

## “Everything is as if Beyond a Boundary”: Reflections on Apprehensions Regarding Aboriginal Re-Territorialization in Northern Russia

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One of the facets of the vast program of reforms being undertaken in the post-socialist Russian Federation is the re-territorialization<sup>1</sup> of aboriginal peoples. Of three general approaches by which aboriginal peoples may increase their control over their homelands (Fondahl 1998), the most commonly used one to date remains the establishment of *obshchiny* (communes or communities).<sup>2</sup> Groups of aboriginal individuals, from families to much larger groups, can organize into an *obshchina* to pursue “traditional” activities, petition for a land base on which to do so, and receive certain usufruct and dispositional rights to this territory.

The creation of a territorialized *obshchina* involves the drawing of new boundaries – both the geographical borders that delineate the *obshchina*’s land base and the social boundaries that define its membership. Recent literature has focused on struggles, caused by the reforms, over land and other forms of property between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people (Habeck 2002; Sirina 1998; Wilson 2002; Ziker 2002). This chapter, however, seeks to consider another facet of aboriginal re-territorialization – that of the impact of such boundary drawing on socio-spatial identities and related tensions *within* aboriginal communities. Drawing on comments raised during discussions regarding *obshchiny* with those involved in their territorialization, it identifies several spheres of apprehension.

### **Boundaries and socio-spatial identities**

Geographer Aansi Paasi defines the process of social spatialization as the “process through which individual actors and collectivities are socialized as members of specific territorially bounded spatial entities and through which they more or less actively internalize collective territorial identities and shared traditions” (1996, 7). Recent works by anthropologists, geographers and others have theorized on how “loyalties” to place are constructed, perpetuated and modified, and what relevance these socio-spatial identities entail in an increasingly “globalizing” world (see, e.g., Conversi 1995; Hirsch and O’Hanlon 1995; Keith and Pile 1993; Paasi 1996; Rumley and Minghi 1991). While emphasis has been placed on the study of state (i.e. “national”) boundaries (e.g. Donnan and Wilson 1999), some scholars have addressed “lower”- and “higher”-level territorial units

(e.g. Herb and Kaplan 1999). Individuals, and the groups they compose, embrace a number of such socio-spatial identities, given that they live within a multitude of bounded territories, and may ascribe primacy to, or hierarchically value different “levels” within, a nested set of spatial identities (Herb and Kaplan 1999; Knight 1999).

Critical in the construction of spatiality and bounded territories is the phenomenon of “othering” (Barth 1969). As Paasi, following Benedict Anderson (1983), puts it, such construction invokes a “dialectic between two languages, the language of *difference* and the language of *integration*. The latter aims at homogenizing the contents of spatial experience, the former strives to distinguish this homogenized experience from the Other” (1996, 15).

If boundaries are implicated as critical axes in defining both one’s own (socio-spatial) identity and, in turn, that of “others,” socio-spatial identities are hardly immutable; rather, they are situational and are elaborated afresh with changing circumstances. Relatively little scholarly attention has been given to the inscription of spatiality at different levels, and to the interaction of commonly held but different spatialities that evolve over a person’s or a group’s lifespan. Also, the role of disparate sorts of boundaries in forming socio-spatial identities remains unexamined. Most works focus on state (i.e. national) boundaries; almost all focus on what I will term, for the sake of convenience “Western”-style boundaries. It appears that at least some indigenous groups’ territorial boundaries (i.e. borders) may be qualitatively different from these. They exhibit traits of permeability, flexibility, seasonality, and zonality (rather than linearity) that are greater than those characteristic of borders common to states and their administrative units. Critical to consider is the impact of imposing, legitimating and enforcing Western-style borders in the re-construction of aboriginal territoriality.

### **The *obschchina* imagined**

The *obschchina* – a small group of families, usually related by blood or marriage ties, inhabiting and using a territory – has been proposed by numerous ethnographers as the predominant unit of fundamental social organization among aboriginal peoples of the Russian North in the immediate period prior to the Revolution (Pika and Prokhorov 1999a).<sup>3</sup> Clan-based social organization allegedly gave way to a more territorial-based form in many areas of the Russian North over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As such, the *obschchina* is imagined as representing a more “authentic” form of aboriginal organization than those imposed during the Soviet period; its resurrection, it was argued, would contribute to the revival of aboriginal

cultures (Pika and Prokhorov 1994). By the end of the Soviet period, a group of aboriginal leaders began to lobby for the legal authorization of the *obshchina*. They were supported by an activist population of academics, dubbed “neo-traditionalists,” who argued for the veracity and, indeed, inevitability of this revived form of social organization. In the early 1990s, official legal acts began to call for the establishment of *obshchiny*.

