

## The Russian Klondike

Peter Aleshkovsky

### 1

“To be honest, we were fed up with the oil company people by 2005. The offshore drilling began in 1990, and we, the natives, promptly had our land confiscated. This was the land we had just been granted, with the promise that we could fish on it for life. And the fishing got worse every year. You would catch these mutant fish, covered with some kind of ulcers, that you didn’t even want to touch. We never saw anything like that before. And there was the environmental damage, too, like oil spills. And their pipeline obstructed some spawning rivers. Those people just did whatever they wanted! One contractor built a storage shed in the traditional Nivkhi<sup>1</sup> settlement camp in Veni, right in a cemetery that was sacred to all of us. They threw scrap metal all over the graves, crushing the souls of the dead, and that’s a serious offense! We tried to negotiate with them like human beings, but they just ignored us. There are so few of us; what can you expect?”

Alexei Limanzo told me about the events of 2005 this past summer. He is the president of the Union of Indigenous Peoples of Sakhalin. We

---

<sup>1</sup> The Nivkhi (in their language, “Nivkhi” = “People”) are an ancient, Paleoasiatic culture closely tied to the Manchu peoples.

sat in a pleasant café at a hotel in Nogliki, the county seat. Next to us were two Scots, an American, and their translator, washing down their pork chops with local beer. The foreign technicians had just finished their 28-day, offshore shifts and were getting ready to leave, to go back to “the mainland.”

“We all gathered at the cemetery in Veni in the winter of 2005,” Alexei continued. “We decided to stage a protest, us against Sakhalin Energy. Sure, one of their Caterpillars could crush all 3,000 of the Sakhalin Nivkhis into dust and never notice. But still, we went. We blocked the road so that the trucks carrying pipes to the terminal station in Chayvo couldn’t get through. And there we stood. Their bosses decided to detour the trucks and try to breach our defenses. At that point, one of us, Kolka, started doing a shaman ritual.”

“He’s a shaman?”

“We don’t actually have any of those left. He was just sort of doing it as a joke, you know, like ‘abracadabra,’ but then the first truck overturned, the pipes rolled out everywhere, and the road was totally shut down. So we’re standing there, the snow is falling, this monster of a truck is lying on its side, rumbling, and the pipes are lying around everywhere... Our hearts were racing. It was such an adrenaline rush! All the trucks were backed up for a kilometer.”

I had read about the protest in Moscow. At the time, it got a lot of coverage, both in Russia and abroad. The press wrote about the natives rising in defense of their homeland, but eventually, of course, the stories ended.

“After the protest, the company finally sat down at the negotiating table with us,” Alexei continued. “All the Nivkhi could feel that something was really happening that winter in Chayvo Bay. Of course it’s just the beginning, we’re desperately short of trained professionals, like ecologists and sociologists. But we’ll have some soon, just give us time.”

“But how much time do you have?”

“I know, I know. Our men die at 50. Our old people are dying right in front of us.”

“From vodka?”

“Mostly from cancer, then from vodka. The governor ordered us to do a cultural impact assessment. To be honest, no one knows how that’s going to be accomplished. But we’ll do it. We’re looking for people who can do it now.”

I mentioned that I had heard that the Khanty and Mansi tribes [in northwestern Siberia] received a lot of money from the companies that were drilling for oil on their ancestral lands. “They’re the recognized ethnic majority where they live,” Alexei replied, “but we’re just an indigenous minority tribe here in the North. We have to fight for everything.”

Of course, I had long since forgotten anything I had learned about the Nivkhi—one of the native peoples of Sakhalin—in my undergraduate ethnography class. But I had always wanted to visit the island, so I requested an assignment and flew across the country.

Arriving in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, I got on a train traveling on the one track that headed north, hoping to work my way down from there. I traveled a thousand kilometers, starting in bamboo groves and ending in arctic tundra. I passed fields of thistle, meadows of tall, windblown grass, and endless creeks and streams flowing down from the mountains. I traveled through the island’s turbulent, unpopulated landscape to find myself among dwarf shrubs and moss, amidst silence and complete emptiness.

The Nivkhi have always lived here, by the rivers and bays of the cold sea. The main island road runs parallel to the train tracks. This road is just clay, scraped flat by a road grader. Dry in sunny weather, it is ever ready to change into an impenetrable wet slog. An occasional Japanese car crawls along it, usually a 4x4—that’s what you need here. You constantly sense the proximity of the Japanese. Their right-hand-drive vehicles scurry along everywhere, like industrious ants.

