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PATTY A. GRAY

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Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, P.O. Box 110351,
06107 Halle / Saale, Phone: +49 (0)345 2927-0, Fax: +49 (0)345 2927-402,
http://www.eth.mpg.de, e-mail: workingpaper@eth.mpg.de

The *Obshchina* in Chukotka: land, property and local autonomy

Patty A. Gray[1]

Abstract

Chukotka, located in Russia's far northeast, is one of several territories of the Russian North where reindeer herding is the main occupation of indigenous residents. In the Soviet period, reindeer herding was collectivized and centrally managed within *sovkhozy* (state farms). With the collapse of the Soviet Union came the application of Russia's privatization program to these *sovkhozy*, and many small privatized reindeer herding enterprises were created. However, these enterprises were unable to survive independently, and their failure triggered a collapse of reindeer herding in Chukotka, which had dire consequences for the rural residents that depended on it for their living. One of the solutions proposed by indigenous advocates in the 1990s was to give rural residents more local control by allowing them to form *obshchiny*, or "ancestral communities," a special category of land tenure defined in Russian federal law. Although *obshchiny* had been established by indigenous groups in other parts of the Russian North, Chukotkan regional authorities were more reluctant to give up centralized control of local production and administration, and so opposed the formation of *obshchiny* there. Instead, they developed a plan to regain control of privatized reindeer herding enterprises by forcing them to convert into municipal property. This paper follows the case of one of the few *obshchiny* established in Chukotka in the early 1990s. An examination of how and why it was formed, and how it was treated by regional authorities, highlights the contested nature of land, property and local autonomy in Chukotka.

[1] Patty Gray, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, P.O. Box 11 03 51, D-06017 Halle (Saale), Germany, E-mail: gray@eth.mpg.de

Introduction: Post-Soviet Chukotka

Chukotka is a mountainous, tundra region in the far northeast of Russia that is so remote and so unimaginable to the average European Russian that many came to know it only though a series of humorous (to Russians) and slightly surreal anecdotes about Chukchis that circulated in the 1980s. To this day, Chukotka remains little known to the world beyond Russia. Situated as almost a mirror image of Alaska on the Bering Strait, it was maintained during the Soviet period as a tense military zone that even Russian citizens had to have special permission to enter. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it began to gain marginal international attention, particularly in nearby Alaska, as a place whose social and physical infrastructure had so completely collapsed as to warrant emergency humanitarian aid to prevent local residents from starving and freezing through the extremely cold Arctic winter. More recently, the once unimaginable Chukotka has now prominently entered the Russian imagination through a flood of articles in national media covering the election of one of Russia's most well-known oligarchs – Roman Abramovich – as governor of the region in December 2000.

This paper deals primarily with events and conditions occurring under the regime of Abramovich's predecessor, Aleksandr Nazarov, a man who is generally reviled in Chukotka as having attempted to maintain an iron grip on power at the expense of the development of Chukotka's economy and, in some extreme cases the very survival of its population. From 1993 to 2000, the years of Nazarov's regime in Chukotka, the population dropped by more than half as residents – most of them immigrants from European Russia – fled the ailing region. Systematic neglect meant that roads and buildings literally crumbled, telephone lines disintegrated, transportation became desperately inaccessible, and residents began to feel generally besieged. The first several months of Abramovich's administration were primarily occupied with arresting or undoing various destructive processes that Nazarov's administration set in motion. It is bitterly ironic that, for these very reasons, Chukotka became an interesting test case for how the consequences of privatization, conceived in European Russia, were experienced in a region far away from, and seemingly forgotten by, the center.

I first traveled to Chukotka in 1995 to investigate the region's fledgling indigenous movement for my Ph.D. dissertation. It soon became clear that the movement had been more or less stillborn, in large part as a result of Nazarov's repressive policies. In the course of my research, I spent two months in one of Chukotka's several tundra villages, which are populated predominantly by the region's indigenous inhabitants. Although in some cases these villages are located in the vicinity of ancient settlements, for the

most part they are artificial conglomerations of Native and Incomer[2] residents brought together to staff Chukotka's state farms (*sovkhozy*). These *sovkhozy* were based primarily on Chukotka's two main pre-Soviet economies: sea mammal hunting on the coast, and reindeer herding in the tundra (my own specialization), supplemented by fishing, hunting, and fur farming.

Collectivization was begun in Chukotka in the 1920s, although it was not until the late 1930s that *kolkhozy* (collective farms) became firmly established. By the 1950s, almost 100 *kolkhozy* had been created across Chukotka. In the 1960s and 1970s, in the name of creating a more "efficient" system, neighboring *kolkhozy* began to be combined into larger, joint enterprises, and then converted into *sovkhozy*, a process that was called "consolidation" (*ukreplenie*). This often entailed closing down whole villages and moving their residents to a larger village nearby. This process radically altered the practice of reindeer herding in Chukotka. Where private herders had once migrated hundreds of kilometers to seek pastures and engage in trade with coastal communities, collectivized herds were obliged to remain not only within the territory of their *sovkhoz*, but within the even more narrowly delimited territory of a brigade (a single *sovkhoz* might have 8-10 such brigades).

It was during my first visit to a reindeer herding village that I began to understand the disastrous effect of Russia's privatization plan on the Chukotka reindeer herding economy,[3] and to shift my attention to studying the postsocialist transformation of Chukotka's *sovkhozy*. In the Soviet period, reindeer herding in Chukotka was always heavily subsidized by the federal government. When this government support was withdrawn, the reindeer herding economy began systematically to collapse.[4] From its peak in the late 1980s of over 500,000, the reindeer headcount has plummeted to the current level of 80,000, and it is still dropping, albeit more slowly. *Sovkhoz* workers, who once counted on receiving a regular salary, were left with virtually no income once the reorganized *sovkhozy* were left to their own profit-making devices, because there was no profit to be made in reindeer herding and therefore no source from which to pay workers. The top tier of professional staff simply fled their positions in the *sovkhozy* and emigrated out of the villages, so that by the late 1990s many of these once multi-ethnic villages were populated mainly by Natives who had no place to emigrate to and in any case felt spiritually attached to the tundra and not inclined to abandon it altogether.