The proposed restoration of the *obshchina*'s importance in native society must be understood within the context of the larger reforms: the collapse of socialism and its organizational structures, such as state farms (*sovkhozy*); the withdrawal of state support from many peripheral areas and aboriginal activities; the penetration of quasi-capitalist institutions into the taiga and tundra; escalating unemployment and a concomitant growing dependence on “traditional” activities for subsistence. Neo-traditionalists admitted the economic necessity of this dependence, while also venerating the return to “traditional” aboriginal activities and “traditional” forms of their organization as the path to cultural revitalization. *Obshchiny* could replace disbanding *sovkhozy* in aboriginal areas and provide an economic framework more “appropriate” to aboriginal cultures.

Based on a communalist approach to socio-spatial organization, *obshchiny* provided a response both to the failed Soviet project of modernization among the aboriginal population and to what some viewed as a morally suspect economy of rampant neo-capitalism, individualism and the threat of private property to the Russian North. Moreover, *obshchiny* acted as a potential signifier of continuity with a pre-Soviet past that had not been fully ruptured, and thus as a counter-narrative to those portraying native culture as effectively extinguished and native populations as irrevocably assimilated. Its supporters located its revival within the context of international developments on indigenous rights, a site that contributed to the Russian state's eventual authorization, though in a form modified and falling short of the original aspirations of many advocates (Todyshev n.d.; Veselov n.d.).

### **The *obshchina* legislated and invoked**

In March 1992 the federal government called for the speedy development and adoption of a law on “clan, *obshchina* and family lands,” which would establish the process by which *obshchiny* could be formed and land transferred to them (Ob uporiadochenii 1992). Shortly thereafter, a presidential decree ordered that land be transferred to “clan *obshchiny* and families of the numerically small peoples of the North” for the pursuit of traditional activities (O neotlozhnykh 1991, §1). While it took the better

part of the next decade to draft and adopt a federal law (Russian Federation 2000), the 1992 presidential decree stimulated a number of regional laws and decrees that sanctioned *obshchina* formation (Kryazhkov 1994; 1999).<sup>4</sup> Active formation of *obshchiny* ensued across Russia, producing an archipelago of such aboriginal territories.

*Obshchiny* are legally defined as “forms of self-organization of persons belonging to numerically small peoples and joined by blood-clan (family, clan) and (or) territorial-neighbor basis, created for the goals of the defense of their age-old surroundings and the maintenance and development of traditional ways of life, economy, trade and culture (Ob obshchikh 2000, §1). They may be formed on the basis of a family, a few individuals or families, a significant subset of a village, or the majority of a village’s population. Each applies for a bounded territory, on which to pursue “traditional” activities. The application requires a plan that outlines what traditional activities are going to be carried out and how. Applications are vetted by numerous regional committees (land use, environmental protection, etc) for conflicting interests; *obshchina* heads assume the responsibility for meeting requirements for resource use and nature protection, and reporting on these. Due to the fact that *obshchiny* were formed prior to laws (that is, based on lesser legal acts such as governmental decrees), re-registration after the passage or significant amendment of such laws has also been a frequent requirement.

Anthropologist Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov has identified several contradictions in the discourse regarding *obshchiny*:

“It simultaneously draws on both the neoliberal language of privatization and the collectivist notion of clan. It is invoked to solve the problems created by Soviet indigenous policies, but it identifies the notions of indigenous clan, community, and ethnicity as being outside the effects of Soviet reforms on actual communities and traditions. And last but not least, the discourse on clan-based community, as a part of post-Soviet traditionalist ideology, tends to privilege anthropological rather than indigenous social categories, and elite rather than common uses of communal identities” (Ssorin-Chaikov 2003, 167).

To these discursive contradictions, we can add a number of antinomies in the materialization of *obshchiny*:

1) while it appears that the boundaries of pre-Soviet *obshchiny* were permeable and flexible, current *obshchiny* may be adopting more crystallized and impervious borders, which may further destabilize traditional activities;

2) imagining *obshchiny* as revived “authentic” socio-spatial organizations ignores the requisites of such units in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (e.g.

registration, accounting, tax-paying) that can challenge their very survival; and

3) *obshchiny* are imagined as centripetal building blocks of cultural revival, yet when created at the sub-village level, they may act as centrifugal forces of intra-ethnic competition.

