how they forged the new relationship with Anabar-Diamonds is the tale of strategic articulation of rurality rather than of Indigeneity, which best can be analyzed through the object of the ATM.

### **The ATM**

There is a plethora of anthropological literature that discusses the political weakness of the category of Indigeneity, considering it to be too confined and narrow, ridden with negative stereotypes and defined by existing dominant groups as well as hegemonic governments (Hicks 2011; Tsing 2007; Yeh 2007). In this context, Indigeneity is understood as “strategic essentialism” (Spivak 1990), “a deconstructive strategy of representation that involves taking the risk of adopting an essentialist position with respect to identity categories (such as woman, worker, nation, or the subaltern) in order to mobilize a collective consciousness for achieving a set of chosen political ends” (Pande 2017, 1). The primary concern over strategic essentialism of Indigeneity is its de-politicizing aspect. The more intense processes of de-politicization of Indigeneity can be accounted in the Russian North (for more in-depth discussion of de-politicization of Indigeneity in Russia, see the Interlude 1). In her comprehensive analysis of problematics of Indigeneity, Alexandra Xanthaki (2004) argues that despite the recent development of the legal situation of Indigenous peoples in Russia, there are prevalent issues that Indigenous peoples still face, such as socio-economic discrimination, a lack of political participation in decision-making, and absence of the working legal guarantees for protection of land and territorial rights. Interestingly, according to Xanthaki, cultural rights are better protected and the historical past of Indigenous peoples, their cultures, religious beliefs, customs, and traditions have received a considerable promotion and protection. Nevertheless, she also notes that despite the existence of the Russian constitutional legislation that prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, language, religion and further legislations on the preservation of Indigenous cultures, languages and lifestyles, some crucial rights of the Indigenous peoples are not fully guaranteed, making the existing legislation weak and declarative in nature (105). Similarly, Hicks (2011) points out that Indigeneity came to be seen as relatively powerless and weak for a

legitimate political claim by the Indigenous Sakha, who prioritized the discourses of nationality and of national sovereignty, merging the logic of Indigeneity with the rhetoric of ethnic nationalism.

In the context of the Djelinde conflict with the mining company, the local articulations of Indigeneity and reliance on the category within the legal discourses proved to be unproductive and unsuccessful. Therefore, as I have shown earlier, the Djelinde residents opted to adopt a different articulation of marginality based on the discourses and experiences of rurality. Thus, opposite to theorizing marginality as a site of resistance (hooks 1990, 341), the local marginality was re-interpreted as site of negotiation where the marginals “forged creative self-positionings that could turn disadvantage into community leadership” (Tsing 1993, 254). Yet, this position of marginality was still shaped within intimate relations with the state. In his analysis of the case of Katonga Evenki, Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov (2003) discusses how the marginal groups “stand outside the state by tying themselves to it” (22), more specifically, he shows how the Katonga Evenki reinforced the legitimacy of the state through discourses of the failure of the state, its inability to and disinterest in accomplishing its responsibilities, making the state itself manifested by its very absence. In this sense, the Djelinde community embellished their marginality through salient discourses of rurality to negotiate socio-economic advancement with the seemingly private institution (mining company) simultaneously re-affirming their marginal position and the power of the state.

Experiences of rurality are not uncommon in Indigenous discourses locally and globally, particularly in the instances of Indigeneity articulations. For example, Julie Cruikshank and Tatyana Argounova-Low (2000) explore localized formations of Indigenous identity in Taatta, a rural district of Sakha Republic, demonstrating how essentialized cultural boundaries are deployed as effective political instruments. Within the Soviet state legislation, the Sakha were differentiated from officially recognized small-numbered Indigenous peoples because of their population size as well as more pronounced politically and economically advantaged position (98). However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the new Sakha government attempted to politically re-articulate itself as the northern state to forge economic and political relations with other Northern regions, such as Alaska, Canada, Greenland, Sweden (102). Accounting for the new post-Soviet emerging narratives among the rural Sakha, Cruikshank and Argounova examine the processes of Indigeneity claims among the Taatta residents; Taatta is the birthplace

of several prominent Sakha cultural and political figures who were active in promoting the Sakha language and culture during the 1920s Russia but were executed during the Stalinist purge as promoters of “bourgeois nationalism” (104). In the post-Soviet processes of ethnic revitalization in Sakha and elsewhere, the rural Taatta residents used material cultural artifacts and oral traditions to re-inscribe memory, previously actively suppressed and distorted, and actively negotiate Indigeneity based on the localized rural narratives. Conversely, Marisol De la Cadena (2000) presents a different picture of how conditions of rurality effectively excluded rural poor Indian peasants from the Indigeneity discourses because of their lack of education, decent morals and “cultural purity”. De la Cadena argues that urban highland intellectuals in 20<sup>th</sup> century Peru replaced biological determinism with cultural determinism, legitimizing racial hierarchies through discourses of cultural achievements, such as literacy, education, and standards of “decency” or middle-class manners. An unexpected twist of this hierarchical rural-urban dynamic was when the rural Indigenous Andeans became to be associated more with class-based struggle, urging rural peasants to reject the term “Indian” in favour of “peasant”, reinforcing both class solidarity and elite rejection of an Indian identity. In the 1990s, a sanitized elite version of Indigeneity was celebrated, separating urban and rural as well as middle-class and lower-class *cuzquenos* and creating the paradox of the “de-Indianized” Indigenous identity; middle-class mestizos participated in folklore groups presenting their “authentic” heritage by dressing up and dancing in festivals, thus cleansing Indigenous culture of the negative stereotypes associated with rural life and ultimately excluding those of rural background.

In the case of the Djelinde community, the Indigenous Evenki residents themselves shifted from the explicit articulations of Indigeneity, which rendered them powerless and depoliticized within the Russian legislative rhetoric, to the articulation of specific marginal rurality as the cornerstone and primary reason for the village troubles in their negotiations with the mining company. It is interesting to note that this enunciation of rural marginality came to be more inclusive, therefore attracting more critical support within the village. The Djelinde community predominantly consists of the Indigenous Evenki, however, there is also a considerable number of Sakha people. In this sense, the logic of rurality succeeded to encompass and represent a diversity of experiences and subject positions rather than one singular, narrow, and perceived exclusive Indigeneity.

In my earlier discussion on the local experiences of marginality, I indicated two interrelated issues that were of particular concern to the Djelinde residents namely, geographical remoteness or rurality, and food security. Having received the Olenyek centre's agreement for extractive activities, Anabar-Diamonds kept their side of the bargain; the company representatives held a couple of post-conflict public hearings, which resulted in the decision to install an ATM in the building of the local post-office. This event was described in the following company publication of the ALROSA (Anabar-Diamonds is an ALROSA Group enterprise) corporate periodical *ALROSA News*:

The positive changes occurred immediately with the arrival of ALROSA. In a month after the local community requested Pavel Marinychev, a general director of Anabar-Diamonds, to install a SBERBANK ATM in the village, he fulfilled his promise. Moreover, the bank representative arrived in the village and taught the local people how to use the ATM and informed them about other services that the Bank provides. The village residents used to have to withdraw cash from the district centre, located 320km away, and wasted their time and money on air transportation, gas for snowmobiles, and motorboats. The ATM will be serviced at the expense of the company. "This is one of the first cases of installing an ATM in such a remote area," Pavel Marinychev states, "Encashment and maintenance require a lot of effort, but we are ready for it. As soon as we learn from this experience, we will be able to implement the same project in other remote areas." (October 2016)

The SBERBANK ATM turned out to be a huge success with the locals who were indeed dependent on the ATMs in Olenyek, which formerly required long and costly travels back and forth or reliance on relatives and friends in the district centre. Though many villagers also used the mobile bank since it was more convenient, they experienced problems at times because of unreliable internet service in the village.

When I was staying in the village Khariyalaakh, one day I crossed the river to Olenyek to withdraw some cash; despite my early morning arrival, there was already a long line inside and outside the bank building. The bank tellers did not handle cash. Instead, people had to wait for two working ATMs for hours. When there were only two persons left ahead of me in line, both ATMs ran out of cash; I went home having wasted the whole morning at the bank and without cash. Dealing with the bank was already a frustrating task and I imagine it was even worse when one had to travel from afar. Thus, the Djelinde residents were deservedly excited about the ATM in their own tiny rural village, but they also recognized their marginal and subordinate position in

this transaction. When asked about the ATM, one of my interlocutors frustratingly uttered: “Yes, they installed the ATM, but a little after that Marinychev showed up in the village with a film crew, and they filmed that video with the cookies (I mentioned that video in the introduction of this chapter). I hated that video, it portrayed us like beggars. I felt so much shame when I saw it, our poor children”. This feeling of shame over one’s oppressed and dependent position is not uncommon in the marginal communities surviving within the neoliberal capitalist logic.

In his analysis of inequality in the Northwestern Territories in Canada, Peter Kulchyski (2016) states, “It is the shame that is the genuinely soul-destroying element of poverty, and that shame can happen when people’s material needs are taken care of, but they live side by side with people who enjoy more wealth, particularly when there are cultural, racial, or gender differences at play” (101). The very fact that the company’s representatives were primarily male and ethnic Russians (it must be also noted that, during the legal proceedings, according to the Olenyek lawyer, a young Evenki woman, Anabar-Diamonds was represented by the group of high-powered male Russian lawyers in expensive suits), and that the company preferred employing male migrant workers from the Central Russia, Ukraine and Belorussia, it was unsurprising that the dynamics of race, ethnicity, and gender intensely intersected in local discussions of the company and its politics towards the Djelinde residents.

Returning to the ATM, I was later informed that the machine did not work properly and was very often out of service (owing to the unreliable internet service, lack of cash in the machine, and other factors). I once attempted to withdraw some cash myself, but it was not in working order and no one knew when it would be fixed. Here, I want to imagine that the ATM in Djelinde represents unsustainability of modernization and of capitalist interventions in local lives. The ATM required constant outside intervention in order to function properly. None of the local residents possessed the skills required for keeping such a machine in working condition, therefore, yet again rendering the village residents dependent on the outside oppressive forces, both corporate and governmental. Furthermore, despite the company’s rhetoric of providing economic benefits directly to the community by passing the regional government, eliminating the local dependence on the state (Kirsch 2014, 169), it was not in effect untrue as Anabar-Diamonds is heavily reliant on the local governmental politics, being in close alliance with the ruling party representatives. What is interesting here is that the Djelinde residents’ acknowledgment of temporary progress in the village with the aid of the company (for example,

the ATM, the Green Flights, a new kindergarten building) must also be understood as the implicit critique of the state that did not deliver the development it had promised; in this sense, forcing the rural villagers turn to the outside forces, simultaneously sacrificing their precious environment and their cultural lifeways.

In my discussion of the local development, one of the Djelinde residents pondered: “There seemed to be some progress here; we have an ATM now, the company promised to assist with building new school and kindergarten. However, they are also extracting resources out of our lands, harming the environment. Sometimes I think that they have used us and simply lied to us. You know that they also claim to hire the locals, but all of the hired ones only work for several months, not full-time”. The politics of labour was another important question repeatedly raised by my interlocutors; to explore this aspect of the mining industry, I interviewed the local young (only male), who were currently employed by the company, their parents, and other residents who wanted to share their thoughts on the topic. Previous anthropological literature on mining industry, labour, and neoliberal economic policies contend that mining corporations justify their extractive activities by creating employment opportunities for local communities and bringing wealth and alleviating poverty (Benson and Kirsch 2010; Chiasson-LeBel 2015; Kirsch 2014; Smith and Helfgott 2010; Tsing 1993, etc.). However, it has also been extensively documented that mining corporations often make available employment under hazardous conditions that only requires unskilled labour, when workers can easily be replaced, rendering them highly expendable and in a constant precarious position. Additionally, as Stuart Kirsch (2014) notes, “Higher wages in the extractive sector of the economy makes other forms of labour – at lower wages – less attractive to potential workers, and it may even produce negative incentives for participation in subsistence production, which becomes viewed as hard work in return for comparatively low returns” (31). All these aspects and conditions of labour exploitation exacerbated by extractive capitalism were present in the Anabar-Diamonds mining facilities. One of my interviews was with a young woman whose husband used to be employed by Anabar-Diamonds, she told me the following:

My husband worked as a heading man on rotational basis for several seasons at the mining facility of Anabar-Diamonds. Six months was the longest period he worked there. The workers labour for 12 hours per day; my husband used to stay in the facility for New Year’s because of holiday double pay. His health is not good right now, his eyesight is even worse, but he still worked there because there are no other jobs in the village. We

have 4 children, he must take care of us. He graduated from the university, you know, he has a degree in engineering, but there were no open positions at the company, or they just said so, that's why he had to work as a heading man - the dirtiest job that requires intense labour. The process of applying for a job at Anabar-Diamonds is also very complicated; applicants must go to Yakutsk in order to submit their documents to the company's HR department. They also had to go through medical examination beforehand either in Olenyek or Yakutsk, that document is valid only for six months, meaning that if they are not hired during those 6 months, they have to do it again and submit new documents in Yakutsk. All of these require a lot of money: transportation back and forth, one also must stay somewhere while in Olenyek and Yakutsk. Not everyone is hired; my husband is currently waiting for the company's call – it has been 2 months already. You have seen many young guys hanging aimlessly around the village and getting in trouble, right? All of them are waiting to hear back from the company.

In another interview with an elderly mother of one of the young men, who worked multiple rotations at Anabar-Diamonds, she described a specific strategy employed by the company that allowed them to claim that they do employ the local youth but simultaneously to avoid any long-term responsibilities:

My son attended several of the company's training workshops (usually for 2-3 weeks), he learned to work as a screener, a bulldozer operator, and a heading man; each time he went through on-job-training-period of two months but was never hired full-time after. He did earn more money for two months than in any other job in the village, but his employment was temporary, and he spent the rest of the year here in the village hoping to be hired again. Everything that company does is only for show.

This strategic short-term employment or “reorganization of the labour process” (Smith and Helfgott 2010, 20) particularly in the extractive sector is also known as subcontracting. In their discussion of the mining industry in the context of Peru, Jessica Smith and Frederico Helfgott (2010) argue that subcontracting serves to require flexibilization of labour, decrease of the employer's financial responsibility for the workforce, and corporate control over the politics of labour. More precisely, they note, “Subcontracting may enjoy significant cultural hegemony at the level of international economic policy, but here, even when people accept it with resignation, they do not see it as anything other than a mechanism set up to benefit the company. The paradox is that while subcontracting potentially discredits claims to corporate responsibility by making labour exploitation more obvious, it simultaneously diminishes workers' political power because it cripples unions” (2010, 23).

Thus, the exploitation of the Djelinde youth through subcontracting was conspicuous; everyone in the community recognized it, especially the young people themselves. In my focus group conversation, ten local on-and-off employees of Anabar-Diamonds, all young males in their 20s, shared some important insights on their work with the company. Several young males admitted they felt that their employment was highly precarious, stating “on the one hand, it is good that we have a job at the company, on the other hand, it is not full-time and not permanent”. The employment with Anabar-Diamonds, albeit exploitative and precarious, was coveted, “there is a huge competition for these positions, there are a lot of applicants from other rural districts and from the city Yakutsk”. Capitalism typically creates competition for scarce employment resources which can fuel existing interethnic animosities, weaken labour (as well as ethnic) solidarity, and prevent effective labour organizing. Additionally, the company’s labour unions did not involve short-term and temporary employees, leaving them outside the institutional company structure. I wondered what would happen when the company eventually closes its operation in the Olenyek district in near future; and what post-extractive life would look like for the local youth. The young men shared my concerns and expressed a degree of ambivalence, “if they close Anabar-Diamonds, we will be jobless, then we might go to Udachny or Mirny (other mining towns in Sakha)”. The absence of high-paying jobs in the village has led youth to think more about migrant labour. Involvement in traditional subsistence activities and other forms of local employment are not considered viable options, “there are no other jobs in the village, reindeer-herders’ wages are too low, one cannot survive on their wages”. Despite the young men’s employment with the company, they unanimously expressed their deep concerns with its extractive activities on the district territory, “of course, we feel for our nature and environment – we grew up here, and if there were another legal proceeding, we would support it, but anonymously” because “if we ask any questions about the negative impact of extractive activities on local environment, we would be fired for sure”. An intense fear of the company’s retaliation was rightfully justified as I had disclosed earlier during the early stages of conflict, the company explicitly excluded the Olenyek youth from employment opportunities. In her analysis of the case study of the workers in the Bolivian mines, disillusioned with Marxist philosophy’s ability to provide solutions, June Nash (1979) explains that for Marxists, exploitation of workers in contemporary capitalism depends on four intersecting sources of alienation:

“(1) separation of the producers from the product, or the alienation of surplus value; (2) separation of the producers from the means of production, which forces them to become dependent on the owners of capital in order to make a living; and (3) separation of the producers from the sense of meaningful self-involvement in the work process. The final source of alienation is the separation of the worker from the sense of identity with community. Marx did not develop this source of alienation, since he assumed that the solidarity of workers in the factory would be the basis for their vanguard action. However, workers in industrial centres have been deprived of that identity with community which provides the moral basis for human action that goes beyond self-interest” (325)

Nash argues however that, “to the extent that the community has these generative bonds of new growth [“*communitas*” and solidarity], the people can sustain the most brutal attacks” (330). I believe that this is exactly what was sustaining the young people with their precarious position and experience of intense exploitation, and a great many of the Djelinde residents – the sense of community, or the community as a form of wealth (Kulchyski 2016, 103). During our conversations, many young people talked about their shared communal experience, and responsibilities and duties expected from them. For instance, it was up to the young men to provide drinking ice and burning wood to the elderly in the village (procuring drinking ice requires intense physical labour, and, as of lately, it became a new necessity because of the worsened water quality of the local river); the young men are indispensable in hunting large game – but most of them generally enjoy hunting and fishing as they learn these subsistence activities in early age; the young men are also needed in other everyday activities of the rural village life. In addition to being involved in various manual labour, many youth were also active in cultural and social life of the village: I attended many events at the local cultural centre during my visit, and the young men’s dancing and singing performances were particularly breathtaking; some, experienced in reindeer herding, annually participate in competitive traditional reindeer run, providing a long-lasting exciting entertainment for the whole community.

## **Conclusion**

In his analysis of the Zapatista movement in the Chiapas of Mexico, Jeff Conant (2010) notes the significance of *dignity* in the Indigenous Zapatista discourses: “What the Indians want,” among other things, is to be allowed to speak, and to be heard, to explain, in their own words, “what the Indians want”. Fundamental to this right is what they repeatedly refer to as “dignity”. In this

case, dignity can be defined as a speaking position and a respectful audience. The effect of the guns, the ski masks, the communiques, and the strategic takeovers of towns and cities, is to force the state to listen” (187). I believe the similar conceptualization of *dignity* can be observed, yet implicitly, in the everyday narratives of a great many of the Djelinde residents. Most of them are discriminated and oppressed in various intersecting ways, experiencing inequalities at every corner, however they also hold on to and reproduce certain *dignity* through their strong communal reciprocal relations, certain responsibilities towards each other, solidarity with non-human environment, and traditional modes of living and surviving. Moreover, this implicit site of *dignity* has a potential to becoming a creative site of localized resistance or as Tania Cañas (2020) puts it, “Sites of resistance necessitate creativity. They require unconventional approaches, thinking, maneuvers that speak outside of the terms of enunciation even as we exist within it. Sites of resistance create and combine in unexpected, sometimes even joyful ways, towards unique manifestations of resistance. Sites of resistance offer frameworks that value holistic, daily, struggles and does not lure one into valuing only those visible to dominant discourse” (3; see also hooks 1990). In this sense, the seemingly undetectable narratives of local re-assertions of *dignity* and *humanness* have a potentiality to become overtly enunciated, ultimately transforming into social and political dissent.



*Figure 6: View on the river Malaya Kuonamka*

## Chapter 4: Rumours

### Introduction

In his book *Lost People: Magic and the Legacy of Slavery in Madagascar*, David Graeber (2007) argues that, accounting for the heterogeneity of social, economic, and political conditions, it is time to rethink our previous understandings of the political and of politics, proposing instead of asking “What is politics?” rather to start with a question “What is a political action?” and “What is it about an act that enables one to say it is *political*?” (130). Graeber suggests his minimal (not finite) definition of political action as “an action meant to influence others who are not physically present when the action is being done. ... It is action that is meant to be recounted, narrated, or in some other way represented to other people afterward” (130). This interpretation of political action and a focus on narratives and stories display political as “intrinsic to the nature of social life, even of ordinary, daily interaction; to think of it as something which everyone is always doing, not just the powerful; that engaging in politics or making history does not have to involve preventing anyone else from doing so” (388).

Building on the definition of political as “mainly about the circulation of stories” (309), this chapter will focus on the political acts of telling, re-telling, and circulating rumours and other fantastical stories, highlighting their contradictory nature, by the rural community of Djelinde. More precisely, in the context of Djelinde, the rumours became weaponized as a politicized tool to open up a public sphere to make sense of, and privately (and publicly) discuss the local ambiguous circumstances in relation to an upcoming mining project, as well as to confront and resist the corporate power. However, it is also important to note that the same very rumours came to provide an insidious way to exercise the governmental power since the ultimate effect was a misinformed, frightened, and intimidated community. Thus, it is this conjecture created by rumours and rumouring, I want to explore in this chapter, by analyzing the complex web of rumours and other stories (poisoned meat, “fixed” radiation meter, forced relocations, and such) that permeated the day-to-day experiences and interactions of the Djelinde community members, illuminating the historically constructed structures and techniques of power, and how - sometimes - it is possible to subvert them.

