



UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC

## Module 4

# Peoples of the Reindeer

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Developed by Michel Bouchard, Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Northern British Columbia; and Jeremei Gabyshev, Professor, Department of History, Sakha State University of Russia

### Key Terms and Concepts

- nomadism and transhumance
- shamanism
- domestication
- pastoralism
- reindeer and reindeer herding

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### Learning Objectives/Outcomes

This module's objective is to discuss those features that define the cultures and economy of the peoples of the reindeer. We will explore possible causes of the intensification of reindeer herding that resulted in a transition from reindeer reliance to reindeer pastoralism in many regions of the Eurasian circumpolar world. It will be argued that intense reindeer herding was a reaction to colonialism, as southern powers were extending their power over the circumpolar peoples; reindeer herding allowed for greater mobility and, in turn, permitted certain indigenous populations to move away from colonial powers. This module will compare the culture—material and spiritual—of a number of reindeer herding peoples in order to foster an understanding of the commonalities in reindeer herding in a vast territory stretching east from Norway to Alaska.

Upon completion of this module you should be able to

1. identify and locate several peoples of the reindeer on a map of the eastern hemisphere of the Arctic.
2. describe the varieties of reindeer, their distinguishing features, behaviours, life cycles, and predators.
3. distinguish between nomadism and transhumance and describe the seasonal activities common to both.



## UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC

4. describe the history of reindeer herding and the evidence supporting it.
5. show the similarities and differences between two of the reindeer herding peoples described in this module in terms of their histories, cultures, and interdependence with the reindeer.

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## Reading Assignments

The course instructor will assign readings from the required textbook by Freeman (2000), *Endangered Peoples of the Arctic*.

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## Overview

The peoples of the reindeer live across the wide territory in the North from Norway in the west to the Bering Strait in the east. Some of the main reindeer herding populations are the Sami, the Izhma Komi, the Nenets, the Evenki, the Even, and the Chukchi (sometimes spelled Chukchee). Though there are differences between the various reindeer herding strategies, there is an overall pattern that can only be understood within the context of colonization and change in the face of encroaching colonial powers. We will look at how primary societies that relied on foraging, fishing, and the hunting of wild reindeer gradually intensified their reindeer herding efforts after the expansion of colonial powers from the south; and how, later, reindeer herding was transformed into a modern industrial economy by the interaction of the peoples of the North, which will be discussed in consideration of the Izhma Komi.

## Lecture

### Reindeer Biology

Reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*) share much in common with their wild North American counterparts, the caribou of the tundra. Both reindeer and caribou are considered to belong to one biological species, though they are classified into different subspecies.<sup>1</sup> Both caribou and reindeer are herd animals that migrate

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<sup>1</sup> In the *New York Times* article “The Call of the Wild Takes Its Toll on Reindeer,” Andrew C. Revkin reported that the domesticated reindeer introduced to Alaska are being lost to the “call of the wild” (January 23, 2001). That is to say, the expansion of caribou herds into the Seward Peninsula, after overhunting in the nineteenth century, is threatening the remaining reindeer. The reindeer merge with the caribou herds, though they rarely survive the transition into the wild herd.



## UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC

large distances from winter to summer ranges and back. Reindeer are the only deer where both the male and the female of the species grow antlers. (See fig. 4.1.) Both caribou and reindeer migrate in the summer to escape biting insects and the heat, which can be detrimental to their health. Their main predators—excluding humans—are bears and wolves; and their main forage is lichens and grasses. In the summer, reindeer will graze on a variety of plants, such as various grasses, marsh plants, and the leaves of birch and willow trees. Reindeer will also eat mushrooms with enthusiasm, and both caribou and reindeer will use their sense of smell to find forage under thick layers of snow. Reindeer can be distinguished from their wild cousins, the caribou, on a number of points: domesticated reindeer tend to be shorter and stouter than the wild caribou (especially the bulls). Wild reindeer and caribou have longer legs; domesticated reindeer are more likely to include light-coloured, even white, individuals than wild reindeer or caribou; and the reindeer's face tends to be flatter than that of wild caribou.





## UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC

**Fig. 4.1** Reindeer

Reindeer are most active in daytime, especially in the summer months when the constant light facilitates movement. In this period, reindeer herders are busy keeping the reindeer from straying too far: on a daily basis, herders will go out to the herds and keep them from drifting away. However, the task of herding is facilitated by the reindeer's inclination to keep circling in a tight group; by contrast, wild caribou—even though they are herd animals, too—will scatter over a much larger territory. Reindeer are also more docile than the wild caribou, though they are much more skittish than other domesticates, such as cattle and goats.

During the long winter days of complete darkness, reindeer are less mobile, but they face two threats: ice and wolves. Sheltered in the forest, reindeer rely for subsistence on lichen and other plant material buried under the snow. Reindeer are well adapted for snow and tundra, having large lateral hooves that facilitate movement across snowy or soft and marshy terrain. The hooves are in fact concave, which facilitates digging in the snow for forage. One primary threat to the reindeer is warm weather that melts the upper layers of snow, which then might freeze into a thick crust that the reindeer are not capable of breaking. Under such conditions, reindeer face starvation unless they can find suitable pastures. The other threat that the reindeer face is that posed by wolves. Under the darkness of long winter nights, wolves can fall upon herds and kill large numbers of reindeer. In winter, reindeer herders cannot protect their herds as effectively as in the summer because they cannot see the wolves. Domesticated reindeer, with their shorter legs, are also not as effective at evading predators as are the wild reindeer and caribou.