A major underlying concern is that of *scale*. Re-establishing *obshchiny* suggests moving “back” to a socio-spatial organization that is frequently much smaller than those imposed during the Soviet era (e.g. collective and state farms). Indeed this has been the result of *obshchina* formation in numerous regions, where from one state farm numerous *obshchiny* devolve. At least some aboriginal individuals register trepidation about the functionality of such units, on a number of axes.

To explore such concerns, I present reflections of individuals, interviewed in mid-1998, who have been involved with and experienced this form of re-territorialization.<sup>5</sup> The reflections are drawn from interviews carried out in a two regions within the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), Srednekolymskii and Aldanskii *ulusy*<sup>6</sup> in the northeast and south of the Republic respectively. They include the views of heads of *obshchiny*, officials of the departments involved in implementing petitions for *obshchina* formation, and other community members who may or may not be members of *obshchiny*. In Srednekolymskii *ulus*, interviews were carried out in the village of Berezovka and the regional capital, Srednekolymsk; in Aldanskii *ulus*, in the village of Khatystyr and the regional capital, Aldan.<sup>7</sup>

The aboriginal *nasleg*<sup>8</sup> of Berezovka accounts for approximately one-third of the territory of Srednekolymskii *ulus* and is home to its only *obshchiny* (the rest of the county’s population is largely Sakha). Berezovka has a population of approximately 350, of which 87% are Even. In 1991 officials from the Sakha Republic’s capital, Yakutsk, and regional capital, Srednekolymsk, arrived to encourage (indeed, dictate) the establishment of an *obshchina* or *obshchiny* to fill the void left by the collapse of the Berezovskii *sovkhos* (Fondahl *et al.* 2001). Though summoned to create *obshchiny*, the Berezovka Evens were encouraged to decide for themselves how many would be created and on what basis (Protokoly 1992). In taking such a decision, they would set the stage for the creation of a new set of boundaries that would divide the community and fracture its land base.

The community debated whether it would be best to form one village-wide *obshchina* or several smaller units. The minutes of meetings show active discussion and a spectrum of opinions (Protokoly 1992). Eventually it was decided to form four *obshchiny*. These were set up in 1992, and each was allocated a territory, the boundaries of which were confirmed in 1995.<sup>9</sup>

In Aldanskii *ulus* a few groups broke away from the state farm and created “proto-*obshchiny*” in 1991, prior to the adoption of legislation that allowed such a step.<sup>10</sup> Once the republican law on *obshchiny* was passed, these were then re-registered as *obshchiny* (O kochevoi 1992). These larger *obshchiny* then divided into smaller ones, and other families also left the state farm, resulting by 1998 in some 43 *obshchiny* that pursued reindeer herding and hunting.

It is to these new boundaries that delineate the numerous *obshchiny* and have socio-spatial effects – and to the thousands of similar lines and their outcomes – that I wish to draw attention in this chapter. The *obshchina* movement is relatively new. Yet concerns regarding the possible consequences of the boundary-drawing process inherent in the creation of *obshchiny* repeatedly arose in discussions about the *obshchiny* with individuals who had experienced a half-decade of living with these new socio-spatial units. This chapter’s musings are meant to encourage others to focus on the phenomenon of intra-ethnic and intra-community boundary drawing. And not just as an interesting intellectual exercise, but to focus on a process that has potentially vital implications for the maintenance and building of community, as well as cohesive forms of resistance and adaptation to outside powers.

### **The *obshchina* evaluated: Apprehensions**

If *obshchiny* were discursively constructed as an appropriate form of aboriginal territoriality in both elite aboriginal leadership circles and in legal acts (governmental decrees, presidential edicts and eventually laws), in their formation they differed significantly. The deviations from imagined revivals of traditional socio-spatial units have led to discursive challenges, including from within the populations involved in their creation. This is not to suggest that even a substantial minority of the population refutes the hypothetical utility of the *obshchina* as a tool of aboriginal re-territorialization. Rather, as the legislation has been invoked, interpreted and implemented, aboriginal and non-aboriginal persons have identified possible flaws in the new formations that confront their operability and detract from their imagined utility.