## **An Act of Rumouring**

It was a cold November day in Djelinde. Diana and I were having a casual conversation and discussing the village news while waiting for Diana's friend, who had agreed to be interviewed for this research. We were sitting on the old sofa in Diana's office in the local cultural centre. Suddenly, Diana asked me: "Do you know if there are bison in Canada?" I confirmed that there were indeed bison in Canada though I had never seen them myself. Diana then excitedly shared: "We saw a bison here last summer. One of the old hunters shot it, he thought it was a bear but when he got closer and couldn't recognize the animal, he brought it to the village; and because we were having problems with the Anabar-Diamonds company at the time, I told others not to consume it because it might have been poisoned". The statement was baffling; I observed closely Diana's face trying to figure out if she was joking, then cautiously asked if she really thought that the company would poison the meat of the bison. Unfazed, Diana exclaimed: "Of course, I do! There were so many things happening at that time in the village, you know; there were also a lot of rumours about the company workers causing harm and intimidating our own people with weapons on our territory! That's why I believed that the company had poisoned that bison and dropped it off for us to find and eat it".

This was a bizarre and hard-to-believe story that came up several times during my visit to Djelinde. In fact, there were a few similar fantastical rumours told and actively shared by the villagers, the rumours that I listened to, empathized with, and even at times circulated myself. My own participation in the act of rumouring - the Djelinde community members' sharing rumours with me, permitting me to repeat them, believing or dismissing them - represents not only my participation in locally derived practice but also my acceptance to "the kitchen" (Jacobs-Huey 2002, 793); after all, particularly in small-scale societies, rumours are believed to be responsible for forming and maintaining social networks, and bonding people to one another (Difonzo and Bordia 2007; Johnston 2011; Rosnow 1988). In addition, in her analysis of a single event of a hermit's death in Ethiopia, Deena Newman (1998) argues that ethnography itself is a lot more like a collection of rumours, that at times unearths divergent and oppressed voices, as ethnographic pieces are based on certain types of information, "accounts of accounts" (84). James Clifford (1986) also insists on ethnographic knowledge being incomplete and partial, stating that "[e]ven the best ethnographic texts - serious, true fictions - are systems, or economies, of truth, power and history work through them, in ways their authors cannot fully

control” (7). Ultimately, participation in the act of rumouring can be seen as one of the conceptual and practical strategies to explore and understand the multiple overt and covert discourses encountered throughout the course of the anthropological fieldwork.

There is a large body of anthropological and sociological literature that addresses the subject of rumours as orally transmitted information, produced and reproduced at specific times with specific reasons (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007; Rosnow 1988), representing unofficial historical narratives of political abuse (Bolten 2014; Kirsch 2002; Masquelier 2000; Perice 1997), historically shaped imaginations of powerlessness and economic exploitation (Taussig 1980), but most importantly, as a discursive field, which could “control some people, terrorize others, damning and enabling, shoring and subverting power at the same time” (Stoler 1992, 75). A central assumption in this literature is that rumours are used to fill in specific contextual vacuum (or scarcity of reliable and trustworthy information about important current events), where they function as a useful tool for collective sense-making of ambiguous (at times dangerous and harmful) situations. Since rumours are often collectively generated, reimagined, and circulated primarily by those deemed powerless (Johnston 2011; Scott 1990; Scheper-Hughes 1992, 1996, 2000; Taussig 1980; White 1997, 2000), it may be useful to suggest that rumours are a special form of politicized narratives, which presuppose political action, precisely because they facilitate vocalization of local concerns and anxieties, as well as express the potentiality of action. In this sense, rumours present “a first step in challenging, and possibly rejecting, hegemonic ideologies as alternative discourses to officialdom. ... rumours are covert tactics that facilitate overt strategies” (Samper 2002, 25). It is this potentiality of politicization of rumours and other narratives around the projected extraction activities on the river Malaya Kuonamka and the Tomtor massif, generated and circulated by the Djelinde residents, I wish to examine in this chapter. The extractive company Anabar-Diamonds specializes in exploration, mining, and manufacturing of diamonds and rare metals. Since 2014, the company was planning to expand its activities on the river Malaya Kuonamka, which served as the primary fresh water source for the villagers. The Tomtor massif, a rare metals deposit site in the Olenyek district, has recently become a focus of heated debates in the central Sakha Republic and locally because extractive activities of rare metals planned for 2025 are speculated to be especially environmentally destructive and radioactively pollutive.

One of the earlier scholars of rumour Ralph Rosnow (1988) defines rumours as “public communications that reflect private hypothesis about how the world works. Embellished by allegations or attributions based on circumstantial evidence, they are attempts to make sense of uncertain situations” (12). Since rumours are based on unconfirmed information and represent attempts of sense-making of uncertain and ambiguous situations and positions, they necessarily occupy a particular thin line between imagination and reality. In his work, Rosnow underscores that the important factor in rumour is context in which it occurs, arguing that the nature of rumour is contextual, which requires a more situated interrogation of “*who was saying what to whom*” (14). Further, Rosnow builds on Tamotsu Shibutani’s influential work on rumours (1966), who viewed rumour construction as a communication process through which individuals seek for other perspectives concerning what is happening, repeating, and circulating rumours to initiate and perpetuate a problem-solving process (17). This emphasizes the ideas of uncertainty and anxiety as implicit in rumour construction and circulation, arguing that the repetition of rumours allows for the communal imagination of their conceptual framework and “new ways of coping with perceived threats to the existing order attain clarity and coherence of purpose” (16). Therefore, when people pass fantastical hard-to-believe rumours, they mediate their anxieties and uncertainties in order to dissipate their discomfort.

The Djelinde residents found themselves in ambiguous and, at times contradictory, situations that engendered highly specific rumours, which I illustrate, are not mere fantasies of the marginalized and powerless community. Instead, they represent the complexity of the events I have witnessed during my fieldwork, the covert practices of maneuvering within the ambiguous contexts between alterity and opposition outside of the official discourses, as well as everyday experiences of the local community. Rumours revealed their concerns over local social and political events. Similarly, Ann Stoler (1992) points out that rumours and narratives based on them can attest to different ways of knowing and different kinds of knowledge, shaping people’s fears and responses to those fears, representing the medium “through which the unspeakable was spoken” (179). The “spoken unspeakable” in Djelinde’s case revealed community anxieties over the planned extractive activities. This resulted in rumours about their environmental impacts and their connection to the transformation of the local subsistence practices - fishing, hunting, and reindeer-herding. Fishing, particularly, was an important activity to the local community, not only because it provided food security for many families but also as an important practice of

traditional knowledge, securing the human/river reciprocal relationships. The potentiality of the radioactive threat of the Tomtor deposit site and its potential to contaminate the environment engendered pervasive rumours about the worsening health of the local population. These rumours addressed threats which included various types of cancer (as the local doctor complained particularly among younger women), sudden deaths of otherwise healthy people, unexpected heart attacks experienced by both elders and youth, and other factors over which community members had no control.

The older community members, who had experienced forced relocations during the Soviet-era *ukrupnenie* programs in the 1950s, also actively circulated the rumours about the government plans of new forced relocations if the extractive companies and potential government decisions to expand activities closer to the village, or if there would be a serious radiation threat or even a radioactive disaster. These localized rumours and similar stories exemplified the uneven power relations between the local community, the extractive company, and the state. Thus, through the production and reproduction of certain rumours, the village residents expressed their fears and anxieties over changing environmental conditions (especially, water pollution and radiation), concerns over health, their precarious and marginalized position within the extensive discourses on economic development, extractive profits, and government interventions. Under these conditions of marginality, the Djelinde residents resisted with the only resources they had - rumours and other fantastical stories, reacting and, sometimes, subverting ambiguous situations. Ann Stoler (1992) offers an excellent theorization of rumours as challenging to “hierarchies of credibility” (179), arguing that for rumours to demand attention, resonate and spread, they must sound probable despite their exaggerated and fantastical content, representing “a highly ambiguous discursive field” (182), where the authority was vulnerable and limited in its encompassing power.

### **Rumours in Action**

Liya was from an extended reindeer-herding family; she spent her childhood between the village (attending a boarding school during falls, winters, and early springs in the village) and the tundra (herding reindeer with her parents and siblings during summer months). Liya was referred to me as a potential interviewee by multiple people because her family was one of the most highly respected in the village, and she had a first-hand knowledge on issues faced by the local

reindeer-herders, hunters, and fishers. Liya was also one of the most active members of the community: organizing and participating in local social and cultural events, as well as political meetings as an elected representative of her administrative division (the village was divided into several administrative clusters, the residents of each of these clusters elect their own representative for the local administrative centre). One afternoon, she agreed to meet with me at the local school; the school was located in the central street; it was hard to miss it as the school was in the largest building in the village. I arrived thirty minutes before the agreed time with an intention to look around the school without disturbing any ongoing classes. Liya showed up a little later and invited me to one of the classrooms so we could converse uninterrupted. The reason I sought out an interview with Liya was her participation with other ten residents in a trip to extractive sites, organized by Anabar-Diamonds in September of 2016. The summer of the same year was a critical period for the village; the local administrative centre had just reached an agreement with the company after two unsuccessful legal proceedings at the Republic court in 2015 and 2016. I asked Liya to elaborate on her impressions from the trip, and she recounted:

There were ten of us, all village residents, you remember Margarita, she was there as a community elder, Ivan (a local paramedic), Taras - a veteran-hunter, Mikhail - the village leader, and several others. The company used its own helicopter for this trip, and we managed to visit three sites of their past and current operations: Talakhtaakh was an important site, however they showed it only from the air, from the helicopter; Mayat was another location but with fully completed extraction activities, they showed us the patches of land where they had re-cultivated, but also from afar. We wanted to see it close up, but the representative assured us it was not possible. I wish I could visit that place now and see how nature is recovering... Finally, the helicopter brought us to *Pentagon*, a newly built company workers' settlement, several buildings make up a pentagon shape and that is why everyone calls it *Pentagon*. It was nice, it looked like the company workers were provided all necessities, most of the workers were fly-in fly-out *nuuchcha* migrants, there were also Sakha boys, and we saw several young men from our village. At the end of the trip, the company's representative made us all sign several documents with statements that we had indeed visited all the sites and were satisfied with their environmental conditions. We had to sign a bunch of other documents back at the administrative centre. It was bizarre to me, and I did not like that when we came back to the village and told others that we had to sign some documents, some people started spreading rumours that we had actually sold ourselves and everyone else in the village to the company. You see, the company was really smart of taking us there, but you know they did not show us the sites that we actually wanted to see. No surprise that people here share information that sounds more like rumours rather than proper news.

Liya and her story about a historically important for the village trip as well as an after-trip rumours about her and others' "selling out" echo the arguments made by numerous scholars of rumour that the power of rumouring and rumourmongering is not to deliver information but to exchange it, simultaneously criticizing and debating issues and concerns. In this sense, a troubling information about the trip, organized by the company management, and the fact, that the invited residents were not permitted to see the sites as carefully as they would have wanted, generated more anxiety, and strengthened mistrust among the residents towards the company.

The rumours about the trip spread almost immediately. Liya was clearly upset about the people spreading rumours about her involvement in the trip, however those rumours so perfectly embodied the concerns of the people, revealing a dire lack of appropriate information (about the company's true intentions, extracting sites, their environmental conditions, etc.), that even she rationalized the existence of those rumours on the first place. Thus, Liya and many others in the village accepted the rumours because their historical and temporal context "made sense" for their specific situation.

Nicholas DiFonzo and Prashant Bordia (2007) argue that, to understand rumours, it is important to analyze and interrogate contexts in which rumours arise. These contexts are often ambiguous and highly contingent where information is neither available nor trustworthy. Rumours, then, in these contexts function as collective sense-making of ambiguous situations, by allowing collective discussion, evaluation, and interpretation of specific roots of a problem at hand, enabling an active management of an informative void (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007).

In her analysis of body-snatching rumours, Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1996) inquires what does it mean when people generate and circulate the same bizarre and fantastic stories, putting forward an argument that rumours crystallize local anxieties. The rumours are believed and circulated precisely because "they are true at that indeterminate level between fact and metaphor" (5). In her work, Scheper-Hughes describes the experiences of the poor people at the Brazilian clinics and hospitals (such as, either poor peoples' bodies going missing in the cemeteries, hospitals, and clinics, or if people die in the hospital, their bodies are claimed by the state; indifferent and hostile doctors over-medicate the poor and perform unnecessary surgery and amputations for otherwise treatable conditions), which seem to exacerbate and justify the body-snatching rumours. The most poignant excerpt though is Scheper-Hughes's interrogation of the violent socio-economic contrast between affluent and poor, serving as rumour fertilizer, the

poor people's belief that "their bodies and those of their children might be worth more dead than alive to the rich and powerful" (7). Ultimately, Scheper-Hughes suggests that the body-snatching rumours of the favela residents exemplify "a sense of alarm, warning people in the community that their bodies, their lives, and those of their children may be in danger" (9). Moreover, those rumours signify the chronic "state of emergency" in which poor people live (Taussig 1991, citing Walter Benjamin) or the conditions of constant crisis. Thus, the bizarre stories among the poor are repeated and shared because they are fundamentally true and imply people's anxieties about the norms and practices of the state and its institutions. Most importantly, abandoning symbolic analysis of rumours for practical and material explanations, Scheper-Hughes insists that even fantastical rumours (such as organ-stealing) can find some basis in social reality, producing historical narratives of state violence. The historicization and interpretation of rumours as "political witnessing" is particularly important since the poor and marginalized are rarely listened to and more rarely speak in the official settings as Scheper-Hughes states: "the rumours participate in the spirit of the official truth commissions by testifying to human suffering on the margins and peripheries of the official story" (9).

Interestingly enough, some village residents confided in me their proactive stance within this complex situation proposing a potentially actionable plan; yet these proposals were also based on specific rumours. Aida was an employee of the local cultural centre; in addition to her busy work schedule, she was known as a cultural activist in the village. Aida and several women activists started a singing ensemble. Their initial repertoire consisted of songs in Sakha and Russian, but Aida later insisted on learning several songs in Evenki language, even though no one in their group spoke the native language (for more discussion on language politics and revitalization efforts refer to chapter 4). Their singing ensemble was very popular; they frequently performed during cultural events in both Djelinde and Olenyek. They even toured to other villages and towns outside of the Olenyek district. The following excerpt is from her interview, recorded during one of my last days in the village. We were talking about the public meetings, organized by the administrative centre and the extractive companies, many of which Aida attended, as well as an infamous trip to the extraction sites – a direct outcome of one of those public meetings. Aida detailed some aspects of the plan she proposed right after the trip on the extraction sites:

You know, I wanted to ask some of our boys who work for the company to take pictures of the sites to see what they are actually extracting there and, most importantly, how they do that. Several community members were taken to those extracting sites, but they were not permitted to visit the most important locations and observe extracting and other processing activities; they were simply told that everything was fine and there was nothing to worry about. But someone posted some comments and pictures on WhatsApp that it was all lies and in fact everything looks damaged and dead there. I have myself heard that if a reindeer wanders on that extraction site, it drops dead just like that.

Understanding the importance of concrete evidence opposite to numerous rumours constantly publicly circulating, Aida and other activists suggested utilizing the access to the sites of interest granted to several youth, employed by the company. However, they also frequently added that it would not be particularly fair to the young men, since their employment was highly precarious, and unemployment was one of the major issues in the village (for more discussion on labour precarity see chapters 2 and 3). The following story, told by Nadezhda, a retired reindeer herder, poignantly demonstrates the precarious and dependent position of the youth employed by the company:

My younger son used to be employed as a heading man (*perehodchik*) by the company, it was a very hard job but well-paid, he recently got married and his wife was pregnant at the time, that's why money was important. He was injured at work - accidentally cut his arm, and the company - without my knowledge - swiftly relocated him to Yakutsk and brought him back through Anabar (a village in the neighbouring district). It turned out that they didn't treat him properly and my son, scared that his arm was infected and he was about to lose it, deserted the work site. When he showed up here, I almost had a heart attack. I called to the company requesting to talk to the management, but they hung up on me. I really wanted to sue the company because my son had to undergo a very long treatment at the Olenyek hospital and his arm still does not function properly, but my son was vehemently against it, he hoped that if he didn't complain to anyone, the company would re-hire him in future. The company did not re-hire him - he has been unemployed for almost two years now.

In his analysis of “weapons of the weak”, James Scott (1990) suggests that rumours, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, and jokes of the powerless represent an anonymous critique of power which he calls “infrapolitics of the powerless” (hidden transcripts) (xiii). This sort of politics occurs in the space between overt collective defiance and complete hegemonic compliance, concealing identity of the powerless, largely because of potential absence of state retaliation (138). According to Scott, rumour is not directed at a particular person, and it

represents a powerful form of anonymous, hence protected, communication that can serve specific interests, usually occurring in situations with unreliable and ambiguous information, where they can serve to elevate anxieties and aspirations. Since rumours are collective action and expression, the group members can “select [what] they choose to emphasize, they adopt them for their own use, and they of course create new cultural practices and artifacts to meet their felt needs” (157), which decentralized, less controlled, and not policed by the dominant group. In this sense, rumours, as well as other forms of oral traditions, provide “seclusion, control, and even anonymity” (160), which make them easily transmittable, therefore ideal for cultural resistance. Here, the anonymity of rumour is of particular interest, because as Scott argues the unstable and changeable forms of rumours (and of other oral culture) represent them as a collective production without specific origins with multiple authors, which provide an opportunity to constantly transform them. Precisely because of this anonymous nature of folk culture (including rumours), Scott notes that this form of oral communication can be understood as elementary modes of political practice that exist within “the realm of informal leadership and nonelites, of conversation and oral discourse, and of surreptitious resistance” (200). However, Scott also argues that infrapolitics are indeed real politics and they are “always pressing, testing, probing the boundaries of the *permissible*” (201), threatening at any moment to turn into strikes, overt resistances, and even revolutions.

Similarly, David Samper (2002), noting that the previous scholarly work on rumours, gossip and contemporary legends neglects the theme of resistance and social movements, argues that: “[r]umours ... affect the solidarity of a group, creating a public that can then participate in collective action. As counter-hegemonic discourse, rumours may lead to resistance” (2). Samper echoes Scott’s analysis of practices of hidden resistance, disguised “ideological insubordination” to the hegemonic ideology, which reveals the false compliance. As such, rumours and similar discursive practices may become “tactics” potential of transforming into more overt politicized strategies. Rumour particularly is understood as representation of unverified information “constructed in order to explain uncertain, ambiguous events or intangible fears, anxieties, or perceived dangers” (4), emerging in uncertain situations with limited, unreliable, or trustworthy information on some event of particular importance to a community. Rumours change and enlarge in the process of transmission, therefore transforming into a collective expression of fear and anxieties. Analyzing the persistent rumours of kidnapped children who are killed for their

organs, and people's acts on those rumours (attacks and injuries of American tourists in Guatemala, for instance), Samper argues that these stories are rooted in everyday lives of the Latin American people and reflect their real concerns and fears (11). Moreover, these rumours serve as symbolic representations of capitalist consumption of raw goods materials, including the consumption of human bodies as consumable commodities, specifically those most vulnerable – the poor children. Samper interprets these narratives as “perception of powerlessness in the face of First World economic, medical, political, cultural, and social hegemony” (15). However, he also adds that rumours can potentially become subtle forms of resistance, by establishing, sustaining, and strengthening social networks. Rumours construct a public through sharing and believing, face-to-face transmission, and forming into a social network. Borrowing Scott's concept of hidden transcripts as formed within the middle ground between complete hegemonic compliance and overt resistance, Samper argues that rumours “do not begin from a posture of resistance, but rather describe the moment when hegemony is first understood as a cultural construct. ... rumours may mark the shift to community resistance, may signal the moment that hegemonic ideology is questioned” (20).

What is interesting about James Scott and David Samper's arguments is that rumours and rumouring may provide a specific public space where illegitimate discourse and action (otherwise radically circumscribed) become potential. Aida's plan of action was envisioned after the dissemination of the rumours about the terrible environmental conditions on the extractive sites as well as unreliable information provided by the company representatives to the community members. Considering the riskiness of the plan, primarily to the employed youth, Aida and other villagers never attempted to realize it. As such, the rumours did not necessarily provide resolution to social problems and ambiguous situations the Djelinde residents found themselves in; yet, their constant circulation provided an opportunity to re-explore and re-negotiate communal fears and anxieties, as well as challenge the official discourses, positioning rumours as “covert tactics that facilitate overt strategies” (Samper 2002, 25).

Another interesting aspect of rumouring is illuminated in Aida's story, especially at the time of ubiquitous social media. As I learned, many rumours were actively repeated and shared utilizing a WhatsApp social network messaging application for smartphones. WhatsApp is the most popular messaging tool in Sakha Republic; the Sakha has the vastest geographical territory in the Russian Federation, and its rural districts often experience unreliable internet connection,

therefore there is a dire need of alternative cheap, somewhat reliable, means for communication, and WhatsApp became it. In Djelinde, almost everyone had a smartphone and often communicated via WhatsApp. Amusingly, the favourite spot for casual meetings among the residents was the post-office building; almost every morning, women, men, and children congregated to the post-office, where the internet connection was the most efficient. The residents explained that it was because of the post-office's close proximity to the local communication and data transmission tower. In time, hanging out at the post-office came to be my own morning ritual. Recently, scholars of information technologies and communication turned their attention to social media rather than mouth-to-ear information dissemination, particularly exploring how during emergencies and times of high stress and uncertainty (emphasizing public distrust of official information channels), people obtain crucial information using backchannels, such as social media (Alzanin and Azmi 2018; Arun 2019; Chandra and Pal 2019; Simon et al. 2016, etc.); in this interplay of informal communication and modern technology, rumours occupy a particularly curious position. Social media is seen an essential tool of communication and information dissemination for many marginalized groups in conditions of limited agency (Agarwal and Wigand 2012; George and Leidner 2018; Lievrouw 2011; Oh and Rao 2015; Shirky 2011, etc.). It has become an imperative coping mechanism and a productive platform in Djelinde as well; for instance, as noted by many residents, the velocity of repeating and sharing rumours via WhatsApp doubled, even tripled, during 2015-2016 conflict between the Olenyek district and Anabar-Diamonds.