Reindeer are semi-domesticated animals. Unlike cattle or sheep, reindeer retain many attributes of wild animals, though they have been domesticated for at least 3,000 years (and possibly as long as 7,000 years). Domestication invariably leads to changes. The domestication of cows led to a number of changes over the millennia as farmers selected certain traits for their cattle; but, under most circumstances, cattle are not capable of surviving in the wild without the help of humans. Reindeer retain wild instincts and can quickly become feral without constant interaction with humans. Though there are signs of human selection—domesticated reindeer are smaller and demonstrate a much greater range of colour—if a herd is not attended, it will quickly become very skittish and will seek to stay away from humans, as would wild reindeer or caribou.

### **Nomadism, Semi-nomadism, and Transhumance**

Given the necessity to be constantly in contact with the reindeer if they are to remain domesticated, the migration patterns of reindeer herders necessitate a great deal of mobility. The nomadic movement of the herders and their reindeer



## UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC

can be best described as a form of transhumance—the seasonal moving of livestock to different regions. In certain cases, this movement is closer to nomadic in nature, as no long-term residences are ever established; in other cases, it is a form of semi-nomadism, as the reindeer herders have permanent houses in their winter ranges or close to their winter ranges. Transhumance is not limited to reindeer herders, as it is also practised in places like the Mediterranean region of the world, where shepherds move their herds up into the mountains in the summer and down into the valleys in the winter. Though the shepherds move great distances, their patterns of migration change very little over the years, and they return to the same pastures year after year. The rationale is the same: move the herds in order to capitalize on ecologically distinct zones that offer forage at different times of the year.

The typical cycle for most reindeer herders is to leave their winter range in spring (March or April) and then to begin a long trek to their summer grazing lands. Along the way, a stop is usually scheduled on spring calving grounds to allow the female reindeer to give birth (usually in mid-spring: in late April or early May). After the calving is over, the reindeer herders can then lead their herds to their summer pastures, where they remain for several months. In the fall (October or November), the herders then lead their herds back to their winter range. It is usually at this time, in late fall or early winter, that the herd is culled and reindeer are butchered for their hides and their meat, as it is at this time of the year that the reindeer provide the best hides.<sup>2</sup> The herders then continue their migration to their winter range in forested territory—with proper forage—where they spend several months before the annual cycle begins again.

The annual cycle also requires the ability to pack and set up residence in a matter of hours. Given that much of the year is often spent in the tundra, where there is little wood, the reindeer peoples carry all of the necessary belongings as the herd moves over the course of the year. The peoples of the reindeer have adopted a material culture that facilitates their movement over the territory.

The most common lodging among reindeer herders is the tent. In the Russian north, the *chum* is common to all reindeer herding peoples. The chum, or tent, is a conical structure consisting of poles covered by hides (or, more common in modern times, by a tarp). At the centre of the tent is a hearth or a box stove, while on either side are two rows of wooden floorboards. The chum has one entrance, and on the opposite side is the space that is usually reserved for

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<sup>2</sup> Among the Izhma Komi, yearlings provide the best hides. One of the parasites that attack reindeer is the warble fly (*Oedemagena tarandi*), which lays its eggs on reindeer in the summer. When the egg hatches on the skin, the larva burrows into and under the skin. After moving through the body of the reindeer, it forms a lump under the skin—a warble—and the parasite lives under the skin of the reindeer, breathing through a hole it bores in the skin. Upon maturing in the spring, the grub leaves the reindeer through its air hole and drops to the ground to pupate; it then emerges as an adult fly, completing the cycle.



## UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC

women (where the household goods and implements are usually stored). In the chums of the Orthodox Izhma Komi, an icon is also hung in this location. On the outer edges of the floorboards are piled layers of reindeer hides that serve as a mattress for the sleeping area. In certain regions, curtains are attached to the sides of the chum and can be unrolled at night to make for closed-off sleeping areas. Above the hearth, horizontal poles run across the tent. These poles are used to dry damp clothes, to smoke various pieces of clothing apparel that are made from hides, and to hang pots and kettles over the fire so they can easily be raised or moved during the course of meal preparation.

The chum can be easily dismantled. In the case of the Izhma Komi, women are responsible for dismantling and raising the chum. In the spring and fall, when the herds are being moved, this is usually done on a daily basis. In the Russian north, a number of castrated bull reindeer are kept for the purpose of pulling wooden sledges. These sledges—built solely with an axe and not requiring any nails—are made and maintained by men and used year-round. The sledges would then be harnessed to a fan-like formation of reindeer.

Reindeer herders have established trails that they use year after year to move over the territory. These trails have to be cleared of vegetation, such as dwarf willow, and they have to be free of holes in the ground so that reindeer will not break their legs by getting them trapped in holes as they run and pull the sledges. Reindeer herders also have established locations where they set up their chums. They often cache goods along the trail; for example, they leave sledges packed with winter clothing and goods as they move to their summer pastures; then they pick up these supplies on their return in the fall.

In the Russian Far East, indigenous reindeer herders do not make use of sledges, preferring to ride reindeer or use them as pack animals in order to haul the goods that they need for their survival. Also, among the Evenki, few domesticated reindeer are killed for meat; instead, the Evenki milk the reindeer.

## The History of Reindeer Herding

There is little evidence of intensive reindeer herding prior to 400 years ago in many areas that now feature intensive herding. The indigenous peoples of northern Russia and Scandinavia have historically relied on the hunting of wild reindeer rather than herding.

