Cooperative Networks and Collective Institutions: opportunities and dilemmas for development on Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula

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Introduction

In this report, I would like to describe a variety of contemporary contexts where cooperation emerges in response to challenges facing communities on Russia's Kamchatka peninsula. Drawing on the results of ethnographic fieldwork with collective institutions that coordinate salmon fishing and reindeer herding, I argue that the strategies used by various actors drawn to these institutions—including not only herders and fishers, but also community leaders, politicians, performance artists, activists, environmental groups and aid organizations—reveal a dynamic interplay between individual and collective interests. This interplay reflects cultural values of a moral economy that may be useful for international organizations seeking to develop meaningful partnerships with local resource users and their communities.

A brief history of collective institutions in Kamchatka

Among the indigenous inhabitants of Russia's Kamchatka peninsula, cooperation has remained an integral part of cultural, economic and political life, persisting despite dramatic transformations during the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. Reindeer herding and salmon fishing, the traditional economic activities of Koryak, Chukchi, Even, and Itel'men peoples, are inherently cooperative strategies that have been adapted to the harsh environments of the North, incorporated into the Soviet state economy, and are now being reinvented in uncertain social and environmental climates. In order to understand this process of reinvention, it is first important to reflect on how practices of herding and fishing have changed so dramatically over just a few generations.

Perhaps due to the fact that herding and fishing rely on the coordinated efforts and talents of multiple individuals utilizing common resources, formal and informal collective institutions have continually played a key role. Early descriptions of Kamchatka's reindeer herders and salmon fishers emphasize the importance of informal collectives called *obshchiny* (sing.

obshchina) whose members shared ties of kinship and marriage, working together to manage herds, harvest salmon, or hunt game (Jochelson 1908). During the Soviet era, local patterns of fishing and herding that had been tailored to the needs of families and communities were transformed into vertically integrated state farms (*sovkhozy*) and collective farms (*kolkhozy*) that were designed to fit the needs of the state (Antropova 1971). Although these Soviet collectives established industrialized modes of production that reflected the ideological and developmental goals of the state economy, they also functioned as "total social institutions" at the local level, providing employment, housing, and a variety of public goods to the community (Humphrey 1998).

Economic developments during the period of collectivization were coupled with equally dramatic attempts to reshape the social fabric of indigenous communities. New villages were constructed and populated by relocating dispersed settlements of fishers and reining in nomadic groups of herders. These villages then became spaces for constructing new cultural identities for Kamchatka's indigenous peoples, providing them with educational and professional skills that were intended to make them fully "modern" Soviet citizens. While many individuals and communities strongly resisted the dual impositions of collectivization and cultural construction, it is also important to recognize the extent that many others ultimately came to embrace these visions of modernity. The nostalgia that many people in Kamchatka feel today when reflecting on life during the Soviet era is no less strong than the sense of loss they share when discussing the traditional ways of life that were transformed so dramatically in order to shape Soviet modernity. Thus, the collapse of the Soviet Union represents a dual tragedy for Kamchatka's fishers and herders: with the privatization and restructuring (*perestroika*) of state and collective farms, fishers and herders are faced with what anthropologist Bruce Grant describes as "the collapse of their visions of *both* tradition and modernity, leaving [them] sorting through the remains of each of the different pasts to which they at one time subscribed" (Grant 1995: 16). Although the imagery of "sorting through the remains" of the past may seem pessimistic, I find this aspect of Grant's analysis compelling because it captures the profound sense of loss that accompanies the newfound freedom facing indigenous peoples throughout Siberia as they reinvent collective institutions to be economically viable and socially meaningful in the post-Soviet environment.

Contemporary collective institutions

In contrast to the relative uniformity established by collectivization, *perestroika* and privatization have led to the formation of diverse collective institutions in Kamchatka and throughout the Russian Federation. This institutional diversity can be seen in both the economic strategies adopted by different collectives as well as the social relationships established among their members. Documenting and analyzing the factors underlying this diversity has been a central goal of researchers working throughout the Russian Federation in the past two decades (Konstantinov 2002, Stammler 2006, Stammler & Ventsel 2002, Ziker 2002). Yet, because these collective institutions continue to play such an important role in their communities, understanding institutional diversity is also an urgent matter of practical concern. Before addressing these concerns, I'll briefly describe some contemporary forms of collective institutions in Kamchatka.