### **Contaminating Rumours**

Rumours, especially those circulated in social media, facilitated by modern technology, offered an unofficial outlet for collective critique of the social, economic, and political circumstances, shaping a public sphere, based on collective realities. Pamela Donovan (2007) argues that rumours have important distinctive features such as, rumours act like news, disseminated outside the official media and authority, serving to reduce anxiety through reshaping information into acceptable forms sharing and disseminating; thus, rumours are understood as problem-solving activity by groups of people who are deprived of adequate information (64). Similarly, Gary Alan Fine (2007) notes that the very existence and frequency of rumours can reveal a lack of confidence in official information adequacy, moreover "society in which much rumour spreads

(particularly those dealing with social issues) has likely experienced institutional breakdown: either institutions are not communicating or are believed not to be providing accurate, fair or necessary information” (12). In this sense, more circulating rumours are found in systems lacking in institutional trust. By analyzing an intersection of trust and rumour, Fine argues that rumours show that information from authoritative sources is incomplete, inadequate, or inaccurate, hence implying that “rumour proposes who and what should be trusted, allowing strategies of social action to be formulated” (7).

One of the best examples of rumours as a trust or lack thereof in society is Timothy Johnston’s (2011) study on rumours in everyday life under Joseph Stalin (1939-1953). Johnston characterizes rumours as “bricolage” tactics widely employed by the Soviet citizens (here, bricolage is how story tellers draw upon a pre-existing repertoire of images to construct a narrative; bricoleurs use the materials before them to create an innovative and novel product (xxxix). The information provided by the official press was supplemented or even replaced by word-of-mouth obtained information, allowing creation of a third product based on two contexts. Johnston notes that rumouring was an extremely widespread phenomenon in the Stalin-era Soviet Union. The Soviet citizens, then, “melded together information from official sources, foreign radio stations, rumours, and pre-existing assumptions about international affairs via the ‘tactic’ of bricolage” (210). Interestingly, even though many scholars treat rumouring as an arena of discursive subversion and resistance, Johnston challenges this argument and states that rumouring was too widespread to be exclusively associated with resistance: “[i]f rumouring was an act of resistance, then all Soviet citizens were resisters” (xxxviii). Yet, Johnston admits that rumours in the Stalin-era Soviet Union were a powerful force capable of simultaneously terrorizing the public and inspiring acts of civil disobedience in particularly ambiguous and uncertain circumstances. However, he also notes that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the same tactics of bricolage were rendered mostly useless as they were intertwined with the Official Soviet Identity and the specific Soviet habitat (211). Ultimately, Johnston views rumours as an important tactic of bricolage which enclosed the Soviet citizens within the Soviet power, rather than removing them from it.

This argument is similar to observations made by Stuart Kirsch (2002) in his research on the intersection between the state political violence in West Papua and rumours. Kirsch highlights rumours and other “fictionalized” narratives as a discursive field, which could provide

space to challenge oppressive regimes; however, as he shows in many cases they also enable and reproduce them. Examining how rumours can contribute to the experiences and expressions of state-sponsored terror, Kirsch states that rumours can provide important historical readings of state power and its abuses, reproduction of inequality and exploitation, “promot[ing] acts of violence” (70), through constructions of cultural and gendered difference. He argues that rumours reflect and reproduce political violence, specifically determining the margins of the Indonesian state as well as constructing “the Other” with hegemonic governmental discourses. Drawing on his fieldwork with political refugees from West Papua, Kirsch focuses on the political properties of rumours about the prostitutes with HIV/AIDS sent by Jakarta, Muyu refugees’ speculations regarding their possible exposure to cysticercosis (a parasite), and cannibal women who capture men to mate and kill them afterwards (61-3). Kirsch argues that the rumours of epidemic diseases (particularly the rumours about the prostitutes infected with HIV/AIDS) represent not only the “penetration of political violence into the most private and intimate areas of life” (61) but also the vulnerability of West Papuans before the Indonesian state terror. As Kirsch puts it “[t]error moves silently beneath the skin, embodying the violence of the state” (63). Additionally, the gendered rumours of cannibal women, linking state aspirations for development with violence against women, manifest concerns over uncontrolled female sexuality as “a threat to both production and orderly reproduction” (65), as well as discourses to bring female sexuality under the state civilizing control. Kirsch adds that the rumours about cannibal women promote the state interests, imaginations of the “primitive West Papuan”, as well as posing a threat to men and modernity, in a way legitimizing the state violence against women. Kirsch further describes how the remote areas, designated for developmental projects, are predominantly inhabited by “the lost tribes”, therefore rumours are used as rationale for taking over the land and reifying the state power. Most importantly, Kirsch points out that even though rumours continually transform as they circulate because of their collective, organic, and subjective nature, they can also be easily appropriated and manipulated by the state, eventually intensifying, and reproducing political violence and the state terror rather than critiquing and potentially subverting existing unequal power relations.

I have noted earlier that the politics and political action within the circumstances, not permitting public and overtly political engagement, can be framed as “the circulation of stories” (Graeber 2007, 309). Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) analyzes the similar type of resistance and

subversive activities among the Bedouin women - oral lyric poetry, “poems/songs, known as *ghinnawas* (little songs), recited mostly by women and young men, usually in the midst of ordinary conversations between inmates” (46). What is particularly interesting about this resistance form is that it enables expressing sentiments which are not expressed in “ordinary-language conversations” (46), however, as Abu-Lughod further shows, the alternative forms of resistance practiced by the Bedouin women have been produced within, and are therefore intimately connected to, the local systems of power. In this sense, rumours and rumouring as a political and resistance action may be used to reveal the local structures and intricacies of complex power relations.

One of the important analytical tools to think about and think with while attempting to understand the state, the nation, power dynamics and power imbalances within particular social systems is an intense focus on “small places” and “small things”. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1998) suggests that seemingly marginal and unimportant people and small communities with less visible manifestations of inequality might tell us more about power and engender a different perspective on understanding the local and the global. Building on Trouillot’s discussion, Vanessa Agard-Jones (2013) turns to the body and its parts as the objects of analysis, exploring “how people understand the small - even microscopic - objects that are ingested into and that meld with their bodies, and in particular [focusing] on the circulation of a hormone-altering pesticide called *chlordecone* (“kepone” in English)” in rural Martinique (188). According to Agard-Jones, Martinique is known as the site most contaminated by chlordecone, a recognized carcinogen and an endocrine disruptor, linked to male infertility and prostate cancer; these particular effects of chlordecone generated the local discussions on an emergent gender and sexual politics on the island as a response to the rumours of “genocide by sterilization” and high rates of “intersex births” (190). Here, Agard-Jones argues that the rumours about local environmental contamination came to be seen as the issues of gender, sexual, and reproductive politics; ultimately insisting that taking a molecule of chlordecone as a unit of analysis encourages us “scaling outward to the world, but in doing so it also enabled our efforts to scale inward, recognizing the multiple levels at which our material entanglements - be they cellular, chemical or commercial - might be connected to global politics” (192).

Like those affected by chlordecone in Martinique, the Djelinde residents were also concerned about a radioactive threat of the Tomtor deposit and its damaging contaminating

effects on the environment as well as their health. These concerns were reflected in several pervasive rumours. In fact, the planned extractive activities in Tomtor massif were the dominant topic of most of my conversations with the Djelinde residents during my fieldwork in 2017; it seemed that the conflict with Anabar-Diamonds exhausted itself and the administrative centre had already started negotiations about the financial contributions by the company to the district budgetary fund. During my conversation with Liya, I asked her if she was concerned about the Tomtor as the company Vostok-Engineering was scheduled to start extracting in the near future. Liya became very agitated:

Apparently, there was such a crazy auction process for the Tomtor massif because it is a federal development project, but here, we did not hear anything; all the updates and news we used to get from the outside people or through rumours. You know, we used to herd in Tomtor area when I was a child, but one cannot go there these days because some of our herders started losing hair and their health worsened. That's why we do not believe when the company experts say that everything is fine, and we will not be impacted by extractions. How come we will not be impacted?! People say that that area is all dug up through and through. But the biggest concern to us is still water, our river seems to be so polluted now; there used to be so many fish, we used to fish by buckets but now if you catch a few, you feel lucky. And you know yourself how we survive here; we depend on fish since we have not had wild deer crossing our territory for almost a decade. Who would bring fish to us if we cannot fish ourselves? A lot of unemployed people and families with many children in the village depend on fish as their primary food source. What will happen with our river when they start with the Tomtor? I cannot even imagine what will happen.

Radiation is highly ambiguous phenomenon to detect (it is invisible, without any smell) and evaluate (its effects on health are undisputed, however, its study can be complicated if necessary data, preferably collected through longitudinal studies, are missing; for instance, a type of exposure, levels of exposure, temporality of exposure, specific circumstances, and so forth). In his research on uranium mining in Meghalaya, India, with a predominantly Indigenous population, Bengt Karlsson (2009) argues that, despite most of countries having their own regulations over permissible doses or levels of radioactive exposure, “all types of environmental or health regulations are settled politically, reflecting a compromise or balance between safety concerns and the economic and other interests involved in pursuing the activity in question” (44). In this sense, if extraction projects with potential radioactive contamination tied to the military and/or highly profitable, both industry and government powers make decisions regarding how

safety standards are set and enforced. Therefore, mineral mining and nuclear industries appear to be the most contentious, often producing public distrust and opposition; in this case, Karlsson notes that the primary strategy of industry becomes “to convince people of the benefits of nuclear-driven development” (46). The similar strategy of persuasion was utilized by Vostok-Engineering; however, the village residents were not convinced. In addition to rumours about radioactive pollution, some villagers told me the stories about the cases of worsening health of the local population, such as more cases of various types of cancer (particularly among younger women), sudden deaths of otherwise healthy people, unexpected heart attacks among both elders and youth, and many more. During my conversation with four local kindergarten employees, the women shared:

People say that the Tomtor extraction site is very radioactive. We had several people die suddenly after visiting that place, and some herders had strange sores on their skin, and some of them lost all of their hair. There was one hunter, Danilov, he visited the site in the 90s and opened the covered-up pit, he got sick and died soon after!

This and similar stories about the herders and hunters’ experiences with radiation in Tomtor were repeated by the local maternity nurse, Khristina. Khristina arrived in Djelinde from a different district as a young professional in the 1960s. Having lived here for a long time, she came to see herself as a local and became a passionate and vocal advocate for local cultural and environmental rights. Khristina’s opinion on the stories about radiation and its effects in Djelinde was of particular interest to me because she was a medical professional, and I wondered if those stories about the people affected could be medically (and scientifically) verified. Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2000) points out that studying rumours, especially in the medical field, requires practical and material explanations, because “[e]ven the most preposterous of the organ-stealing rumours, which the TransWeb authors say has never been documented anywhere ... finds some basis in lawsuits and criminal proceedings, some still unresolved or pending” (204).

Therefore, upon learning about the potential radiation and health issues, I sought out interviews with the local medical professionals, who would be aware of both rumours and the specific contexts which engendered them. I met with Khristina at the local hospital, the third largest building in Djelinde. The locals were very proud of the hospital building, despite it lacking some necessary equipment and even medical supplies. The Djelinde hospital had a special section for geriatric residents (which is not a regular set-up for remote hospitals), who

could spend time there with food and other amenities provided for free and, most importantly, go through an annual medical checkup. When I visited the hospital, there were only two senior residents present, who I also interviewed later. Despite my unfortunate arrival during her work hours, Khristina was eager to talk to me, and when I asked her about radiation and herders' health problems, she emphatically ranted:

I think that they [the company Vostok-Engineering] are lying to us, they say that it does not have any radiation, but it is a lie – Tomtor is very radioactive. Why then the workers take off and disinfect their clothes after being there, huh?! They make our own people work there because it is already polluted. People say some herders lost their hair, and they were camping close to Tomtor; nowadays no one dares to go to that area. And if anyone asks any questions, they twist your words and state the opposite. Last year, they sent some doctors here, but they were all sell-outs (*prodazhnie*); after examining several community members, they announced that everyone was healthy here. It is ridiculous! How come people would be healthy here? Half of the population have problems with joints, some are not even able to walk, everyone's blood pressure is abnormally high, there are a lot of people with heart defects... We did have cancer patients before but nowadays we have more of them and with "unusual" and "atypical" cancer types, especially among younger women.

According to Nancy Scheper-Hughes, actual events and rumours, based on them, reflect "poor people's perceptions, grounded in a social and in a biomedical reality" (1990, 58), within the doctor-patient relations in public clinics and hospitals where poor people and their bodies are viewed as "dispensable", residents of shantytowns, where Scheper-Hughes conducted her research, easily believed rumours and bizarre and unlikely stories since they are "fundamentally, *existentially true*" (1996, 9).

Likewise, Liya, Khristina, and the kindergarten employees' fears over radiation exposure and deteriorating health of the village residents should be perceived as *fundamentally true*, therefore, these rumours and other stories may be reconstructed as evidence of local complex experiences of conflict, injustice, and violent social reality. Intense and widely practiced rumouring, moreover, revealed the deep concerns of the Djelinde residents over contamination they were exposed to and its harmful toxic effects.

Glen Perice (1997) argues that, in violent and dangerous situations, specific rumours are constantly repeated "to calcify them into accepted representations of social reality and political life" (1). Perice focuses on the rumours circulated during Francois Duvalier's political reign in Haiti, including "gruesome tales of the severed head packed on ice, the heart taken from the dead

man, the children stolen from their families” (4). He argues that these are not only scary blood-chilling fantastical stories but products of the imaginations of those who suffer within the authoritarian state - the terror and power of terror are spread and mediated by this specific discursive practice. Rumours, then, “are not a collection of unverified reports and fantasies of the marginalized and powerless, but a speech form used by speakers to maneuver into spaces of alterity and opposition” (9). This two-sidedness of rumours suggests the intimate relation of rumour to authority, creating circumstances where rumours can be strategically instrumentalized by the government to strengthen its power and inflict political violence on its own citizens.

In his ethnography *Lost People: Magic and the Legacy of Slavery in Madagascar*, David Graeber (2007) states that one’s political power depends on others’ uncertainty about his/her actions and abilities. To support his thinking, he shares a story about Ramena, a powerful man from the village Ambaribe, who was believed to have a *Vazimba*, “a kind of mysterious spirit which lurked in watery places, an anonymous, dangerous ghost” (159), which made him a potentially dangerous man. Ramena only half-heartedly denied the rumours about *Vazimba* and skillfully manipulated impressions that people had about him, which created and circulated more rumours and stories about his capabilities and power, preventing anyone from speaking or acting against him (162). This conceptualization and praxis of power, of course, are circumstantial to the specific contexts where there is a lack of formal political institutions, according to Graeber, however, the similar statement can be made about governmental power and its intention to generate rumours as a way of manipulating certain discourses and exercising political power. Returning to Perice’s discussion on Francois Duvalier’s power hold over Haiti (1997), he notes that “[r]eports of Francois Duvalier’s power give testimony not only to the power of magic but to the power of rumour itself” (4). Thus, in the context of Djelinde, the power of rumours coincided with the insidious power of the government, which was paradoxically expressed through a lack of governmental intervention and an absence of the official clarifications and explanations to the concerns that the local people had about the projected activities of Vostok-Engineering. This governmental invisibility in Djelinde invigorated more intense and frantic rumouring.

Interestingly enough, Vostok-Engineering and its extractive projects faced another opposition, activated through concerns of a different village located close to the capital city Yakutsk (NewsYktRu 2017). The residents opposed the company’s plan to transport a radioactive ore mined in Djelinde through their village as well as the construction of a terminal

on the local river to transload ore on its way to a processing factory outside the Republic. A great many urban environmental activists, government officials, local councilmen, academics, and journalists joined the villagers' opposition, actively attending the public hearings organized by Vostok-Engineering, openly confronting the company, and circulating the updates widely on social media and in local and regional newspapers. This rapid collective mobilization resulted in the company's decision to change the transportation route.

In contrast, Djelinde's complaints about the same company did not galvanize a similar response from either environmental activists or government representatives, rendering the local community victims of the government industrial and economic interests yet again. Most disturbingly, urban activists and academics, that I met with and talked to after my visit of Djelinde, blamed the villagers for their concerns being ignored and dismissed. This is what one of the local academics told me:

Their lawsuit [Djelinde was involved in the lawsuit against Anabar-Diamonds in 2015-2016] did not include the information on two rivers that could have been affected by the niobium contamination [the mining and transportation of niobium and other metals became an issue in late 2016 and early 2017, and was an entirely different case]. They could have done it, but they did not lift a finger to oppose that! It was thanks to all of us here in the city, we were the ones who raised this issue with potential contamination of those rivers. And I absolutely do not understand why they did not say anything! We had so many meetings here and they did nothing!

This comment stunned me not only because it was highly misinformed (the conflation of two cases that took place in different time frames was ignorant at best), but it also reiterated the prejudices about rural Indigenous people as being lazy, uninterested in their own development, and lacking any agency. Further, the statement was eerily similar to the one made by a senior forest officer in Jharkhand in Alpa Shah's (2010) ethnographic work on *adivasis* and Indigenous politics, "First, they must learn how to chase the elephants. Second, they must not keep rice in their houses. Third, they must learn how to worship Ganesh Devta. And fourth, they must stop drinking rice beer and mahua wine" (121). Shah argues that this particular statement reflected the sentiments of the urban educated activists, who claimed to speak on behalf of the Indigenous *adivasis*, simultaneously reducing them to narrow stereotypical yet marketable images, which further marginalized already powerless and impoverished Indigenous communities.

I argue that the previous comment made by the urban activist in Yakutsk (and many similar ones for that matter) must be understood in terms of systematic marginalization and exclusion of rural Indigenous people from the political and public spheres. Equally problematic is the undermining of class dimensions in rural Indigenous struggles; the rural communities in remote isolated locations do not often have access to same crucial resources (financial and otherwise) that could have propelled their grievances to more public arenas. I myself witnessed the administration office worker in Djelinde spend an hour and a half to upload and email two photos to someone in Yakutsk; hence, the urban residents' statements such as "if they really want to, they would be able to find all necessary information and documentation online, there is plenty of resources" (from my personal conversation with an urban activist who also happened to be a lawyer) do not assure confidence in urban-rural solidarity. However, it must be also noted that several community members managed to vocalize their grievances and fears over radiation during a handful of public hearings with the environmental researchers/experts, hired by Vostok-Engineering. Katya, a local elderly activist, attended those meetings and recounted to me afterwards:

I was at the hearings with Vostok-Engineering, they talked a lot about nanotechnology, niobium, other rare metals, periodic table, ore, and so much more. Apparently, they have been working there for a long time, but they still state that there is no radiation. I do not believe that, if there are so many metals there, it is bound to have some radiation.

In her ethnography *Unearthing Conflict: Corporate Mining, Activism and Expertise in Peru*, Fabiana Li (2015) argues that the strategic language of science and expertise, frequently implemented by mining corporations in their dealings with affected communities, "prioritize[s] mining interests and enable[s] corporations to define the standards of performance that governments will use to establish compliance" (186), disadvantaging activists and NGOs since they rarely have resources to produce "accurate and scientific" counterarguments (207). Considering Katya's description of the public hearings and the company representatives' deliberate deployment of overtly scientific language (nanotechnology, niobium, rare metals, periodic table, ore, etc.), I would assert that this corporate strategy not only managed to limit an informed participation of the Djelinde residents in critical discussions about their futures and future of their environment, but it also allowed them to be dismissed as "ignorant", "irrational",

“misinformed”, and “biased”, making them appear deficient and in need of external “developmental” interventions.

To alleviate the public mistrust and fear of radioactive contamination, the company later installed a radiation meter on the main administrative building; however, the villagers immediately circulated another rumour, alleging that the meter was actually “set up” to only show numbers eight and, occasionally, nine - supposedly acceptable radiation emission range, believed to be harmless for humans. During one of our many conversations in the library, I specifically mentioned the radiation meter to my friend Aida and asked her what she thought of it; Aida replied:

I attended the recent meeting with the company representatives; the local people were very concerned about radiation, but the company people assured us there was nothing to worry about and they put that radiation meter on the administrative building. But you know what people say? They say it is fixed (*zafiksirovan*) on number eight on purpose; it does not go over eight at all, that’s why people say that the company is lying to us, but what can we do?

Tatiana, Aida’s friend, who happened to be with us in the library, also shared her opinion:

I firmly believe that radiation meter is rigged, it is like a conspiracy against us; and we are guinea pigs here, even city doctors and scientists are visiting our village every 2-3 years to monitor us and examine how radiation is impacting our health. I was in Yakutsk this summer, and many people were asking me if our village was planned to be relocated. There were so many rumours about relocations! When I talked to my friends here, they say if the government and the company decide to relocate us, what can we do? We will simply move away.

These statements confirm once again that rumours arise from specific ambiguous contexts; however, these particular rumours on radioactive impact as well as “fixed” radiation meter emphasize not only abstract uncertainty, rather physically threatening or potentially threatening situation, where people feel a psychological need for sense of security and safety. This threat of contamination seems to be quite tangible considering earlier mentioned details on the highly contentious plans of extraction activities in Tomtor massif. Thus, rumours function not only to make sense of potential threat but also to psychologically manage it.

The rumours about the Djelinde residents being “guinea pigs” and a “rigged” radiation meter were shared by the residents many times, sometimes with a pinch of humour, but more often with serious and frustrated tone. Baffled and intrigued by the rumours about the meter, I

made a point of checking it every day throughout my stay in Djelinde. Numbers never dropped below or got above eight. I cannot say that this exercise reduced my own anxiety over radiation rumours, but I indeed grew more suspicious of both the meter and of the company's assurance regarding the lack of contamination threat.