The archaeological evidence does point to a limited domestication of reindeer in the Russian north. It is hypothesized that the peoples of the North—including the Nenets and the Sami—did possess limited numbers of domesticated reindeer. These reindeer would have been used for pulling sledges (see fig. 4.2)—as the presence of harnesses found in Iron Age archaeological sites indicate—and would likely have served as decoys to facilitate the hunting of wild reindeer.



## UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC

It is only in recent centuries that herding intensified and, as some researchers have called it, a “reindeer revolution” has occurred.



**Photo:** Courtesy of Michel Bouchard

**Fig. 4.2** Nenets reindeer herder with sled and team of reindeer, Ural Mountains

A number of hypotheses were put forward to explain this transition from hunting wild reindeer and limited herding to an increased reliance on large-scale reindeer herding. Two main factors considered to have contributed to this change are ecological and social ones. The ecological argument hypothesizes that changes in global temperatures had a great impact on the indigenous reindeer hunters and the wild herds they relied on, causing an “ecological crisis” that would have triggered the emergence of wide-scale reindeer herding.

The social hypothesis suggests that, in Russia, colonial powers encouraged private ownership of reindeer and that, via changing social conditions, it became easier for individuals and families to acquire larger herds without being required to redistribute the animals to their kin and to protect large herds from neighbours who could have attacked the clan and stolen the animals. Under Russian colonial rule, warfare between indigenous groups would have been curtailed, thereby facilitating the growth of large herds.

Finally, a third hypothesis proposes that large herds would have been necessary for indigenous populations so that they could move away from Russian colonial outposts. Larger herds would have been necessary so that indigenous peoples could move away from Russian merchants and soldiers to more distant and isolated tundra terrains. Having large herds—not only for transportation and for



## UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC

serving as decoys to lure wild reindeer to hunters—allowed indigenous populations a greater mobility because then they were not dependent on wild reindeer for food; rather, they could rely on the semi-domesticated reindeer, which they could guide in their annual migrations away from the colonizing power.

It is Russian colonialism that would have been the primary instigator of the “reindeer revolution,” which was a means for indigenous peoples of escaping colonial Russian influence. Coupled with ecological factors, this could have been a strong determinant in the transition from foraging to a life of shepherding and herds—that is, pastoralism.

In the Russian Far East, Russian colonialism would have favoured the spread and expansion of reindeer herders. Because the spread of Russian colonial power in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries was motivated by the desire to acquire the highly coveted sable furs (and later the sea otter) of Siberia and the Far East, Russian colonialism devastated those populations that relied on hunting and fishing. Because the foraging peoples were forced to pay tribute to, and often fought vicious battles against, Russian forces, their populations were often drastically reduced over the course of Russian colonization. Populations that had once been quite numerous—for example, the Yukagir—were reduced to a few hundred individuals by the end of the nineteenth century. With the decline of many indigenous populations, there was a corresponding increase and spread in the populations that relied on reindeer herding. These included the tundra Nenets of the Russian north, the Evenki and Even of Siberia and the Russian Far East, and the Chukchi of northeastern Siberia (see fig. 4.3). Intensified reindeer herding was a way of dealing with the encroachment of Russian colonial forces, as it allowed for movement away from Russian outposts and escape from the tribute-seeking Russian authorities. Those peoples that did not adopt reindeer herding moved towards an intensification of trapping and hunting for furs in order to pay tribute to the Russian forces and to trade for industrial goods.



## UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC



**Fig. 4.3** Reindeer herding peoples, Norway to Alaska

A similar pattern seems apparent among the Sami of northern Scandinavia. In historical records there is mention of Sami tying female reindeer decoys to a stake in the ground to attract wild reindeer in the rutting season; also that a buck would be staked out to attract “competitors”—wild male reindeer that would come to challenge and drive out the contender. The goal was the same: to effectively hunt wild reindeer. It is thought that the Sami had reindeer for decoy and for transportation, as was the case with the Nenets and other populations in northern Russia.

However, in the mid-fourteenth century, traders from the south came to the traditional lands of the Sami. The Swedish Crown, for example, issued royal charters authorizing trade in Sami lands with a proviso that a portion of the proceeds was to be returned to the Crown. Given that the traders did not fully reimburse the Crown what it was owed, the Swedish kingdom extended its authority and right to taxation far north into Sami lands. Taxes were paid in the form of furs and barrels of fish. As a consequence, the Sami had to contend with three authorities vying for authority (and tribute): the kingdoms of Norway and Sweden, and the principality of Novgorod in northwestern Russia. However, given the competition, these southern powers were relatively mild in their colonial treatment of the Sami; they could not risk offending “their” Sami as they sought to exert their influence in the contested region.

After the traders came the missionaries. Traditionally, the Sami’s pre-Christian religion was quite similar to that of all the peoples of the circumpolar North: a form of animism where a ritual specialist—a shaman—would communicate and negotiate with the spirit world. The first missionaries ventured into Sami territories in the eleventh century. Missionary activity intensified with attempts by both the Catholic (later Lutheran) Church and the Orthodox Church to



## UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC

convert the Sami. The major transition from shamanism to Christianity occurred in the seventeenth century as attempts to enforce the spread of Christianity among the Sami increased.

