

1

Evenkis in the Lower Yenisei Valley

THE PURPOSE OF this book is to answer the primary question of my field hosts: who are the Evenkis of Taimyr? As the following chapters will show, this is a complex question which will consider the history of a single reindeer brigade, the nature of identity when it is questioned by bureaucratized organs of power, and the utility of nationalist rhetoric for making political claims. Although Evenkis in the lower Yenisei valley are far from articulating a nationalist project in a classic sense, their recent circulation of claims to national pedigrees, exclusive territories, and kin linkages illuminate the origins of social movements focused upon national identity. Through identifying three ways in which Evenkis wield their identities, I present an ethnographic account of the everyday life, culture, and economy for Evenkis in this region of Arctic Siberia. The key foci for national identity in Taimyr are an inflated concept of nationality, a consciousness of territory, and a feeling of solidarity for one's *kollektiv*.

Arrival

There is no word in Evenki for 'blizzard' but there is a word for 'wind'—*edyn*. For the experienced *tundrovik*, who moves between the rolling hummocks of the tundra or through larch forests sheltered by foothills, there is no need to name the blinding mix of snow and wind called *purga* in Russian. A person who lives on the land learns to avoid exposed places during wind. If a hunter happens to find himself in a vulnerable open place, such as the sites of most Russian-built cities and settlements, it is easier to use the Russian term.

For the traveller who first arrives in the region of Siberia called 'the Taimyr' the differing pragmatics of how one might experience wind are not at all obvious. The airports and the regional capitals are built not in the most protected settings but in the most strategic locations to receive mechanized transport and to dispatch production to the other industrialized centres of the Russian Federation. These portholes are as practical as they are disorienting. They are designed to deliver people or freight quickly and in straight trajectories with no relation to the rhythms of the land. When gazing at Taimyr from the frosted windows of an airport baggage hall, it is difficult to know which hillside is less windy or which plain is naturally swept clean of snow. With experience one learns that the Taimyr is better imagined not as the edge of the industrialized world but as a chain of places chosen over time for their unique properties to harbour life from the winds that rage between tundra, taiga, and jagged mountain ridges.

There are two airports to which the traveller can arrive in Taimyr. The large commercial airport, Noril'sk-Aiakel, hosts at least two flights a day from Moscow as well as many other Russian centres and chartered flights from Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and South Korea. It is built on a large open plateau that is popularly said to have been a 'no man's land' by indigenous Dolgans and Nenetses. The smaller airport in the district capital of Dudinka is built on an exposed island at the place where the Dudina river meets the wide Yenisei. In 1992 it was still possible to arrive here from the territorial capital of Krasnoïarsk and then set off for any one of the smaller rural settlements, if the winds and water levels permit. Upon a December arrival at either airport one learns the meaning of *purga*. The blizzards are so constant on this large continental peninsula that pilots must search for a lull in what are often gale-force gusts to ease their jets down the ice-strip in Dudinka. When travelling from the territorial capital 1,500 kilometres to the south, you watch the clear, cold weather of the continental centre of Siberia cloud over into an almost bubbly turbulence below. The midday sunlight, still quite strong at the altitudes where jet aircraft travel, abruptly ends upon descent. It seems that you can make out the line between southern day and polar night outlined against the clouds. In your mind you know you are flying to the dark side of the globe, but for the newcomer it creates the impression that you have flown off the end of the Earth.

Upon disembarking, you immediately taste the flavour of the winds. They have a warm breath to them, although not a light one. It is the best that you can do to stay upright when walking against them. The haze created by a turbulent mix of snow and wind make the nearest mountains vanish and well-lit apartment blocks dissolve into a milky haze. In Dudinka, snow can bank up to the third storey of the centrally heated eight-storey buildings within a few hours to be removed the next morning by a patient tractor operator. During the winter of 1992–3, the Taimyr was buried under a snowfall that was four times the average precipitation for this season.