Interestingly, rumours of radiation engendered other relevant rumours, Tatiana and many others shared rumour about potential forced relocations. The topic of forced relocations is not unfamiliar for the Djelinde residents. I interviewed several elderly individuals in the village, who vividly remembered the 1950s forced relocations from the village Sukhaany. The forced relocations were the Soviet-era governmental project of agricultural and residential integration and centralization (*ukrupnenie*) (Anderson 2000; Donahoe 2011; Martin 2001; Slezkine 1992, 1994, among others). The majority of the Sukhaany population was relocated to the village Khariyalaakh, but some were moved to Djelinde. The residual memories of those experienced *ukrupnenie* program reinvigorated old fears and concerns among both older community members and youth in the village. Kirill was a local youth and a passionate cultural activist. I was introduced to him by Aida when he was volunteering with many cultural events at the community centre. I encountered him multiple times throughout my stay in Djelinde, and we had many lively conversations. During our "official" interview, I asked him what he thought about the extractive plans and potential relocations. Kirill provided an overtly politicized answer:

Those companies are literally squashing us; if they continue with their extractive activities, we will have nothing left, no fish, no nature, nothing. The companies have a lot of money and, if they work here, they ought to help the local community; we are Indigenous people and we have rights. However, if the Tomtor extractions start in 2025, I believe they will demand people to leave the territory, and I do not even think the local people would want to stay here either because health is the most important thing. And the issue of extraction or non-extraction has been already decided by Moscow. Moscow is devouring everything.

Here, Kirill's statement exposes the murkiness of rumour margins, its discursive space that allows co-existence of spoken and unspoken, overt, and covert, and creation of specific openings where local political and economic issues can be addressed.

In her analysis of rumours about attacks of *sobel's* (soldiers collaborating with the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in the town of Makeni, Sierra Leone in 1994), and building on Fine's definition of rumour as "unsecured information" - "information that is suspect because

of its uncertain and unauthorized origins within a social system” (2005, cited in Bolten), Catherine Bolten (2014) highlights several key characteristics of the local population that made the rumours become more salient and consequential, such as widely-spread illiteracy among the local population that primarily relied on word-of-mouth transmission of news between towns and villages (“pavement radio”) as well as local mistrust of authority (192). In Sierra Leone, rumours were deeply intertwined with local politics because of the continuing war, which required a quick circulation of either political commentary or life-saving information (193). Through her excellent analysis of the *sobel* rumours, Bolten states that rumours can reveal covert social tensions surrounding certain political and social divisions, arguing that it is not problematic that rumours exist, repeated, and extensively shared, but one should take an issue with social, political, and economic conditions and events, which are responsible for engendering rumours. In this sense, rumours about radioactive extraction sites and relocations do not decidedly provide resolution to the local problems, concerns, and ambiguous situations; yet they represent the dynamic responses to social and political milieu within which they are collectively produced and reproduced as discursive constructions. Moreover, their retelling can provide an opportunity to re-negotiate communal fears and anxieties, as well as challenge and reject hegemonic ideologies and practices. While telling me about and sharing rumours with me, the Djelinde residents clearly understood that rumouring is not necessarily productive; Aida once explained to me:

You hear the stories about some people getting skin sores and seeing a dead elk in the Tomtor site, but everything that people talk about seem to be made-up stories and rumours, there is no one who could verify these stories.

Yet, this particular ambiguity of rumour origins and its elusive nature can have unintended consequences, such as creating discursive spaces and forcing to address socially and politically important, yet dangerous, issues. Moreover, re-encountering rumours was important since anxieties over scheduled extractions and a potential industrial disturbance of some sites within the local territory was exacerbated by the local knowledge of historical events taken place decades ago. Albina, a veterinarian with almost 30 years of professional experience, grew up herding with her parents; she often travelled as a professional between the village and different herding locations. One day, Albina invited me for lunch; after, we got to talking about extractive activities, and she contended:

They are planning to start extractions on the upper side of the river; during the Soviet time, we had an anthrax scare in that area. I was the only veterinarian at that time, and some herders told me that they saw multiple dead reindeer there. I went to check, and when I realized what it was, I ordered the herders to immediately relocate to a different far away site. I called the administrative centre about the situation. The very next day we had a doctor arrive with the necessary shots for the herders and the rest of reindeer. If they get to that site and start extracting, I do not even know what can happen.

Later, exploring the local newspaper archives, I did confirm that there was indeed such incident in the history of the Olenyek district. The Djelinde residents (especially older and more experienced herders and hunters) were acutely aware of the burial grounds of contaminated animals' remains and abandoned herders' camps, which might still contain anthrax spores; most of them already shifted their herding routes, moving away from the dangerous sites. However, the recent extraction activities, foreclosing both the herding sites and potentially dangerously contaminated sites, seem to be re-producing anxieties and fears among the villagers.

In her analysis of head-hunting and cannibalism rumours, Adeline Masquelier (2000) suggests that the stories, circulated throughout the Dogondoutchi area in 1988-1989, about the wicked Igbo cannibals who preyed on migrant labourers from neighbouring Niger, emerged in specific socio-economic circumstances where “commodity consumption in the neighbouring world of the Igbo is nothing but a disguised form of cannibalism in which the people of Nigeria eat the people of Niger, just as the rich eat the poor” (107). The rumours generated about the extractive activities in Djelinde seemed to manifest a similar predatory theme, that of neoliberal processes, primitive accumulation, fragmentation, and commodification of communal land, as well as intensification of extractive capitalism.

Expanding the Marxist concepts of accumulation by dispossession and primitive accumulation, recent studies on the intersection of environmentalism, capitalist economic restructuring, and extractivism suggest considering the concept of dispossession by contamination (Hogan 2015; Leifsen 2017; Perrault 2013). In her discussion of the open-pit large-scale copper mine in Mirador, the Southern Ecuadorian Amazon, Esben Leifsen (2017) describes dispossession by contamination as following:

Dispossession by contamination refers to an ecological distribution conflict created by the establishment of projects such as the Mirador mine, by externalizing environmental impacts of its extractive activity, specifically increased sedimentation of the rivers (increased turbidity), acid drainage, and the exposure of heavy metals and other toxic

substances. Dispossession related to contamination concerns an environmental transformation that restricts the access of humans and non-humans to water sources of a quality that does not harm their existence and health. Moreover, it refers to the externalization of environmental impact, in other words, to the displacement of costs related to the mitigation and management of environmental damage. (347)

Here, dispossession by contamination implies dispossession of land and natural resources not through direct capitalist intervention and appropriation, but rather through contamination with processes of resource extraction and industrial production. This renders the environment toxic and unlivable. In this sense, recent drastic environmental changes in Djelinde, radioactive pollution, and contamination of water, land and of human bodies due to the ongoing and projected extractive activities may potentially culminate in ultimate dispossession by contamination and removal of unwanted bodies from the land for the sake of capitalist accumulation and exploitation.

## **Conclusion**

In his seminal work on devil and commodity fetishism in South America, Michael Taussig (1980) notes that public distrust of socio-historical, political, and economic transformations is engendered “within a historically shaped imagination seized with the human significance given to otherwise mute things” (229). While for tin miners in Taussig’s analysis, devil embodied “mute” experiences of exploitation and alienating capitalist relations; “muted” experiences of political and economic precarity of the Djelinde residents were best translated through the complex web of rumours and other fantastical stories. Furthermore, Luise White (2000) suggests that “[s]tories and rumours are produced in the cultural conflicts of local life; they mark ways to talk about the conflicts and contradictions that gave them meaning and power. These conflicts and their meanings can only be reconstructed if the stories are grounded in relation to other evidence, other interpretations, other stories” (312). Thus, rumours can open up a specific productive space for alternative forms of political expressions and provide evidence to understand and, most importantly, narrate history at ambiguous yet dangerous times.

During another cold but blindingly sunny November day in Djelinde, I went to the local kindergarten, a small building bursting (the best way to describe it) with children’s loud voices and laughter. I was almost trampled by several of them in the narrow hallway when I was searching for someone to ask about my appointment. Eventually I caught a passing young

woman by her nurse robe's sleeve and was shown a way to the main office with instructions to wait there. Shortly after, I was having a lively conversation with several kindergarten employees. Having exhausted the questions related to research, we continued chatting. We then circled back to rumours about radiation and Vostok-Engineering politics; suddenly one of the women exclaimed:

In many years, people would tell stories that there was such village like Djelinde, there were people living here and they died because of disease or radiation exposure - we can imagine that... Some people say that we are already impacted by radiation, and if we leave this place, we can just die, meaning that we just need to stay in our radioactive place to survive. They also say that we are already doomed, and we are like "zombies" here, that's why we encourage our children to leave this place. But most of them stay, they do not leave. You have seen all these new houses here for young families, many of them have children. That's why we must stay very optimistic.

In her analysis of the works by the Karrabing Film Collective in Australia, Maggie Wander (2018) shares a striking scene from the film *Windjarrameru* (2007). In that episode, two young Aboriginal men, accused of robbery, hide from the police in the toxic radioactive swamp. "It's ok, we're safe here. We're inside this radiation area. Police won't come in here, we're safe" assures one of the men. This statement, according to Wander, perfectly summarizes the current reality of Indigenous people in northern Australia, "they are "safe" from being unjustly arrested by a corrupt police force, while at the same time this "safety" is found amidst the toxic waste produced by that same corrupt system of settler colonialism" (62). It seems that radiation rumours and other fantastical stories of the Djelinde residents manifest similar experiences of struggle, marginalization, yet also survival. In this sense, despite the sense of being "doomed" in potentially toxic environment, the community of Djelinde is "staying very optimistic", carving out spaces for covert and overt expressions of discontent, alternative forms of political, and opportunities for the sake of their future generations.



*Figure 7: The cultural centre in the village Khariyalaakh*

## Chapter 5: *Babushkas*

### Introduction

There is a growing literature on the intersection of gender and activism that urges recognizing the importance of direct involvement and strategic contributions of women into a variety of activist projects worldwide. As such, this chapter focuses on the alternative Indigenous activisms, arguing that the local diverse initiatives can reveal more subtle, yet, still effective forms of local agency, and, most importantly, highlight the plurality of Indigenous mobilizations. I examine several forms of grassroots women-led community projects: collectives focused on crucial issues within the community, complaints, self-publishing, cultural and language revitalization projects, and the nomadic school.

The women involved were predominantly rural older women who developed ingenious and productive initiatives, which, I argue, have the potential to change our understanding of Indigenous politics as well as gendered aspects of Indigenous activism in the Russian Arctic. Most importantly, this chapter emphasizes the agency of older rural women and how the narratives of their experiences can open up a space for further critical interrogation of Indigenous politics within the specific context of the rural and somewhat isolated community.

### *Subbotnik*

During my first week in Khariyalaakh, my host Mariya inquired if I had any plans for the upcoming Saturday. I assured her that I did not have any meetings or interviews scheduled on that day. Mariya seemed to be relieved, then asked me for a favour: she wanted to visit her daughter who lived on the other side of the river. Mariya's son-in-law was one of the victims of the tragic shooting that happened earlier in one of the herding brigades far away from the village. Her daughter had a newborn baby, she clearly needed some help. However, Mariya had also agreed to participate in *subbotnik*, a community-clean up, on the same day; she did not want to break her promise and asked me to replace her. I happily agreed because *subbotnik* was a great opportunity to introduce myself to the larger community of Khariyalaakh and mingle among the local activists. I also wanted to somehow contribute to the community and cleaning up the village streets seemed to be a good start. That Saturday, Mariya and I woke up early, had breakfast, she instructed me how to take care of the house and her pets (a cat and two dogs), and hurried away to the river to catch the motorboat, which operated on weekdays and Saturdays.

*Subbotnik* started at noon. It was a windy and chilly day. When I came out to the street targeted for clean-up, there were already around 10 people gathered, mostly older women (some brought along their grandchildren) with the cleaning tools: brooms, rakes, shovels, and big sacks to put garbage in.

I brought my own broom that Mariya had left for me on the porch. I came up to Alexandra, who I was already familiar with, and started to explain that I was there to replace Mariya. It turned out Alexandra was already informed, and hastily introduced me to other women. Our little group spent a bit of time discussing the logistics of clean-up. We were going to clean only the main street. “Be wary of the glass,” the women warned me. Some women complained about a lack of men in the group because they wanted to demolish a couple of old constructions (abandoned outdoor toilets), that stood out like sore thumbs on the one side of the street. I asked Alexandra if village men were often missing in this sort of gatherings, she laughed, “Yes, men and youth do not want to come to *subbotniks* because they are lazy and they think it is not important, so it is usually only us, the old women *babushkas* (grandmothers), who try to keep the village clean and orderly”. Meanwhile, a couple of women suggested they call their husbands in an hour so they could help them with demolishing the toilets. Having agreed on that, our little group dispersed and commenced cleaning up. The cleaning itself was not difficult, we were walking around collecting litter: broken glass, candy wrappers, newspaper, plastic, bones; some women were raking the old grass to burn it later; the children stayed close to their *babushkas*, who were encouraging and praising them for the collected litter; some women were chatting; everyone seemed to enjoy their time despite a chilly wind and a gloomy day. In half an hour, Alexandra waved me to the fountain on the side of the street, constructed this summer but already non-functional, and asked me to clean the inside of the fountain full of broken glass. “Where should I put the glass?” I asked her. Alexandra showed me several deep holes on the ground close to the fountain, “You can dump the glass there, then we will fill them up”. Two women volunteered to help me, and we finished the job rather quickly. During our clean-up, the women told me about the fountain, how it was put up this summer, how the district spent a lot of money to construct it, how it worked only for several weeks, then broke down, how it would not get fixed any time soon because there was no money left in the village budget, and how the fountain became a hub for the local youth, who usually gather, play, and occasionally get drunk here, and that’s why there were so much broken glass.

Looking around the village, thriving and hopeful only several years ago, but suffering from neglect at present, I was consumed by an overwhelming sense of abandonment. This was an upsetting, however, not unique reality for the region. The Soviet-led economic “modernization” was a part of the Soviet goal to make the North “self-sufficient” and this practice continued in different stages and formats throughout the Soviet period. In the economically crucial regions (primarily those with potentiality of mining industry), the development of infrastructure (transportation networks, electrification, etc.) primarily served to facilitate large-scale projects in which Indigenous populations were expected to actively participate. For instance, Susan Hicks (2011) observes similar processes of economic decline in my hometown, Nyurba, in relation to the current marginality of Sakha, who are the globally but not locally recognized Indigenous group of the Russian North. The Sakha population in Nyurba were the central participants of the Soviet modernization in relation to the state-pioneered and maintained massive mining industry since the 1930s but suffered an intense de-modernization due to the withdrawal of the state after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In her ethnography, Hicks argues that the local post-Soviet cultural revivalist activism with an emphasis on the traditional subsistence practices effectively emerged as a critique of the Soviet modernizing projects and its post-Soviet limitations (35). “The system of northern subsidies that sustained a network of industrial towns and their surrounding villages collapsed”, Hicks notes, and many communities found themselves isolated and neglected by the new state, “struggling with the aftereffects of economic collapse: deteriorating infrastructure, high unemployment, and higher dependence on traditional modes of subsistence, such as cattle and horse husbandry, hunting, fishing and gathering” (37). Hicks argues that this contemporary “return” to pre-industrial traditional modes of subsistence is indicative of “global capitalism as a period of post-development rather than pre-development” (35). Moreover, the Indigenous economic marginality, instability, and exclusion from the gains of the post-Soviet capitalist development further reified the dichotomous dynamics between Indigeneity and Russian modernity.

In a different context, Gail Fondahl and Anna Sirina (2006) consider the case of Evenki of Buryat Republic, who followed the same way of life as other Indigenous peoples during the Soviet period, such as a forced sedentary lifestyle, boarding schools, and wage employment; leaving behind nomadic lifestyles, traditional hunting, fishing, and reindeer herding (117). The ambitiously massive Soviet governmental project of the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM)

facilitated the development of the local infrastructure: paved roads, airports, schools, medical service in villages, etc.; yet, it also increased negative aspects of Soviet modernity, “competition for wildlife resources, environmental degradation, increased the number of forest fires, polluted water sources, development of a logging industry” (119). The collapse of the Soviet Union contributed to the demise of majority of state-sponsored industries in Buryatia, high rates of unemployment, decline of living standards, and, eventually, de-modernization. The increased dependence on traditional subsistence activities, i.e., de-modernization process, came to be the primary counterargument against the construction project of the Baikal oil pipeline going through the traditional territory as potentially harmful for the environment and, therefore, limiting options to pursue traditional activities (Fondahl and Sirina 2006, 125).

Similar to the Sakha in Nyurba and the Evenki in Buryatia, the Indigenous Evenki of the Olenyok district were targeted by collectivization projects as traditional subsistence economies came to be seen as inefficient because of decentralized labour, stretched across vast territories. Thus, the various Soviet committees and organizations responsible for Indigenous peoples were brought in to reorganize the small nomadic communities into larger manageable sedentary units, where Indigenous men were employed in specialized brigades dedicated to a single form of economic production, mostly reindeer herding and hunting; while the majority of women settled in villages and engaged in wage employment as teachers, accountants, kindergarten and hospital workers, with children living and studying in boarding schools. This socio-economic arrangement persists in many Indigenous communities today including those of the Olenyok region, and might be one of the reasons women are especially visible in local grassroots mobilizations and activities, political or otherwise.

Alexia Bloch (2004) argues that the status of women can serve as one of the central indicators of a Soviet modernity, as women are “widely seen as reproducing the nation, both biologically and socially as they raise the next generation, and also as the bearers of tradition” (98). In the case of the Soviet radical projects of transforming or emancipating women, the modernization of Indigenous women was concentrated in the attempts to instill socialist visions of modernity by “teach[ing] native “sisters” to wash themselves, clean the tent, do the dishes, bake bread, and in general do everything that a self-respecting Russian wife and mother would do” (Slezkine 1992, 67). Like the “isolated peoples”, who were the subjects of the Indonesian resettlements within locations more accessible to the state apparatus and who embraced these

interventions (Li 1999), not all Indigenous peoples in the Soviet North opposed state projects of modernization. Many Indigenous women were proud of becoming a part of the Soviet society, enjoyed certain degree of independence, and actively participated in local politics (Bloch 2004; Slezkine 1992, 1994). For instance, Yuri Slezkine (1992) states the Koriak women enjoyed a higher degree of political independence unlike the Nenets women, who had more reservations towards women's equality and participation in political life (68). Many Evenki women also viewed the Soviet modernization programs as representation of "the enfranchisement of Evenki within the broader "modern" society" (117), as well as an opportunity to promote an Evenki cultural identity and traditional ways of life. Yet, for the Soviet modernizing organs, Indigenous women's politicization was not necessarily the main issue, rather they were more concerned about "backward" traditional institutions of marriage and other cultural practices, such as bridewealth and polygamy (Slezkine 1992, 68). This dialectic of tradition and state-sanctioned modernity was central to the overall Soviet policy towards Indigenous peoples that viewed and treated them as essentialized and romanticized bearers of timeless tradition, who still needed to be properly transformed and modernized.

### **Gendered Activism and "Nosy Old Women"**

A vast sea of scholarship on gendered activism suggests that women often initiate and lead grassroots activism, employing strategically gendered ways to contest dominant patriarchal discourses. It is not surprising as women, especially Indigenous women, are among the most severely affected groups when it comes to large-scale development projects, exploitation of natural resources, mining industries, and general neoliberal economic restructuring (Brown 1996; Jenkins 2015, 2017; Knobbloch and Kuokkanen 2015; Kojola 2019; Kuokkanen 2008; Nash 2001; Waldron 2018). Therefore, it is vital to explore gendered activism and gendered political representations in-depth, without seeking to reproduce overly simplistic and narrow analyses of gendered violence and oppression, engendered by capitalism, patriarchy, and racial politics.

In this regard, for instance, arguing that gendered dynamics of anti-mining resistances are often overlooked and undermined in the broader literature on anti-mining activism, Katy Jenkins (2015) analyzes the multiple intersections in gender and mining, focusing on the involvement of the Andean Peruvian and Ecuadorian women in anti-mining activism and its gendered narratives. The women activists in her research are from predominantly rural communities and are directly

affected by the mining projects. Notably, the older women composed the majority of activists, though they did not necessarily consider themselves as such (444). Jenkins describes how the gendered narratives of the activists drew heavily on the essentialized notions of femininity in an attempt to make sense of their involvement in anti-mining resistance, such as, emphasizing women's intimate connections with water and with the earth (Pachamama/Mother Earth, an Indigenous female deity of the Earth), traditional rural way of life in harmony with the land, and the land as "a symbolic link between the past, present and future, a direct connection to ancestors and future descendants" (451). However, these strategic essentialisms (Spivak 1990) also simultaneously disrupted the traditional gender roles and positions of women within their own communities; specifically, the Peruvian and Ecuadorian grassroots organizers found themselves stepping outside the borders of the socially accepted female behaviour, earning such labels as "mad old women" (454), associated with deviance and subversion.

Khariyalaakh had its own "mad old women", whose mobilizing was both creative and intently focused on the local community issues, which were not evident to outsiders' eyes. I met Natalya and Nadezhda through my host Mariya; Natalya and Nadezhda were well-known community activists and performers at the local folk musical ensemble, consisting entirely of local *babushkas*. We arranged an interview at my host's house; Natalya and Nadezhda were excited to talk about their previous and current community projects. One of their projects was of particular interest to me as it dealt with problem drinking.

Problem drinking or alcoholism has been one of the critical social problems persisting within Indigenous communities of the Russian North since the 1990s. Alexander Pika (1999), for instance, situates alcoholism with the same degree of urgency to be addressed as legal and territorial status, economic dependence, "lumpenization", declining demographics, and loss of culture and language. He writes, "the increases in drunkenness and alcoholism among the peoples of the North is closely tied to the high rate of mortality due to accidents, suicide, and homicide. More than 30% of all deaths among peoples of the North are violent deaths, which the figure for Russia as a whole is 18%. The level of suicide and homicide among Indigenous northerners is 3-4 times higher than the Russian average" (9). Alexander Pika is not the only contemporary scholar who discusses the problematics of alcoholism among Indigenous communities and its intersection with other social and economic problems (Dudeck 2015; Gray 2005; Istomin 2012; Koester 2003). For instance, David Koester (2003) writes that "drinking is a

socially powerful and powerfully social practice that facilitates the expression of honor, respect, friendship, obligation and group membership as well as insult and exclusion” (41); through his research with the Indigenous communities in Kamchatka, he argues that an obligation to accept an offered drink implied “the legacy of threat and violence against those who resist or stand out and by assumption of the colonized status” (46), and power imbalance between Indigenous communities and Russians. In another instance, Stephan Dudeck (2015) explores the main motivations for drinking among the Khanty and Nenets herding communities in the Russian North, arguing that extent of alcohol consumption is seen as “depending on the individual decision of the self and on inherent personal factors like genes or traditions, but not on external factors like the environment or technology” (109).

