

From the Reindeer Path to the Highway and back - How Infrastructural Innovations Enable Distinctive Lifestyles in Western Siberia

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No region in Siberia underwent as dramatic changes in transportation infrastructure as the oil producing Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug. In only one generation's time the forest was covered by a network of roads and highways between the newly established settlements and oil fields. Forty years ago reindeer sledges and canoes were the only means of transportation to reach the reindeer herders' camps. Nowadays a lot of Khanty reindeer herders are using private cars to commute between the oil towns and their forest camps over roads established by oil companies.

Contrary to the common expectation that the reindeer herders' lifestyles would adapt to the mainstream society and Khanty culture assimilate to Russian culture, Khanty reindeer herders living in the vicinity of oil fields around the cities of Surgut and Kogalym preserve their language and distinctive lifestyles more than Khanty in regions not affected by oil production. Over centuries, the Khanty reindeer herders' main strategy of resisting Russian colonization was to combine a partial integration with retreating into the forest where they avoided contact and hid cultural practices. Their exclusive knowledge and technology of transportation made the local indigenous population the masters of movement in an area covered by swamps and taiga forest. New forms of transportation, communication and interaction challenged that position. They brought new possibilities of communication, but also new possibilities to prevent contact, new forms of movement, but also new possibilities to prevent movement.

The paper explores the Khanty reindeer herders' strategies to integrate technological change into their distinctive lifestyles and their changing concepts of movement. It develops the analytical framework of technological and social change, a theme introduced into social sciences of the Arctic by Pelto's "Snowmobile Revolution" as far back as the 1970s.