I left from Dudinka for the Khantaika on a special flight for the Department of Education earmarked to deliver snowmobiles for the school. The flight had been already delayed for over a month due to 'scheduling conflicts' (which turned out to be a refusal by the pilots to manhandle the leaden machines onto the plane). I had been assured that the flight would soon be organized, perhaps due to the increased exoticness of delivering a Canadian ethnographer. On the third day of negotiations, the conflicts were resolved when the airport supplied a fixed-wing biplane charged at the higher fee of a large helicopter (it was left unclear who received the difference). Our passenger complement included a teacher (and husband to the school director) who was overseeing the delivery of the snowmobiles; a 12-year-old boy expelled from the Dudinka boarding school for petty robbery, and a teacher from the neighbouring settlement of Potapovo. In addition to the two tonnes

of snowmobiles, we took on board my trunk of cassette tapes, winter clothes, and notebooks, and the equally sizeable trunks of the teachers which, it later turned out, were filled with illegal shipments of alcohol. The Evenki boy had no luggage other than the package of gum that I gave him.

On the day of our departure we were blessed with a hard frost and no wind. It took us a couple of hours to load the snowmobiles onto the plane—during which time the reddened faces of the teachers looked close to frost-bite. After removing the protective quilts from the engine, the single propeller sputtered into action. The two pilots, their breath icing the wind-screen, urged the plane forward and back to dislodge the skis from their frozen hollows. They slapped each other's shoulders and shouted out 'with God!' over the sound of the engine. The plane slowly trundled down the ice-strip and took flight into the deep blue of the noon twilight.

After the days of anxious waiting and negotiation, the flight to the Khantaika was deceptively quick and easy—making the settlement seem to be a close neighbour to Dudinka. The distance was not great—250 kilometres as the crow flies or 370 kilometres by the aviation corridors which weave between the mountain tops. The land gradually changed from windswept tundra to rolling hills with stands of larch in the valleys, and finally to the front ranges of the Putoran plateau blanketed in deep snow. In the short two hours that it took us to arrive the twilight was already fading. My first sight of the settlement from the cockpit of the aircraft was the single navigation light in the midst of a large white lake, and the frozen rock face to the south whose top was obscured by windswept clouds working their way down the mountain. It was this sight that worried the pilots. The *purga* always starts unexpectedly from the south and can strand travellers for weeks. Omitting the obligatory flight over the airstrip offices, the pilots hurriedly landed and bullied the local porters to quickly unload the snowmobiles and the freight. The plane was quickly turned to escape back to Dudinka.

On the ground, in the place that I had planned to reach for two years, I was immediately bundled onto an awaiting snowmobile and hauled off to the apartment of the school headmaster. A large crowd of drunk adults, children, and dogs greeted the plane, apparently anticipating the contents of the teacher's trunk (and hungrily looking at mine). That night, while making toasts with the assembled Russian intelligentsia, I was poorly placed to understand the context of my arrival. Thinking that I was simply in the company of teachers and transport employees, I could not understand why the chain of people who called by to make my acquaintance were briskly turned away. In conditions of a crumbling economy, teachers do not make ends meet with their pay-checks but on their access to centrally funded chartered flights. The local callers did not at first interpret my place in this company as part of a scientific project to extend literature and knowledge to an unknown corner (as the toasts of the headmaster signified), but instead

understood that a foreign tradesman had arrived as a guest to an infamous den of bootleggers with exotic alcohols for sale. It was only several months later that I understood the significant smiles and winks that I received on the street that next day.

It became immediately clear to me that I had arrived to stay for a long time with this uneasily united group of people. What Russians describe as ‘unusually unlucky weather’ was to continue in the wake of a string of angry deaths. Evenkis and Dolgans say that when an old person dies, the *purga* comes from the south for the period before the body is interred (and while the drunken *pominki* [wake] is conducted). After the burial, the elder takes an infant soul with him or her. My arrival had coincided with the death of an elder to be followed, as forecast, by the death of an infant. It would be two weeks (perhaps due to a particularly successful wake) for both burials to be concluded and for the raging winds to cease and for the skies to clear. It was only then that I first discovered that this settlement, on the shores of a majestic lake, was surrounded by one of the most breathtaking range of mountains that I have seen anywhere.