It’s too expensive to repair a car once you’ve bought it; it’s easier to just drive it into the ground. Abandoned cars are junked next to houses or left up on curbs, their beat-up frames silently observing the strange lives of the island’s inhabitants, so different from life on the mainland. The people who live here are ethnically Russian, Ukrainian, Korean,

**106** Tatar, Evenk, Orochi, and, of course, Nivkhi, the people for whom I had traveled so far.

## 2

Verbs in Nivkhi folk tales function like ski poles. They propel the narrative forward, giving birth to strangely progressive recitations. “In the beginning,” starts one tale, “when the world began, there were two suns. It was always summer, and the water was constantly boiling, even in pleasant weather. Then one day, a bird called the *namgursh* appeared. Two of them grew up. They perched in a hollow in a little hill, and this is where they lived. One day the younger one said, ‘You go and fly down the river to look for some flies to eat. I will go and fly up the river to look for flies.’”

Hunters, fishers, and gatherers spend most of their time looking for food, so eating is an important part of Nivkhi folk tales. Even two *namgursh* (similar to chickadees), the founders of the human race, go off “to look for something to eat” along the river, just as the indigenous people of Sakhalin did for centuries.

The pre-revolutionary scientist, Dr. Foma Avgustinovich, described the Nivkhi (or, as the Russians called them at that time, the Gilyaks) a bit condescendingly as “a people of gentle disposition, patient and taciturn, with fairly well-developed intellectual capacities.” In the nineteenth century, they still lived in bark-covered mud huts. They could shoot a squirrel in the eye, and depended on their dogs for survival. They ate dried fish instead of bread, dipping it into stinky seal fat, and they never bathed.

Back then, the administrators of the local penal colony warned their Russian convicts that the Nivkhi were cannibals, thus ensuring that the frightened prisoners would not try to run away. The native inhabitants had been trained to hunt down escapees.

The Nivkhis’ love for dogs and their accurate marksmanship also served them well in Soviet times. “When our men went to fight the Finns, they always took their huskies along,” said Uncle Petya Muvchik, from the traditional Nivkhi settlement camp in Veni. “My father told me that

once his dog started barking at a cuckoo bird that was sitting in a pine tree. The sniper who was trying to hide there pressed himself into the tree trunk, but my father took him out with a single shot. If the dogs die, the Nivkhi will die,” Uncle Petya concluded.

Life changed rapidly under Soviet rule. Nivkhi children were rounded up and forced into *internat* boarding schools, which saved them from the tuberculosis and chronic, infectious conjunctivitis that were raging through the settlement camps. Although the Soviets managed to defeat the tuberculosis and conjunctivitis, and even to create a Nivkhi intellectual class, they decimated the Nivkhi language, which is not related to any other on earth and now is spoken by only a few old people.

After the Russo-Japanese war, the southern half of Sakhalin was ceded to the Japanese, while most of the Nivkhi remained on the northern part of the island. In the 1920's the *upoltuzy*—individuals authorized to manage the affairs of the indigenous tribes, began to enlighten the Nivkhi about the advantages of life in the socialist collective. The authorities took an increased interest in the Nivkhi communities in the years immediately after WWII, when Soviet troops invaded South Sakhalin and expelled the Japanese.

The Nivkhi were forcibly resettled onto specially built reservations in two stages, first in the 1950's, and then in the 1970's. These people, whose lives until recently had remained virtually unchanged since the Stone Age, took a giant leap forward—directly into socialism, and were put to work in fishing *kolkhozes*. The Nivkhi alphabet, created in the 1930's and finally put on paper in the 1970's, was not really of any use to them. The father of one Nivkhi I met worked delivering newspapers, so he was given the last name “Pravda.” A people who had always lived by oral legends began to read *And Quiet Flows the Don* and *Moydodir* (a children's comic book about the importance of personal hygiene) in school.

The *kolkhozes* collapsed during *perestroika*, leaving behind only heaps of scrap metal. The Nivkhi, who were again forced to go out and search for food, remembered the ancestral lands where their forefathers had fished. In reality, they had never forgotten, but had just waited patiently. They waited until the time was right. Deeply disillusioned by the

**108** results of collective farming, Russia now began to encourage the development of small, private farms. Of course, many Nivkhi, like non-drinking Russians, were perfectly capable of running a business and had their own dreams of economic independence. So they created tribal co-op businesses in their settlement camps, based on the skills they still remembered: hunting, fishing, and farming. This was the start of the “roaring 90’s,” as one Sakhalin islander put it.

They divided up and handed out the traditional Nivkhi fishing sites, and seventeen years passed.

### 3

The town of Nekrasovka is at the northern end of the island, 29 kilometers from Okha, the county seat. There is a school, a post office, and a well-stocked general store, called “Happiness.” Vodka is sold under the counter. I remember being frightened by the drunks in Moscow. Indigenous people and alcohol are usually a bad combination. There are few men on the street in Nekrasovka, but I do not see any drunks. Women walk around with children, pushing strollers. Nekrasovka has a population of 1,200, 560 of whom are Nivkhi. There are about 3,000 Nivkhi on Sakhalin.