Natalya, Nadezhda, and other local activists all identified the problem drinking as one of the important issues not only in Khariyalaakh but in the Olenyek district in general. However, as I later learned Khariyalaakh had its own specificity that needed to be addressed; precisely, a drinking problem affected young women within the community, especially young mothers. The local activists were interested in community-based direct-action solutions to this problem, and were keen to learn about more academic research on the topic. However, as far as I understood, the research on the local nuances of problem drinking was lacking at best.

The women activists told me an anecdote about the researchers from the local university, who arrived to collect information on alcoholism among the villagers. Before their arrival, the Khariyalaakh community leader urged everyone who was believed to have a drinking problem to come out and participate in the research. Only around 15 people showed up to take a survey, and, ironically, none of them had that problem. Nevertheless, the university researchers collected the completed surveys, and departed the village next day. After this and other instances like this, the local activists talked about taking things into their own hands, and eventually organized *tumsuu*, a collective. They invited young women and young mothers to meetings at the local cultural centre once or twice per week, providing them a safe and judgement-free space to discuss their problems, receive support from other women with similar troubles, socialize, as well as learn important life and traditional skills. Natalya and Nadezhda told me the following story about their collective:

The work of our collective started so well, you know. It was not something that the women were forced to do - sometimes the cultural centre workers have to make people

participate in the public events - but our group was fully voluntary, all the young women attended our meetings voluntarily. We organized different events for them. Once we showed them a movie about a young mother who abandoned her child because of her drinking problem; that movie really resonated with our mothers and they had a very long discussion after viewing it. Obviously, we did not participate, we stayed in a different room, we wanted to provide them a safe space to talk to each other. Some of our activists volunteered to teach the women traditional skills, such as leather tanning, sewing traditional clothes, beading, and such. Some young mothers also brought their children to socialize. Everything was going so well, but some people in the community started gossiping that we were gathering all the alcoholic women on purpose, insinuating that they gather to drink together. Of course, our young mothers were offended by that, and they gradually stopped coming. Eventually our collective fell apart. We tried to tell them not to pay attention to what people say but to no avail.

What I find interesting in Natalya and Nadezhda's story about their attempted intervention in problem drinking among the local young women is their clear understanding of the critical importance of traditional cultural knowledge, as well as anti-individualization of the problem itself.

The anthropological literature on problem drinking emphasizes a necessity of thorough examination of how cultural, political, and economic factors might intersect to produce specific attitudes towards and relationships with drinking (Everett, Waddell, and Heath 2011; Leete 2005; Marshall, Ames, and Bennett, 2001, etc.). In her research on the dialectical role of drinking rum, its spiritual importance, and problematic cause of economic exploitation and gender inequality among the Indigenous communities of the Highland Chiapas in Mexico, Christine Eber (1995) notes that problem drinking has always been existent in most societies particularly during the stressful times. Eber urges for a more nuanced understanding of problem drinking especially among women, criticizing a tendency to overmedicalize and individualize the problem, ignoring societal and historical processes contributing to alcohol use, and arguing that "healing from drinking problems most successful when it draws on cultural traditions" (247). It seems that not only Natalya, Nadezhda, and other activists valued the importance of traditional knowledge in overcoming and healing drinking problems among young women, but they also realized the necessity to address this issue collectively, conceptualizing it as an overarching social problem rather than individual woman's failing. Natalya later shared another story of how their collective of *babushkas* succeeded in shutting down one of the little shops selling alcohol to the Khariyalaakh residents:

They were selling alcohol through a small window without even looking who was buying it; can you imagine that? They could easily sell alcohol to small children; they did not care who was buying as long as they handed them money through that small window. We collected 52 signatures to close that shop. We succeeded in shutting down that shop's operation, but people still buy alcohol from Olenyek and bring it here. We demanded to close the shops in Olenyek as well; we collected signatures, we vocalized our concerns and demands during many meetings with the district leaders, but nothing changed so far. There are some people who do not like our efforts, and even curse at us in the streets saying that old women should not nose into other people's business. You know, when I was a child, I remember my parents, reindeer herders, always carrying several bottles of alcohol with them; but they used alcohol only to propitiate *ebee* ("grandmother" is the respectful name for the local river Olenyek), and I had never seen any drunk person there, but nowadays alcoholism is the most deep-seated problem of our communities.

As evident from this passage, Natalya and other activists mobilized not only the traditional strategies of politicized mobilization, such as collecting signatures and voicing their opinions during the governmental meetings with decision-makers, but they also strategically employed the idealized images of their own pasts and traditional spiritual activities to create specific emotional and powerful narratives, contrasting and contesting the current communal problems and realities. The strategy of enforcing oneself into the local political and public sphere as Natalya and her friends did - sometimes to the dismay of other community members who view them as "nosy old women" - must be seen as positioning oneself within their own community, in the sense, legitimizing their activism by transgressing traditional gender roles. Here, the transgression of socially accepted gender roles not only shows how restrictive and oppressive those roles can be, but it can also provide alternative strategies for resistance and organizing.

Diana Taylor (2001), for instance, discusses the staged performative walks by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo against the military juntas in Argentina between 1976 and 1983; Taylor argues that the Mothers performed as activists challenging "good mother" roles, bringing motherhood out to the public political sphere, moving away from the idealized imagery of motherhood as domestic and docile (107). Moreover, the Mothers' demand for the government explanation about their missing and murdered children disrupted the patriarchal authority of the state and introduced a different other than governmental perspective on the oppressive political regime. Thus, Taylor's mothers not only came to be seen as representative of "bad" and "crazy old" women but also as disruptive, creating unnecessary spectacle, and complaining about nothing.

Similarly, R. Aida Hernandez Castillo (2019) explores the politics of the mothers' search collectives for their missing and murdered sons and daughters in the states of Guerrero, Veracruz, Sinaloa, Nuevo Leon, Chihuahua, and Coahuila in Mexico. Hernandez Castillo focuses on activism of *Las Buscadoras* (The Searchers) operating in the state of Sinaloa of the northern Mexico, which single-handedly documented more than 400 citizen disappearances between 2010 and 2018. What is of particular interest to Hernandez Castillo is the women's strategic political employment of their identity as mothers to engender solidarity with similar collectives and larger civil society as well as to receive protection, albeit limited, if faced with members of organized crime groups, "This stance assumes the existence of some sort of ethic-moral reserve of values among the perpetrators of violence, who despite all, would still hold some respect toward the figure of the mother. According to this logic, one of *Las Buscadoras* from El Fuerte shared a story with me in which a heavily armed man with his face covered impeded her from entering a field where, she assumed, there were clandestine graves. She scolded him, saying, "Boy, move aside and let me pass; one day it will be your mother who is searching, just like I am now, and you will want her to find you." The young man responded by calling her by her name and telling her, "My respects, ma'am; please pass through to look for him" (8). Here, positioning as mother not only sheltered women themselves from criminal violence but also their husbands, who seldom participated in searches.

Addressing the liberal feminist criticism of utilization of political identity of "mother" as affirming and reifying the traditional gender roles, sexual division of labour, and overall subordinated position of women (particularly in the contemporary Mexican society), Hernandez Castillo poignantly notes, "While it is true that the members of *Las Buscadoras* do not vindicate any feminist agenda, nor have they set out to confront the patriarchal relations that frame their daily lives, the act of going out to search for their sons and daughters, husbands, brothers and sisters, and godchildren has in fact implied negotiating many things within the domestic sphere, which inevitably ends up destabilizing gender roles. At the level of the process of politicization, their involvement in spaces of convergence with other families has led them to locate their searches in the frame of a wider set of demands against violence and impunity" (11-2). Thus, limited understanding and disqualifying of identities as 'mothers' can hinder complex processes of identity politicization as well as particular conditions and power dynamics that urge this reconfiguration of traditional identities and statuses. The cases of the Mothers of the Plaza de

Mayo and *Las Buscadoras* show how seemingly private identities of mothers came to become utterly public, and disruptive to existing gendered power relations, simultaneously expanding the normalized roles and behaviours as mothers, and creating new social and political meanings.

In addition, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and *Las Buscadoras*'s vocalization of complaints over impunity and complicity of the state in terrorization of its citizens by criminal organizations and by government itself provides a space for potential reconfiguration of complaint as representation of political agency, which occupies a particular niche within numerous discussions of political and of politics. For instance, in his article on the Indigenous mobilization in Kamchatka, David Koester (2005) describes how a group of Indigenous Itelmen write a letter to the United Nations in an attempt to restore electricity in their village. Examining the complex interaction between global processes and local events, he argues that Itelmen "w[ere] adapting an international discourse of Indigenesness to the local context and a process of vernacularization of those concepts was beginning" (645). The Itelmen drew on both international conceptualizations of Indigenesness, discourses of cultural and resource rights, and on the state bureaucratic forms: letter writing to authorities, categories of Indigenesness used in bureaucratic policies, and such. Being in attendance but not participating in the public discussions about local hardships and problems, Koester highlights the speech genre of litany liberally employed by those in the meeting. Adopting Nancy Ries's (1997) definition of litanies as a speech genre, "a first-person and collective statement of persistent, common suffering that bemoaned the hopelessness of the collective's situation" (647), Koester suggests that litanies or complaints reflect the speaker's (or the collective's) relation to power and, particularly, the speaker's dire powerlessness, preventing resolution of problems and reifying victimization of its practitioners.

The frequent engagement with litanies or complaints, I witnessed in Khariyalaakh were different. These focused on the economic, political, and environmental issues, and on colourful descriptions of highly personal individual hardships, sufferings, and burdens. There was another kind of litany or complaint deployed during public community meetings that was more forceful and disruptive, mostly uttered by the older women and activists. These complaints enunciated the village's problems, its residents' victimization, as well as demands of some sort of resolution. I argue that to better understand this engagement of the local activists with complaint, it is more

productive to depart from Koester's theorization, and adopt conceptualization of complaint as "feminist pedagogy" (Ahmed 2018, 2019).

In her critique of the academic institutional responses to sexual harassment and sexual misconduct (as well as racism), Sara Ahmed (2019) notes that "participating in a complaint [is] a *politicising process* in a similar way to participating in a protest: you get a real sense of the scale of a problem when you try to address a problem" (under "Similar problems; similar complaints"). Further, Ahmed argues that making a complaint is sometimes necessary as it brings one against the culture of the institution, moreover, "complaints reveal a mask" of the very same institution as incapable of addressing problems affecting individuals and communities, minimizing, and reducing the responsibility for abuse of power.

In this sense, numerous passionate complaints by community members and especially by the women activists of Khariyalaakh must be framed as a politicized practice that implies a sense of hope or an aspiration for potential resolution (Ahmed 2019). In this sense, utilizing various strategies beyond the purview of local patriarchal society, the "nosy old" *babushkas* of Khariyalaakh came to position themselves as political actors potentially capable of challenging existing power relations and disrupting the social expectations about their gender and age.

### **Stratified Indigenous Activism**

The political activities of Indigenous peoples are often framed within discourses of politics of marginalized peoples. From the late 1990s onward, the subject has attracted an abundance of academic interest by way of scholars interested in so-called new social movements, organized around specific issues of identity, self-representation, culture, autonomy, and sovereignty (Fox and Starn 1997). Academic inquiry concentrated on studying small-scale unorthodox forms of resistance, and covert strategies and actions, such as foot-dragging, theft, arson, false deference, gossip, slander, etc., which James Scott (1985) referred to as "weapons of the weak". In his work, Scott (1990) demonstrates how the subordinated and oppressed groups may oppose both the oppressors and state by developing "hidden transcripts" or "a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant" (xii). Scholars today have come to see the focus on "weapons of the weak" as romanticized and exoticized and as exaggerating the political potential of small-scale and hidden acts of opposition outside of dominant power dynamics (Theodossopoulos 2014, 416). Most importantly, the scholars of political agency underscore the limits of such

resistance, which does not necessarily provide an escape from dominant power relations but may intensify, perpetuate, or even reproduce them (Abu-Lughod 1990; Gledhill 2014; Theodossopoulos 2014). Moreover, romanticizations and exoticizations of resistance on the social margins simplify those who resist, by reducing them to static homogenous resisting subjects. In this sense, the resisting subjects are reduced to and viewed as “primitive”, violent, and “uncivilized” - or idealized, but patronizingly degraded - as noble (but savage), bigger than life (yet somewhat unrealistic), idealistic (although naive), daring (but nonetheless temporary)” (Theodossopoulos 2014, 418). These idealized, sanitized, and demeaning images of the resisting Other, as Dimitrios Theodossopoulos (2014) puts it, “inspire the imagination of resistance from afar” (418), placing it at a convenient physical as well as social distance, decontextualizing and distorting existing inequalities and injustices, which ultimately, silence the resistance. Thus, depoliticizing resistance necessarily distances experience of the resisting from an actual context, in the sense, stripping it of its political connotations. Thus, small-scale political action comes to be seen as merely symbolic and lacking any political transformative potentialities.

However, the orientation, ideals, and strategies of “on-stage” resistance (public and engaging with power such as marches, speeches, protests, etc.), which emphasize “true” political consciousness that is alone capable and powerful enough to provoke “real” revolution and “real” historical change are also challenged (Fox and Starn 1997; Greene 2012). Shane Greene (2012), for instance, defines this classic Marxist Enlightenment ideal as a sort of “trap of fucked over-ism”, i.e., “the tendency to believe that the system fucks us over so bad that the only real revolutionary response is to completely fuck the system over as the measure of really revolutionary resistance” (584). Contrary to these ideal revolutionary actions, Greene (2012) underscores “dissent within dissent” or “under-fucking the system” that involves a series of refusals: a refusal of absolute systemic power, a refusal of a simple dichotomy of oppressed/oppressor, and a refusal of a single revolutionary process (585).

Similarly, Fox and Starn (1997) note that the discourse on resistance and mobilization tends to be limited to the imagery of marches, speeches, rallies, and strikes, hindering the diverse strategies and mechanisms involved in political and social transformation, i.e., a variety of overt politicking (10). In contrast, they advocate for recognizing heterogeneity and unexpectedness of resistance, mobilizations, dissent, and their diverse, often contradictory origins. Unlike the spontaneity and naturalization of grassroots mobilizations or uprising from below, Fox and Starn

(1997) highlight social forces from below, from above, and across that come into play in political mobilizations on the margins. They also suggest examining not only initiatives of the local poor, dispossessed, and marginalized but also their interactions with political parties, development groups, military officials, state bureaucracies, international aid organizations, contending that “there is never a straight vertical line from misery to protest nor a straight historical line from dissent to mobilization” (Fox and Starn 1997, 10). In addition, it is imperative to consider not only the diversity of outside forces but also heterogeneity from within. Fabiana Li (2015), for instance, underscores the multiplicity of local forms of organizing and mobilizing, which do not necessarily represent equally and evenly shared common interests and objectives; rather local mobilizations can involve multiple demands and a diverse group of actors, and may produce unintended partnerships and outcomes (6). Ultimately, the view on politics on the margins as either “hidden transcripts” or “on stage” simplifies the diversity of narratives of resistance and of those resisting; politicized actions and mobilizations of marginalized should be understood as a process of becoming rather than an already achieved state, “exposing the intermediate space in-between of small-scale resistance and mass revolution” (Fox and Starn 1997, 7).

Observing the busy *babushkas*, and later spending a lot of time with many of them, (and later thinking through the literature on overt and covert ways of political action), I could not help but think of the political potential of these old women, their activism, their resilience, and hopeful visions for improvement, despite their acute awareness of own negative and tragic realities. I would imagine this is what Antonio Gramsci meant when he wrote his famous conceptual strategy for understanding the contemporary political and economic dynamics, “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will”, or as a Gramscian scholar Anne Showstack Sassoon (2000) puts it, “if this optimism of the will is to result in real change, it cannot be based on what we would wish but what we endeavor to construct in the difficult conditions we face” (82).

The women’s activism occupies a particular niche in the social and political life of the post-Soviet state. A number of researchers noted that the post-Soviet community activism, especially in rural areas, was predominantly carried out by middle-aged and well-educated women, holding relatively powerful positions in local institutions, invoking new forms of agency, which “compete, coexist, or merge with old Soviet practices of social support and activism” (Kulmala 2010, 165). Meri Kulmala (2010) conducted her research with a few women

activists in the Sortavala municipal district of the Russian Karelia; she contends that the communities were very small, the activists were well-known and trusted among the villagers because of their employment in public sector (educational institutions, libraries, museums, economic state departments, etc.). According to Kulmala, these community organizers represented the mixture of local intelligentsia and Soviet *nomenklatura*, blurring the lines between the state and civil society boundaries (170). This mixture of intelligentsia and *nomenklatura* (albeit successful and productive specifically in the case of rural activists of Sortavala district) can also be understood as a representation of melancholic politics, unable and unwilling to let go of and remain fixated in the Soviet past.

In her discussion of the melancholic politics in the context of India, Srila Roy (2009) defines the contemporary Indian feminist movement as melancholic and de-politicized due to its state institutionalization, dependence on funding by foreign agencies, and leadership by professionalized “nine-to-five” feminists, who promoted corporatization and careerism rather than radical and authentic politics (343). However, in another instance, Srila Roy (2011) admits that her critique of Indian organizing is not monolithic, and offers an interesting turn in her conceptualization of the current Indian feminism; she writes “it can be activist *and* institutionalized just as it can be professionalized but not corporatized” (598), emphasizing the hybrid nature of feminist political identity that is capable of engendering new political possibilities by “challeng[ing] essentialist, purist and polarized categories of politics ... breaking down the boundaries and allowing something to begin” (599).

Yet, it seems that in the case of the post-Soviet Indigenous movements, a particular melancholic attachment to the Soviet system of social activism still de-politicizes current Indigenous politics, further marginalizing Indigenous rights. Patty Gray (2005), for instance, views the post-Soviet Indigenous mobilizations as remnants of the Soviet social organization and the still operating Soviet civil society. Gray notes that the Soviet state encouraged Indigenous political participation, and made Indigenous actors visible in local, regional and central governments; in this sense, the development of a nation-wide Indigenous movement during the post-Soviet *glasnost* period was not a new phenomenon, but rather an extension of the Soviet political and cultural politics (2005, 48). Thus, she connects an incomplete and ineffective nature of this sort of activism to the political dominance of a small group of urban intellectuals at the expense of a great many rural Indigenous communities. Ultimately, this group of urban

Indigenous intellectuals represent what Antonio Gramsci (1971) refers to as leadership of “traditional intellectuals” (20), i.e., those who put themselves forward as autonomous and independent from the dominant social group, however, in reality they are tied to the system, which merely allows them to exist.

Madonna Thunder Hawk (2007), a veteran of the Red Power Movement of the 1960s and 70s in the United States, writes, “when you start paying people to do activism, you can start to attract people to the work who are not primarily motivated by or dedicated to the struggle. In addition, getting paid to do the work can also change those of us who are dedicated. Before we know it, we start to expect to be paid and do less unpaid work than we would have before. This way of organizing benefits the system, of course, because people start seeing organizing as a career rather than as involvement in a social movement that requires sacrifice. As a result, organizing is not as effective” (105).

This view of urban career-oriented activists and the ineffectiveness of their organizing was echoed in my interview with one of the Indigenous youth activists, Viktoriya. Viktoriya was an Eveny youth, opinionated, politically conscious, passionate about Indigenous politics, and interested in issues of identity and politics of recognition. This particular interest in politics of recognition was not random; Viktoriya’s father was of Sakha ethnic background while her mother was an Indigenous Eveny. Viktoriya openly and at length discussed the problematics of her in-between status both in Sakha and Eveny communities during our interview and later casual conversations. My friend Nikolay introduced me to Viktoriya during my stay in Yakutsk, and we quickly arranged a meeting at the local coffee shop. Viktoriya was a former member of the local Indigenous Youth Organization, which operated under the guidance of the larger Indigenous Association, involving around 30 Indigenous youth of various ethnic backgrounds, predominantly university students and a few young professionals. When I asked her why she left the organization, Viktoriya explained:

I can say that I left with a scandal because I was convinced that the organization was squandering money, and I did not agree with the politics of the larger Association (the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North). As a youth organization, we were supposed to be independent and responsible for our own ideas and projects, but we were doing only what we were told from above, working only on the projects, which were approved by the older members of the Association. The older members of the Association were like the elites, a very small group of people who make all the decisions,

and they always controlled and limited our actions because they distributed the resources; I felt like we were their puppets. When I expressed my concerns about the elites of the Association, I was told that I was not a pure Indigenous, “half-breed”, like a dirt; and because of my mixed ethnic background I was told not to “bad-mouth” and critique the Association members. I was also upset by our lack of relationships with the rural Indigenous youth; we had a lot of rural youth interested, they attended our events when they were here in the city, but we never actually visited the rural areas in order to foster and maintain those connections.

In my view, Viktoriya’s disappointment both with the Indigenous Youth Organization and larger Indigenous Association was indicative of the unequal power dynamics that existed within the Indigenous politics itself, privileging some voices and silencing others, establishing rigid hierarchies, benefitting some and marginalizing others; in the sense, creating stratified activism. It seems that, within this stratified activism hierarchy, *babushkas* of Khariyalaakh with their grassroots organizing (and overall rural Indigenous communities) occupied the lowest position.