The road to the Khantaika

Evenkis believe that a person’s life has a trajectory. The image that they often use in conversation when discussing significant turning points in a person’s biography is that of a ‘road’. For me, the lower Yenisei valley, and specifically the tundra around Lake Khantaika, lay at a crossroads of many different trajectories. The predominating rationale which brought me to ‘the Khantaika’ (as the locals call the village) was a dry, scholarly one. My intention was to find a place and a people in the Russian sub-Arctic which bore a close resemblance to the geography and economy of a community in the Canadian sub-Arctic. This design had much to do with my biography. Before starting graduate work, and before studying anthropology, I had worked for the Fort McPherson Indian Band in the Northwest Territories, between 1983 and 1986. The Gwich’in people of Fort McPherson first gave me the taste for living on the land in an Arctic landscape which lets itself become known to people through stories, dreams, and the paths of animals. They also presented to me the problem of how a subtle relationship between people and the land becomes a troubled one when confronted with the regulation of governments and powerful mineral consortiums. Analytically, the study of an equivalent Siberian community—a community which was not presumably struggling with capitalist corporations—seemed a practical way to demonstrate that industrial development could be conducted in a different fashion. Personally, the transplanting of this Canadian experience into the Siberian frontier was an indirect way to explore an interest in Slavic cultures which I inherited from my parents.

In comparative terms the Taimyr Autonomous *okrug* [district] is an ideal field location. Although the Taimyr peninsula is geographically unique in that it extends its tundra marshes above 74 degrees North latitude (making it the most northerly continental peninsula in the world), the southern parts of this administrative district start at the more modest height of 69 degrees North latitude. Southern Taimyr is bounded by the wide Yenisei river, the mountainous Putoran plateau, and is interspersed with thick patches of larch forest. Unique to this region of Siberia is the large migratory population of wild deer which continues to provide a staple source of food for indigenous peoples. The geographical combination of rich fishing sites on a large Arctic river, a traditional economy centred on the hunt of the wild deer, and series of valleys populated with many different linguistic groups immediately suggests comparable sites in the circumpolar Arctic such as Canada's Mackenzie delta.

The cultural complexity and the rich history of the lower Yenisei valley initially drove me away from my original comparative project. I mention this aspect here since it formed a very important silent part of this work. Much of my enthusiasm for spending long terms on the land in often cold and cramped conditions came from an earlier introduction to this climate. My familiarity with cross-country skiing, with splitting wood, and fetching water from under the ice made me a clumsy but not useless companion around the camps. Finally, my stories and photographs gave a point of common contact with my Evenki hosts—for it turned out that they as well as I felt a common identity between the Canadian Arctic and the Russian Arctic and had a keen curiosity as to how life might be different across the polar sea.

An analytic curiosity is not sufficient to describe the road which led me to the Khantaika. Taimyr is a huge Arctic territory which, between 1932 and 1992, was completely closed to foreign guests and thus was a place poorly known. My attention was drawn specifically to the area around Lake Khantaika by the late Galina Nikolaevna Gracheva of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in St Petersburg. She spent several decades working in the Dolgan and Nia settlements of Ust'-Avam and Volochanka and had made one trip to the Khantaika in 1976 (Gracheva 1983). One half-year before she departed on the ethnographic expedition to Chukotka which claimed her life, she surprised me by alerting me to the very existence of Evenkis in Taimyr. In January 1992 I had lazily assumed, as do many contemporary Siberianists, that the national composition of Siberian administrative districts was roughly congruent with their names. Thus, expecting to find only Nenets and Dolgan people within the 'Taimyr (Dolgano-Nenets) Autonomous District', I was caught entirely off-guard to hear of Evenkis, *sakhalar*, *argastar*, and a host of other localized identities which have puzzled many generations of ethnographers working in Taimyr. With her words in mind, I paid careful attention to what it means when people apply a name to themselves or to others. However, more importantly, it was her enthusiasm for studying this forgotten corner of

the Russian ethnographic map that encouraged me to complete this project when overwhelmed by adverse circumstances and every rational reason to leave for a less troubled site.

My arrival by bush-plane on the shores of Lake Khantaika at the beginning of December 1992 followed upon a three-month period studying the Evenki language with the linguist Nadezhda Yakovlevna Bulatova. This short but intense course in orthography and grammar was conducted in the Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St Petersburg and at the practice site of Number Three Reindeer Brigade of the Surinda state farm in the central part of the Evenki Autonomous District. From December 1992 to August 1993 I remained within the borders of the state farm Khantaiskii (with the exception of two ten-day trips to Dudinka in February and July). This nine-month period of my field project was abruptly cut short by the need to extend my Russian visa. After extending my visa, I remained in Russia until the end of December 1994 conducting library and archive research in the cities of St Petersburg, Moscow, Novosibirsk, and Krasnoiarsk. The entire length of the field project was sixteen months. Since completing my doctoral thesis, and before commencing this book, I have returned to Taimyr twice; once in 1995 and again in 1997. Both times poor weather did not permit me to fly to the Khantaika.