Some boys are clustered around a market stall.

“How’s it going?” I ask them.

“Nothing’s going on here. You a tourist?”

“Sort of.”

“You’re lucky you’re not from here. This is a hellhole.”

### 4

Here in this hellhole, in a three-room apartment with natural-gas heat and hot water, is the Kykh-Kykh Center for the Preservation and Development of the Traditional Cultures of the Indigenous Minority People of the North. (“Kykh-Kykh” means “swan.”) This is where they lay out the newspaper *Nivkhi Dif* (“Nivkhi Word”) prior to printing. They have a press run of 250 copies, printed in Nivkhi and Russian. The regional administration pays for the preparation and printing of each edition.

Fyodor Mygun is the director of the non-profit, subsidized center, and a correspondent for the newspaper.

After the protest, Sakhalin Energy began negotiating with the Union of Indigenous Peoples of Sakhalin, and their discussions resulted in the “Development Plan for the Indigenous Minority People of the North (IMPN) on Sakhalin.” A compensation fund was drawn up, and \$1.5 million was given to the IMPN to be distributed over five years. That amounts to \$300,000 per year, or approximately \$100 per Nivkhi per year. Fyodor is one of the coordinators of the project.

Elderly women gather in the evenings in the Kykh-Kykh Center to sew costumes for the national ensemble. A special subsidy pays them for their work. Twice a week a study circle convenes to practice the Nivkhi language, but not many people attend. “I encourage everyone to come, but not many do,” Fyodor complains. He is originally from Amur, where another 3,000 Nivkhi live. In 1972, his brother brought him and his sister to an *internat* school on the island. Fyodor turned out to be a gifted student, and was later sent back to the mainland to attend the Abramtsev Technical School, where he majored in “stone-, wood-, and bone-carving.” When he came back to Sakhalin, he worked on a fishing crew and as a local schoolteacher.

Fyodor has participated in the *Pila Ken* (“Big Sun”) folk music and dance ensemble for many years. At the age of 45, he has been to Japan three times with the ensemble, as well as to France, Switzerland, and Alaska. In 1990, he tried to start a souvenir business, but it went under; he doesn’t carve wood anymore. In 2002, he created the Kykh-Kykh Center. He studies the Nivkhi language, but finds it difficult to read, and is too embarrassed to try to speak it. There’s not really anyone to speak it with, anyway. Nivkhi language classes are only offered through fourth grade in the Nekrasovka school. After that, state funding stops. The Nivkhi language teacher also refuses to speak the language of her ancestors. When asked why, she responds with embarrassment, “We’re still learning it.”

The school in Nekrasovka is public, so Russian children study Nivkhi as well. There are Russian children in the Nivkhi national ensemble and

**110** in the sports club. They like it. They get to do traditional dances, beat sacred sticks on logs, and shake tambourines. Everyone gets *torbasa*—embroidered fur boots, and beautiful robes. In the sports club they practice archery, throw hatchets, and wrestle, grabbing each other around the waist. This is serious stuff.

“At this rate, how long do you think it will take to revive the language?” I ask.

“We’re in no hurry. We’re working on it.”

Nivkhi are famous for their patience.

Few of the male Nivkhi of Nekrasovka ever set foot in the Kykh-Kykh.

## 5

That night I leave the center in search of food. The same women are pushing strollers along the town’s main, dusty street; the same boys are standing around the market stall, gnawing on seeds. Here, in the epicenter of Nivkhi culture, in a town where they doggedly publish a useless newspaper, I can’t find anything that seems particularly Nivkhi. But what was it I wanted to see? A diseased ethnic settlement, covered in bark? Fish hung out to dry on the walls of five-story buildings? But still, this restrained silence feels oppressive. One-sixth of the 3,000 members of an ancient race live here, on a reservation created by the government, enjoying all the blessings of civilization, and they are slowly but surely disappearing from the face of the earth. Is Fyodor Mygun one of only a handful who understand this and are trying to withstand the march of time? No, surely not all the natives are as passive as they seem.

A nice, well-brought-up boy is the first to greet me on the street. I answer him automatically. Did I expect or want him to greet me in Nivkhi? If you can’t save a dead language, then what can you save? The celebrated Nivkhi patience seems to me more like a deeply repressed despair, which perhaps can only be countered by a profound religious faith. But if Kolka is the only one who can even pretend to be a shaman, then there is no religion left to turn to. And why are the ethnic minorities of Dagestan, for example, not fighting for their rights, not demanding subsidies from the government? Because they live in a warm climate