One of the problems of institutionalized Indigenous organizing is articulated as one of donor or funding dependence. Most Indigenous institutions currently operating in Sakha Republic are funded by the local and federal governments. Alexander, one of the activists of the Indigenous Association in Yakutsk, shared this piece of information with me:

The Indigenous Association is a non-commercial organization, and the financing of non-commercial organizations in Russia comes from the grants; those grants can only be allocated by the regional government or by the federal government.

The dependence of the Indigenous institutions on governmental funding implies compliance with funding agencies’ goals and discourses, raising the questions of accountability. In her analysis of nongovernmental organizations working on feminist issues in India, Srila Roy (2015) notes that autonomous non-funded women’s groups argued that the NGOs are accountable primarily to their funders rather than their beneficiaries; additionally, the NGO employees complained about overworking and exploitation, representing not only the structural dependencies of the NGOs but also their inherently neoliberal and corporate nature (103). I argue that this critique can be applied to the urban Indigenous institutions that are making important decisions on behalf of the diverse Indigenous communities and can potentially change priority areas of intervention depending on the ideological and economic interests of the funding agency, in this case, the federal government.

In stark contrast, the grassroots collectives, organized by the women activists in Khariyalaakh, were fully financially autonomous. The activists themselves confirmed: “Our collectives find their own money, even our local administrative centre does not help us financially”. It was evident that the lack of funds did not necessarily limit the progressive achievements of the local grassroots mobilizations, rather it provided them with more flexibility and ingenuity in their objectives and strategies employed. The organizing of the Khariyalaakh *babushkas* was similar to what Madonna Thunder Hawk (2007) recounted about her community organizing experiences and involvement with the grassroots initiatives:

How we organized was different from how activists tend to respond now. We didn’t wait for permission from anyone. We didn’t have people tell us, this is too big of a project for you to do - you should contact the state or some other governing power first. Nowadays, an organization might want to do something more creative, but its board of directors will tell them no. We didn’t have a board since we weren’t formally organized, so we could just proceed with what we thought was best. We did not worry if our work would upset funders; we just worried about whether the work would help our communities” (104).

Similar to many grassroots organizing, the political potentiality of the *babushkas*, their creativity and effectiveness were often overlooked by urban activists, official Indigenous organizations, and local scholars; however, I contend that focusing on the forms of activism of the *babushkas* of Khariyalaakh can provide a critical understanding of plurality of Indigenous politics, Indigenous activisms, and draw critical attention to social, economic and political stratifications within Indigenous activism.

Moreover, it will be useful to view the locally engendered activisms as representing what Marisol de La Cadena (2008) refers to as “politics without guarantees”, arguing that “Indigeneity is not only about ethnicity – it exceeds it” (344). Adopting Stuart Hall’s conceptualization of “politics without guarantees” - i.e., effective mobilization does not depend on a specific category, such as race, ethnicity, gender, rather politics should be open and without any guarantees built into it, De la Cadena argues that the core of Indigeneity politics is in defiance and resistance of Indigenous peoples to the reproduction of hegemonic feelings and systems of stratification. In this sense, the Indigenous politics without guarantees has a potential to destabilize governmental classifications and hierarchies of “bodies and territories and interrogate tension between self-positioning and being positioned” (de la Cadena 2008, 344). This point in Indigenous politics can as well be understood as the point where Indigenous peoples are

challenging and disrupting discourses of power, which have come to define “authentic” Indigenous ontology (Hokowhita 2015, Larsen 2015); in this sense, the core of the struggle is not a category of Indigeneity, rather experiences, actions, and strategies of Indigenous peoples as autonomous political agents in certain temporalities, geographies, and socio-economic contexts.

In addition, Indigenous politics, which recognizes the heterogeneity of contexts and struggles, the intersectionality of individual participants, as well as the need for the local and global solidarity, is framed and realized within the “real politics” in the Rancierian sense. In this view, Indigenous peoples are entangled and immersed in broader power relations, resisting, and transforming power structures, essentially participating in what Jacques Ranciere (1999) calls “politics” – “efforts to transform the given order by disrupting the “distribution of the sensible” (29).

Nancy Postero (2013) argues that this kind of politics serves as a tool of emancipation and resistance that recognizes Indigeneity as a discursive formation and a framework, which produces specific forms of power and knowledge, making it “a relational field of governance, subjectivities, and knowledges that is constructed and contested by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people” (116). Postero states that an examination of Ranciere’s notion of “policing”, a tool of governance and order of inclusion or exclusion, can illuminate how Indigeneity is redefined and re-negotiated, depending, and responding to different power relations at play in particular moments and contexts (112). Here, the “police” is the broad bureaucratic administration of society, which establishes certain heterogeneous hierarchies (such as gender, racial, sexual, religious, economic) and order, where there are those who benefit and those who do not, those who have a say and those who do not, and those who are counted and whose views count and those who are uncounted (May 2009, 2010). Ranciere (1999) theorizes that the police orders work on assumption of inequality, utilizing racial, sex, gender, class, and other distinctions that ground themselves within that order. In this sense, the “real politics” (or as Todd May (2009, 2010) refers to as “democratic politics”) needs to function on the presupposition of equality where equality is “a mere assumption that needs to be discerned within the practices implementing it” (Ranciere 1999, 33).

Following Ranciere’s understanding of politics, participants of collective action first need to subjectify themselves into *the* collective entity (for instance, not simply poor people but *the* poor, a collective subject in solidarity), and act on the presupposition of equality declassifying

hierarchies, therefore, subverting the police order (May 2009, 2010). For example, Todd May (2009, 2010) illustrates this process of the real or democratic politics with the example of the Indigenous Zapatista movement in the Chiapas of the southern Mexico. The EZLN (the Zapatista Army of National Liberation) was a counter-hegemonic movement that protested the Mexican neo-liberal government and its economic, political, and cultural marginalization of the Indigenous communities in the region. Because of the Zapatistas' emphasis on critical recognition of local cultural practices, it would seem that it was primarily an identity-based and identity-motivated movement, making it another example of identity politics. However, May (2009, 2010) argues that it was not, rather the Zapatista movement was a practice of the politics in the Rancierian sense with their explicitly expressed solidarity with other oppressed groups around the world as well as their internal promotion of radical equality, specifically of women, who were traditionally marginalized in Indigenous societies of Mexico. The Zapatista movement, rooted within this presupposition of equality, then discarded the social and cultural inequality of women as unacceptable for truly democratic politics, "organizing against particular hierarchies of particular police order" (May 2009, 14), practicing what David Graeber (2004) calls "radical democratic transformation" (105).

Graeber (2004) also contends that the Zapatistas developed specific forms of deliberation and organization, producing radically different and novel political possibilities, contrary to the patronizing belief that "for a Maya to say something to the world that was not simply a comment on their own Maya-ness would be inconceivable" (105). Like the Zapatista movement and its practice of real democratic politics or politics without guarantees, the grassroots mobilizations of the *babushkas* of Khariyalaakh have a potential to de-focus struggle from its essentialized assumptions and construct it in a way which would allow a mutually recognized and practiced equality within and outside itself. In this sense, an important aspect of the Indigenous politics in Khariyalaakh was the role of community members as equal political agents, defying the stratified Indigenous activisms existent in urban areas and governmental institutions.

### **Historicizing Memory: Self-Publishing as Activism**

Mariya, my host and one of the most passionate activists in the local political and cultural arena, was not local herself, but arrived in Khariyalaakh as a Sakha educational worker from the neighbouring district in 1960s; Mariya was employed in multiple positions by the local school

till her retirement because of health reasons in 2009. Yet, Mariya still curates the nomadic school as an advisor and elder and mentors its teachers. In addition to her busy career in the educational field, Mariya came to be a passionate advocate of the Evenki culture, establishing the school museum, containing various cultural artifacts collected by the school children or donated by the village elders and families, crafts and arts created either by the students or their parents and grandparents. Mariya's passion and profound knowledge of the Evenki traditions, cultural nuances, and practices were partly a result of her marriage to the local Evenki man, a member of one of the Khariyalaakh oldest reindeer herding dynasties. Mariya herself spent years leading a nomadic life with her husband; she brought up her three children and several grandchildren, working along her husband and his reindeer brigade; her children and grandchildren were also educated in the nomadic school, a remarkable achievement of her tireless advocacy. I was very lucky to be hosted by Mariya, her name opened a lot of doors to me; she seemed to know everyone, and everyone knew her in Khariyalaakh and beyond. I will discuss the specifics and important cultural and political implications of the nomadic school later on, but here I would like to focus on one of the unique and profoundly politicized activities, practiced by Mariya and her fellow activists in Khariyalaakh: self-publishing books on the history of the region based on local lived experiences.

Self-publishing occupies a special place within the activist toolkit, as they often utilize personalized narratives to generate important knowledge and bring that knowledge into public spaces, representing a purposeful and highly productive and creative form of activism. Alison Piepmeier (2009) presents an interesting discussion of the *grrrl* zines and their cultural and political significance for the conceptualization of the Third Wave feminism, arguing that not only the distinctive characteristics of the Third Wave are saliently visible in *grrrl* zines, but that zines can provide rich primary sources for Third Wave studies. To understand the ways girls and women challenge dominant cultural discourses and normative gender roles, Piepmeier utilizes a concept of "insubordinate creativity", first introduced by Janice Radway (2001), i.e., "creative construction of the self-using the cultural materials that are "ready-to-hand" (199). According to Piepmeier (2009), these cultural materials and artifacts do not necessarily "originate from sources that have the best interests of girls and women in mind", but *grrrl* zinesters bring these materials creatively together to produce particular meanings, potential to challenge and contest the discourses that they originally conveyed. Moreover, Piepmeier notes that even though the

zines are seemingly personalized, “the theoretical structures that zines build and the hope that zines offer point to the larger political projects ... provid[ing] a glimpse of the future of feminism”, constructing innovative political forms and interventions (21).

The self-publishing projects of the local *babushkas* can also represent what is known as participatory media; according to Clemencia Rodriguez (2008), participatory media emphasizes an open access to anyone in the community to contribute and produce their own media product (radio, television, zines, etc.). The publications by *babushkas* focused not only on their own personal histories, but also the stories of other community members, bringing a participatory aspect of self-publication into action. One of the first people in Khariyalaakh I was introduced to was Agafya, a highly respected Evenki elder and a life-long activist. At the time of our meeting, Agafya was 87 years old, frail-looking, she moved with difficulty, and recently lost her eyesight, yet she was also very lively and talkative. In her calm and quiet voice, Agafya told me wonderful stories about her childhood, her parents, her native village *Sukhaany*, her work in *kolkhoz* (the Soviet era collective farm), and a busy activist life. At the end of our long conversation when I was getting ready to leave, Agafya proudly handed me a book:

“Here, this is my gift to you. I told you so much about *Sukhaany*, but you can find more stories in this book. I published it myself.”

“Oh wow!” I exclaimed not knowing how to thank Agafya for such a generous gift.

I immediately recalled that I saw the copy of the book at the local library on the shelf with a collection of locally published books on the local history, and the Evenki cultural and language knowledge. I later learned most of those books in the collection were self-published by the local activists. Agafya’s self-published book *Sukhaany - the Root of Development* (2016) turned out to be one of a kind. This work with only 300 copies memorialized the complex experiences of the *Sukhaany* village residents during the Soviet-era governmental project of residential integration and centralization, which operated through forced relocations of Indigenous communities from smaller villages to larger settlements. To collect the materials on *Sukhaany* history and its residents, Agafya, her relatives, and other activists conducted extensive research at the local and regional archives and galvanized the whole community to contribute their written memories and lived experiences on forced relocations. The publication consisted of around 70 different memoir pieces, the photos provided by the community members, and the copies of the relevant governmental documents. The ultimate result was a rich, detailed, and

utterly engaging historical narrative based on highly personal and intimate stories of the local community about their collective trauma – a direct result of forced relocations. Agafya’s book became one of my most prized possessions, and one of the important (and rare) sources on the local forgotten history.

Mariya, my host, also published several books on the history of the village, based on the collection of stories provided by the community members. I read all Mariya’s published books while staying at her house, and learned quite a lot about the local history. During an official interview, I asked Mariya to talk about her self-published works:

My first book was about *Kuonelekeen*, our nomadic school; I published it in 2009, the book contained a piece on history of the school, students’ memoirs, photos taken by my students, and my own photos. My other published books are about the history of the region, the history of Khariyalaakh, the history of Olenyek, about my parents. I personally collect all necessary information, I visit and conduct research at the local and regional archives, other activists also help, my students also help with collecting the materials, so the community is very involved. You know, I used to spend my vacation money to publish the books, but the last several books on the history of Olenyek were financed by the administrative centre; I got the funding only after they had learned how popular these books were among the locals, it convinced them of importance to save the local heritage. I already have a couple of books ready to be published, but I am short in money right now.

What is fascinating about these and other self-publishing projects by the local activists is their ingenious combination of Indigenous oral tradition and written records, that ultimately creates radically different historical narratives that reject the official scientific and/or governmental discourses, or what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2015) calls authenticity of historical representation, which “implies a relation with what is known that duplicates the two sides of historicity: it engages us both as actors and narrators” (150). In this sense, the Khariyalaakh activists must be seen as both actors and narrators of the local history, ultimately, pointing out the “inherent debatability of the past” (Appadurai 1981, 203).

In her book on oral and written interpretations of the Yukon’s past, Julie Cruikshank (1991) discusses the problematics of history books on Indigenous pasts that usually utilize available written records rather than oral testimonies, which are often seen as merely “anecdotal” accounts, the very term suggesting that they lack a serious purpose” (141). However, written records represent a specific point of view, “shaped by the cultural traditions and the experiences

of those who make the records” (144), therefore, expressing the views of visitors (fur traders, missionaries, scientists) and ignoring the perspectives of the Yukon Native society. On the contrary, stories and oral accounts, Cruikshank argues, are “statements of worldview. They encompass many layers of meaning”, moreover “oral tradition itself is a lively, continuous, ongoing process, a way of understanding the present as well as the past” (141). Contrasting written records and oral traditions, Cruikshank suggests, “[w]e may talk about oral and written traditions as though they are passed on independently. In our own lives, though, most of us combine what we learn in books with what we learn by word of mouth. In the Yukon especially, we have opportunities to learn about the world from both written and oral sources. In the words of elder Mrs. Kitty Smith: “Well, my grandchild is six years old now. She’s going to start school pretty soon now. pretty soon, paper’s going to talk to her.” But if she is lucky, the oral tradition is going to keep talking to her as well” (11).

In case of Agafya and other activists in Khariyalaakh, their self-publishing projects managed to merge the differing aspects of oral and written, and sometimes scientific traditions, producing a variation of “citizens media” (Rodriguez 2002, 2008), i.e., community media products that emerge from the need to contest dominant frameworks and bring the transformative processes within the communities, promoting alternative and community-oriented formats and aesthetic values. Here, adopting Chantal Mouffe’s (1988) theory of radical democracy and definition of citizenship, Clemencia Rodriguez (2002, 2008) understands citizens as necessarily political subjects and citizens media - politicized. In this sense, the production of citizens’ media and labour put into this production represent the employment of agency in shaping and transforming one’s communities according to localized needs and visions for present and future.

### **Revitalizing Evenki**

Another alternative and productive way of grassroots organizing among the Khariyalaakh community was the founding of the singing ensemble, consisting of the local *babushkas*; the group was conceived in 2004 as an initiative of the local Evenki poet and composer, Nadezhda Dakalova. Sadly, Nadezhda Dakalova, a talented Evenki poet, composer, and a passionate cultural activist, passed away several years ago. She is warmly remembered by everyone in Khariyalaakh and Olenyek. Almost everyone I encountered knew by heart her songs (written both in Sakha and Evenki languages) about the Olenyek district, and performing one or two of

her compositions was a staple in every cultural event. Natalya, the current leader of the group and an avid cultural activist, told me that it was Nadezhda Dakalova's idea to learn traditional and contemporary songs in Evenki language, or as Natalya put it "it was our own cultural and language propaganda". Further, to recreate more authentic representation of the Evenki culture, the ensemble members decided to perform in traditional clothes they sewed themselves; but they did not stop there, they made it their mission to popularize and teach how to build *uraha* (a traditional Evenki dwelling), how to sew traditional clothes such as *saary* (a beaded long shirt from deerskin), they even shot a short documentary about the local Evenki traditions with the help of a young employee of the Olenyek cultural centre in 2014; they also travelled to other villages and towns outside the Olenyek district, to perform their songs, give talks about the local Evenki culture and the Olenyek history, and present a mobile exhibition that they assembled themselves. I asked Natalya if they receive any funding for their out-of-village performances and exhibitions, she replied:

No, we are not associated with the village cultural centre, we are independent, and that's why we are not eligible for the government funding. We usually travel to the locations when they invite us. In this case, if we can show and prove that we are invited, we can get a bit of money from the local administration, but in most of cases we use our pension. Two years ago, we got invited to a large *yhyakh* [the traditional Sakha celebration of the beginning of summer] in another district. It was so great, there were so many people interested in our cultural display, we got asked so many questions! But the people in Yakutsk do not even invite us to their annual *bakaldyn* [the traditional Evenki celebration usually early spring, which is also known as "a meeting of all kin", a day when all the nomadic members of an interrelated kin group would gather in one place to celebrate awakening of nature; *bakaldyn* is one of the most important Evenki cultural events]! Once, we managed to get into a meeting in the cultural centre of Yakutsk, it was a meeting with the Chinese Evenki representatives, our friend Misha (a young employee of the cultural centre, who did his practicum in Olenyek, later moved back to Yakutsk) invited us. It was amazing! The Chinese Evenki were very impressed by our singing, one old man even invited us to China; but we do not have any money.

Natalya's story yet again illuminates the problematic divide between rural Indigenous activists and urban institutions and urban activists, who claim to work on behalf of Indigenous peoples, yet exclude those in the periphery from greater integration into a broader and even global Indigenous politics, cultural or otherwise. Unfortunately, it seems that the urban activists and organizations more effectively interact with Indigenous organizations in other countries

rather than fostering more productive and equal relationships with the Indigenous groups within the Republic.

Vasilii Robbek (1998), an Indigenous scholar and activist, argues that in order to understand the current conditions of the Indigenous languages, it is imperative to consider the unique local contexts, i.e., the close interaction between Indigenous, Sakha and Russian languages; because the communities, especially the Sakha and Evenki, co-existed for centuries, therefore creating bilingual and polylingual clusters (113). In 1992, the languages of the Indigenous groups in the republic were legally proclaimed official languages in the traditional territories, providing a constitutional right to education and training of students in their native languages, and invigorating multiple language revitalization movements (119-20). The singing ensemble in Khariyalaakh was a result of one of the language revitalization initiatives by the local activists; interestingly enough, the ensemble repertoire also reflects the polylingualism of the local community as they performed the songs in three different languages.

During my interviews with the villagers, I wondered what they thought about the current situation with the Evenki language in Khariyalaakh. The answers varied; for example, many older community members informed me that even when they were children, they did not hear their parents talking in Evenki (they spoke primarily in Sakha and, sometimes, Russian), some of them assured though that their grandparents did converse in Evenki but only to each other, and they never taught their children or grandchildren. Robbek (1998), observing the similar conditions with the Indigenous languages in the 1990s, explains them in terms of the assimilation processes, such as Indigenous peoples living dispersed throughout the entire Republic territory, thus adopting the dominant Sakha language and lifestyle; with too many dialects of Indigenous languages it became impossible to interact with other ethnic groups, which resulted in Sakha and Russian serving as primary languages of interethnic communication; finally, the Soviet Eurocentric economic and cultural mass reorganization of Indigenous peoples' traditional lifestyle (115-18).

In his research on the reindeer herding communities of the Taymir Peninsula, David Anderson (2000) also notes the historically extensive kinship patterns of the Khantaika Evenkis and Dolgans over great distances and diverse language groups, suggesting that these Indigenous groups maintained close social relations and alliances, including extensive intermarriage, with neighbouring groups regardless of ethnicity, resulting in most of the older community members

speaking multiple Indigenous languages. Anderson further argues that this differentiation within state-defined, “authorized” identities is a new phenomenon that replaced the past “relational” senses of identity, based on clan, environment, or occupation, but not ethnic (including language) or national affiliation. On my question about the Evenki language and Evenki identity in Khariyalaakh, one of the older community members told me the following:

We are both Evenki and Sakha here, for example, the Shologon community (a former village of the Olenyek district) was a place where the Evenki and the Buluu, Nyurba, Suntaar Sakha lived together for a long time. My mother adopted two Sakha boys from Nyurba when their mother died, and they were identified as the Evenki in their passports. We are all mixed here - the Evenki boys have been marrying the Sakha girls and we are descendants of those marriages.

Interestingly, this complex and flexible understanding of identity, that highlights the multiple social forces which impact and construct identities, was prioritized by the older members of the Khariyalaakh community, whilst younger people expressed their identities mainly within the essentialist theorizations of ethnicity. Anderson (2005) observed the similar generational differences in identity formulations, articulations, and manipulations in Khantaika, arguing that “this is a clear and detailed illustration of how Soviet nationality policy did not suppress, contain, or assimilate national identities but instead made them one of the most central distinctions of civic life” (201), where the Evenki and Dolgans “moved away from a tradition of complex, relational understandings between themselves and the land, and between themselves and their neighbours” (202) only within a span of one or two generations. Thus, the Soviet reconstructions of ethnicities impacted the language knowledge and practice, converting the previously polylingual communities into bilingual or unilingual only (Martin 2001; Robbek 1998, 2011; Slezkine 1992, 1994). Nowadays, very few people speak Evenki language in Khariyalaakh (and overall in the Olenyek district); those who mostly use and speak Evenki day to day are the oldest reindeer herders, hunters, and fishers. Accounting for this, Alevtina, a local singer and cultural activist from a highly respected reindeer-herding family, who grew up herding herself along her grandparents, parents, and siblings, explained:

The first teachers of the Evenki language arrived here only in the 1990s, they were young teachers from another Evenki district that managed to preserve their language knowledge. Of course, not many people can speak Evenki here, however we do recite poems in Evenki, sing songs in Evenki, celebrate the Evenki holidays, and our material culture is very well-preserved. You have seen all those beautiful traditional clothes made by our

women, almost every woman and girl know how to sew and bead; you have seen all those reindeer husbandry tools and devices, hunting and fishing tools - all of these terms are in Evenki language. We might not speak a pure and fluent Evenki, but I believe, through our material culture, we still preserve it and are still using it in our everyday life.