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[2] "Native" is a term of collective reference to Chukotka's indigenous residents, which include Chukchi's, Yupik Eskimos, Chuvans, Evens, Koryaks, and Iukagirs. "Incomer" is a term of collective reference to Chukotka's non-indigenous residents, who are overwhelmingly Russian, but also include Ukrainians, Belorussians, and a broad sampling of other formerly Soviet nationalities.

[3] The impact on reindeer herding varies dramatically in different regions of Russia, as research by fellow Max Planck researchers Florian Stammler and Aimar Ventsel shows. Chukotka, it appears, has been the worst affected.

[4] See Gray 2000 for a detailed analysis of this collapse.

Throughout the 1990s, the situation in Chukotka's villages became bleaker and bleaker. The endless pleas and lobbying efforts of indigenous activists toward the regional administration fell upon deaf ears. Nevertheless, a handful of indigenous activists worked diligently to devise solutions to the domino-like crisis growing in Chukotka's villages, drawing upon ideas from other parts of the Russian Far North. One of the most popular of these solutions, which indeed had become by the mid-1990s a phenomenon in many parts of the Russian Far North, was the concept of the *rodovaia obshchina*, loosely translatable as "ancestral community."[5]

The *obshchina* and the reorganization of *sovkhozy* in Chukotka

The concept of *obshchina* is difficult to translate precisely – it means something more than simply "the community," almost something like "commune," but does not carry quite the semantic load that the latter word carries for English speakers. For clarity's sake, I will continue to use the Russian word *obshchina* (plural: *obshchiny*). *Obshchiny* tend to be established by indigenous peoples, and they usually function as a way to organize local economic activities as well as being a form of local self-government. The issue of the *obshchina* in the North is particularly timely, because in July 2000 Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a federal law on *obshchina*,[6] a law that has been the subject of lobbying by indigenous advocates for a decade (the provisions of this law will be discussed in the final section of this paper). During a trip to Chukotka in 1998, I happen interviewed Anna Kutynkeva, the head of what was claimed to be Chukotka's first *obshchina*, established in 1993 and known as Kaiettyn. Kutynkeva explained to me that this *obshchina* was not engaged in any economic activities of its own, but was established purely as an organ of local self-government. The residents that it united were themselves members of four separate, recently privatized reindeer herding enterprises. In Fall 2000, at Kutynkeva's invitation, I was able to visit the *obshchina* Kaiettyn.

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[5] This phrase is sometimes translated "clan community" (Fondahl et al. 2000, Ziker 1998), since the Russian word *rod* ("family," "kin") can also be translated as "clan." However, although many Siberian indigenous peoples may have had clan-based social systems in their past, not all did, and in any case such clan-based organization is not always relevant today. *Rodovoi* glosses as "ancestral" or "patrimonial," and I find that "ancestral community" better captures the more generic intent of the phrase *rodovaia obshchina*, especially in Russian law, since such communities are not restricted to indigenous peoples but should somehow be based on either extended family ties or long-term co-residence on a particular territory.

[6] *Federal'nyi zakon ot 20 iulia 2000 g. No. 104-FZ "Ob obshchikh printsipakh organizatsii obshchin korennykh malochislennykh narodov Severa, Sibiri i Dal'nego Vostoka Rossiiskoi Federatsii"* (Federal law of 20 July 2000 No. 104-FZ "On the general principles for the organization of *obshchiny* of the Native Lesser-Numbered Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation").

Map 1. Chukotka showing territory of *obshchina* Kaiettyn

I decided to study this phenomenon of the *obshchina* in conjunction with my continuing study of the reorganization of former *sovkhozy* because I could see how the two were intimately related. There have already been a few studies that consider *obshchiny* elsewhere in the Russian North (Anderson 1998 on Taimyr, Fondahl 1998 on Transbaikalia, and Sirina 1999 on the Republic of Sakha). Until recently, it had not been a terribly relevant issue in Chukotka because so few *obshchiny* had been established – besides the one I visited, I was able to confirm that only two others had been established (one in the village of Krasneno in Anadyrskii district and one in the village of Beringovskii in Beringovskii district). The matter is complicated in Chukotka because the region has passed no local legislation supporting any kind of legal status for would-be *obshchiny*, unlike other regions, such as the Republic of Sakha and Khabarovsk Krai (Kriazhkov 1994, 1999). On the contrary, Nazarov, in his capacity as chair of the Committee on the affairs of the North and Lesser-Numbered Peoples of the Council of the Federation, Russia's upper house of legislature, actively opposed the idea of federal legislation on *obshchina*. Furthermore, Chukotka in the 1990s restricted rights to local self-government and attempted to centralize and

monopolize control over the economic activity of reindeer herding that is often associated with *obshchiny*.

Although I recognized from the start the interrelation between these two processes in Chukotka – the reorganization of *sovkhozy* on the one hand, and the formation of *obshchiny* on the other – in my own mind I tended to think of the *obshchina* and the reindeer herding enterprise (based on the former *sovkhoz*) as two distinct entities, albeit potentially cooperative. I came to find out it is not nearly so tidy, neither in practice nor in the minds of the people involved with *obshchiny* and reindeer pastoralism in Chukotka. For some, *obshchina* and enterprise are indistinguishable, and the need to regard them as separate entities would seem incomprehensible. For others, the difference is clear, and yet some in this second category would prefer purposely to blur the distinctions, while others would prefer to clarify them. It is possible to distinguish three categories of persons in Chukotka on the basis of differing, often incompatible ideas about how reindeer herding should be managed and how *obshchiny* should fit into the picture.

1) Employees of the Chukotka administration, both at the overall regional level and at the district level, who are charged with managing a village economy dominated by reindeer herding (it should be mentioned that, at least in its early phase, Abramovich's administration continued to be staffed by bureaucrats from Nazarov's administration, especially outside the regional center of Anadyr');

2) Indigenous intellectual activists who live in cities but argue primarily in defense of the rights and interests of indigenous peoples living in the villages and the tundra of Chukotka;

3) The village and tundra residents themselves, most but not all of them indigenous peoples, over whom those in categories 1 and 2 are in continual debate.