#### *Border permeability*

As noted above, the creation of *obshchiny* entails petitioning the county administration for a land base on which to carry out the traditional (and other) activities proposed in the *obshchina*’s charter. Such lands are mostly carved out of former state farm territory. The state farm itself marked

internal borders, allocating hunting grounds for state hunters and specifying bounded areas for pasturing reindeer during different seasons. *Obshchina* formation does not create a finer mosaic of bounded spaces in every case. For instance, the four reindeer-herding *obshchiny* created from the dissolution of the Berezovka state farm actually united herding pastures that had formerly been divided among eight reindeer brigades. Many of the *obshchina* territories in Aldanskii ulus were formulated along hunting allocations, which themselves were relics of pre-Soviet *obshchina* lands.

Yet certain characteristics of the *obshchina* borders may be developing that differ in essential ways from those of internal state farm divisions. The latter were quite porous and adjustable, subject to the dictates of the state farm's chairperson. For instance, internal pasture and hunting borders were occasionally re-formed due to changes in reindeer numbers, to contamination of pasture areas by reindeer disease, and to devastation brought on by forest fires. With the formation of the *obshchina*, concerns have emerged over the permeability of the resulting borders and the effect of these borders on resource management. Might these new borders hinder flexible approaches to natural disasters?

Paradoxically, as a "traditional", pre-Soviet socio-spatial unit, the *obshchina* entailed what appear to be permeable and flexible boundaries. Pre-soviet systems of aboriginal land tenure are still poorly understood. In the literature, some students of aboriginal society have painted a picture of discrete, mutually recognized territories occupied and used by groups of families, and respected by others. For the Evens of the Berezovka region, for instance, ethnographer M. Turaev noted that "several productive-camp unions used one territory, the boundaries of which neighbors acknowledged. Conflicts regarding land did not arise" (1997, 65). Ethnographer Ul'iana Popova, herself an Even, held that "groups of households united for mutual migration always held one continuous territory, the boundaries of which were considered by them inviolable [...]. If any kind of friction arose over the use of land, it was always resolved simply – by moving, by the departure of families to new, uninhabited regions where there was untouched pasture and hunting grounds" (Popova 1981, 102).

Similar observations were made for the Evenki: "Many of the places comprising the nomadic lands of [the Evenki], as a result of ancient agreements, are divided between them, in some way, into separate allotments, which are known [...]. Thus each family or several together have one general allotment, as inviolable property" (Mordvinov 1851, 129).<sup>11</sup>

However in some cases a more exclusionary and conflictive approach was noted: "Each [Evenki] clan occupied a give territory. According to customary law the use of [...] hunting lands belonged to the whole clan.

The clan protected its hunting lands from encroachment by members of unrelated clans and repulsed with arms those who violated their rights” (Tokarev *et al.* 1957, 98).

In interviews carried out among Even and Evenki individuals, we see discursive portrayals of known (and observed) boundaries as well as competing narratives of unbounded space. Some individuals chose to emphasize the indivisibility of land, presenting a picture of commons:

“At present, one thing that is wrong is that everything is as if beyond a boundary. You probably saw the map, that the land is divided up among the *obshchiny*, and there are boundaries everywhere now. Previously there was nothing of the kind. In olden times, Evenki didn’t know boundaries. My grandfather was generally from Chita, they didn’t have boundaries, they nomadized all the time. Take Khatystyr as an example – they traveled around it. In the summer they went hunting along the Aldan [river], in the Amur province, then in the Chita province, then back to Yakutia. But they continually returned to their region. These were the nomadic Evenki, they simply ‘floated’ across the earth, as if on the sea. They nomadized not for a year, but for several. They were always searching for the best places [...]. In earlier times, there were no boundaries or prohibitions, they freely nomadized” (Head of *obshchina*, Aldanskii ulus).

“We didn’t divide up the land, ‘this is your territory, this is mine” (Pensioner, Berezovka).

“Evens didn’t make boundaries – that was a sin” (Pensioner, Berezovka).

Others described a system of discrete, mutually recognized territories occupied and used by groups of families – *obshchiny* – and respected by others.

“Prior to the revolution, tribes had their own land, but if a stranger comes, no one chased him away, if he wants to live there, well, let him live there. Previously people were hospitable. Generally, our hunters have their place for hunting and any other person knows that they hunt there, and don’t go climbing around in it” (Head of *obshchina*, Aldanskii ulus).

“We knew where our territories were, these were passed down from generation to generation. There were no conflicts – all knew where their own land was” (Pensioner, Berezovka).