The intensification of reindeer herding coincided with the colonization of the Sami territory and led to a change in Sami social organization. With larger herds, the larger winter villages of the past were no longer viable because there was not enough winter forage for the larger herds. Also, with colonization, southern colonists moved into southern Sami territories to settle and farm. In the nineteenth century, the colonial nation-states of Scandinavia first regulated grazing lands and social organization. The Sami were seen as inferior to the southern populations—ethnic Swedes or Norwegians, for example—and the states sought to ensure that the reindeer herds would not damage farmland and that the Sami would be collectively responsible for any damages that did occur. The state encouraged greater nomadism and wanted to ensure that the Sami would continue to look after their herds and to better control the reindeer. Such policies came to identify the Sami with reindeer herding, though significant numbers of Sami subsisted on hunting and fishing.

The “reindeer revolution” in the Scandinavian countries cannot be fully understood without examining the history of colonialism in Scandinavia. As is often the case across the circumpolar region, the northern territories of the Sami became internal colonies serving the interests of southern powers. In Scandinavia, intensive reindeer herding emerged in large part as a response to the pressures of the spread of colonialism from the south.

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### Student Activity

1. How has domestication affected reindeer?
  2. What is the difference between nomadism and transhumance?
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## The Reindeer Herding Material Culture of the Izhma Komi and the Sami

The Sami and the Izhma Komi are distant linguistic relatives: the two peoples speak Finno-Ugric languages. Both peoples developed the practice of reindeer herding. Yet, the two provide a point of departure in understanding the origins and development of reindeer herding.



## UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC

The Sami are indigenous northerners whose ancestors had a long history of relying on reindeer. Archaeological and historical evidence indicates that the Sami have been hunting reindeer for millennia and also that they used limited numbers of domesticated reindeer as decoys for hunting and for transportation. Three hundred or so years ago, the Sami, in the face of encroaching colonialism, intensified their herding and moved from foraging and the hunting of reindeer to reindeer pastoralism.

The Izhma Komi were pushed north by population pressure and the migration of Russians into their traditional territories farther west. Though they were traditionally hunters and gatherers, the Komi adopted agriculture, which they combined with hunting and fishing. In the northern reaches of the Izhma River, agriculture was at best marginal, and the Izhma Komi, who interacted with the Nenets, developed a form of intensive reindeer husbandry that they practise to this day. The Izhma Komi then expanded outwards, driving their herds to northern tundra—to their summer pastures—crossing the mountains into what is now the Yamalo-Nenets Okrug. Other Izhma Komi moved into Sami territory in the Kola Peninsula, where they continue to live. This interaction between the Komi, Nenets, and Sami helped to forge a common reindeer herding economy that persists to this day.

### **The Reindeer Cycle**

Reindeer calves are born in late April, and the six months that follow are the most important for both reindeer and reindeer herder. The summer tundra provides a protein-rich diet of grasses and foliage that is easily digested. Calves grow quickly, and the adults accumulate a thick layer of fat that will help them survive through the winter. Calves will continue to grow—slowly in the winter—and will then resume their growth spurt in the second summer. By the age of sixteen months, young reindeer are close to their full adult size. Females continue to gain weight until they peak in the third year, while bulls may continue to grow until their fifth year. The ideal time to kill a reindeer calf for its hide is after the first summer; for the best meat, it is best to kill a reindeer after its second summer.

The ideal weather for the reindeer is that of a cool, wet, and windy summer. Such weather keeps the animals in good health and keeps away biting insects and other parasites.

There are variations in herding practices between the different groups. The Izhma Komi implemented a system of constant surveillance over their herds to minimize losses and to maximize herds; whereas the Sami of the extreme north of Scandinavia leave the herds scattered over their summer pastures and then gather their free-ranging herds in the fall in preparation for migration to the winter pastures. Though other reindeer herders in the east leave the reindeer to



## UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC

their devices for part of the day, the Izhma Komi herders watch the herds around the clock. Working in twenty-four-hour shifts, Komi herders and their employees—often Nenets reindeer herders who have no herds of their own—guard the herds throughout the spring, summer, and fall to minimize losses to predators or to the wandering nature of reindeer. A minimum of four herders, and preferably six or more, would thus take turns herding the reindeer.

Both the Sami and the Komi mark their reindeer with an elaborate system of notches and incisions in the animals' ears. Similar in principle to the "brand" used to mark and identify cattle in the ranches of North America, each Sami or Komi reindeer herder marks the ears of their animals with a distinctive set of marks that belong to that particular reindeer herder. When herds do mix, it is possible to separate the herds and return the reindeer to their owners. This system has long been in use among the Komi and other indigenous reindeer herders in northern Russia.

The Sami, the Izhma Komi, and the Nenets use dogs to help them herd reindeer. In northern Russia, the dogs resemble small huskies, and a pair of well-trained dogs is an invaluable tool in herding reindeer. The dogs, following the commands of their owners, run out to guide straying reindeer back to the collective safety of the herd.

Few reindeer are killed over the summer. Given that there is no means of preserving the meat at that time, reindeer are killed one at a time on an as-needed basis and the meat is consumed before it spoils. In order to kill a reindeer, one animal is separated from the rest of the herd; a lasso is used to catch the reindeer, and the animal is usually killed with a knife. It is quickly skinned—usually by pulling the hide off the carcass—and the herders then butcher the carcass. Certain parts of the reindeer are prized: among the Komi and other reindeer herders, frozen, raw, salted liver is a delicacy. The meat is usually boiled and is mixed, today, with various forms of pasta (for example, macaroni) to serve as one of the principal meals.