I will argue that in reality those in the first two categories pay little attention to the views and preferences of village and tundra residents. What seems more important to them is to pay attention to form, as if in the hope that substance will follow, i.e. that the attitudes of the local people will conform to the nature of the administrative apparatus built around them. In fact, the communication and transportation infrastructure is in such a state of dissolution, and most villages are so remotely located, that it is really not possible to maintain any on-going dialogue with local residents. Nor is it possible for residents to maintain a steady inflow of regional information relevant to them. Thus they are dependent on outsiders to make decisions on their behalf, and they are often confused about who is making the decisions and what their own status is. This makes them vulnerable to being manipulated, as I will demonstrate below.

This remoteness and isolation is perhaps the strongest argument for local self-government in such villages, so that decision-making power over the fates of the villagers rests in the hands of those who best

understand the local conditions. This is in fact the justification that the head of the Kaiettyn *obshchina* gives for why she established it in the first place. Ironically, she could establish it only by struggling with administrators in the halls of power far from the *obshchina*, and without the full awareness of the *obshchina* residents. And yet the same remoteness that drove the head of the *obshchina* to seek more local control also drove the administration to seek more centralized control, over both administration of the local community and the management of the local economic enterprises, so that there would be no need to coordinate decision-making with a poorly-accessible local authority. The simplest way to achieve this was to collapse, at least officially, the functions of community administration and economic enterprise into one. This is in fact what the administration did.

It is important here to understand the nature of "local self-government" as defined by Russian law and as carried out in practice. Since local self-government is regulated by federal law, local authority is passed down from organs higher up the administrative chain of command. In the early 1990s, this meant that any *obshchina* had to register in the district center, and the Kaiettyn *obshchina* was in fact so registered – a movement that involved initiative going up from below, and which was carried out by Kutynkeva as the elected head of the *obshchina*. However, the general policy of the Nazarov administration was to acquire nearly totalitarian control over virtually everything in the region. This, along with the claim that financial resources were insufficient to support individual administrations in each village, led the Nazarov administration to take advantage of a clause in the federal law on local self-government[7] and strip local authority from villages, collapsing it into the next higher administrative level, the district (there are only eight districts in Chukotka – a much more manageable number for a regime seeking greater centralized control). In practical terms, this means that where there used to be elected mayors in each village, there is now an appointed deputy of the (very powerful) head of the district administration, and these deputies answer to the district head and not to the village population.

To complete the *obshchina*'s quest for officially recognized local authority would have had to involve a downward directed initiative from the district administration via the appointed village administrator. Yet any community that sought local autonomy and self-determination presented a distinct threat to the Nazarov administration, and so this was an initiative the administration had no intention of taking. Thus, the *obshchina* was never able fully to activate the authority it desired to make local decisions about local matters. Rather, the district administration continued to make decisions on behalf of the residents without their consent, perfectly in accordance with the Nazarov administration's policy of denying the existence

[7] *Federal'nyi zakon ot 28 avgusta 1995 g. No. 154-FZ "Ob obshchikh printsipakh organizatsii mestnogo samoupravleniia v Rossiiskoi Federatsii"* (Federal law of 28 August 2000 No. 154-FZ "On the general principles of the organization of local self-government in the Russian Federation").

of local self-government even where it potentially existed, and insisting that what existed in its place was a more efficient, top-down management of people and production. From the perspective of the *obshchina* residents, this was business-as-usual as in Soviet times. They were more aware of the after-effects of these decisions than they were aware of their existence as an *obshchina* whose theoretical rights to self-determination could not be activated in the current context.

At the start of my research on *obshchiny* in the summer of 2000, I paid a visit to the head of the Department of Agriculture in Chukotka's capital city. When I told him I was interested in studying the Kaiettyn *obshchina*, he cavalierly waved his hand and said, "There is no *obshchina* anymore. That's all over with."[8] For him, the *obshchina* was a layer of reality that did not exist, or at least that he wished did not exist. During the same interview, he opined that everything had worked much better when there were big *sovkhozy* all across Chukotka, and the best thing to do would be to get back to something similar. He, like many others in the Department of Agriculture, had worked his way up through the *sovkhoz* system, coming to his current desk job directly from a position as director of a *sovkhoz*. For such people, the *sovkhoz* system presents an understandable logic; all they know of the privatized system is that it has brought headaches and hardships, and their imaginations have failed to offer them any fresh solutions. So they long to go back to what they know makes sense.

Another example will illustrate the perspective of the residents of the Kaiettyn *obshchina*. In the course of a house-to-house survey I made in September 2000, I asked residents about the *obshchina* in which they lived. To a man, they all answered that there *was* no *obshchina*. I actually obtained three categories of answers:

1. *Obshchina*? What *Obshchina*? If there was an *obshchina* here, I would know about it.
2. *Obshchina*? Oh yes, I remember they talked about establishing one here, but nothing ever came of it.
3. *Obshchina*? Oh yes, but it exists only on paper. (This answer tended to come from relatives of the head of the *obshchina*)

At first I was rather taken aback by this and thought that I had come a long way to find out that I had no subject to study. Granted, Kutynkeva had warned me that the *obshchina* was "less active" than it had been in the past, although at that time it remained unclear what she meant by this and how an *obshchina* could be "active." But still, I had arrived with the expectation that the residents would at least recognize that an *obshchina* existed, and would see themselves as members of it. And from what I had seen, an

[8] Interview with Viktor Ivanovich Podgainii, head of the Department of Agriculture, Commerce, Production and Fishing, in his office on 26 July 2000.

obshchina did exist, at least what I thought constituted an *obshchina*. Let me now shift to a description of the *obshchina* itself.

The *Obshchina* Kaiettyn

The *obshchina* I visited is located in Bilibinskii district, which is an area of mixed taiga and tundra located on the western end of Chukotka, bordering on the Sakha Republic, Magadan Oblast' and the Koriak Autonomous Okrug.[9] The physical location of the *obshchina* is the site of what had been simply a division of the former *sovkhoz* in the village of Omolon. It was called in Russian a *perevalbaza* – a way station, a distribution point for supplies to tundra reindeer brigades. Although the *obshchina* bears the name Kaiettyn, after the river along which it was built, most residents today refer to the location simply as *baza*, "the base." The *baza* is located about two days away from the main village, and four or five days away from the district center, if one is traveling either by reindeer sled or snowmobile in winter, or in any season by passenger tank (*vezdekhod*) (these are the most common forms of transportation today; in the past, helicopter flights were also common). It is one of three such *baza* formerly connected to the now-defunct *sovkhoz* in Omolon. Each had four or five reindeer brigades associated with it, their camps scattered across the territory that was assigned to the *baza*. The reindeer herders would periodically come to the *baza* for supplies or for medical attention; physically it consisted of just a few houses, a store, and a basic medical clinic. In the past, this *baza* had absolutely no independent status; it was not a *naselennyi punkt*, a "populated point," that is, a place that could be officially shown on a map as a town or village. The *baza* buildings were the property of the *sovkhoz*; its residents, who were all employees of that *sovkhoz*, were registered as residents of the village of Omolon. Even the reindeer herders living in the tundra had permanent apartments in Omolon. In fact, you will not find this location pin-pointed on any published map of Chukotka.