As pointed out by Alevtina, there are institutional efforts of language teaching and learning at the local and regional levels, but resources are extremely limited. The local teacher of Evenki language confided, “I have only three hours per week for the primary school children and two hours per week for the secondary school students; the textbooks are my headache, I have only grammar books for some levels and reading books for some, and I don’t have any textbooks meeting the federal state language standards”. Despite these educational circumstances that do not inspire much hope in successful language revitalization efforts, I would agree with Alevtina and her statement that most of the Khariyalaakh villagers do possess at least a basic knowledge of Evenki language.

In this regard, it is imperative to consider the Khariyalaakh Evenki residents as semi-speakers in terms of their language usage rather than non-speakers, how they are often characterized by many outsiders. In her article on the Dene semi-speakers in northwestern Alberta, Daria Boltokova (2017) contends that the current methodologies for measuring language endangerment are based on ambiguous definitions of “real or fluent speaker” of an endangered language, failing to account for “the heterogenous ways that people may use and identify with the heritage language of their community” (13). Through her interviews with the Dene youth, who consider Dene Dhah to be central to their sense of identity and culture, self-identify as fluent and “real speakers” (despite their partial language proficiency) and who outrightly reject the endangered status of Dene Dhah language because of the term’s negative connotation, Boltokova points out that in order to assess language conditions, we must focus on “identifying ways individual community members - many of whom are semi-speakers or even non-speakers - might positively contribute to their language’s revitalization” (24), considering that most semi-speakers perceive themselves as rightful speakers of their heritage language.

In this sense, the *babushkas*’ singing ensemble, reindeer herders, hunters, and craftswomen’s knowledge of various terms in Evenki language, and other cultural and language revitalization projects should be seen as the potential and productive sources of motivation for “language propaganda”, and further language acquisition.

## Schooling Nomads

One of the important spaces of the language vitality in Khariyalaakh that motivated a lot of youth to improve their language skills, learn and, most importantly practice traditional knowledges was the local nomadic school *Kuonelekeen*, established in 1991. Historically, the treatment of the Indigenous peoples in Russia by the state educational system was one of patronizing, interventionist, and assimilatory attitude, which introduced a boarding schooling system *internaty*. The educational policy of boarding schooling meant taking Indigenous children away from their parents and was met with the obvious hostility and resistance from both parents and children. The children were crucial for families as they provided labour for survival, moreover, the parents believed that the schools' goals were to make their children forget their ways of life and turn them into "little Russians" (Slezkine 1992, 71). To describe the parents' bitterness over the residential system of schooling, Yuri Slezkine (1992) uses a quote by a Khanty Indigenous woman: "Why are you Russians trying to prevent us from living our way? Why do they take our children to school and teach them to forget and to destroy the Khanty ways? They'll forget their parents and won't come back home ... how would you feel if they took away your children and taught them to despise everything about the way you live?" (71).

Yet, the Soviet educational interventions had different outcomes in different contexts; Alexia Bloch (2004), for example, discusses the historical significance of the residential schools to contemporary Evenki experiences in the Evenk Autonomous District. She argues that the discourse of modernization of the residential schools represented the benefits of the Soviet system as well as promoted Evenki cultural identity and traditional ways of life (39). Bloch (2004) notes that for many Evenki women, the Soviet modernization projects represented "the enfranchisement of Evenki within the broader "modern" society" (117), therefore, the post-Soviet Evenki, drawing on their memories of the socialist past to navigate the harsh market conditions of the 1990s, considered the residential schools as important sites for Evenki to renegotiate their traditional culture, and construct their collective belonging in the post-Soviet period (187). Nevertheless, education became a crucial status symbol that indeed alienated the educated Indigenous youth from the traditional economies, as most of them preferred settling and seeking for white-collar employment in the villages and towns (Slezkine 1992, 1994). In this context, nomadic schools came to be seen as important instruments in cultural and language revitalization movements of the 1990s. For instance, Alexander Pika (1999) convincingly argues

that to preserve language and cultural traditions and improve psychological and physical health in Indigenous communities, the education system “should be reformulated to allow children to be together more often with their families, their parents and, if possible, to be closer to nature. Children must receive knowledge of traditional industries and life in the taiga or tundra from their parents and older relatives, not only from textbooks and slides. ... The form and content of education and upbringing must approximate as closely as possible to Indigenous ways of life, traditional economy, and the spiritual and material cultures of native people” (182). These were the same specificities and goals of the nomadic schooling, shared by Mariya during our interview, but unlike Pika, she did work as a teacher at the nomadic school for many years since 1991. I asked Mariya to share details about the school:

The school operates from January through May; we do not work in fall because it is the busiest season for reindeer herders, they have to move almost every day, that’s why children stay in the village. Most of our children also stay with their parents during summers, but, of course, we do not have school at that time. Our educational program is the same as in the local school, the only difference is we offer the course *Lessons of Our Ancestors*. During these lessons, children learn a variety of important traditional skills: wood crafting, building a traditional sledge, cooking traditional food, sewing, beading, and so on. It is important to mention that these lessons are taught by herders and tent-workers firsthand, which make them unique. We encourage students learning to observe their surrounding environment, they really enjoy taking photos, making videos. We send students’ photos to different photo competitions, they often win; several of their photos were published in the regional and republic newspapers and magazines. Last year one of our students won a photo competition and was awarded a laptop! We also teach researching skills, and our students conduct their own research projects to present at the local and republic science fairs. When children are not attending the lessons, they work alongside their parents and grandparents, helping them with herding and taking care of the camp. All our graduates later worked with herders this way or another; I must note that only our graduates, children who were educated in the nomadic school, choose to become herders, brigadiers, and tent-workers. Children educated in the village school don’t know much about reindeer herding, but our children experience, work, herd, and move together with their parents from a very young age, so they are more prepared for this kind of job. We also have children educated to become veterinarians, teachers, nurses, and doctors.

Interestingly, the concept of nomadic schooling in the context of Russia originated in the 1920s, the earlier years of the Soviet Union. In his analysis of the history of Indigenous education in the Russian Arctic, Vasili Robbek (2011) notes that a specific system of nomadic

schools, where a teacher, a central authority responsible for cultural and educational development of local population, moves with a nomad group, instructing during the stops, aimed to “provide an education without separation from a specific environment, traditional ways of living and production; additionally, the educational content must meet the requirements of the local cultural practices, traditions, and economies” (544). However, the Soviet state further introduced collectivization and sedentarization policies targeting nomadic Indigenous population, and nomadic schools were discarded as unnecessary, since the newly built settlements had their own schools (546). The concept of nomadic schools was revitalized in the 1990s amidst an emergence of Indigenous movements when the local Indigenous groups turned to global articulations of politicized Indigeneity and engaged in a wide range of frameworks for constructing their subjectivities, re-shaping the post-Soviet Indigeneities that came to mean much more than “pretty costumes, choreographed dances, and music ensembles” (Donahoe 2011, 404). Conceptually, the nomadic school *Kuonelekeen* in Khariyalaakh and its radical approach to Indigenous education and Indigenous teaching and learning is similar to the idea of land-based education (Battiste 2019; Greenwood 2009; Gruenewald 2003; Scully 2012). David Gruenewald (2003) argues that place-based education is needed “so that the education of citizens might have some direct bearing on the well-being of the social and ecological places people actually inhabit” (3), where the study of place “increase[s] student engagement and understanding through multidisciplinary, experiential, and intergenerational learning that is not only relevant but potentially contributes to the well-being of community life” (7).

When I was in Khariyaalaakh, I met many nomadic school students, former and current: Alevtina, a talented Evenki singer and a cultural activist; Mariya’s sons, who were known as the best reindeer-riders (her oldest son once famously won two snow-mobiles during the annual reindeer herders’ festival); a young boy, himself from a poor and troubled family, who was considered “a bad student” at the local school, but as Mariya described he was also “a pure natural talent in reindeer herding” with the same amount of knowledge and skills as the oldest and most experienced herders; a young girl from a local herding family, a future scholar in the making, who successfully participated in many student science fairs; a young woman who currently works as a nomadic school teacher; a young family of reindeer herders, both graduates of the school, and many more. Of course, it is important not to romanticize Indigenous cultural and educational models, especially, when they exist within the state educational system that is

based on primordial and essentialist interpretations of Indigeneity and of Indigenous communities. However, I would argue that we should see the existence and operation of the nomadic school in Khariyalaakh (and elsewhere) as the emerging survivance of the Indigenous students and educators, who create the diverse spaces and representations of cultural and political potentiality, challenging negative assumptions about Indigenous communities and constructing their own futures, informed by their experiences concerning the land and environment.

## Conclusion

Our people in the rural areas do not have enough information about their own rights; however, it also happens that they do know their rights but because of their psychology of an object rather than a subject, they end up relying only on the Association, and do not want to do anything themselves. I tell them at least inform us about what is happening or initiate something in your village and tell us about it and we will get involved. But most often, we are the ones doing things and the local people do not do anything. I believe this is a psychology of a passive dependency and waiting for someone accomplish things for them.

The above excerpt is from my interview with one of the urban activists in Yakutsk. Time and again my conversations with urban academics, activists, and government officials confirmed the salient division and strict hierarchy existing between rural and urban activists, creating a particular stratified Indigenous activism. The most disappointing though was the dismissal of the efforts of the rural activists by the urban representatives of the Indigenous organizations and institutions. Here, I argue that it is imperative to conceptualize constant struggle and resilience of the rural activists, *babushkas* of Khariyalaakh (and of Djelinde), as *Survivance*. According to Gerald Vizenor (2009), *Survivance* refers to the survival, endurance, and resistance of Indigenous people in the face of oppression and marginalization through narratives in action, “creat[ing] a sense of presence over absence, nihility, and victimry” (1). I contend that the *Survivance* of *babushkas* can teach us more about the politics and of political on the margins than activism in privileged urban spaces. Moreso, we can learn how to be and act political in a way that challenges social, economic, and political hierarchies as well as asserts reciprocal humanization.

## Interlude 2: Some Thoughts On (Post)Coloniality of (Post)Soviet<sup>4</sup>

Indigeneity has recently become one of the most contentious and debated concepts in the post-colonial studies, effectively unsettling and shifting theoretical grounds by “[weaving] together in an intricate web of ideas such as hybridity, essentialism, authenticity, diaspora, Third World, and Fourth World, and the way those ideas are developed and “owned” (Weaver 2005, 221). Jace Weaver (2005) relates the contested nature and ambiguity surrounding Indigeneity to the problematic of post-coloniality, which is generally defined as the “time after colonialism” and the “time of post-independence” of the former colonial states even if the struggle for decolonization is not yet complete (223). The problematic, according to Weaver (2005), is that colonialism is not over; moreover, Indigenous peoples remain colonized as victims of internal colonialism, “swamped by a large mass of colonial settlers who, after generations, no longer have a metropole to which to return (for instance, Australia, Palestine, New Zealand, Canada and the United States)” (223).

Similarly, Ella Shohat (1992) poignantly questions the appropriateness of “post” in post-colonial as it implies “the notion of a movement beyond ... a passage into a new period and a closure of a certain historical event or age” (102). This assumes the demise of colonialism, deemphasizes the neocolonial spatio-temporal positionings of settler-states, and prevents political links between post-colonial theories and contemporary anti-colonial or anti-neo-colonial struggles, which has to effect to reproduce the same colonial power relations and discourses of the Other (104). Shohat (1992) urges us to critically interrogate “post-colonial”, noting that at least in 1992, the critique of post-coloniality was virtually non-existent in western academia. She points out that the term “post-colonial” masks heterogeneities and internal contradictions and differences, generating long outdated Orientalizing and homogenizing connotations.

In his analysis of the Orientalist processes, Edward Said (1979) argues that the Oriental or the Other was a creation of the west, and colonialism was not only a system of economic and

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<sup>4</sup> In 2019, I attended *Decolonizing Conference* at the University of Toronto. During one of the panel discussions on colonialism and decolonization, I asked a question if one could consider the current Russian political, economic, and cultural sphere as post-colonial. The members of the panel quickly dismissed the idea, leaving me disappointed. Based on my own experiential knowledge (and knowledge and trauma of so many I have encountered throughout my life and particularly during my fieldwork in Sakha Republic), I found it uneasy that the experiences of so many generations in Sakha were counted as insignificant and unworthy of critical discussion and efforts of decolonization. Hence, here, I include some of my previous writings on (post)coloniality of (post)Soviet in order to fill the gap in discussion of post/soviet colonialism to inform the readers of my position on the topic.

political domination and exploitation but also a way to re/construct complex hegemonic ideological structures through orientalist discourses by controlling the past, present and future of the Other. Furthermore, Said (1979) points out that literary, academic and cultural texts “can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe” (94). Academic discourses have historically been closely connected to the hegemonic system of knowledge making them perfect tools both for facilitating and subverting the political and economic power of the west over the rest as Said’s own work proves. Academic orientalist discourse was itself “a product of certain political forces and activities” (Said 1979, 203), as is contemporary academic discourse which ostensibly renders all whose privilege (in whatever form) allows them to engage with it as outsiders in all but the academic community (and for many, within it).

I use discourse is understood in the Foucauldian (2000) sense, i.e., making statements about a social, political, cultural, or moral world are rarely simply true or false, and rather depend on some “outcome” of power relations, since for Foucault, discourse is always implicated by power, and it is one of the systems through which power is produced, circulated, and exercised. In his analysis of discourse and the Other, Stuart Hall (1992) argues that the construct of “the west” functions in several ways: it characterizes and classifies societies as western and non-western, it homogenizes and lumps peoples together, and provides the default model against which comparisons are made to explain differences (usually Others’ deficiencies), producing a certain historical self-referential knowledge about the central normative subject and the erasure of all else, except in relation to it (186).

The 1990s scholarship on post-coloniality sheds light on the ways how these historical knowledges and narratives are shaped by relations of domination rendering Other histories part of the universalizing master narrative of dominant society (Chakrabarty 1992; Chatterjee 1996; Trouillot 2003). Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992) argues that dominant “history” emerged as a meta-narrative in the course of the Enlightenment during which the European philosophy and science erected themselves as universal disciplines, despite having little or no knowledge of those living in non-western societies. In this meta-narrative says Chakrabarty (1992), the “Indian” (or subaltern) was always “a figure of lack”, “the theme of inadequacy and failure” (6), and the nation-state in its European notion was seen as the most desirable form of political community. Partha Chatterjee (1996) offers an extended critique of Benedict Anderson’s (2006) theory that nations are not determined by blood and soil but rather are “imagined” into existence, creating

another example of “the phenomenon as part of the universal history of the modern world” (216), recreating euro-centric discourses of western universalism and “oriental exceptionalism”.

Chakrabarty (1992) and Chatterjee’s (1996) complication of the universalizing projects of the modern state exposes its contradictions, institutional, and symbolic violence, and suggests necessity of anti-colonial and anti-imperial challenges to colonial and imperial hegemonies.

The ambiguity surrounding post-coloniality has the effect to de-politicize the struggles of Indigenous peoples, who are dominated by multi- and trans-national corporations within nation-states, and to undermine valid critiques of these neo-colonial structures of domination. As many scholars from the 1970s onwards have asserted, colonization is more than a mere binary of colonial domination and colonized resistance, and coloniality as well as post-coloniality and neo-coloniality are more than a matter of the west and the rest. Post-coloniality or neocoloniality are characterized by a multiplicity of discourses and contexts, yet postcolonial theories and studies were until recently geographically and geopolitically restrictive and exclusive. David Moore (2001), for instance, states that postcolonial was in the 1990s held to describe “good chunks of the contemporary political, social, cultural and literary situations in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, the Caribbean, the Arab world, and to lesser different extents Latin America, Australia, Canada, Ireland, and even the United States” (112). Moore includes the post-Soviet sphere in this mix as virtually ignored within post-colonial studies. According to Moore (2001), there are two plausible explanations for this exclusion, firstly, that the post-colonial critique focused on “the First World caused the Third World’s ills” where “the Second [World]’s socialism was the best alternative” (117). Secondly, he suggests, many post-colonial scholars were Marxist or strongly leftist, therefore very reluctant to identify the Soviet Union with European colonizers (117). He suggests that the Soviet Union attempted a very different approach to “colonization”, precisely through “a multilayered “voluntary” union of republics - nationalist in form, socialist in content” (Moore 2001, 122). This brand of colonialism produced and maintained certain kinds of discourses which came to be actively embraced by the colonized, destabilizing simple dichotomies of colonizer/colonized and domination/resistance as well as “universalizing” categories and conditions. In this sense, the post-soviet sphere can be better understood as post-colonial or rather neo-colonial as it clearly exercised and still exercises powerful neo/colonial control over much of its territory, yet, with a careful attention to its specific conditions and modalities (Moore 2001, 123).

Similarly to Shohat's interrogation of "post" in "post-colonial", Alexander Etkind (2014) examines the ambiguity of the "post" in "post-soviet", considering current problems in Russia and wondering if they are determined by the Soviet legacy. The post-Sovietness that Russia has been asserting since 1991 shows that Russia "still defines itself in contrast to its Soviet past" having failed to develop a new self-description (154). To interrogate this condition, Etkind adopts and expands Paul Gilroy's (2005) concept of "postcolonial melancholia", a state of "unconscious fixation on the past" and simultaneous "denial of the past" where melancholy, the work of mourning, "remains incomplete and unsuccessful" (155). According to Gilroy (2005), postwar Germany's "loss of a fantasy of the omnipotence" and other racial and national fantasies such as the Aryan master race (99) is similar to Britain's postcolonial melancholia which suggests that Britain's racist and anti-immigration violence should be understood as "a means to "purify" and re-homogenize the nation" (102), echoing the post-colonial anxieties over national identity and reflecting the brutalities of the colonial and imperial rule. It is this Britain's inability to mourn its loss of empire as well as "loss of certainty about the limits of national and racial identity that result from it" that perpetuates its longing and desiring for its past colonial empire (Gilroy 2005, 106).

In the similar vein, Etkind (2014) argues that the main reasons for Russia's arrested development are not only its deindustrialization, corruption, and dependence on foreign trade, but, most importantly, its economic and political reliance on natural resources. Russia's "oil curse" (Etkind specifically mentions oil, however it is important to expand the object of dependency to variety of natural resources) concentrates the means of production and extractivist profits in the hands of a few oligarchs, creating an unequal distribution of wealth, perpetuating the exploitation of natural resources, the centralization of power, the deterioration of human capital, and the transformation of the population into objects of charity rather than equal participatory and decision-making citizens (Etkind 2014, 162). Moreover, mainstream Russia still perceives Indigenous peoples as exotic and backward people and oil and gas extraction as priorities for the country's economic development. Indigenous peoples' claims are often seen as unsubstantial and secondary (Hicks 2011; Koch and Tomaselli 2015; Tomaselli 2014). The Russian academia, particularly the Russian social scientists, who "study" Indigenous communities of the Northern regions, perpetuate the same negative essentialist and Orientalist representations of Indigenous peoples, reifying power imbalances and justifying Indigenous

knowledge exploitation<sup>5</sup>. In his discussion of transformations of Siberian anthropology, for instance, Nikolai Vakhtin (2006) says nothing about Indigenous scholars or Indigenous research partners who facilitated the Russian academic knowledge production and contributed to the development and transformations of the discipline. The Russian anthropological space embodies what Sara Ahmed (2014) calls *white men as an institution*, which is “not only to what has already been instituted or built but the mechanisms that ensure the persistence of that structure ... “White men” refers also to conduct; it is not simply who is here, who is given a place at the table, but how bodies are occupied once they have arrived; behavior as bond” (under “When we talk of “white men”). This also implies that the present discipline of anthropology in the Russian academe operates within the constraints and demands of the colonial academic tradition not only perpetuating its own local brand of Orientalism but also engendering a deep internalization of the colonial discourses among “native” scholars, cultivating home-grown Orientalists (Po’dar and Subba 1991). According to Po’dar and Subba (1991), home-grown Orientalists of the Indian academia are Indian anthropologists and other scholars, who assimilated dominant discourses through “the tyranny of the Orientalist discourse in which they were educated” without challenging them; “they are Orientals in that they have been ‘othered’ in the discourse of the West about India; they are Orientalists in that they study and ‘other’ their objects of study – the subordinate Orientals” (78).

Here, it is particularly important to turn to the critique of the universalist and cosmopolitan ideologies of the post-colonial states, interrogating post-coloniality as the strategy of re-authorizing processes of domination and subjugation and re-affirming the hegemony and imbalanced power hierarchy. To critique the history from the perspective of the west, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) urges to Indigenous scholars to reclaim it, “to tell our own stories, write

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<sup>5</sup> I should add that the Orientalist discourses on Indigenous communities in Sakha Republic produced by some Western anthropologists (and scholars from other disciplines) are no better than those by the Russian researchers. I recently came across a thesis written by a student of the UNBC graduate program, whose research revealed a rudimentary knowledge of complex relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in Sakha, and utter ignorance of the history of colonial/Soviet (and post-Soviet) politics towards ethnic minorities and Indigenous groups; particularly historicization of the political legacy of the Soviet colonialism akin to the colonial project of human hierarchies in Rwanda analyzed by Mahmood Mamdani (2001), and thoughtless imposition of western academic concepts onto poorly understood community dynamics. More disappointing was the total absence of any reflexivity which exacerbated epistemic violence, while marginalizing the work of “native” anthropologists who were not considered or cited.

our own versions, in our own ways, for our own purposes” (30), “giving testimony to the injustices of the past” (34) as critical and essential aspects of decolonization. She argues that this reclamation can become “the powerful imperative of a powerful form of resistance” (35), an important way to assert one’s political agency and unbalance post-coloniality and its hegemonizing gaze, potentially erasing the dichotomy of colonizer/colonized and neo-colonizer/neo-colonized, as there is no sense in post-colonizer/post-colonized - “no clear domination and no clear opposition” (Shohat 1992, 107). Moreover, Ella Shohat (1992) insists that the obsession with the “post- “in examining the current political and economic conditions obscures “forced assimilation, internalized self-rejection, political cooptation, social conformism, cultural mimicry, and creative transcendence” (110). She calls scholars to focus instead on the following questions, “who is mobilizing what in the articulation of the past, deploying what identities, identification and representations, and in the name of what political vision and goals” (110).