The summer season is also a propitious time for hunting and fishing. In the northern tundra, the rivers and lakes hold a variety of fish that are prized by reindeer herders. These include Arctic grayling, often served raw and lightly salted. Fish are caught using a combination of nets and traps.

Reindeer herding was and is performed through the division of tasks according to gender. One of the principal tasks of all reindeer herding women is to prepare all the clothing. A variety of scraping instruments are used to clean and prepare the hide. In order to keep the fur on the hides, the hides are not tanned. Various recipes are used to treat the inside of the hide, including boiled reindeer-liver broth, in order to make the inner hide soft and supple. Once the hide is prepared, it is cut and sewn into garments.



## UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC

Different parts of the hide are used for making clothing. The Komi use the hide from the legs of the reindeer to make winter boots, which is thought to be the most durable and ideally suited for this purpose. Generally, light-coloured or white hides are used to make women's boots and darker hides are used to make boots for men. Among the Komi, the boots are worn in combination with reindeer-hide leggings that rise up above the knees. Among the Sami, women spend a lot of time in the summer cutting and collecting sedge grass in marshes. This grass is prepared by the women and used to line moccasins.

A number of hides are used to make full-length parkas—the *malitsa*—that are worn by the Izhma Komi. This parka is pulled over the head, and it drops below the knees. The fur is on the inside of the *malitsa*, with the exception of the hood, which has the fur on the outside. The *malitsa* worn by men and women are identical, except that the women's hood is white and the men's hood is dark. This parka has a set of mittens that are attached to the sleeves. Men often wear an apron on the inside of the *malitsa*, with pockets for storing goods, and a belt to which is attached a knife and other implements. When something is required, a man pulls his arm out of the *malitsa* sleeve and then pulls what is needed out of the apron without having to get undressed in the cold. When temperatures drop, a second parka, this one with the fur on the outside, is worn over the *malitsa*. Additionally, a woven belt is worn on the outside of the parka. In times of need, the two layers of parka serve as an impromptu sleeping bag: lying in the snow, the bottom of the two layers of the parka is tied with the belt, and a reindeer herder could spend a night outside protected by the two layers of parka.

The younger the reindeer, the better the quality of the hide, as the skin from younger reindeer is not as likely to be filled with holes left by the warble fly. The hides of yearlings could be used to make most clothing, especially the clothing used for everyday. Only the best hides would be selected for sewing the highly decorated clothing reserved for holidays and ceremonies.

In the late summer, berries are gathered both in the tundra and the marshlands of the boreal forest. One berry especially prized by the Komi is the cloudberry. A delicate, yellow berry, it can be preserved over many years in its own juices. A number of other berries and mushrooms are gathered to supplement the diet and to provide both useful sources of vitamins and variety to meals.

In September and October, preparations begin to return the herd to their winter ranges. It is a challenging time; there is a tendency for the herd to stray, as reindeer will range far looking for mushrooms. It is in this period that the reindeer herd will begin their rutting season. Being herd animals and belonging to the deer family, reindeer bucks will seek to gather a number of females and to drive away other contenders. It is a strenuous time for the males; they risk injury and lose much of the fat they stored over the summer. Limiting the number of fertile males in the herd minimizes this competition for females. Among the Izhma Komi, a large number of male reindeer are castrated and used for pulling



## UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC

sleds. Because the herders have a number of sleds and each reindeer is not used on a daily basis, the number of castrated reindeer could number more than 100. The majority of reindeer in the herd are cows and their calves. The bulls and castrated males represent less than 20 per cent of the total herd.

The Komi, Sami, and other reindeer herders use corrals to gather their reindeer in the late fall or early winter and to separate the animals that are to be killed from those that are to be directed to their winter ranges. The corrals are quite similar to those used by the Dene and the Inuit who hunted caribou. The reindeer are funnelled into the corral by two “wings” that squeeze the herd into the circular enclosure. The corral itself does not have to be very strong: the reindeer begin instinctively to circle inside the corral in a counter-clockwise direction. In such corrals the herd can be culled, and in recent years such corrals are used to gather reindeer velvet and to have veterinarians inspect the herds for signs of sickness.

Once the rutting season and the cull are over, the remaining reindeer are herded to their winter ranges. For the Izhma Komi, this means returning close to the villages of the Izhma region. During the winter months, reindeer do not wander far. The Izhma Komi, and the Sami, use skis to patrol the herds in the winter. For the Izhma Komi, this means circling around the herd to ensure it is safe from predators and that the snow conditions permit the reindeer to dig for forage. In cases of wolf attacks, fires are set. Herders take great care to frighten away wolves that could kill large numbers of reindeer if left unchecked.

In the early spring (that is, March or April), the Izhma Komi, as well as the Sami, begin their trek northwards towards the spring and summer pastures. The Izhma Komi travel incredible distances over the course of the year—more than 1000 kilometres. The movement north is a long trek that requires the constant setting up and tearing down of the chum. This voyage also requires a number of different types of sleds, some designed for humans, others for transporting goods. On certain sleds, a large, wooden container is placed; with only a small opening at the top, the container ensures that the goods will not spill if the sled overturns. Such containers are especially useful for packing a variety of food supplies.

The Izhma Komi follow the same trails north every year. Two reindeer roads often run parallel to the White Sea. This way, two herds could be driven to the same territory, yet their movements are timed in such a manner that they would never meet, thus ensuring that both herds have an adequate supply of foliage while moving north. A reindeer brigade chooses its trail along suitable sites where chums could be set up. The reindeer are moved during the day and stop for the night under the constant supervision of the herders.