In both cases, interviewees stressed the abundance of land, the willingness of other native *obshchiny* to accommodate the pasture and/or hunt-

ing needs of newer arrivals to the area, and the lack of territorially-based conflicts in the pre-state-farm period. Territory, bounded by permeable boundaries, was not scarce. It appeared to embrace versatility, a characteristic that persisted into the Soviet period. Even bounded territories allocated to each herding brigade were at first seemingly ignored when need be. For instance, state farm documents from the Srednekolymskii *ulus* noted laconically the lack of “hard and fast” boundaries between Even herders (Yakutskaiia 1952<sup>12</sup>), which suggests that there was a continued flexibility amenable to dealing with environmental challenges such as fires, icings and epizootics.

New boundary drawing transpires within the different and difficult context of broader debates regarding private property (including real property), and in Aldanskii *ulus*, in an environment of industrial encroachment and resultant land scarcity. Yet an observation made in a report on land allocation for Berezovka *nasleg's obshchina* indicates the necessity of continued flexibility for traditional activities:

“... from 1984 to 1995 large changes have occurred in the use of lands: some territories of [reindeer] pasture have become boggy, others have dried out, and shrubs have grown up on others; and at the same time large fires have occurred on the territory of Berezovka *nasleg*, both on summer and winter pastures. In connection with this, the geobotanical composition of grasses has changed, as has the actual area useful for pasture” (Filippov *et al.* 1995, 9).

Concern over just such situations has been voiced both by officials and heads of *obshchiny*. The individuated land tenures may be insufficient to deal with fires, epizootics, and even more gradual but inevitable biogeographic changes:

“Let’s say, as an example, that there is a clan *obshchina*; they have 300 reindeer and a territory of 250,000 hectares. After a given time it is closed, because the whole territory has already been grazed and there are also *obshchiny* all around it. There is no more forage base. We often didn’t think of these things – it was very easy for us to create *obshchiny*, but to carry on is complicated. We have had many such situations” (Official, State Committee on Nature, Aldanskii *ulus*).

“The small enterprise or *obshchina*, up to 100 head of reindeer, they have a territory that is not overly large. If they have a fire, or a disease strikes, they will need to change the territory again [...]. Yet aside from their corner [i.e. allotted land], they have nothing” (State farm director, Aldanskii *ulus*).

The impact of affirming the new boundaries of the *obshchiny* is not yet known. It will depend in part on how they are visualized (as exclusive and impermeable, or as more flexible), and concomitantly, how they are enforced. Strong enforcement could likely cause tensions among community members, because it would obviate traditional means of coping with environmental changes.

### *Scalar inefficiencies*

The establishment of *obshchiny* imagines a re-spatialization of aboriginal society along “traditional lines,” and leads to the resurrection of “family-clan” units. These serve as the basic social and economic cells in such societies, though those who support the revival of *obshchiny* have certainly acknowledged the impossibility of duplication (Pika and Prokhorov 1994). Some late-twentieth century *obshchiny* do approximate the size of their pre-Soviet counterparts; others range in size from dozens to hundreds of members. In Berezovka the *obshchiny* formed in 1992 ranged from 59 to 69 working members (Filippov *et al.* 1995). Four of the *obshchiny* appear to have formed on the basis of eight pre-Soviet *obshchiny*. *Obshchiny* in Aldanskii ulus were substantially smaller; many comprised just a few families.

The advantage of breaking into small units, the membership of which usually consisted of related persons, was repeatedly couched in terms of responsibility, responsiveness, and motivation. This contrasted to the scalar inefficiencies of the overly-large state farms:

“They thought it would be better [to divide] – each for himself. It’s more obvious, and when it was all common, you don’t work, and all the same, you receive. Everything went into the common pot. Thus they decided to divide up.” (Head of *obshchina*, Berezovka)

“The state farm was too big, and too dispersed – that was a negative side, because whoever sat in the office, he didn’t think about those in the taiga. The head of the *obshchina* thinks not only about himself” (Head of *obshchina*, Aldanskii ulus).

Yet, the small size of many *obshchiny*, as well as their increasing geographic dispersedness, have provoked concern about their efficacy:

“They [the *obshchiny*] all live isolated from each other; there’s nothing in common. They don’t have a united power [...]. They don’t work very well, they are helpless, without strength, they can’t achieve anything” (*Obshchina* member, Aldanskii ulus, 1998).

