Northeast Asian Tundra and Taiga: The Yukagir-Chuwan (Northern Paleoasiatic) Complex

The Northern Paleoasiatic complex, of which the Yukagir are the best known group, is an amalgam of heterogeneous groups of the tundra and taiga zones of Northeast Asia. While they occupied a vast territory during the time of contact, they were virtually unknown until the late 19th and early 20th century, and especially until the publication of Jochelson’s monograph under the auspices of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition. By this time, however, most Northern Paleoasiatic groups were assimilated by the Tungus who were aggressively expanding over the Yukagir territory since before the 17th century in search of new pastures for their reindeer herds and as a result of colonization of major river valleys of northeastern Siberia by the Sakha horse and cattle breeders, and also as a result of the brutal Russian tax demands. The eastern section of their territory was inhabited by various groups such as the Chuwan and Khodyn. These groups simultaneously experienced the rapid expansion of the Reindeer Koryak and Chukchi who absorbed them culturally and linguistically before any professional research could be undertaken. Consequently, our knowledge of the Northern Paleoasiatic complex is limited to the surviving groups of Alai (Tundra Yukagir), Odul (Kolyma Yukagir), and partly Etal (Chuwan). From the point of view of historical anthropology, the culture of the Northern Paleoasiatic groups, in particular the wild-reindeer hunting Yukagir, is unique in that it is a window on interior North and Northeast Asia prior to the now almost universal replacement of subsistence based on the wild reindeer hunting by that of reindeer domestication. Their culture provides many distinctive features, including a double descent system, funerary rituals in which shamans’s bodies are dissected and their flesh is dried and preserved as amulets, and a system of mnemonic symbols. There is a strong argument for an unbroken link of the Northern Paleoasiatic cultures with Neolithic cultures of that general area, especially the Aldan River cultural sequence, and their languages seem to suggest a bridge between the Uralic and Eskaleut families.
a Ethnographic Synopsis

Background
The broad generic terms Northern Paleoasiatics, Inland North Siberian Paleoasiatics, Yukagir, Yukagir-Chuwan and other designations indicate a loose, poorly-defined and amorphous ethno-cultural complex composed of linguistically heterogeneous groups that, at the beginning of the Russian exploration, inhabited a vast region of northeastern Siberia roughly between the Arctic Ocean in the north, the Verkhoyansk range in the west and southwest, the Kolyma range in the southeast, and the Pacific coast in the east. Westernmost groups lived as far west as the right bank of the lower reaches of the Lena river, while eastern extremities of the land occupied by Northern Paleoasiatic groups included the estuary of the Anadyr River in the Bay of Anadyr of the Bering Sea and the inland border of the Chukotka peninsula, or over 2000 kilometers between the western and eastern and 800 kilometers between the northern and southern boundaries. Rivers running through the Yukagir territory, such as the Yana, Indigirka, Kolyma, and Omolon, flow in the northern direction toward the Arctic Ocean, but the Anadyr flows east and empties in the Pacific. At the beginning of the 20th century, however, the territory inhabited by speakers of the Yukagir languages became confined to an approximately 200 kilometer wide strip of land along the Arctic Ocean between the Lena and Kolyma Rivers and several enclaves to the east and south that were surrounded by the Chukchi and Tungus. The originally Tungus term Yukagir refers to north and northeast Siberian hunters and fishermen who have traditionally lacked domestic reindeer and who have spoken various local languages unrelated to Tungus, Sakha, Koryak or Chukchi. The ethnonym Chuwan appears to be derived from the Northeastern Paleoasiatic Chawchuwen/Chawchuwat that designates reindeer nomads, and the ethnographic literature often uses the Russified form Chuvantsy. Each local Yukagir group has used a particular term for self-identification such as Odul, Wadul, Khodyn, Yandin, Onondi, Kogime, Koromoi, Chuwan (Shelga, Etel, Atal), Shoromba, Alai, Anaul, Omok, etc., some of whom became extinct before any ethnographic or linguistic investigation could be undertaken.

Present-day ethnologists and linguists distinguish two major groups; i.e. the numerically and territorially larger Alai (or “Tundra” Yukagir), inhabiting regions close to the Arctic Ocean, and the Odul or Wadul (or “Kolyma” or “Taiga” Yukagir). Because of strongly pronounced lexical differences, linguists generally consider these two living Yukagir variants as two separate but probably genetically related languages. Lexical and other data concerning other variants that are usually classified with Yukagir and that are now extinct, such as Chuwan, Omok and Khodyn, are too limited to determine whether they are