

# NATIVE PEOPLES OF THE RUSSIAN FAR NORTH

## THE SHAMAN'S STORY

— Nikolai Vakhtin is a Russian linguist who has worked with several Eskimo communities. He tells the story of Aglu.

“I'll never forget Aglu, even though I only knew him for a short time. I met him in 1974 and he died a year later. His story seemed to sum up all the terrible things that a totalitarian society inflicted on these small communities and how they managed to survive.

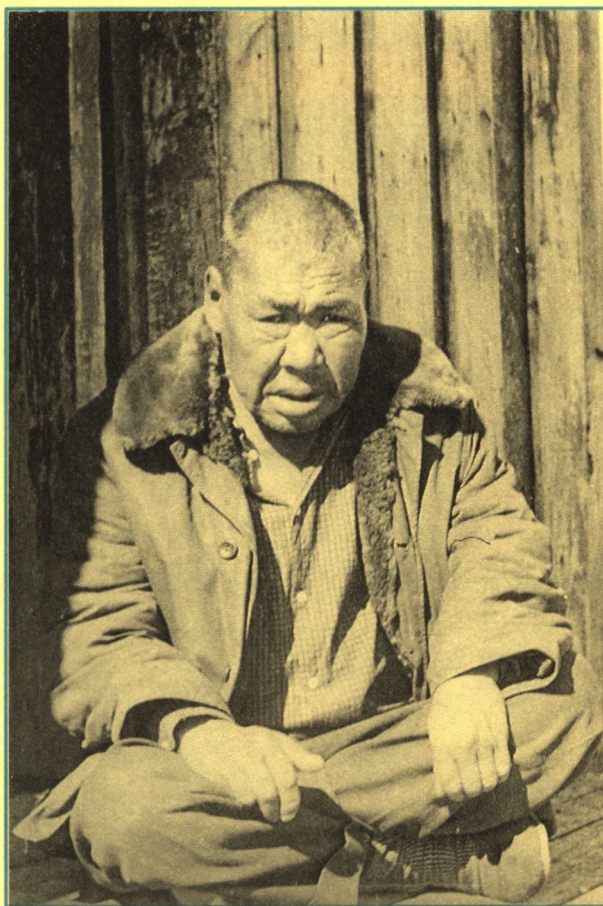
Aglu was an Eskimo, from the Chukotka peninsula. It's a tough climate – very cold all year and in winter it's often ice-bound. The Eskimos have traditionally made their livelihood from hunting sea-mammals – seals, walrus and whales – but Aglu wasn't a hunter. He was a shaman. Shamans are a combination of priest, doctor and magician; traditionally they were highly respected and very powerful.

Aglu was born in 1922, soon after the Bolsheviks had consolidated their power. But although they promised to respect minority cultures, they were determined to change it. Soon there was an official campaign against religion and the shamans were not allowed to practice their skills. In the 1930s, during the Great Terror, many shamans were taken away and executed.

Though Aglu had great powers as a shaman, he had to hide them, and for a shaman to suppress his powers is a torture. Like many other Eskimos he started drinking and became an alcoholic. When I met him, he appeared to be in a drunken stupor much of the time.

But despite this, his powers continued. He could do amazing things. One day two Russian policemen came to arrest him for being drunk. They each took an arm and started dragging him away. Suddenly he disappeared, just like that. The policemen were left dragging at the air. Everybody stared in amazement. Only a great shaman could do things like that.

He was a wonderful story teller. Even though I didn't know much Eskimo at that time, I would sit and listen to him for hours, telling the myths and legends of his people, of the great hunts and the spirits of animals. He knew a little Russian and also some English that he or his parents had picked up from American traders and whalers.



NIKOLAI VAKHTIN

I wish he had lived longer to see the end of Communist rule. The fresh wind of *glasnost* took a while to reach the far north but then native peoples began to organize to protect their languages, cultures and lands. From 1988, Russian and American Eskimos have been able to travel across the straits to meet again. But so much damage has been done. It was too late for Aglu – I hope it's not too late for the others.”