While many state and collective farms were quickly privatized or liquidated entirely, others survived the chaotic period of *perestroika* and remain government enterprises to this day. In Kamchatka, a major factor determining the fate of Soviet collectives was whether the collective specialized primarily in fishing or herding. In the Oliutorsky Raion, an administrative district in the northern part of the Kamchatka peninsula, collectives located in coastal villages were quickly privatized. With the technology and facilities to harvest and process large quantities of salmon, these former state and collective farms have managed to secure a foothold in the market economy as private enterprises. Rather than continuing to be known as the *kolkhoz* or *sovkhoz*, privatized collectives operate simply as seasonal factories (*zavody*) and are comparable to mining companies and other private businesses that utilize local natural resources but whose authority lies far off in the regional capital, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, or in Moscow.

The few Soviet collectives that continue to operate as government enterprises in this region are almost exclusively focused on reindeer herding. While these collectives continue to receive budget support and subsidies from regional governments, the level of support has dramatically decreased since the Soviet era and often exists only on paper. Far from realizing profits, these herding collectives generally struggle to pay salaries to their herders, transportation technicians, and other workers, who often are owed as much as one-quarter to one-half of their annual salary in back pay. Distance to markets, increasing transportation costs, and severe declines in herd sizes are all obstacles that these collectives must overcome to remain economically viable in the

market economy, and these factors may explain why few of these collectives have been privatized in Kamchatka.

In addition to private and government-sponsored collectives, a series of laws has created a new kind of collective called an *obshchina*. While the word *obshchina* has generally been used to describe the traditional socio-economic unit of indigenous peoples throughout Russia prior to collectivization, this new institutional form is considered by both anthropologists and indigenous activists alike as a "neo-traditional" collective designed to support traditional ways of life connected to fishing, herding, and hunting while also providing tangible economic benefits to its members (Pika 1999). *Obshchina* members most often share ties of kinship and marriage, but connections are also built on other significant relationships among friends and business partners. Although the core founders of an *obshchina* must be indigenous, a great deal of flexibility is allowed in that contracts can be drafted that allow the *obshchina* to work with any other individual in the community. As a result, each *obshchina* establishes a different set of social and economic relationships and obligations among its members, further adding to the institutional diversity in Kamchatka today.

As in the case of former Soviet collectives, the form an *obshchina* takes differs between those groups primarily focused on fishing or herding. *Obshchiny* that devote most of their efforts toward fishing are more numerous within a given village but usually include only about 5-20 members each. Among fishers, the *obshchina* has played a key political role in lobbying for increased access to quotas for Kamchatka's legendary summer salmon migrations. Fishing *obshchiny* now have access to significantly larger salmon quotas than those given to individuals within the community, and their primary organizational tasks concern dividing these limits among their members, working together to process fish and caviar, and locating buyers in local and regional markets. Although the quotas given to *obshchiny* still pale in comparison to the industrial quotas awarded to privatized Soviet collectives, the number of registered *obshchiny* dramatically increases each year, indicating that local fishers view the *obshchina* as a significant step toward cultural continuity and economic development.

Compared to fishing *obshchiny*, reindeer herding *obshchiny* are less numerous but include more members, often encompassing an entire community within a single collective. In Oliutorsky Raion, there are two *obshchiny* with relatively small reindeer herds that are composed of private deer owned by individuals. During the Soviet era, these deer remained private

property within the collective herd, but were later withdrawn from the state farm herds to form the *obshchina*. Members of these *obshchiny* pay a small monthly fee to the collective that is used to purchase supplies and compensate the herders who manage the *obshchina's* herd. *Obshchina* members also support herders by harvesting, salting, and drying salmon during the summer months and giving this food to sustain the herders as they migrate with the herd throughout the year. Even more so than the state-sponsored *sovkhozy*, herding *obshchiny* struggle economically and rely primarily on the uncompensated labor and ingenuity of community members who quite simply consider the reindeer herd a symbol of their cultural values and way of life that is too important to be lost (see also King 2003).

Cooperation within and between collectives

While contemporary collective institutions assume many forms, each one plays a similar role as a focal point for cooperation within the community. Whether coordinated by a private enterprise, a *sovkhoz*, or an *obshchina*, fishing and herding require the cooperation and collective action of multiple individuals within the community. By producing food that continues to have significant practical and spiritual value, these collectives also play a key role in the social or moral economy of villages in Kamchatka. Reindeer herders frequently re-distribute fresh reindeer meat among family and friends within the village. Likewise, fishers often give part or all of their daily catch to those who cannot fish because of employment demands or physical limitations such as illness and old age.