Given the distance the Izhma Komi have to travel to reach their summer range, it is not surprising that they have both spring and summer pastures. The Izhma Komi have calving grounds where they stop with their herds while the cows give birth. Calving grounds are chosen based on a number of characteristics:



## UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC

ideally the terrain is flat, without high bushes, rich in lichen and other foliage, and with a small hill nearby to give herders a good vantage point from which to observe their herds. Once the calving is finished, the herders continue north to the sea to spend the rest of the summer in the northern tundra before returning south.

The Izhma Komi were renowned merchants and traders in the pre-revolutionary Russian Empire. Reindeer herding intensified as it ensured goods for trade, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a wealthy class of herders and merchants emerged in the Izhma region of the Komi Republic. Though the reindeer herders were nomadic, prosperous herders owned large two-storey houses in the villages of the Izhma region.

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### Student Activity

1. How and when did colonialism affect the relationship between the Sami and the reindeer?
  2. Describe the typical life cycle of a reindeer.
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## The Reindeer Herders of the Russian Far East

The Tungusic-speaking Even and Evenki share much in common with the reindeer herders to the west, but significant differences exist. They are, however, the most widespread population of indigenous reindeer herders. Their territory stretches from Siberia all the way to the Kamchatka Peninsula and even into northern China.

The traditional Even and the Evenki could best be described as foragers instead of pastoralists, as they relied—and continue to rely—to a great extent on hunting and gathering as opposed to killing reindeer for meat. The herds of the Even and the Evenki tended to be smaller than those of the Sami, Komi, and others in northern Russia. An Even or Evenki family might have 200–400 reindeer, enough to support a family of six. A Komi herd could easily number 1,500 reindeer or more. Part of the difficulty of keeping large herds is the predation of wolves; packs of wolves can easily kill half a reindeer herd over the summer. This predation makes it difficult to expand herds, so in order to maintain the herd size, the Even and Evenki in the past killed their reindeer only for rare important ceremonial occasions or to fend off imminent starvation. Today, they hunt for their meat and milk their reindeer for a sweet but low-fat beverage. A female reindeer can give up to a litre of milk per day.



## UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC

Unlike the reindeer herders of the far north, many Even or Evenki cannot move their reindeer to the tundra to escape the mosquitoes and other biting insects. Under some circumstances, the Even or Evenki build smoky fires around their herds to drive away insects during the day. Such fires allow the reindeer to survive in the taiga, an area that has swarms of biting insects that can otherwise leave the reindeer emaciated and even on the verge of death.

As with the northern reindeer herders, the Even and the Evenki use reindeer for transportation, but in the thickly forested and marshy taiga, sleds are not typically used. Instead, the Even and Evenki fashion saddles and ride their reindeer, often with reindeer as pack animals in tow. This is still a common form of transportation for the Even and Evenki, as a reindeer can carry a load of close to 80 kilograms and can easily travel 100 kilometres in a day. This allows the Even and the Evenki to range great distances in their hunting expeditions.

The main traditional activities of the Even and the Evenki were hunting and trapping. Their main prey included wild reindeer, deer, moose, elk, bear, wolf, boar, and mountain sheep. Smaller animals are hunted and trapped for their furs, including squirrel, fox, and sable; the pelts were used for trade and barter with Russian merchants and traders. Hunting continues to be vital to reindeer herders of the Russian Far East.

The basic economic unit in traditional Even and Evenki society is the tent household of the nuclear family. Traditionally, the husband, the wife, the children, and a surviving older parent worked together to ensure the survival of the family. As with other reindeer peoples, tasks were assigned according to gender. The traditional winter tent of the Even and Evenki was smaller than a chum, usually with enough space to sleep two or three adults and a few children. Typically, individuals lay in the tent instead of sitting, as the space closer to the ground is free of smoke. In the cold continental winters, the tent is kept tightly closed in order to keep the heat of the fire inside. In the summer, the traditional residence was a conical birchbark lodge. Today, tarp tents have replaced the traditional habitations, but the main feature remains: these tents can be easily and quickly dismantled and can be easily transported by reindeer over long distances. These are the same features that define the Izhma Komi chum.

Traditionally, women would prepare the hides, make clothing and tent covers, milk the reindeer, prepare food, and take care of the children. When the men were away hunting, women would take care of the reindeer. Men hunted and defended the herds against dangerous animals, loaded pack animals, killed and skinned animals, chopped firewood, and manufactured a number of implements. However, these divisions of labour were not strictly maintained; in fact, men and women often helped one another with their assigned tasks. Today, the men continue to work as herders in collective reindeer herding farms, but the women and children often live in villages or larger centres.



## UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC

Though the basic economic unit was the nuclear family, the reindeer were not the property of the family, but were rather under the control of larger units—clans. Because the size of herds could fluctuate drastically, owing to predation or epidemics, reindeer were redistributed within the clan to ensure the survival of everyone. Likewise, the clan had a traditional territory over which intermarrying families migrated through the course of the year. The families congregated in the summer, at which time a clan council oversaw the redistribution of reindeer. The ideal marriage partner was a cross-cousin; for example, a man could marry his mother's brother's daughter. Since the clans were patrilineal, a cross-cousin would belong to another clan and would therefore be a suitable marriage partner. Quite often, two clans intermarried with each other over the generations, solidifying the alliance between the two clans. The Soviet collectivization of reindeer herders brought about forced social change: rather than centred on the clan, social organization and leadership was centred on the collective or state farm in the Soviet era. Traditional social structures had to accommodate the change imposed by the state. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the collective farms remained. One of the challenges today is how to restructure the social order; this is an ongoing process across Russia.