As an economic entity in a post-Soviet (increasingly market-oriented, globalizing) environment, the *obshchina* requires access to markets for its products and financial resources with which to support traditional activities. Numerous *obshchina* heads alleged that their inability to find a stable market for their product was in part due to the small scale of production (as well as to remoteness). Many also noted that their operations were too small to afford basic equipment, and that once any they received upon dissolution of the state farms broke down, they had to go without:

“If one looks at the current situation, then this division in economic terms did not lead to anything good. The units [*khozaiaistva*] are too small; there is nowhere to turn over what is produced. Some have 25-30 deer, two or three persons hunt in one *obshchina*” (Head of *obshchina*, Aldanskii ulus).

“There is also a very big problem with equipment [...]. We have no money to buy equipment. I have two tractors, but they are also old; they are already very worn out. And it takes 120-160 thousand [rubles] to buy one; there’s no such money for this. That is why I say that small *obshchiny* are not advantageous [...]. It is necessary to unite, so that equipment can be bought or that more product can be turned over” (Head of *obshchina*, Aldanskii ulus).

The small scale of *obshchiny* also posed challenges to environmental management. Most notably, fire protection was mentioned as an axis of significant concern. Many *obshchina* heads described their uncertainty regarding to what degree they were responsible for fire fighting on their *obshchina* territories, an uncertainty not assuaged by the contradictory messages they received from different ulus officials:

“For management of the land, the *obshchina* is a good form for managing land, but perhaps only up to a certain point. The land needs not only to be managed, to be protected from fires, from all types of firms. For this, some form of – roughly speaking – cooperation is needed, some kind of center that will defend the rights, defend the interests of the clan *obshchiny*” (Head of *obshchina*, Aldanskii ulus).

Moreover, the *obshchina* holds a variety of bureaucratic responsibilities of a complexity unknown to its earlier counterpart. Such demands weigh especially heavily on the smaller, and one could argue therefore, “most authentic,” *obshchiny*:

“There are many complications, with taxes, with credits. We were not trained for this, and it comes down to one having to do every-

thing oneself – bookkeeping reports, on the economics, repairing machinery, going hunting. We now need to be universalists, we need to be able to do everything ourselves. It is very complicated to master everything, and if one hires someone, then it becomes very difficult on the financial side. Previously there were no *obshchiny*, this is the first experience; thus, it is difficult for us. Especially if you are the leader, with reports, with taxes, with protecting the environment” (Head of *obshchina*, Aldanskii ulus).

The “traditional”-sized *obshchina* has faced difficult problems in coping with the requisites of the post-Soviet political economy. In numerous cases, this was being dealt with through a partial re-unification into associations or unions of *obshchiny*, where members could pool resources for various purposes (from hiring a bookkeeper to equipment purchase to re-allocation of land to political lobbying).

### *Competition / “othering”*

Associations and unions still maintained within them internal boundaries that divided the lands and their resources among *obshchiny*:

“I think that previously, without the *obshchiny*, people hunted, fished, carried out the traditional activities, and the *obshchiny*, as such, are unnecessary. Boundaries, internal squabbles, someone leaves the *obshchina*” (Official, Aldanskii ulus).

“It would have been better to create one *obshchina*, so that not just members of the *obshchina* would have joined, but everyone [...]. And let there be one head. But when they divided into *obshchiny*, we have four *obshchiny*, each lives only for itself, and those who don’t enter into an *obshchina* – aren’t member of an *obshchina* – they are isolated [...]. It is true that [the *obshchiny*] work very well on the basis that they are all relatives – maybe they want to be separate, so as not to depend on anyone else [...]. It seems to me that it would be better to create, unite together, and they could all live amicably, and support each other (Student, Berezovka, 1998).

Disputes over land and resources have cropped up:

“Now the land belongs to the members of the *obshchina*, and it isn’t adequate. Now there are too many people, and there isn’t enough land. The *obshchiny* need to agree among themselves not to go on other’s [*chuzhuiu*] land. This all needs to be confirmed. Ivan [a member of another *obshchina*] is hunting the headwaters, but that

is our territory; they know this; we've had discussions with them on account of this" (*Obshchina* member, Berezovka, 1998).