Although I spent much time with the fishermen, teachers, and office workers of the Khantaiskii state farm during my nine months' stay, the largest part of my time was spent with Number One Reindeer Brigade. This formally organized team of kinsmen was reputed to be the most representative collective of Evenkis and of Evenki knowledge in the settlement. From February 1994 until August 1994 our brigadier, Nikolai Savel'evich Utukogir, patiently led me through a vigorous training exercise which did not differ from that of a local apprentice herder [*uchenik*] within the brigade. In that short time I learned much about the reindeer, wood, wind, and about humility in the face of unfamiliar skills. However, before I can tell the full story of the people and their animals, and the skills and technology which mediate this relationship, I wish to discuss the identity of my hosts and of their homeland.

Evenkis and Dolgans

For reasons which will soon become clear, it is impossible to write about Khantaika Evenkis without also discussing those from whom they distance themselves. Like many places in Inner Asia and the circumpolar North, identity here sports a relational quality which makes it difficult to draw hard and fast lines between people. To be Evenki on the Khantaika means to be an Evenki living among Dolgans, Russians, and to a lesser extent, among Sakhas and Enneches.

Although Khantaika Evenkis may have been forgotten by many professional ethnographers, they have chosen to ally themselves with one of the widely dispersed and widely known nationalities in eastern Asia. Contemporary Evenki populations can be found in a wide arc starting at the northern edge of Kamchatka, descending along the Pacific interior into Manchuria and eastern Mongolia, and then ascending northwards along the Yenisei river valley into Taimyr. Within the centre of this arc, Evenki (and their Eveni cousins) live side by side with Turkic-speaking Sakhas. In the 1989 census their population within the Russian Federation was 29,901 (with 311 living in Taimyr). Taimyr represents the most northerly point of their settlement and, with the exception of Sovetskaia Rechka (Turukhansk County) and the settlements in Tomsk Province (Siminov 1983; Vasilevich 1931*a*; 1931*b*), it is also the westernmost fringe of Evenki settlement (see Map 1). The sum total of the published work devoted to the Evenkis of the lower Yenisei valley and the Putoran plateau can be found in Rychkov (1917–23), Lebedeva (1960), Tugolukov (1963; 1985), and Vasilevich (1951; 1972). In English-language anthropology and classic Russian literary works, Evenkis are known as Tunguses.¹

Evenkis are generally known to ethnographers as the domesticators of the reindeer, speakers of a language of the Tungus-Manchurian family, and masters of a mixed economy of hunting, fishing, reindeer herding, and trading exclusively within taiga regions. Almost every ethnography stresses their extensive use of land and their wide knowledge of the customs and languages of their neighbours. They are perhaps best known to the English-language reader for their *hamanil* [shamans] who had privileged knowledge of the spirits of animals, people, and places (Shirokogoroff 1935). Khantaika Evenkis are no different in their traditions or their lifestyles from the ‘classic Evenkis’ of the literature. Until the late 1960s, Evenkis at Lake Khantaika used saddled reindeer to hunt, fish, and trade with neighbouring Sakhas, Enneches, Russians, and Evenkis. Their language is that of the northern dialect of Evenki spoken in Ilimpei County (Evenki Autonomous District). The extent of their historic land use went no further than the fringe of the larch forest high in the rugged Arctic valleys of Taimyr. Although there is little talk today of shamanism, the reticence to speak of deceased shamans combined with the large number of abandoned (and feared) ritual sites suggest that the skill of seeing deeply into the souls of living beings was

¹ There are additional rich sources of unpublished ethnographic material in the archives of K. M. Rychkov (AIV fond 49), Tugarinov (ARAN fond 135) and A. A. Popov (AMAE fond 14) as well as in the notes of Soviet Territorial Formation workers (AMAE fond K-2; GAKK fond R-1845). Notes on the region surrounding Lake Khantaika can be found *passim* in Stepanov (1835), Middendorf (1869), Kastren (1860), Czaplicka (1914; 1917; see Collins & Urry 1997) and Tret’iakov (1869). Recently, Ziker (1996) has published his accounts of a short visit to the Khantaika. Portions of my field research have been published as articles and chapters (1994; 1995; 1996*b*; 1996*c*; 1997).