As is the case almost everywhere in the circumpolar North, the Even and the Evenki were highly egalitarian, with no differences between individuals in terms of wealth. The Even and the Evenki had storehouses where they could cache food and goods. These storehouses were small structures, raised on platforms to discourage animals from raiding the stores. However, it was expected that any relative or clan member who came upon the storehouse would help him- or herself to whatever was needed. It was simply understood that this individual would likely return the favour at some future point. This egalitarian ethos continues to mark much of Even and Evenki society and social relations today.

Whereas the Sami and the Komi were Christianized at relatively early periods, the influence of Christianity in the Russian Far East was much more limited, allowing the Even and Evenki to maintain traditional religious practices. The Even and Evenki universe was comprised of three levels: the lower, the middle, and the upper world. Humans inhabited the middle world; the spirits of ancestors lived in the lower world; and the Sun, Moon, stars, and other spirits inhabited the upper realm.

An important individual in Even and Evenki society was the shaman, who could enter into communication with spirits. The term *shaman* itself is derived from Tungusic languages, and one of the translations of the term is "he who knows." Russians later introduced the term to the West. The Even or Evenki shaman had a special knowledge of the spirits and could use helper spirits to combat or guide other spirits that had the potential to harm humans. The shaman's soul could also travel to the lower world to accomplish important tasks, including



## UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC

locating the spirits of living individuals who were sick. It was believed that one of the causes of sickness was losing one's soul. The shaman could carry out a cure by retrieving a soul and bringing it back to the middle world.

Even and Evenki shamans made use of a shamanic drum in their ritual ceremonies. Dressed in elaborate and highly symbolized clothing, and rhythmically beating on the drum, the shaman could enter into a state of ecstasy at which time a spirit would possess him. In such a trance, the shaman's soul could travel to the other worlds. When an individual died, a shaman could be called upon to help a soul travel to the lower world. The shaman played an essential role in maintaining equilibrium in the larger spiritual universe in which humans lived. Though many shamans were killed in the Soviet war against religion, and traditional shamanistic practices were discouraged at that time, shamanism continues to play a central role in the religious beliefs of the Even and Evenki. A number of contemporary shamans exist in these societies.

### **The Chukchi Reindeer Herders**

Another important group of reindeer herders are the Chukchi of the extreme northeast of Siberia. Not all of the Chukchi are reindeer herders, though, as some live on the coast and share much in common with their Yupik (Siberian Eskimo) neighbours. However, the coastal peoples and the peoples of the reindeer often traded with each other, as the coastal peoples would often travel to the inland Chukchi in order to trade for reindeer hides.

The Chukchi's reindeer are among the wildest. However, the Chukchi keep large herds—larger than those of the Even and Evenki. The Chukchi keep reindeer as a source of meat; they do not usually milk the female reindeer, as the Even and Evenki do. Neither do the Chukchi ride their reindeer the way the Even and Evenki do; instead, the Chukchi harness reindeer to sleds for transportation.

The coastal Chukchi have dogs, which they use to pull sleds over the ice. The reindeer Chukchi do not use their dogs for either herding reindeer or for guarding the herds.

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### **Student Activity**

1. What do reindeer provide for the reindeer herding people? To your knowledge, is this module's lecture missing anything in its discussion of this topic?



## UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC

2. Trace the approximate yearly migration route of one of the reindeer herding peoples discussed in this module.
  3. What are some pre-Christian perceptions of the universe?
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## Summary

The “reindeer revolution” was one of the central developments of the Eurasian circumpolar world. From Norway across the continent to the Chuckchi Peninsula, the indigenous peoples of Siberia turned to reindeer herding. Though it is easy to imagine that reindeer herding was practised unchanged over the millennia, the evidence indicates that intensive reindeer herding emerged a few hundred years ago. Almost simultaneously, certain populations such as the Sami were intensifying their reindeer herding, moving from a traditional economy based on hunting, fishing, and gathering and the use of limited numbers of reindeer for transportation and as useful decoys in hunting wild reindeer, to an economy that was focused exclusively on pastoralism and reindeer. Successful reindeer herders expanded over vast territories. This is true for the Izhma Komi, who successfully adopted and adapted reindeer herding and, in the process, spread over great distances with their reindeer. Over the Ural Mountains, the Even and the Evenki were likewise expanding as neighbouring groups were being decimated by the expansion of Russian colonial forces.

It is difficult to separate the development of intensive forms of reindeer herding from the spread of colonial powers. Reindeer herding provided great mobility, and that mobility was often used to move away from colonial powers. This certainly seems to be the case of the Yamalo-Nenets. In other cases, such as in Scandinavia, reindeer herders were encouraged to move farther north to the tundra as a means of protecting recently settled farmland that was brought under cultivation by southern settlers.

Regardless of the possible causes of the intensification of reindeer herding, it is clear that reindeer herding was an advantageous strategy in northern Russia and Scandinavia. It allowed for the prosperity of a well-to-do class of reindeer herders in the Izhma Komi. However, it was not easily transported. Though attempts were made to introduce reindeer herding in Alaska and northern Canada, these attempts were met with limited success. For most of the peoples of the reindeer, herding is more than an economic adaptation; it is a way of life that is central to the larger cultural world view of the indigenous populations of northern Russia and Scandinavia.