Today, this *baza* is the only one of the three original *bazy* that is still inhabited on a permanent basis (although I was told one of the others is beginning again to resemble a permanent settlement). In the fall of 2000, it had a population of about 63 residents living at the *baza* itself, plus about 66 more scattered in camps across the surrounding taiga and tundra. In contrast to the general atmosphere of disarray and disintegration that was felt in most other Chukotka villages, this little community seemed to be thriving, even in the midst of hard economic times. Its buildings were in relatively good repair, and there was even

[9] It is often incorrectly thought that the "Chukchi Peninsula" *is* Chukotka, but in fact the peninsula itself comprises only a small portion of the total territory of Chukotka. Most of Chukotka lies to the west, off the peninsula, and is dominated by taiga and tundra interspersed with low, rugged mountains.

evidence of new construction, a rarity in Chukotka at that time – a bath house was built in 1999, and while I was there in 2000 I saw a greenhouse under construction. The *baza* boasted the only local one-room schoolhouse in Chukotka with a full-time teacher, which enabled children up to the third grade to study in close proximity to their working parents, rather than being sent off to the residential school in the village of Omolon (after third grade they had no choice but to continue their schooling there). Almost everyone at the *baza* was employed by a hunting, herding, fishing and gathering enterprise based there (OAO "Ilguveem" – OAO standing for *otkrytoe aktsionernoe obshchestvo,* or open joint-stock company). The unemployed and pensioners were regularly provided with firewood and drinking water on a voluntary basis by the employees of the OAO, and they received medical attention from a full-time resident medic. There was a full-time vet who treated not only reindeer, but also dogs and cats, and there was a full-time social worker who looked after the few elderly residents. These were all the hallmarks of what I would have expected from a real-live *obshchina*.

The comparative success of this tiny community made it fairly well-known in Chukotka, and it begged the question: what was the secret of its success, when almost everywhere else in Chukotka one found only poverty and despair? And why did the residents not perceive themselves as constituting an *obshchina*? People in the three categories I identified above would each explain this apparent success in a different way, in accordance with a particular bias regarding local self-government. The administration would attribute it to the extent to which the *baza* was integrated into district and regional support programs; the indigenous activists would attribute it to the accomplishments of the *obshchina* on behalf of its residents; the local residents would attribute it to the fact that help came from the outside, regardless of who actually sent the help – and the residents were rarely able to explain the precise origins of any of the aid they received.

This last point highlights the remoteness and isolation of the community, which at least partially accounts for their lack of self-consciousness as an *obshchina*. The positive developments at the *baza* were the result of a patchwork of efforts and resources of widely varying origin -- the teacher was provided by the village of Omolon, the medic was provided by the district hospital, and the vet by the district veterinary station. Even the new construction was carried out by employees of the OAO, an enterprise controlled by the district administration. However, these were all services for which the director of the *obshchina* planned eventually to take over responsibility. Here I think it is necessary review briefly the origins of this *obshchina* in the context of the reorganization – the so-called "privatization" -- of the Omolon *sovkhoz* of which this *baza* was once an integral part.

Privatization, "de-privatization," and the fate of the *Obshchina*

Up until 1992, the village of Omolon constituted the headquarters of the *sovkhoz* "Omolon," which managed 15 separate herds of reindeer organized in brigades scattered across its vast territory. Beginning in 1992, in response to the Russian privatization program, this *sovkhoz* was gradually dismantled. It had once been the heart and soul of the village, administering its store, school, hospital, heating and electricity station, and many other social services, but these components were now carved away and passed over to other authorities, either at the village or the district level. Where it had once commanded the activities of its 15 reindeer herding brigades, four of these now split off to form their own independent collective enterprises, *fermerskie khoziaistva,* or "farming enterprises." An additional four small enterprises hived off from these, although they proved to be short-lived. The other 11 original brigades remained connected to the headquarters in Omolon and were reorganized into a "limited liability company" called TOO "Omolon" (*tovarishchestvo s ogranichennoi otvetstvennosti*), an entity which everyone nevertheless continued to refer to, and relate to as, the *sovkhoz,* even if it no longer performed its former wide-ranging social functions. Four of these brigades were eventually liquidated as a myriad of complex factors caused reindeer headcounts in Chukotka to plummet. In 1998, Department of Agriculture records showed a total of nine separate enterprises on the territory of what had been a single *sovkhoz*. By that year the records also showed that the reindeer headcount for all enterprises combined had fallen to 9,152 (from 33,898 in possession of the *sovkhoz* in 1985).

In 1993, members of the four reindeer herding brigades that were located on the territory of the *baza* Kaiettyn – which included three of the newly-independent "farming enterprises" and one brigade still belonging to the main collective in Omolon – held a meeting to discuss their common fate. The first item on the agenda was titled, "On the self-government of the citizens living on the territory of the division 'Kaiettyn' of the *sovkhoz* 'Omolon.' The point was made that federal law allowed local residents the option of establishing their own organ of local self-government. The Protocol reads: "If you support such a proposal – to take responsibility for resolving questions concerning the tundra-dwellers (*tundroviki*) of 'Kaiettyn,' the pensioners, the primary school – then let's discuss it, and elect an organ of self-government. A general gathering of citizens has the right to elect a head of the *obshchina,* an *obshchina* council, and a council of elders." In the end, the gathering voted unanimously to establish the *obshchina* and to appeal to the district administration officially to hand over local administrative control to the *obshchina*, so that its residents would no longer be subject to the administration of the far-away village of Omolon.