# HIDDEN FROM HISTORY

— “Northern Minorities” is the official term given to the 26 small tribal groups who live in the vast region across Northern Russia, stretching from the Bering Straits in the east to the borders of Norway and Finland in the west. Although the terrain is rough and the climate extremely cold, the region is rich in natural resources – timber, oil, coal, gold – and the great rivers are seen as a potential or actual source of hydro-electricity. Thus the land of the Northern Minorities became the object of exploitation by giant state companies.

According to the 1989 Census of the USSR there were 183,700 members of the Northern Minorities – only 0.06% of the then Soviet population. Almost everywhere they are a small minority, outnumbered by Russian and other settlers. For many years they were hidden from the outside world. Today they are making contact with other indigenous peoples in Alaska, Canada and elsewhere.

## History

For centuries the native peoples lived in small-scale societies as hunters, reindeer-herders and fishermen on land and water. Each group had its own language, customs and way of life. From the 17th Century, Russian explorers, traders and colonists entered their lands and gradually brought the area under Russian administration. Some of the native peoples suffered severely under Russian rule, others fled into the tundra, while a few tribes flourished. In the 19th Century the Russian government made some attempts to protect the tribespeople from rapacious settlers and dishonest officials when it promulgated “The Code of Indigenous Administration”.

When the Bolsheviks seized power in October 1917 and established the new Communist State, they passed laws aimed at giving equal rights to all peoples. In 1924 they established the Committee of the North, composed of scholars and government officials, to work for the benefit of the Northern Minorities. But from the beginning there were disagreements within the Committee. The scholars wanted to protect the traditional ways of life and advocated slow and gradual changes while the Communist Party representatives wanted to promote class struggle and the economic integration of the North into the rest of the country.

At first the Committee followed the course recommended by the scholars. They began to establish reserved territories for the tribespeople along with new Tribal Soviets (councils) of elected representatives to exercise executive and judicial power. Northern Minorities were released from taxes and military service. Academics developed new written forms for many of the native languages and a sympathetic education system was established.

## Industrialization

But these important gains were shortlived as the totalitarian Communist system tightened its grip. In 1929 a forced rapid industrialization campaign began. Land, herds and property were collectivized (i.e. made state property). Those who dared to protest were killed or deported to vast prison camps. The Communist Party under Stalin became all-powerful. The Tribal Soviets were replaced by less representative bodies. In 1935 the

## NATIVE PEOPLES OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION



Committee of the North was abolished and the way was open to unfettered industrialization of the North.

Gradually, the real power leaked away from the local administration and state-owned companies or government ministries became the dominant power, taking over native land and resources. The land and herds were collectivized. In 1934, while only 12 per cent of the deer herds were in collective ownership, by 1943 it was 89 per cent. Russian and other settlers poured into the region, in state farms and in labour camps. The Northern Minorities became a powerless minority in their own land.

This process accelerated after 1955. In the following decades the North was not merely colonized, it was conquered. First came the timber companies; in a few years the far east region lost 30 per cent of its forests. Then came the oil and gas extraction companies. Together they reduced once-forested areas full of fur animals to barren deserts. The fragile ecological systems of the North could not withstand this environmental aggression. The Northern Minorities had no control over the situation and no legal redress.

### Russification

Parallel to industrialization was a process of Russification. The Soviet State promoted Russian language and culture above all others. Native peoples were pressured to become as Russian as possible. In the Northern schools native language teaching was reduced and replaced by Russian and from an early age native children were placed in boarding schools where they lost their language, culture and traditional skills.

Nomadic peoples were forced to settle. The small settlements of the Northern Minorities were declared "unprofitable" and amalgamated and relocated into larger villages. Traditional subsistence systems were destroyed in the lifetime of one generation. The new jobs went mainly to the new Russian settlers, many of whom were deeply prejudiced against the indigenous population. There were vast inequalities in wages and living standards. The result was the formation of a "broken generation", neither traditional nor Russian. There were massive social problems – unemployment, ill-health, alcoholism, alienation.