The use of the term "*chuzhaia zemlia*" is notable here – "another's land," but with overtone's of "a stranger's land." While this narrative certainly is not representative of the majority of individuals interviewed, it does nonetheless underscore the tensions surrounding boundaries. In Berezovka, members of two *obshchiny* have also bickered over a small parcel of land that is valuable for fishing; it was assigned to one *obshchina*, then later transferred to another, allegedly without the consent of the first. However, the head of the *obshchina* from which the fishing ground was allegedly removed emphasized that it was not "ownership" of the land he was interested in, but access for his members.

In Olekminskii *ulus*, which borders Aldanskii *ulus* to the west, a large amount of land (1,285,000 hectares) was assigned to the first *obshchina* (initially including 25 families) that was formed. Then other *obshchiny* began to form, and some families from the initial *obshchina* became dissatisfied with its operation and decided to withdraw and join these newer *obshchiny*. At that point the initial land grant became hotly contested; law did not stipulate whether or how land could be removed from an *obshchina*. Hostilities arising by the drawing of *obshchina* boundaries were conspicuous in the rhetoric of numerous community members.<sup>13</sup> Here, as elsewhere, nascent socio-spatial identity-development by *obshchina* members as such provided a new potential axis of competition and contestation.

To what extent will the "othered" identity of the neighboring *obshchina* member outweigh in importance the common identity of that person as a fellow villager? This will depend on a whole variety of factors, and will surely play out in different ways. Identities can be manipulated, and boundaries worked, for a variety of purposes; indeed they have been in the recent past in the Russian North (e.g. Fondahl and Sirina 2003). The impact of *obshchina* formation on identity politics may depend on the extent to which populations disperse to land bases, and thus on how far the common identity created during the Soviet period (by inclusion in an economic enterprise and settlement into a village) is eroded. It may depend on unevenness in resource distribution, and/or on the relative efficacy of resource use by different *obshchiny*. What is clear is that some aboriginal villagers do worry about schisms that appear to be developing along the axes of the *obshchina* boundaries.

An ameliorating (or in some cases exacerbating?) factor may be one that at the same time belies the "traditionality" of the *obshchina*, namely that membership appears to be quite fluid in some areas. Not only do *obshchiny*

form, divide, and re-unite, but there appears to have been substantial transfer of members from one *obshchina* to another in some cases.

### *Social exclusions and geographies of responsibility*

*Obshchiny* rarely include all members of a community, but rather mainly those involved in traditional activities, and often their family members. They have most often served as a replacement for a larger state institution, such as the state farm. As *obshchiny* were established, the locus and scale of decision-making shifted for a whole range of matters. It is unclear to what extent individuals are reformulating or re-prioritizing their socio-spatial identities to elevate that of *obshchina* membership, or what such re-mappings of loyalty may mean. Nevertheless, some community members discursively confront the politics of what we might term “reduced geographies of responsibility” (cf. Massey 2004):

“Not all people are in the clan *obshchiny*. There are also teachers, communal workers. All people want to collect mushrooms, and industry has encircled everything, and they have nowhere to go” (Hunter, Aldanskii *ulus*).

Territorial access is just one facet of non-membership. Some of those people interviewed also expressed concern over access for aboriginal persons who were elderly, disabled, or otherwise challenged to meet subsistence needs. In some areas, only able-bodied individuals were registered as *obshchina* members. This however, obscured the fact that “non-*obshchina* members” were still actively provided for as family members. Strategies of membership registration differed from place to place, depending on the interpretation of rules regarding financial and other responsibilities, liabilities, and benefits.

If community (village) members who are not *obshchina* members are the most obvious potential “victims” of reformed identities and concomitant, increasingly exclusive territorialities, the plight of those *obshchina* members who belong to less successful *obshchiny* is also a focus of concern. Strong communalist ideologies still persist among many persons interviewed. While the *obshchina* is occasionally justified in terms of promoting a personal responsibility and motivation that were discouraged by the *sovkhoz* and other large Soviet institutions, it is also criticized (though usually by a different sector of the population) as failing to provide a social safety net for community members. Perhaps herein lies the greatest irony: the *obshchina* is simultaneously imagined as the restitution of the traditional socio-spatial unit, and as the replacement for all the functions of the state farm.

## Conclusions

The rationale for re-establishing the *obshchina* is to restore some elements of traditional social and political order (O kochevoi 1992). The spatial and social boundaries created by this new/revived form appear to be qualitatively different from those of pre-Soviet *obshchiny*. That is, the production of these new aboriginal spaces appears to involve the creation of more fixed, impermeable territorial boundaries. This may encourage exclusivity and “othering” across such boundaries. What symbolic and practical potency will *obshchina* boundaries assume in post-Soviet aboriginal societies and communities?