In its first few years, the *obshchina* was quite active in trying to take on the rights and responsibilities of an autonomous administrative unit. Although the question of officially assuming full administrative power was never resolved, the *obshchina* did manage to get the district administration to register the *obshchina* under the title "Organ of territorial public self-government of the ancestral community 'Kaiettyn'." It also obtained funding from the district and from the Chukotkan administration to renovate and outfit its school, and to hire (on the district payroll) the teacher, the medic, the social worker, and the veterinarian, as discussed above. Most of this was achieved more-or-less single-handedly by the elected head of the *obshchina*, Anna Kutynkeva, a Chukchi. Kutynkeva's profile will highlight the complexity of the status of this tiny and remote tundra community. Although her entire family still lived at the *obshchina*, she herself was officially resident in Bilibino, the district center, where she was employed in the district administration as the specialist for indigenous peoples. Later she was elected to the regional legislature of Chukotka and began to spend several weeks a year in Anadyr', the capital. Her mobility and political connections surely facilitated her success in obtaining benefits for the *obshchina*. She is positioned squarely as a member of the second group I outlined above, the indigenous intellectual activists who routinely argue on behalf of the rights of Chukotka's indigenous peoples.[10]

As stated above, three of the reindeer herding enterprises that operated on the territory of the newly-established *obshchina* Kaiettyn were independent "farming operations," while the fourth was still part of the original collective based in the village of Omolon. In the crisis that ravaged Chukotkan reindeer herding during the 1990s, exacerbated by the remoteness of their location, they too struggled to survive, in

[10] This position is further reinforced by the fact that she is the cousin of Vladimir Etylin, the most highly-visible Chukchi activist in Chukotka. Etylin himself was born and raised on the territory of Kaiettyn, and his elderly mother still lives there. Although he was once a high-placed politician, the head of the regional legislature of Chukotka, his opposition to Nazarov's administration caused him to fall out of favor, and left him no possibilities for employment in the political sphere for the duration of Nazarov's regime. In the 1990s, he took refuge in the regional research institute, working as the Head of the Laboratory of Traditional Resource Management and Ethnosocial Research. He continued to pursue his political aspirations by seeking election either as governor or as representative to the federal legislature, but it was not until the new governor, Abramovich, took office that Etylin succeeded in obtaining election to the latter, with Abramovich's visible backing. Abramovich entered politics in 1999 as Chukotka's elected representative to the federal legislature (*Duma*) with sponsorship from Nazarov, but Abramovich soon became disenchanted with Nazarov. In 2000 he sought election to the governorship in direct opposition to Nazarov, and suddenly Nazarov's enemies became Abramovich's friends – chief among them Etylin. Etylin later became the Advisor to the Governor on Native Affairs in Abramovich's new administration, and immediately began to campaign to fill the seat in the *Duma* vacated by Abramovich (and he won election to this seat). But since in the 1990s he was seen as an opponent of Nazarov, his political connections were not useful to the *obshchina* during the years when it was struggling to become established. On the contrary, Kutynkeva came under pressure from her non-indigenous colleagues in the Chukotka legislature as a result of her genealogy. I am myself connected to Etylin, since in his capacity as a scientific colleague at the research institute, he routinely arranged the paperwork I needed in order to travel to Chukotka. My first contact to Kutynkeva was made through Etylin. I was therefore inextricably enmeshed in these webs of connections long before I even saw where the links led, and once I began to understand the implications, I could only ride the wave that fate had set me upon.

spite of the presence of an *obshchina* that was ostensibly there to support them. The three independent enterprises in desperation collectively hired an outside director, a Russian economist (formerly employed in the Omolon *sovkhoz*) whom they hoped would provide the expertise and connections that would save them in the new "market relations." For a couple of years things seemed to stabilize; but then, in a scenario that became all too common in Chukotka, this director embezzled a large sum of money from the enterprises and fled Chukotka for Moscow. By 1998, there were very few reindeer left, and all three of the enterprises were, for all practical purposes, defunct. But the people had to find some way to live.

Here is where group No. 1, the Chukotkan administration, steps more prominently into the picture. In 1998, faced with a crisis in reindeer herding that it could neither hide nor deny, the Chukotkan administration devised a plan that it claimed would lift reindeer herding out of its crisis and stabilize it once again. The plan, which came to be called "municipalization," involved yet another thorough reorganization of reindeer herding enterprises. When I discussed this plan with officials in the Chukotka Department of Agriculture in 1998, they admitted that many details had still not been worked out. But the basic idea was to create, out of the myriad small, privatized reindeer herding enterprises all across Chukotka, a smaller number of entities that would be called "Municipal Unitary Enterprises" (MUP). This would be analogous to the change in the basic structure of local government in Chukotka discussed above, which collapsed administrative authority into the next higher level.

Although all reindeer herding operations were now ostensibly either private or collective property – in any case certainly NOT state property – the new plan stipulated that the state, in the form of the recently-reorganized eight district municipalities of Chukotka, would once again take on at least partial ownership of reindeer herding enterprises. The plan stipulated that at least 51% of the property of each enterprise should belong to the district government – the remaining 49% could still belong to the members of the enterprise, as their shares in its property. The point was clearly to give the districts the "controlling share" (*kontrol'nyi paket*) in each enterprise, so that they could effectively command its activities. In many cases, the district administration became 100% owner of the enterprise.[11] In order to implement the plan, the regional administration sent representatives to each and every reindeer herding enterprise in Chukotka and presented a basic ultimatum: hand over 51% or more of your assets (which consisted primarily of reindeer), and the administration will give you unlimited assistance as a vested partner. Refuse to hand over the assets, and you will be left to fend for yourself. By all accounts it was meant to be an offer they could not refuse.

[11] The direct owner of the enterprise at the Kaiettyn *baza* is listed as *Komitet po upravleniiu imushchestvom Bilibinskogo raiona*, Committee for the administration of the property of Bilibinskii district.

The reasoning behind the plan, which was repeated to me several times by various representatives of the Department of Agriculture, was this: The government cannot render material or financial aid to farming operations that are privately owned. Therefore, the government is taking on partial ownership so that it has the right to render this much-needed aid. The reasoning seems flawed – to my knowledge there is no basis in Russian law that prevents the government from rendering material or financial aid to a private firm. This of course happens all the time all over the world, in the form of state-backed loans, grants, tax breaks, etc. But this disclaimer had clearly become a party line of the Chukotka Department of Agriculture.