Plate 2. Innokentii Tasachi
preparing his saddle-reindeer for
sable hunting on the territories of
the Surinda state farm

no less developed here. At this most northerly and westerly extent of Evenki settlement, one finds occasional borrowings from Sakhas and Enneches in technology, mythology, and lexica.

In direct contrast to the wide and ancient pedigree of Evenkis, Dolgans are reputed to be among the ‘youngest’ of the Siberian nationalities. In most official and vernacular presentations of Dolgan identity, Dolgans are said to be a ‘mixture’ of Sakhas, Evenkis, Nias, Enneches, and Russian Tundra-Peasants. Dolgans can be found exclusively within the territories of Taimyr and Anabar County of the Sakha Republic (which was once contiguous with Taimyr). Their cosmopolitan origins open the possibility of comparing Dolgan sub-groups to each of their ‘component’ nationalities—a technique which carries much potential for political positioning in everyday village life. Like the ripples in a pond, easterly Dolgan groups are said to have a dialect and consciousness which reflects that of Sakhas. As one moves westwards, the Sakha elements of the culture dampen and become interlaced with lexica and skills which are represented as *tongus* [‘Evenki-like’]. Specific Dolgan clans who have been more closely concerned with trade, and who usually

Plate 3. Vladimir pilots his *balok* above the Sukharika river

locate themselves close to major rivers like the Yenisei, the Dudypa, and the Kheta, are often said to have an appearance and behaviour which is Russian. In the 1989 census the population of Dolgans within the Russian Federation was 5,584 (with 408 living in the Sakha Republic). Ethnographic and linguistic work on Dolgans is thin but authoritative. It is associated with the names of Popov (1934a; 1954), Dolgikh (1963), and Ubriatova (1985).

Dolgan ethnography tends to distinguish this people by qualities which resonate with more recent political concerns of the Russian state. They are often portrayed as ‘leading’ or ‘advanced’ people in Taimyr, having an interest in trade, and a closer relationship to Christianity than to pagan beliefs (for an exception see Popov 1958; 1981). Dolgans are said to have adopted domesticated reindeer-breeding from Evenkis and to have modified it into a more intensified, ‘efficient’ form. The best illustration of their ‘modern’ outlook is the invention of the *balok*, a light, mobile, furnished structure which can be pulled behind harnessed reindeer to facilitate comfortable travel across the tundra. Classically, their folklore displays a mixture of themes from each of their ‘component’ nationalities (but shows a great debt to Sakha oral style). Both their language and musical culture display Sakha features most prominently with lexis and motif being contributed from other cultural areas. Like Evenkis, they tended to trap fur-bearers and to keep their reindeer within the embrace of the boreal forest but characteristically close to those rivers which were the arteries of trans-Siberian trade.

The above descriptions of Evenki and Dolgan practice already foreshadow some of the more contentious issues involved in ascribing culture and nationality. As is the case in the relationship of both Canadian Metis and Peruvian mestizo to their 'pure' indigenous neighbours (Slobodin 1966; Gow 1991), assigning an identity to an individual immediately implicates that person's attitude towards tradition, profession, or his or her relationship to a colonizing nation. Rather than affirming the national distinctions which have become part of official Russian ethnography, this book will encourage the reader to consider Evenki and Dolgan identity positions as part of a continuum. In this manner it will be possible to understand what it means when people choose a life trajectory which advertises either the flexibility of 'mixing' of cultural practice or instead choose to display the dignity of an ancient and fixed pedigree.

Mapping the tundra

The entity which is most closely involved in the politics, economy, and identity of both Evenkis and Dolgans in Taimyr is the landscape surrounding the settlements. People speak of 'the tundra' as a place where one makes one's livelihood, follows one's life road, or makes a political point of the self-determination of one's nation. It is important to point out from the outset that these places are not technically tundras of twiggy bushes, rock outcroppings, and lichens. *Tundra* stands for any place which is not built, wired, and measured by the apparatuses of the Russian state structure. The 'tundras' where most Dolgans and Evenkis travel lie at the borderline where thick stands of larch merge into arctic and alpine expanses devoid of trees. This patchwork alteration of ecological zones in fact constitutes the places which are good for hunting, travelling, and coveting.