Giving food and sharing meals is a frequent and significant form of cooperation within families, and these behaviors are also used to maintain and strengthen bonds among friends and business partners. Collective institutions expand the scale of food sharing by selling at a discount or giving free salmon and reindeer to the local clinic, kindergarten, and school. These gifts are very public, and it is quite common to hear them referred to in private conversations and public debates about the role that different collective institutions play in the community. In this way, cultural norms and values of food sharing that usually express relationships between individuals and families are adopted by collective institutions to signal their contributions to the community and strengthen support for their continued presence there. Indeed, my ethnographic research shows that these altruistic acts often emerge in response to local expectations that all collectives—even those that have been privatized and now operate just as any other business—

contribute more than simply employment opportunities to the community. The obligations collective institutions have to contribute to their communities likely have deep roots in both indigenous and Soviet pasts. Early ethnographic accounts emphasize strong values of interdependence and altruism among herders and fishers. More recently during the Soviet era, collectives were integral to the provision of electricity, water, construction and other public goods in their communities.

In villages with more than one collective, the extent of these contributions has even begun to enter into debates over future quota allocations, government support, and development initiatives. However, I don't want to suggest that these debates reflect a lack of cooperation among multiple collectives within a single community. In villages with both a private *obshchina* herd and a government sponsored *sovkhoz* herd, there also exists significant cooperation between the two collectives, with the *sovkhoz* providing access to transportation and supplies and the *obshchina* contributing knowledge and expertise during corrals. Similarly, the members of fishing *obshchiny* often help one another navigate the registration process, prepare grant requests for development funds, and share information about market opportunities and quota allocations. While conflicts do sometimes arise, my research suggests that multiple collectives can coexist and even work together within a single community, provided that all are treated equally and given access to resources for further development.

The institutional diversity evident in Kamchatka's collectives today is understandable when we consider that these contemporary forms have emerged through processes of reinvention on a local level that differ from one community to the next. In sharp contrast to the uniformity established by a top-down authority during the Soviet era, this diversity reflects attempts by individuals and communities to reconstruct the present from what remains of their multiple pasts. Although the continued use of terms like *sovkhoz* and *obshchina* may suggest that one kind of collective is more or less traditional or more or less modern than another, my research shows that in practice these abstract terms are difficult to accurately apply when moving from one community to the next. The herders and fishers with whom I have worked do not consider these two categories as diametrically opposed, nor do they view a collective's institutional form as the primary measure of its value to the community.

Local resources, global concerns

Even in the Russian Federation, the world's largest country, Kamchatka stands out as a land of singular beauty with a unique constellation of natural resources. After being inaccessible to foreigners and even most Russians during the Soviet era, a large number of international organizations have established partnerships with governmental and non-governmental groups in Kamchatka in the past 20 years. Including the United Nations Development Program, the World Wildlife Fund, the Wild Salmon Center, and Pacific Environment among others, many of these partnerships address issues of environmental protection, natural resource management, and economic development that are also of great concern to communities of fishers and herders (Webster 2003). Accordingly, new partnerships with regional and local activists, politicians, academics, performance artists, and entrepreneurs also extend to collective institutions, which provide focal points for outside groups seeking the cooperation of local natural resource users. International institutions provide potential access to development capital, information networks, and political authority that are often far beyond what local fishers and herders can tap independently. Yet, these partnerships are still in their infancy, and currently present dilemmas as well as opportunities for both international organizations and local communities (Wilson & Koester 2008).

While the majority of international organizations working on Kamchatka today are developing projects on environmental conservation and natural resource use, the most pressing concern in Kamchatka's rural villages is often economic development. As natural resource users with clear practical interests in maintaining those resources and protecting them from exogenous threats, collective institutions are clearly potential partners for these projects. Yet, international organizations must recognize the difficult and uncertain economic environment in which collectives and their communities are struggling to adapt. Locating a common path for development that represents an intersection of the distinct historical trajectories of both local communities and international organizations is a central dilemma that must be resolved.

A first step may be for international organizations to reflect on the extent to which they, like Kamchatka's herders and fishers, are also "sorting through the remains" of their pasts. Global climate change, environmental conservation, economic development aid, and other issues concerning international organizations are responses to rapid industrialization, environmental destruction, imperialism, colonialism, and other tragic periods in our own past. In seeking to

redress past injustices and reinvent themselves, international organizations have been drawn to places like Kamchatka, and so their paths have come into contact with those of fishers, herders, and their communities.

Conclusion

How can international organizations begin to form meaningful and mutually beneficial cooperative partnerships with local resource users in order to realize opportunities for development? When Kamchatka's reindeer herders and salmon fishers were left to sort through the remains of their past, they found strength and support in the cultural values of interdependence, reciprocity, trust, and sacrifice that had long been important parts of their moral economies. These values could provide international organizations with a guide to effectively engage local communities. Yet, I think these values may have even greater importance to the international community. Many of the problems we face today are the direct result of the values we have held in the past. Partnerships with communities help us move forward by giving us an example of how to build and sustain cooperation.

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