In fact, the administration was altogether on shaky legal ground with its municipalization plan. The Federal Civil Code of Russia clearly states, in Article 113, "the property of a unitary enterprise is indivisible and cannot be distributed as investments (portions, shares), including among workers of the enterprise." Yet here several of the newly-municipalized enterprises in Chukotka were being divided into shares – 51% or more held by the administration, and the remaining 49% divided among the members. In only a few cases were the enterprises converted into 100% municipal property. In the case of the former, these were officially registered as OAO (open joint-stock company) rather than as MUP, presumably to skirt the potential legal problems. Although Department of Agriculture officials were typically ambivalent about this, I was given the impression that establishment of these OAOs might be a preliminary step toward complete municipalization of these enterprises. Moreover, the Russian civil code continues: "Only state and municipal enterprises can be created in the form of unitary enterprises." Yet these were *privatized* enterprises being created in the form of unitary enterprises. In an anonymous document circulated in the Department of Agriculture in 1998,[12] the author muses on this problem: "In accordance with the Civil Code of the Russian Federation, article 113, only state and municipal enterprises can be created in the form of unitary enterprises. Therefore the property of these farms should be fully given over to either state or municipal property." Several of my consultees described a process whereby the members of privatized enterprises were given a document to sign indicating that they "voluntarily" gave over their property to state ownership. They felt they had no choice but to sign this document, and in some cases, members apparently did not even understand what they were signing. When I pressed one official in the Department of Agriculture on the legality of these issues, his answers were almost comically evasive, and each time I pinned him down in his

[12] *Informatsiia po vypolneniiu raboty po reorganizatsii sel'khozpredpriiatii Chukotskogo avtonomnogo okruga v razreze raionov* (Information on the completion of the work of reorganizing agricultural enterprises of the Chukotka autonomous okrug by district).

logic, he simply repeated the phrase, "There are nuances."

In a meeting I had with the Deputy Head of the Department of Justice in Chukotka in 2001, she touched on the questionable legality of the whole municipalization plan. Smiling wryly, she said she thought the whole thing was carried out in violation of the law, but that it was probably fairly innocent -- people trying to solve a problem and failing to understand the law as they went along. Yet the author of the above-mentioned anonymous document clearly understands the implications, and goes on to recommend that, particularly with regard to the enterprises that were proposing to become 49% privately owned / 51% state owned, "corrections [should] be carried out in accordance with Article 113 of the Civil Code of the Russian Federation."

In spite of the shaky legal ground, the Department of Agriculture forged ahead with its municipalization plan. A list of all the reindeer herding enterprises in Chukotka as of January 2000, categorized by type of property, showed a total of 40 enterprises, compared with 57 in 1998, indicating that 17 enterprises had been liquidated in the course of the municipalization plan. Of the 40 enterprises that existed in 2000, only ten were classed as "municipal," five were "51% municipal (mixed)," while 25 were classed as either "joint" or "in shares," meaning these were enterprises that had not handed over any of their shares to the administration (see Table 1). Thus it seems that many reindeer herding enterprises resisted the administration's proposal to municipalize. However, of these 25 non-municipal enterprises, it appears that 12 quickly became defunct, with no reindeer and no appreciable productive activity, leaving only 13 viable non-municipal enterprises, plus the 15 that are either fully are partially municipal – for a total of 28 enterprises existing as of first quarter 2001 (see Table 2).

Table 1. Reindeer Herding Enterprises in Chukotka by type as defined by the Chukotka Department of Agriculture in 2000

Form of property	**Number of enterprises**	**Deer 1998**	**Deer 2001**
"Municipal"	10	77 886	49 609
"51% municipal (mixed)"	5	18 301	14 935
"In shares"	21	43 262	20 829
"Joint"	4	3400	574
TOTAL	**40**	**142 849**	**85 947**

Source: Data provided by the Chukotka Department of Agriculture.

Table 2. Sizes of Existing Reindeer Herding Enterprises in Chukotka as of 1st Quarter 2001

Total number of deer	number of enterprises
0 (i.e. enterprise has no deer at all)	2
1-500	6
501-1000	1
1001-5000	14
5001-10 000	3
10 001+	2
	TOTAL: 28

Source: Data provided by the Chukotka Department of Agriculture.

One official admitted that what they were really after in the reorganization effort were the larger enterprises that still had some reindeer left – the assumption seemed to be that the smaller ones would simply fade away, and the people involved would end up joining larger enterprises. In fact, from comments by former members of some of these now-defunct enterprises, it seems they did not simply "fade away" but found the new conditions created by the Department of Agriculture sufficiently hostile as to make their continued survival impossible. Ironically, this reduction in the number of enterprises is reminiscent of the earlier phase of "consolidation" mentioned in the introduction, when the large number of *kolkhozy* were combined for efficiency's sake into a smaller number of *sovkhozy*. In fact, it is rather striking to note that at the point in the 1970s when the collectivization and "consolidation" of rural agriculture in Chukotka was considered by the Soviet state to be "complete," there were precisely 28 sovkhozy – seemingly a magic number, from the perspective of planners in Chukotka.[13]

At Kaiettyn, two of the three privatized reindeer enterprises that had been swindled by the Russian economist were persuaded to take up the administration's offer to municipalize. So once again they were united under a single director, only this time it was not one chosen by them, but rather appointed by the district administration. Many of the members of the enterprises knew him, because he had been employed as a hunter by the old *sovkhoz* "Omolon." A new enterprise was created, one of the 51% municipal (mixed) type, with the name OAO (Open Joint-Stock Company) "Ilguveem" (*otkrytoe aktsionernoe obshchestvo*). This enterprise became the legal successor (*pravo ???emnik*) to the property of the two formerly independent enterprises, and all the remaining reindeer – 3455 head in all -- were driven together to form a single herd. Although there remain prickly unanswered questions about the

[13] Leont'ev (n.d., but published sometime in the 1970s) provides a schematic representation showing this process of consolidation, with the final stage neatly showing a total of 28 *sovkhozy*.