The negotiation of new forms of spatiality and territoriality is a challenge that faces aboriginal peoples throughout the Russian, and indeed the circumpolar, North. To what extent do social imaginaries of the *obshchina* (or other forms of land claims), and specifically their boundaries, encourage divisions between communities of aboriginal people? Will the *obshchina* achieve primacy in the nested hierarchy of socio-spatial identities of enough individuals to encourage clan identities at the expense of larger-scale socio-spatial identities? How might native groups balance, on the one hand, the need to assert greater control over resources at the local level, and on the other, the disadvantages of the social fissioning that such boundary-drawing can produce?

Socio-spatial identities are not reformulated overnight, and they lag behind new legal boundaries and definitions of space. Given this attribute, indeed this temporal buffer, we need to encourage thinking about both the potential effects and the desired outcomes of these new boundaries. We may need to advocate new ways of visualizing and administering boundaries, ways that incorporate the greater flexibility and permeability seemingly inherent in aboriginal conceptualizations of space. Concomitantly, we need to invite the development of just processes to de-legitimize boundaries that have become politicized and exclusive, especially if they obstruct the (re)forging of socio-spatial identities deemed essential to aboriginal revival by aboriginal persons themselves.

## Notes

- 1 I follow R. Sack's definition of territoriality as “an attempt by an individual or group to influence, affect or control people, phenomena or relationships by delimiting a geographic area and asserting control over it” (Sack 1986). I use the term “re-territorialization” to refer to the process of an individual or group re-asserting its control over a delimited geographic area and its resources.
- 2 Given the rather unsatisfactory common translations of *obshchina* as “community” or “commune,” and the loaded nature of these English terms, I choose

- to retain the Russian term throughout for clarity's sake. Some writings and indeed legal texts use the term "clan-based *obshchina*" (*rodovaia obshchina*) or "indigenous clan-based *obshchina*" (*korennaia rodovaia obshchina*) (e.g. Sakha Republic 1992); the federal law, however, simply employs the term "*obshchina*" (Russian Federation 2000).
- 3 Some scholars underscore that the *obshchina* was not a universal form of social organization among aboriginal peoples of the Russian North. See, e.g. Murashko 1998.
  - 4 Such regional legislation was passed, for instance, in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) in 1992, and in Khabarovskii krai and Sakhalinskaia oblast' in 1996.
  - 5 Interviews were carried out as a part of a project on "Indigenous Land Tenure and Self-Administration in the Sakha Republic, Russian Federation." See Acknowledgements. All quotes come from Even individuals in Berezovka, and Evenki individuals in Aldanskii ulus, except where otherwise noted.
  - 6 In the Sakha Republic, *raiony* (roughly equivalent to counties) are called *ulusy*. Sakha Republic is comprised of 33 *ulusy*. Each *ulus* is further subdivided into administrative *naslega* (singular, *nasleg*), the equivalent of *sel'skie administratsii* (rural administrations, roughly translatable as townships) elsewhere in the Russian Federation.
  - 7 In Srednekolymsk and Berezovka interviews were carried out by Olga Lazebnik and Mikhail Prisiashnyi (Yakutsk State University), as well as myself. In Berezovka, if interviewees chose to speak in Even, Galina Balaganchik provided invaluable translation services. In Aldan and Khatystyr interviews were carried out by Tamara Andreeva (Institute of the Problems of Northern Indigenous Peoples, Yakutsk), Antonina Avvakomova (Yakutsk State University), Darren Hynes, Georgina Martin, and Greg Poelzer (all of University of Northern British Columbia). Professor Lazebnik oversaw the transcription of interview tapes.
  - 8 See footnote 5, above.
  - 9 A fifth, focused on the tiny settlement of Urodan, was also established.
  - 10 Draft legislation regarding *obshchiny* had been circulated, and the groups were aware that its adoption was being actively pursued in the Sakha Republic's parliament.
  - 11 Mordvinov (1851, 129) goes on to describe rules of pursuing fur and game animals across the boundaries of one's territory into another's. For other resonant descriptions of pre-Soviet Evenki land tenure, see also Shirokogoroff 1966; Sirina 1995; and Turov 1990.
  - 12 This archival document dated to the 1950s, but the date's final numeral was not filled in.
  - 13 Though it may have been that extant tensions in the community had simply been afforded a new validation.

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