### Glasnost and Beyond

After 1985 the situation slowly began to change as *glasnost* allowed once-defenceless peoples, like the Northern Minorities, to find a voice. At first they took their cases to the administration and the courts but after these proved ineffective they turned to public protest and press campaigns. The Northern Minority languages were reinstated into the school curriculum. Independent native organizations were founded. The First Congress of Northern Minorities in 1990 demanded greater political autonomy, including the return of Tribal Soviets, guaranteed land rights in reserved territories and special measures to preserve their languages and cultures.

Like the other peoples of the ex-USSR, Northern Minorities were victims of totalitarian communism. As a small and fragile people, the great pressures almost succeeded in destroying them. Today they face new pressures – to regain their traditional lands, to repair past damage, to cope with a free-market economy, to achieve human rights in the new Russian State. Their voices deserve to be heard in the international community.



JACEK PALKIEWICZ/FRANK SPOONER PICTURES

## ISSUES FOR ACTION

**1 Land Rights** The Northern Minorities should gain meaningful title to their traditional territories, through new legal and constitutional means. No industrial or resource development should be allowed on the land unless proper assessment has taken place and a democratic decision-making body of the tribe or tribes has approved it.

**2 Compensation** Much of the land and natural resources of the Northern Minorities has already been destroyed or taken over by settlers. Compensation should be paid to the indigenous peoples to make partial amendments for this destruction. Even if the Russian government cannot afford immediate monetary compensation, the principle should be established and enshrined in law.

**3 Environment** The fragile ecology of the traditional territories of the Northern Minorities is in the process of being destroyed. There should be an immediate veto on all new projects and an environmental assessment of all projects in progress. The forests, rivers and seas are the resource base for the Northern Minorities; they should not be destroyed for short-term gain, nor for grandiose projects in the "national interest".

**4 Language and culture** Russification has destroyed or impoverished many languages and much native culture. The Russian government must make immediate efforts to promote the language and cultures of the Northern Peoples, through locally-controlled programmes.

**5 International monitoring** For 70 years the Northern Minorities lived in a totalitarian State and were not allowed free access to the international community. As a small and vulnerable people, their situation must be open to international scrutiny to ensure that their rights are respected.

## IDEAS FOR ACTION

If you are disturbed by what you have read and wish to carry your concern further, you can write to the authorities below to express your views and ask them what they are doing:

to ensure guaranteed reserved territories for all the Native Peoples of the North, to allow them to pursue the way of life they choose;

to protect the environment from destructive industrial development and resource extraction and to grant compensation to the Native Peoples for past losses;

to legislate for genuine minority rights for all the Native Peoples of the North;

to preserve as far as possible the languages and cultures of Northern Peoples.

The authorities to whom you may wish to present your views include:

Your parliamentary representatives, including those in your country's Foreign Ministry and Overseas Development Ministries; Members of the CSCE (Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe);

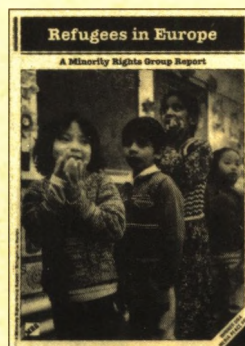
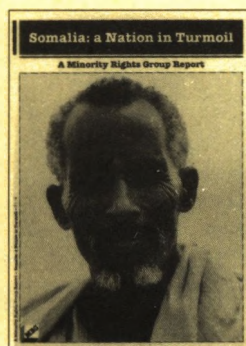
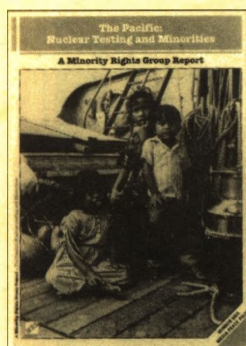
International agencies, including the World Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development;

The UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations (Centre for Human Rights, Palais des Nations, Geneva);

The government of Russia, either directly or through its ambassador in your own country.

## Some other reports available from MRG:

If you would like a complete list of MRG publications or more information on how MRG works, please send a large SAE or international reply-paid coupon to MRG, London.



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*For full details:*  
Minority Rights Group  
379 Brixton Road  
London SW9 7DE  
UK

Telephone: +44 (0) 71-978 9498  
Fax: +44 (0) 71-738 6265