In her poignant work on post-Sovietness, Madina Tlostanova (2018) critiques the current appropriation of post-colonial rhetoric by the Central Russian political discourses, targeting the western left and fueling anti-western sentiments in the public. Tlostanova contends that these appropriations of ‘post’ are problematic as they hinder the dark side of post/Soviet Orientalist and racist modernity, neglecting the fact that “Soviet progressivism meant one thing for Russians and something else for Uzbeks and Georgians” (10), and successfully muting any critique of Soviet and Russian colonial expansionism. What is important in Tlostanova’s analysis of the decolonial aesthesis and art activism in post-Soviet Estonia, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan is her argument that if we aim to understand the consequences of imperial and colonial regimes, we must interrogate their present trajectories since they are not “parallel or identical by definition” (10). Moreover, we must look out for overt forms of social and political dissent (activism-cum-art in her work), the effect of which is not immediate and radical but potentially subversive and decolonial in its praxis.



*Figure 8: The view on the river Olenyek*

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

On June 21, 2020, Vladimir Putin, the current president of the Russian Federation, gave an interview during a multiple-day programming series entitled “Moscow. Putin. Kremlin” for the major Russian broadcasting channel *Russia 1*. During the interview, Putin declared:

This poses a question when this or that republic joined the Soviet Union, and received massive areas of Russian lands, traditional and historical Russian lands, then suddenly decides to exit the Union – well, if it was getting out with what it had joined with, rather than taking away the gifts of the Russian people, then we would not have any issues, would we?

This statement generated heated debates on social media outside Russia, particularly within the former Soviet republics, which gained independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. Yet, much of the critique was dominated by academics, doubting the claim of the existence of historically traditional Russian lands by pointing out a continuous human migration and political and cultural changes that occurred on territories over centuries. The voices of Indigenous peoples were missing in these debates. The reliance on governmental, bureaucratic, and academic discourses erased the existence of Indigenous peoples and Indigenous territories in totality. This is quite telling of the current territorial (and human) politics of Central Russia, reflecting its neo-imperialist ambitions and ideologies, and exclusionary practices particularly in the Arctic regions.

In her interrogation of the universal theorizations on human origins, Jen Rose Smith (2021) interrogates the phenomenon of *temperate-normativity* in Arctic spaces:

... which demonstrates how “proper” civilizations are said to arise from settlements in temperate locales that depend largely on cultivation via agricultural practices. Sedentarism through agricultural practice becomes a universal indicator and foundation for civilization. Under this rubric, ice, in its resistance to root and hostility to settlement, is said to not only racialize due to “extreme” climate but the Arctic also becomes a space where pathological migrancy and transit takes place. Such narrations enmesh within the Bering Land Bridge Theory wherein waves of human migrations are said to have moved through the Arctic on the way to temperate zones, and those who linger are exceptional and aberrant. Within this explanation, Indigeneity becomes a temporal question, and Indigenous peoples who reside in the Arctic are read as recent arrivals from elsewhere (159).

I find this concept to be useful in understanding both Soviet and post-Soviet state political, economic, and socio-cultural practices targeting Indigenous communities in Sakha Republic, and

elsewhere. The ideology of civilizational (therefore rational) fixity in space and the articulation of traditional Indigenous transits as pathological (see the discussion on the Soviet politics of sedentarism in 1950s-1960s, and its consequences) strategically undermine the complexities of local land (and other more-than-human entities) philosophies and relationships rendering Indigenous territorial knowledges inferior.

My Olenyek host Sasha once complained about her daughter, who she described as “restless”; Vera, just year out of high school, seemed to be in constant movement: from Olenyek to Khariyalaakh, from Olenyek to Yakutsk, from Olenyek to other districts of the Republic, then back to Olenyek, only to embark on another geographical adventure in and outside the district. Yet Sasha also contended that even though Vera travels far and wide, she always comes back to Olenyek because “it calls out to her”. Similarly, according to the Djelinde elders, the village youth always return to their native home, having spent time in big cities and other districts, “we even have a whole street with only young families in Djelinde” they told me once, “we call it the Youth Street”. I believe the statements like these reflect the complexities of how the local Evenki think about and imagine the geographical space; while staying fixed in place and space, the Evenki I encountered refuse this geographical determinism, and articulate specific accountability to and custody for spaces exceeding an immediate occupancy, and challenge the ongoing neoliberal policies of dispossession. In this sense, the governmental language of bureaucracy and the corporate language of profit obscure “vibrant and multiply rich space” with “consistent historical, ongoing, and distinct socio-political relations” (Smith 2021, 171). In this dissertation, I assert that the concept of “exceeding” can be applied to Indigenous politics itself, illustrating not only the complexity and vibrancy of the local historical and ongoing socio-economic, political, and cultural experiences of the Olenyek residents, but also showing how the local political exceeds our assumptions and expectations about Indigeneity and Indigenous politics. I hope that this intersectional analysis of the local communities often uneven encounters with, and imaginations and articulations of, the political in the Olenyek district brings about a better understanding of Indigeneity in the rural Russian Arctic and that it inspires changes in the extractive relationships between the academe and Indigenous peoples everywhere.

### Photo-Essay: *Sinilgen*, the Celebration of the First Snow

*Sinilgen* ('first snow' in the Evenki language) is a traditional Evenki celebration of the first snow and the start of hunting season. The tradition was abandoned during the Soviet era; only after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Evenki around Russia were able to revitalize the celebration as one of the most important and meaningful traditional rituals, centered around the Nature and the Fire Spirits, men as hunters, and community elders, responsible for blessing a successful hunting. Each Evenki community has its own unique way of celebrating *Sinilgen*, but its purpose and cultural significance are unchanged. The event is also an occasion to showcase one's traditional clothes, hand-sewn by Evenki talented craftswomen, and feast on traditional foods. I was invited to attend *Sinilgen* by my host in Khariyalaakh; I also had an assignment to capture the images of *Sinilgen* celebration for my host's photo archives. All the photos<sup>6</sup> presented here were taken with a full consent of everyone involved.



The residents of the villages Khariyalaakh and Olenyek gather to celebrate *Sinilgen* on the bank of the river Olenyek. The Soviet-era tents and the traditional *chum* in the center have been set up earlier by the organizers and volunteers before the arrival of the guests.

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<sup>6</sup> I recognize the problematic of capturing images of marginalized people and of particular perceptions that they can create (see for example Anne McClintock (1995), Paige West (2012) among many or Craig Campbell (2014) for the Russian Arctic context). In fact, I was very reluctant to take photos of any individuals throughout my stay in the Olenyek district, acknowledging an exploitative nature of anthropological gaze. However, here, a photo-essay represented an opportunity not only to provide more in depth and intimate context for the everyday of the Indigenous Evenki, but this photo-essay is also a result of our partnered collaboration with the local activists. We are also working on another photo project to narrate a history of women's activism in the Olenyek district.



The children-dancers of *Oronchikan* (a baby reindeer) are rehearsing their performances. *Oronchikan* is the dancing troupe formed by the local cultural activists in the 1990s; several generations of young girls and boys in Khariyalaakh were dancers in *Oronchikan*. *Oronchikan* dancers perform at every celebration or cultural event in the village to the delight of their families and the rest of the community.



The *Oronchikan* dancers and a singer Sinilga pose for the photograph. The traditional outfits of the dancers were designed and sewn by their mothers and grandmothers from the pelts procured by their fathers and grandfathers.



The group of the local Elders in traditional outfits pose for the photograph. From right to left: Nikolaev Egor Osipovich, Sergeeva Mariya Afanasyevna, Dolgunova Varvara Vasilyevna, and Dmitrieva Nadezhda Ignatyevna.



The local Elder, Egorova Mariya Ivanovna, is demonstrating how to remove fat from a deer skin.



The local Elder, Nikolaev Nikolay Nikiforovich, is adjusting a rope on the traditional deer sled.



The women are cooking traditional foods inside the Soviet-era tents. This stove is similar to those still used by many reindeer herders in Olenyek; despite the claims of modernization, the Soviet-era tents and old-style stoves are archaic yet reliable devices of survival for Olenyek reindeer herders.



The women are busy with cooking. *Babushka* on the right is making a traditional Evenki blood sausage.



The *Sinilgen* feast offering a diversity of traditional and “modern” foods. The traditional Evenki cuisine is a hybrid of reindeer meat, meat of other animals and birds, variety of clear-water fish, jams from locally harvested berries, with some foods adopted from the Sakha, such as *alaadji* (fried pancakes).



The *Oronchikan* dancers and their retired dancing instructor, Mikhaylova Svetlana Stepanovna, pose for the photograph.



The girls from the local herding family brought a baby reindeer from one of their herds to participate in the ceremony.



The Elders, the performers, and the guests lined up to observe the ceremony of blessing the Fire Spirits.



The singer Sinilga, born and raised in the herding family of Khariyalaakh, is performing a traditional Evenki song.



A group of the local Elders and the guests are dancing *heedje*, a traditional Evenki round dance.



The celebration of *Sinilgen* concluded with the traditional sport activities intended to sharpen herding and hunting skills. This is an opportunity for young herders and hunters to demonstrate and boast of their knowledge and skills.



The *Sinilgen* organizers and the guests are taking photos to memorialize another successful celebration.

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## Appendices

### Letter of Informed Consent Form

**Research Title:** De-politicized Indigeneity in the Russian North: Politics of Misrecognition and Misrecognition of Politics

**Researcher:** Sardana Nikolaeva  
PhD Candidate, Department of Anthropology  
432 Fletcher Argue Building  
University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, MB  
Canada R3T 2N2

**This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.**

#### Purpose and Procedure of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the multiplicity of emerging forms of indigeneity articulations (both politicized and de-politicized) among indigenous groups in the Russian North and the conditions through which indigenous peoples become involved in localized political struggles and mobilizations. Participation in this study involves completion of a face-to-face interview, which will last approximately one to two hours. Approximately 60 indigenous government officials, representatives of indigenous groups, indigenous activists, indigenous cultural figures, indigenous educators, and other supporters of indigenous mobilizations in the area will be invited to participate. If you agree to participate, you will be requested to answer several interview questions at your preferred location and time. You will be asked for the verbal consent to digitally record the interview; the recorded interview will be transferred to a password-protected lap-top for storage, and later transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. You are free to refuse to answer any question I might ask you during the interview without penalty or prejudice. This written consent forms will be produced in Sakha, Russian and English languages, tailored to your language knowledge and preference.

#### Potential Risks

The interviews will not seek information that could affect your reputation, employability, financial or political standing, or cause any physical and emotional harm. However, there is a potential risk in case of the infringement of confidentiality. This specific risk will be addressed through taking thorough measures to ensure confidentiality of all your information. All records pertaining to your involvement in this study (your name and any other identifying details) will be kept strictly confidential and any data that includes your information will be stored in a personal password-protected computer, retained by the researcher for a maximum of five (5) years and destroyed afterwards (est. 12/2024). Your personal name and any other identifying details will never be revealed in any publication of the results of this study.

### Costs and Benefits

There are no costs to you for participating in this study, and you will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study. However, your participation in this research will greatly contribute to further understanding of indigeneity as well as shed light on the current indigenous experiences and conditions among indigenous communities in the post-Soviet Russian North context. The research data are also expected to benefit local community members and leaders, local grassroots organizations/groups, which promote and support indigeneity politics, local indigenous advocacy organizations/groups, as well as the state indigenous cultural and political institutions.

### Withdrawal

Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You may refuse to take part in it, or you may stop participating at ANY time, even after signing this form, without any penalty and prejudice. In case you decide to withdraw from the research project, you need to contact and inform the primary investigator via contact information provided above that you would like to withdraw from the study, and all information that you have already provided will be destroyed.

### Further Questions and Follow-Up

You are welcome to ask the researcher any questions that occur to you prior or during the interview. If you have further questions once the interview is completed, you are encouraged to contact the researcher using the contact information provided above. Upon completion of an initial summary draft (est. 08/2018), I will ask you to participate in member-checking via email, where you will have an opportunity to review and determine if an interpretation of data matches what you intended to share and mean. Ultimately, you will be provided with an opportunity to comment on or edit the completed draft of the dissertation (est. 12/2018). Your participation in member-checking and general feedback is completely voluntary and depends on your personal interest and availability.

### Dissemination

Upon completion of the research project, I will use the following methods of knowledge dissemination: an open public access to a final full version of the dissertation; participation and/or leading workshop/s organized in collaboration with indigenous organizations and institutions; presentations at conferences on regional, national and international levels; papers and publications in regional, national and international peer-reviewed journals; deployment of research theoretical frameworks and findings in designing syllabi for undergraduate and graduate level courses, etc.

**Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and /or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.**

**The University of Manitoba may look at your research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way.**

**This research has been approved by the University of Manitoba Office of Research Ethics and Compliance. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project, you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Coordinator at 204-474-7122. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.**

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (name; please print clearly), have read the above information. I freely agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to refuse to answer any question and to withdraw from the study at any time. I understand that my responses will be kept anonymous and confidential.

I freely agree to be recorded during the interview session: yes \_\_\_\_ no \_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

If you are interested in information about the study results as a whole and <sup>if</sup>if you would be willing to be contacted again in the future for member-checking and follow-up, please provide contact information below.

by mail (write your mailing address clearly below):

by email (write your e-mail address clearly below):

## Форма информированного согласия

Название исследования: Де-политизированная Индигенность на Севере России: Политика Непризнания и Непризнанная Политика

Исследователь: Сардана Николаева, кандидат PhD  
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Эта форма информированного согласия является частью процесса информированного согласия участвовать в данном научном исследовании. Эта форма обязана предоставить основную информацию о теме исследования и в чём заключается ваше участие в данном исследовании. Если вы хотите получить больше деталей или дополнительных данных по любой информации предоставленной в этой форме или вам нужны данные которых в этой форме нет, вы имеете право попросить исследователя вам их предоставить. Пожалуйста внимательно прочитайте данную форму и если у вас есть любые вопросы пожалуйста обратитесь к исследователю.

### Цель и процедура исследования:

Цель данного исследования - изучить разнообразие выявляющихся форм артикуляций индигенности (политизированной и де-политизированной) среди коренных народов на севере России и условий, которые позволяют или заставляют коренные народы проявить инициативу в местной политической борьбе и мобилизации. Участие в данном исследовании включает интервью с исследователем, которое продлится примерно 1 или 2 часа. Примерно 60 представителям коренных народов (представители правительства, местного управления, активисты, представители культуры, образования, и другие сторонники политики коренных народов) будет предложено участвовать в данном исследовании. Если вы согласитесь участвовать в исследовании, исследователь пригласит вас на интервью ответить на несколько вопросов в удобное вам время и в удобном вам месте. Исследователь попросит разрешения записать ваше интервью на цифровое записывающее устройство; исследователь перенесёт записанное интервью на личный компьютер для хранения и транскрипции для анализа текста. Вы имеете право отказаться ответить на любой вопрос во время интервью.

### Потенциальный риск

Интервью не включает в себя вопросы, которые могут причинить физический или эмоциональный ущерб. Тем не менее имеется потенциальный риск при нарушении конфиденциальности, которые может повредить вашу репутацию, трудовую деятельность, или политическое положение. Этот конкретный риск будет устранён исследователем принятием определённых мер, чтобы гарантировать конфиденциальность всей вашей информации. Все данные о вашем участии в исследовании (ваше имя и другие опознавательные детали) будут храниться в строгой конфиденциальности и любые данные, которые включают предоставленную вами информацию, будут храниться в защищённом паролем компьютере в течение 5 лет и уничтожены через 5 лет после

окончания исследования (примерно в 12/2024). Ваше личные данные и другие опознавательные детали не будут выложены или использованы в любой публикации результатов данного исследования.

#### Стоимость и польза

Ваше участие в данном исследовании не потребует от вас затрат, и, как участник исследования, вы не получите прямой финансовой выгоды. Тем не менее, ваше участие может внести огромный вклад в дальнейшее понимание индигенности и прояснить существующие переживания, знания и жизненные условия коренных народов в контексте постсоветского пространства севера России. Мы ожидаем, что результаты исследования окажут пользу и помощь представителям и лидерам местных организаций и групп, которые занимаются поддержкой и продвижением политики коренных народов, местным организациям по правозащитной деятельности коренных народов, и государственным культурным и политическим учреждениям.

#### Прекращение участия

Ваше участие в данном исследовании абсолютно добровольное. Вы можете отказаться участвовать в исследовании, или прекратить участие в любое время и попросить удалить всю вашу информацию во время любого этапа исследования до того момента, когда будет невозможно удалить некоторые данные (примерно 02/2019) без предубеждения со стороны исследователя. Если вы решите прекратить участие в исследовании, вам необходимо будет информировать исследователя напрямую или через контакты, которые вы можете найти на этой форме, что вы хотите прекратить участие, и вся ваша информация и данные будут сразу же уничтожены исследователем.

#### Последующие вопросы и проверка результатов

Вы имеете право спросить любые интересующие вас вопросы до, во время или после интервью. Если у вас возникнут последующие вопросы после интервью, вы имеете право связаться с исследователем по контактной информации в данной форме. После окончания транскрипций интервью (примерно 04/2018) я попрошу вас участвовать в проверке, которая позволит вам рассмотреть критически, исправить ошибки, и определить адекватны ли транскрипции интервью и совпадает ли информация, которой вы поделились. Таким образом, у вас будет возможность проверить точность, редактировать интервью или удалить информацию, чтобы защитить свою анонимность. Ваше участие в проверке интервью абсолютно добровольно и зависит от вашего личного интереса и занятости.

#### Распространение результатов

После завершения исследования, исследователь использует следующие методы распространения результатов: открытый доступ к окончательному варианту диссертации, участие в семинарах, совещаниях и тренингах в сотрудничестве с организациями и учреждениями коренных народов, участие и презентации в региональных, федеральных и международных конференциях, публикации в региональных и международных журналах, использование результатов и теоретической концепции в конструкции учебного плана для студентов разных курсов, и т.д.

Ваша подпись на этой форме означает, что вы полностью поняли информацию о вашем участии в данном исследовании и согласны быть участником. Ваше согласие ни в коем случае не означает что вы отказываетесь от своих прав, и что исследователи, спонсоры или учреждения отказываются от своей юридической и профессиональной ответственности. Вы имеете право отказаться или прекратить участие в исследовании в любое время, или отказаться ответить на любой вопрос, который вы хотите пропустить, без предубеждения или последствия. Ваше участие должно быть информированным так же как и ваше начальное согласие, поэтому вы имеете право уточнить информацию или попросить дополнительную информацию во время всего участия.

Университет Манитобы может просмотреть полученные результаты, чтобы убедиться, что исследование прошло безопасно и согласно требованиям.

Данное исследование одобрено Отделом Этики Исследования Университета Манитобы. Если у вас есть какие-нибудь вопросы или жалобы о данном исследовании, вы имеете право связаться с исследователем, научным руководителем по предоставленной контактной информации, или координатором отдела этики исследования по телефону +1(204)474-7122 или по email: [humanethics@umanitoba.ca](mailto:humanethics@umanitoba.ca). Пожалуйста сохраните копию этой формы для будущей ссылки.

Я, \_\_\_\_\_ (имя), прочитал вышпенписанную информацию. Я добровольно соглашаюсь участвовать в данном исследовании. Я понимаю, что я могу отказаться ответить на любой вопрос или прекратить участие в исследование в любой момент. Я понимаю, что мои ответы будут полностью анонимны и конфиденциальны.

Я добровольно соглашаюсь, что моё интервью будет записано на цифровое записывающее устройство: да \_\_\_\_\_ нет \_\_\_\_\_.

Подпись участника: \_\_\_\_\_ Дата \_\_\_\_\_

Подпись исследователя: \_\_\_\_\_ Дата \_\_\_\_\_

Если вы заинтересованы в получении информации о результатах исследования или вы согласны, что исследователь свяжется с вами в будущем, чтобы провести проверку результатов, пожалуйста предоставьте свою контактную информацию.

по почте (предоставьте вас почтовый адрес):

по email (предоставьте email):

## Semi-Structured Interview Questions

For this research project, I will deploy the semi-structured individual interviews where interviewees will be asked to answer several open-ended questions. The following open-ended questions will guide the interviews:

- 1) When, where and how did you get involved with indigenous activism and/or movement? How would you define the goals and objectives of indigenous activism? Please elaborate.
- 2) How would you define local indigeneity? How would you define global indigeneity? Please elaborate.
- 3) Are there, if any, specific characteristics of local indigeneity and of local indigenous politics? Please elaborate.
- 4) If you are a leader/member/activist of indigenous group/organization, how would you define and describe your previous and current strategies and practices of articulating, negotiating and promoting of local indigeneity and indigenous politics? Could you talk about goals, activities and practices of indigenous groups and organization in the region?
- 5) Do you think the current state politics of recognition of indigeneity in some way affect and shape indigeneity politics both locally and globally? Please elaborate.

Though I will deploy the semi-structured questionnaire for this research project, I will attempt to keep an interview process as flexible as possible, sometimes improvising, omitting, changing questions to accommodate interviewees' goals, interests, and concerns.