The tundras which are important for this story can be found within a large region which I call the lower Yenisei valley (Anderson 1996*b*). This region, composed of the tree-line areas along both the left and right banks of the Yenisei river, is known on official maps by some four administrative parcels, the largest of which is the Taimyr (Dolgano-Nenets) Autonomous District (see Map 2). Other than the obvious ecological marker of the Yenisei river itself, the valley is characterized by the transition of three ecological zones. The major part of the Taimyr peninsula is located in the tundra zone, which is not now permanently occupied (with the exception of a handful of scientific and military outposts). Here one can find the short shrubs and lichen-covered hummocks that in the spring and summer support the Taimyr population of wild tundra deer [*Rangifer tarandus sibiricus* Murray] and a wide variety of waterfowl which migrate yearly from as far as Africa. The permanent points of settlement of Russians, Dolgans, and Evenki are located to the south within the reach of the central Siberian taiga. Here one can

Map 2. The lower Yenisei valley showing administrative boundaries, cities, extensive settlements, and abandoned villages, *circa* 1993

Plate 4. Guiding the Number One herd through a *laida* near the Gorbiachin river

distinguish two zones. At the intersection of the tundra and the taiga there is a wide area of relatively dense forests of larch and pine interspersed with large patches of tundra and marsh. The latter are of primary importance for hunters and herders. These *laidil*, which one finds dotting the landscape, are the primary feeding places for both wild deer and domestic reindeer. The speckled distribution of differing micro-ecological areas along the tree line is also an ideal haven for fur-bearers such as the Arctic fox, forest deer [*Rangifer tarandus valentinae* Flerov], and other large mammals such as moose and bear. The majority of the traditional native settlements are located, as is popularly said, ‘along the forest’s edge’ [*v krae lesa*]. The third zone starts suddenly along the right bank of the Kureika river and to the north of the port of Igarka. Here one finds the start of the classic Siberian taiga of fir trees and cedars with luxurious fur-bearers such as the sable.

What is unique about this region is the Putoran alpine plateau. These mountains, which start as isolated, box-like, foothills and get progressively more rugged as one moves east, have the ecological effect of pushing the tree-line zone unusually far past the Arctic Circle. This geographical factor alone has made the region along the edge of the Putoran plateau—the region corresponding to the headwaters of the Piasina and Kheta rivers—a very rich and comfortable place to hunt wildlife and to raise domestic reindeer. Not only does the existence of wood and fur-bearing animals make life on the land possible, the varied terrain created by these flat-topped mountains

allows one to change ecological zones quickly by simply changing altitude as well as moving laterally. Although much of the Russian-language literature portrays the lands of the lower Yenisei valley as harsh and uninhabitable, the biodiversity and variety created by the rapid succession of ecological types makes this area a very rich and secure one for those who know its secrets. The rugged valleys also cover some of the richest lodes of strategic and precious metals in Asia—the mining and smelting of which pose the most significant threat to the ecology of the region.

One of the most significant wildlife resources for the local economy is the migratory population of wild deer. All of the aboriginal peoples of the lower Yenisei valley invested much effort and enjoyment in taking wild deer from the land for fresh meat, to make dried meat, and to sew winter clothing. Within the Putoran mountains, herders could take advantage of the rapid alteration of ecological zones in order to harness domesticated reindeer in order to approach quickly and silently the pastures where migratory wild deer fed. Wild deer also provided an invaluable breeding source for domestic reindeer breeders. Since the 1970s, for reasons which are a mystery to biologists, the Taimyr population of wild reindeer began to explode in population, jumping within a decade from a rough estimate of 100,000 head to nearly half a million (Syroechkovskii 1990). This explosion was also accompanied by unpredictable changes in the migration trajectories. Some observers blame the expanding ring of heavy metal pollution from Noril'sk for poisoning traditional pastures (Shideler *et al.* 1986; Klein 1971). Local people blame the lack of respect shown to migrating herds at the dozen points along the Piasina and Dudypta rivers where hired marksmen from the *gospromkhoz* [state economic enterprise] Taimyrskii efficiently but unceremoniously slaughtered thousands of migrating deer with automatic weapons (Yakushkin *et al.* 1971; 1984). The change in migration routes has made it difficult for both local people and Russian marksmen to anticipate where the deer will go and more importantly made it difficult for herders to shelter domestic populations of reindeer from large flows of wild deer blackening the horizon. From 1973 onwards, several waves of chaotic migrations have steadily stolen away the local populations of domestic reindeer from Kresty, Ust'-Avam, and Volochanka and now threaten herders within villages in Khatanga County and Ilimpei County of the Evenki Autonomous District (Klein 1980; Geller 1984; Gracheva 1980; Syroechkovskii 1984). People in these communities still hunt the wild deer, but they do so with snow machines or on foot. The Khantaika today is one of the last havens of domestic reindeer-breeding in the lower Yenisei valley and one of the last places where domestic reindeer are used to hunt wild reindeer.