transfer of property, in particular reindeer belonging to individuals who have chosen NOT to become employees of the new enterprise, most residents of the *baza* Kaiettyn expressed satisfaction with the work this new director was performing. And indeed, his energy and initiative were clearly responsible for much of the overall positive atmosphere, in spite of the fact that his official residence remained in the district center of Bilibino, and he spent only a few months of the year at the *baza*. He had coordinated the construction of a new bath house, an underground cold storage, and a greenhouse, as well as the renovation of the school. He organized the gathering of berries that he regularly traded for staple foods, which he then supplied to his workers. And he directed his own employees to supply firewood and drinking water to all residents, including those not in his employ. It should also be pointed out, however, that several *baza* residents found this new director impossible to work with, and either refused to accept his offers of employment, or quit the OAO after years of working with the herds in their previous property form. Some left the *baza* altogether to settle in the village of Omolon.[14]

Given the circumstances at Kaiettyn, it is no wonder that the lines between *obshchina* and OAO remain fuzzy for the residents of the *baza*, and here the issue of property becomes even fuzzier. Remember that Kaiettyn originally existed only as an outpost of the *sovkhoz* located in the village of Omolon. The *obshchina* was never officially handed by the district administration the powers of a local organ of government. Therefore, the *baza* continues to exist very much in limbo – in fact, one could say that, from an official point of view, it does not exist at all. Its residents are still registered as inhabitants of the village of Omolon, so on paper it looks as if no one lives at Kaiettyn. Its buildings, once property of the *sovkhoz*, were transferred to the privatized enterprises, but these no longer exist, so that today no one is really sure who owns what. One might suspect they simply belong to the new enterprise OAO "Ilguveem." But each building is required to have a set of documents, called a "passport," which show the physical specifications of the building, and these documents disappeared about the time the money was embezzled by the former director. So on paper it looks as if there are no buildings at Kaiettyn. I surveyed residents of the *baza* about whose property the buildings were, and all were stumped by the question, including the director of the OAO. The only one who could give a definitive answer was Kutynkeva, the absentee head of the *obshchina*, and what she told me was that, officially, they simply did not exist.

So the net effect was that Kaiettyn remained a small community whose very existence and legal status was contested on many fronts. In the minds of its residents, there was no sense that the *baza* could be administered separately and independently from the reindeer herding enterprise for which many of the

[14] It has been reported to me that this man has now been appointed director of OAO "Omolon," in addition to his duties as director of OAO "Ilguveem" – a development that remains to be investigated.

baza residents work. So far there has been insufficient impetus to disabuse them of the sense that nothing has really changed from *sovkhoz* days. In the minds of indigenous activists, the *obshchina* stood as a symbol of Native self-determination, and represented the only answer to the problems of securing both daily survival and the future cultural survival of the community. In the minds of the regional administration, which held the most power, the *obshchina* was so insignificant as not to exist. What the administration preferred to draw attention to was the newly municipalized enterprise, which was heralded as a symbol of its alleged concern for its village residents. At the same time, the municipalization plan could be seen as a further attempt at totalitarian control.

A new era for *obshchiny* in the Russian North?

As mentioned previously, in July 2001 a federal law on *obshchina* was signed by President Putin (see footnote 7). This law, and the election of a new governor, have set in motion an entirely new set of dynamics in Chukotka. There are no longer any legal – and few bureaucratic – obstacles to establishing *obshchiny* in Chukotka, and rural residents have responded with what might be called an *obshchina* movement in Chukotka.

The federal law on *obshchina* has existed in draft form since the early 1990s, and one of the key figures on the *Duma* subcommittee responsible for drafting the law was Vladimir Etylin. The final law was stripped of many of the provisions intended by the drafters. As Etylin himself explained,[15] the law was meant to provide rural (indigenous) residents with three fundamental legal rights:

1) Ownership and use of land
2) Economic activity on those lands
3) Self-government

However, Etylin lamented that the first provision was entirely removed from the law – in fact, the very word "land" (*zemlia*) does not appear once in the text of the law. Land is a particularly difficult issue in Russia generally, not only for indigenous peoples. The newly passed Land Code,[16] which finally formalizes the sale of land in Russia, excludes agricultural land, which thus remains effectively the property of the state even when given over for long-term inheritable use rights. The second provision, economic activity, is only partially present – the law defines an *obshchina* as a non-commercial enterprise producing

[15] Interview with Vladimir M. Etylin in his office at the Administration Building of the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug, 27 April 2001.
[16] *Zemel'nyi kodeks Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 25 oktiabria 2001 g. No. 136-FZ* (Land Code of the Russian Federation of 25 October 2001 No. 136-FZ).

for subsistence purposes, but also allows for it to sell "surplus" products. Only the third provision, self-government, is left intact in the law – and Etylin considers this to be the least important provision.

Nevertheless, Etylin expressed satisfaction that at least there was now a federal legal basis for the establishment of *obshchiny* anywhere in the Russian North, including Chukotka. He outlined a strategy whereby rights should be secured through additional legislative work in two parallel veins: 1) introducing amendments to existing legal acts that have relevance for indigenous peoples (two other recently passed laws – on the status of indigenous peoples and on territories of traditional resource management[17] – do contain references to the kinds of rights indigenous peoples can expect to have in regard to land), and 2) linking existing federal laws through practice, including the introduction of additional legal instruments on the regional level that he in any case sees as a necessary intermediary step toward implementing federal law locally. Russian federal laws are notoriously general, and very weak in terms of enforcement mechanisms. Thus, it is a matter of policy (certainly in Chukotka) that whenever a federal legal act appears, an analogous regional act should also be passed, and local implementation will be carried out primarily in reference to this local legal act. I had often heard this argument made in Chukotka as an explanation for why the establishment of *obshchiny* was discouraged – because no federal law had been passed regarding them. (However, this fact did not prevent the Sakha Republic and Khabarovsk Krai from passing their own *obshchina* laws in the early 1990s.)[18]

In Chukotka, due to the conditions of information dearth described above, the July 2000 law on *obshchina* remained practically unknown until April 2001, when it was prominently heralded and discussed at the Third Congress of Native Lesser-Numbered Peoples of Chukotka in Anadyr', the regional capital. This congress was in itself an unprecedented event. The first two congresses (in 1994 and 1997) had been orchestrated and heavily manipulated by the Nazarov administration. Although an Association of Native Lesser-Numbered Peoples of Chukotka exists and many assume that the Association organized the congresses, in fact they were inventions of the Nazarov administration, which I have elsewhere argued were conscious attempts to co-opt the agenda of the Association to better suit the ends of the Nazarov administration (Gray 2000). Thus, the first two congresses were mere rubber-stamping exer-

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[17] *Federal'nyi zakon ot 30 aprelia 1999 g. No. 82-FZ "O garantiiakh prav korennykh malochislennykh narodov Rossiiskoi Federatsii"* (Federal law of 30 April 1999 No. 82-FZ "On guarantees of the rights of Native Lesser-Numbered Peoples of the Russian Federation") and *Federal'nyi zakon ot 7 maia 2001 g. No.49-FZ "O territoriiakh traditsionnogo prirodopol'zovaniia korennykh malochislennykh narodov Severa, Sibiri i Dal'nego Vostoka Rossiiskoi Federatsii"* (Federal law of 7 May 2001 No. 49-FZ "On territories of traditional resource management of the Native Lesser-Numbered Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation").