## Study Questions



## UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC

1. Compare the lives of the Izhma Komi reindeer herders with another people of the reindeer.
2. Examine how reindeer herding has changed over time, and discuss the possible origins of reindeer herding as opposed to reindeer hunting.
3. How are reindeer different from caribou? Discuss the biology of wild reindeer/caribou and its implications for reindeer herding.
4. Define transhumance, and describe the yearly cycle of reindeer herders. Choose one circumpolar population and describe in detail the traditional/contemporary lifeways of reindeer herders.

## Supplementary Readings/Materials

### Internet Resources

Epochs: <http://www.hyperdictionary.com/computing/epoch>

Red Book of the Peoples of the Russian Empire. Information on the Chukchi, the Even, the Evenki, the Nenets, and the Yukagirs:

<http://www.eki.ee/books/redbook/>

Komi

- 2004 Circumpolar Ethnographic Field School: <http://anthro.unbc.ca/>
- Autonomous Areas in Russia (map):  
[http://www.christusrex.org/www1/pater/maps/Russia\\_Autonom.jpg](http://www.christusrex.org/www1/pater/maps/Russia_Autonom.jpg)

Sami

- <http://arcticcircle.uconn.edu/HistoryCulture/samiindex.html>
- <http://www.lysator.liu.se/nordic/scn/faq23.html>
- <http://www.allfiberarts.com/library/aa01/aa092401.htm>
- <http://www.calacademy.org/research/anthropology/tap/archive/2000/2000-08--saami.html>
- <http://www.hunmagyar.org/lapp/lapp.html>
- <http://www.er.ee/viker/kuula/saamimaa.html>
- <http://www.repisvare.co.gellivare.se/>

Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, Russia (includes map):

<http://odur.let.rug.nl/~bergmann/russia/regions/rus89yan.htm>



UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC

## Glossary of Terms

chum	a conical structure that serves as the primary dwelling for reindeer herders of northern Russia.
clan	kinship groups that are the primary social structure in many societies. Membership of a clan is socially defined in terms of actual or purported descent from a common ancestor. This descent is unilineal; i.e., derived only through the male (patriclan) or the female (matriclan). Normally, but not always, clans are exogamous, and marriage within the clan is usually forbidden and regarded as incest. Clans may be divided into subclans or lineages.
cross-cousin	a first cousin who is the child of a mother's brother or a father's sister. [see PARALLEL COUSIN]
encroach	<b>1</b> intrude, especially on another's territory or rights. <b>2</b> advance gradually beyond due limits.
foraging	a subsistence pattern that relies on finding naturally occurring food sources.



## UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC

genus <i>Rangifer</i>	<p>reindeer or caribou. The genus <i>Rangifer</i> includes a number of closely related subspecies including reindeer and caribou. Both reindeer and caribou are grouped into one common species: <i>Ranger tarandus</i>. Some of the main species/subspecies are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Rangifer tarandus pearyi</i> (Peary caribou)</li> <li>• <i>Rangifer tarandus fennicus</i> (wild reindeer of Finland)</li> <li>• <i>Rangifer tarandus pearsoni</i> (wild reindeer of the Russian Novaya Zemlya)</li> <li>• <i>Rangifer tarandus caribou</i> (woodland caribou)</li> <li>• <i>Rangifer tarandus groenlandicus</i> (barren ground caribou)</li> </ul>
graze	<p><b>1</b> (of reindeer, cattle, sheep, etc.) eat growing grass.  <b>2</b> feed animals on growing grass.</p>
lichen	<p>symbiotic organisms composed of members of as many as three kingdoms, including fungi, algae, and blue-green algae. Lichen fungi cultivate partners that manufacture food by photosynthesis.</p>
nomadism and semi-nomadism	<p>a cyclical or periodic movement; based on temporary habitation sites (the chum, for example) that are established and which depend on the availability of a food supply and the technology for exploiting it. The term <i>nomad</i> encompasses three general types: nomadic hunters and gatherers, pastoral nomads, and tinker or trader nomads who exist in industrial societies.</p>
parallel cousin	<p>a first cousin who is the child of a mother's sister or a father's brother. [see CROSS-COUSIN]</p>
pastoral	<p><b>1</b> of, relating to, or associated with shepherds or flocks and herds. <b>2</b> of or pertaining to the country; rural.  <b>3</b> (of land) used for pasture.</p>
shamanism	<p>a religious phenomenon centred on the shaman, who is believed to have power to heal the sick and to communicate with the world beyond. Shamanism usually implies a spiritual world view in which the universe is seen as divided into a number of worlds, each of which is inhabited by spirits and spiritual forces. These spirits inhabit not only living beings (humans and animals), but also a number of inanimate entities (e.g., fire, lakes, mountains).</p>



## UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC

transhumance	transhumance involves the cyclical movement between two very distinct environments: for example, for much of southern Europe, mountain pastures in the summer and valleys in the winter. For reindeer herders, transhumance usually involves the movement from forested zones in the winter to the High Arctic tundra zones in the summer.
Tungus	a term used to refer to the Even and Evenki of the Russian Far East and northern Russia. Today, the term is used to refer to a language family that includes the Even and the Evenki languages.

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**UNIVERSITY OF THE ARCTIC**

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