The location of Evenki and Dolgan places within the rural areas of the lower Yenisei valley could at one time be explained by their proximity to major trading routes established along corridors which intersected the

migratory paths of the Taimyr population of wild deer. This is rapidly changing as state-enforced relocations, pollution, and transportation bottlenecks change the human geography. The Yenisei river itself provides a major transport artery. The tree line along the edge of the Putoran plateau was also a major historic overland transport artery into eastern Siberia known as the Khatanga Way [*trakt*]. Those settlements located within the embrace of the Putoran mountains have been located along routes of easy overland travel across the distinctively long lakes which fill valleys of the region. The left-bank communities similarly provide convenient staging points for overland travel to the Ob' river system (see Map 4 in Chapter 6).

Moving across the land for Evenki and Dolgan has much to do with taking advantage of the opportunities that the tundra offers and classically does not respect externally imposed measures of time and space. This flexible manner of 'knowing' the tundra has been under attack throughout the period of Russian colonization, but especially during the Soviet period. Instead of responding to the movements of wild deer and the changes in the distribution of fur-bearing species, Soviet officials encourage people to imagine the landscape as a series of bounded spaces fitting one within the other. Instead of knowing the tundra, contemporary hunters and herders are expected to map the tundra—or at least to understand and respect how government officials imagine and enclose space. While having little to do with the dynamics of living on the tundra, these maps are by far the easiest way for the reader to initially situate Taimyr and the Khantaika.

The political geography of the lower Yenisei valley is unusually Byzantine. The greater part of the space has been mapped as the 'Taimyr (Dolganonenets) Autonomous District'—a jurisdictional unit created in the Soviet period on 10 December 1930. It takes its title from the peninsula which fills its boundaries and the Russified ethnonyms of the nationalities that made up the largest part of its population at this early date. The valley is also enclosed by the two smaller territories of the Turukhansk County and the Evenki Autonomous District, and two small but wealthy industrial enclaves: the Noril'sk Industrial County and the Igarka Industrial County. The contemporary demographic indicators of these units are given in Table 1.

During the Soviet period, all of these units were part of the immense Krasnoïarsk Territory. In the cybernetics of Soviet administration, counties had the lowest authority to be followed up the rungs by districts, provinces, and territories. However, the political ecology of administration in the lower Yenisei valley was even more intricate than the standard Soviet template. During the fever of centralizations in the 1950s and 1960s, several rural counties of Taimyr were restructured with two (Dudinka and Avam counties) becoming a huge rural frontier to the Dudinka City Council. Of greater political importance is the odd constitutional status of the territories encompassing the cities of Igarka and Noril'sk. Due to their strategic significance,

TABLE 1. Population statistics for the Sparse Peoples of Taimyr

Population	Total	Aboriginal					
		Total	Dolgars	Neenetses	Evenkis	Ngan asans	Enetses
Taimyr TOTAL (1992) ^A	53,100	8,585	4,851	2,465	316	844	109
Dudinka City County ^B	36,769	2,592	1,543	751	298	727 ^A	65 ^A
Ust'-Yenisei County ^A	3,800	1,906	51	1,800	6	5	44
Khatanga County ^A	9,200	3,679	3,539	24	4	112	0
Urban Centres (1992) ^A	35,900	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Dudinka ^B	32,180	505	385	191	30	N/A	N/A
Noril'sk ^B	179,757	146	83	40	23	N/A	N/A
Igarka ^B	26,506	66	16	6	44	N/A	N/A
Rural Settlements (1992)	17,200 ^A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Selected from Taimyr (1990)							
Khantaiskoe Ozero ^C	540	476	242	0	229	1	4
Potapovo ^C	509	252	26	142	68	4	12
Volochanka ^C	942	756	373	7	8	368	0
Levinskii Peski ^C	467	233	199	11	0	11	0
Ust' -Avam ^C	701	637	325	3	11	296	0
Selected Settlements from Neighbouring Districts (1988)							
Sovetskaia Rechka ^D	148	146	0	0	0	118	0
Chirinda ^D	336	300	(30)	0	262	0	0
Yessei ^D	799	746	(778)	0	21	0	0
Tutonchany ^D	554	219	0	327	0	0	0

N/A Not available.