[18] Much of this is directly related to sovereignty struggles between Russia's regions and its center that developed after Yeltsin encouraged regions to take more sovereignty for themselves after the Soviet Union was dissolved. See Dunlop 1993:62-65. See also *RFE/RL News Briefs* Vol.2, No.26, 14-18 June 1993, p.1.

cises, at which non-indigenous bureaucrats (such as district heads) sat among the delegates and dictated how they were to vote on each motion that was raised. The Third Congress, however, was held shortly after the election of Chukotka's new, progressive governor, Roman Abramovich. The excitement at this congress was palpable, as delegates sensed that, for the first time, they could openly discuss issues without fear of serious retaliation back in their districts, and they were free to vote according to their consciences on all motions.

The congress was preceded by a special session organized by the Chukotka *Duma* to familiarize delegates with federal and local legislation relevant to indigenous peoples. Chief among these was the new federal law on *obshchina*, and the text of this law was distributed to all delegates. Over lunch breaks during the subsequent congress, I overheard and was even drawn into excited discussions of the implications of this law, and heard plans by delegates to return to their home districts, spread the word, and begin establishing *obshchiny*. I later followed delegates from Bilibinskii district back to Bilibino, the district center, and less than two weeks later attended the congress of the district-level Association of Native Lesser-Numbered Peoples in the nearby village of Keperveem. The atmosphere of excitement in discussing *obshchina* continued, although here, far from the regional capital, the old practice of local bosses seeking to intimidate delegates to the congress had not yet been abandoned. Nevertheless, after the congress, I met with two young men who were already in the process of preparing documents to register an *obshchina* in Keperveem. They said they had many acquaintances in rural areas throughout the district who had asked to see their founding documents once they were registered, so they could use them as a template for preparing their own documents. When I returned to Anadyr' and visited the Department of Justice, I learned that this *obshchina* had been successfully registered. Meanwhile, another *obshchina* had been registered in Tavaivaam, a village neighboring Anadyr'. It seemed the Chukotka *obshchina* movement had begun.

Conclusion

Under the auspices of Abramovich's new administration, Chukotka appears to be entering a period of political and economic stabilization, although many remain suspicious of Abramovich and his motives, given his personal history. In the Russian national media, Abramovich is reviled as one of the notorious "oligarchs," Russian industrialist billionaires who built their empires through the privatization of large state enterprises under suspect circumstances. Many of these have since become active in politics on the national and/or regional level. Abramovich is best known as chairman of the giant oil conglomerate Sibneft

(a position he has given up since his entrée into politics), and more recently for his role in creating the world's second largest-producing aluminum concern, Russian Aluminum.[19] Upon his election as governor, Abramovich immediately began an oil drilling operation in Chukotka's southernmost district of Beringovskii. This causes some to worry about adventurism and potential environmental damage, although others see it as a necessary step in the development of Chukotka's economy. Indigenous residents generally view Abramovich as their new, perhaps heaven-sent, benefactor. At the very least, there are already clear indications that Abramovich's administration feels no compulsion to match the level of corruption and repression of Nazarov's administration.

There has been some evidence to indicate that, in other parts of the Russian North (such as Yamal and the Sakha Republic) indigenous residents have received some benefits when local industry is well-developed. A healthy economy can perhaps create conditions in which indigenous residents are freer to pursue their own political and economic goals, including establishing locally-autonomous communal forms such as *obshchiny*. The trade-off has always been the ensuing conflicts over land – direct conflicts over use rights to particular parcels of land as well as more general conflicts over negative impacts on the environment from industrial practice (and in Russia has been particularly egregious in causing environmental pollution). Land and local autonomy, with the addition of property rights, are precisely the three components that seem to be most at stake for rural residents of Chukotka. These are analogous to the three elements Etylin says were originally meant to be defined by the federal law on *obshchina* (land ownership, local self-government and private economic activity). Chukotka promises to be a unique test case for working out each of these components in practice. It is a latecomer to the *obshchina* movement in the North, and this means it will be one of the few places – perhaps the only – where the new law on *obshchina* will be implemented without the basis of existing local precedent.

One question that remains open is the status of the three *obshchiny* that did manage to become established in the early 1990s. All three were rendered effectively obsolete by Chukotka's municipalization plan; but could they legitimately claim the right to continue their existence under the new federal law? Or must they – and would they want to – establish themselves anew? In any case, the "fuzziness" (Verdery 1999) of property as a result of the privatization of *sovkhozy*, further complicated by the municipalization of the resulting privatized enterprises, makes it very difficult to determine who can claim property rights to buildings, homes of *obshchina* members, machinery, hunting and fishing equipment, reindeer.

[19]"It Isn't Always Normal To Discover a Mogul In the Arctic Snow" by Andrew Higgins, *The Wall Street Journal*, Wednesday, June 13, 2001.

Finally, the outcome of all of these questions will be largely dependent on the participation of the rural residents themselves, and the very nature of their participation promises to bring about a transformation of political relations in Chukotka. It is no longer a matter of administration policy to marginalize and silence rural residents, nor to manipulate and co-opt urban intellectual activists. Improvements in the communication and transportation infrastructure mean that an information-bearing indigenous network can now develop in Chukotka, to begin to fill that information vacuum discussed earlier. A rural-urban coalition seems to be a prerequisite to establishing *obshchiny* in remote rural areas, given that *obshchina* documents must be properly prepared by local residents and then forwarded to the regional center for approval and registration. The conditions for such a coalition – and for a full-fledged *obshchina* movement in Chukotka -- have now been set.

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