^A Administration of the Taimyr Autonomous District, Internal Memorandum, January 1992.

^B Goskomstat (1991). These data are for Jan. 1991. The cities of Noril'sk and Igarka are not jurisdictionally part of the Taimyr, thus their populations do not contribute towards the total for Taimyr. The Noril'sk Industrial District also includes the cities of Talnakh and Kaerkan for which I have no statistics.

^C Petrushin (1992). A copy of this manuscript is in the library of the Scott Polar Research Institute.

^D Department of the North and the Arctic, Administration of Krasnoiar'sk Territory for Jan. 1988. The Yakut-speaking population of the Evenki Autonomous District, although related to Taimyr Dolgars, is statistically registered as Yakut.

these cities were placed in special postage stamp counties which have direct relationships with Moscow and Krasnoiar'sk but absolutely no legal relationship with those districts (such as Taimyr) whose tundras enclose them. This pattern of encapsulated governance wherein strategic urban sites live a charmed existence independent of their 'autonomous' rural neighbours creates extreme paradoxes. For example, most people wishing to arrive in Taimyr have to pass through one of the airstrips or ports which are located on territories 'outside' of Taimyr; a difficult journey in the days before 1991 when special permits were required by all to enter and leave each of these 'closed' jurisdictions. The most tangible paradox is the bifurcation of wealth between the well-supplied and well-built brick and marble city of Noril'sk and the poverty of the rural terrains from which it draws its wealth. Finally,

of central importance to this book is the paradox of assigning national identifiers to a tundra which resists classification. The result is that the mapping of Dolgan and Nenets identity over a large rural space masks the complexity of real identity at the local level.

Since the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991 each of these administrative fragments has been vying for various forms of sovereignty in a struggle for control of budgets, peoples, and resources which, at the time this book goes to press, is not yet clearly resolved.² For the purposes of this ethnography it is sufficient to understand that each of these units, be they districts, counties, or territories, continues to possess a powerful administrative imprint on people such that the level of wages, the reliability of public services, and even the possibility of travelling between one unit and another may differ wildly between each unit. The speckled political geography of the lower Yenisei valley, like that of its tree-line ecology, implies great differences of opportunity for traders and entrepreneurs who know how to profit from its administrative disjunctures.

The fact that maps of the tundra have been administratively created and invigorated will be a point that I will return to often. It is impossible to justify Taimyr's southern or eastern border on ethnographic lines since Dolgans, Sakhas, and Evenkis have shared land-use and kinship lineages across the boundaries. Geographically there is little to distinguish the alpine plateaus of the Putoran mountains in northern Evenkiia and southern Taimyr. However, the recently created boundaries have come to be meaningful in terms of trade links and transport as well as in the imaginations of people. This is to the credit of the efficacy of the state in defining and realigning social practices and movements along the patterns that it itself authorizes.

² The history of administration in this region from Tsarist times to the present can be found described in Anderson (1996a: 24–7). The present district of Taimyr was formed out of the Tsarist administrative unit 'Turukhansk *krai*'. In 1975 the word 'national' was dropped from its original title and replaced with the ambiguous adjective of 'autonomous'.

Since 1991 the relationship between Taimyr and Noril'sk has gone through a number of trials. In 1995 Taimyr had taken a strong stand on its own autonomy such that it refused to participate in territorial elections and even threatened to challenge in court the legality of the administrative decision [*ukaz*] which severed the Noril'sk Industrial County from Taimyr in 1940. In Nov. 1997 the Governor of Taimyr attempted to settle a growing feud through a treaty with the President of the Russian Federation and the Governors of Evenkiia and of Krasnoiarsk Territory. In somewhat ambiguous language, this treaty recognized that Taimyr will possess a separate administration and would receive its budgetary finances directly from Moscow as a 'subject' of the Russian Federation. However, Taimyr would remain part of the transportation and trade networks of Krasnoiarsk Territory and the urban enclave of Noril'sk would remain jurisdictionally separate. Local commentators hoped that this document would help in obliging Noril'sk to pay several billion roubles in unpaid rent, taxes, and fines for environmental degradation to Taimyr.