Gone the bull of winter: Grappling with the cultural implications of and anthropology's role(s) in global climate change

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Gone the bull of winter: grappling with the cultural implications of and anthropology’s role(s) in global climate change

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Increasingly anthropologists are encountering the local effects and broader social, cultural, economic and political issues of climate change with their field partners. Although we are versed in the frames of adaptive capacity and resilience, there remains doubt that these coping mechanisms are sufficient and that perhaps environmental and cultural damage, far beyond the reach of restoration, is occurring. Consider our Arctic colleagues’ references to the local effects of climate change on subsistence efforts as “cause for alarm” and “requiring urgent and special attention” in the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA). As the climate changes, the indigenous peoples of the Arctic are facing special challenges and their abilities to harvest wildlife and food resources are already being tested . . . the rate and extent of current and projected change give cause for alarm. Adaptation refers to the potential to react in a way that mitigates the impacts of negative change. Becoming resilient to climate change, and preparing to respond, cope with, adapt to, and negotiate climate change and its impacts, risks, and opportunities will require urgent and special attention. (Nuttall 2005b:685) We are in an emergency state now as field researchers. We are confronted with an ethical and moral issue. And we are left with a flurry of questions, directly related to our age-old struggle as academics to reconcile anthropology’s applied, public and activist roots (Lassiter 2005:84). What is our proper response and what is our responsibility to our consultants in these revelations? How do we translate, advocate, educate, and mediate? What are the theoretical frames that inform our queries? What are the challenges faced by the current scientific models in trying to bring their research to bear in a meaningful way? How do we negotiate and communicate anthropological insights effectively to influential policy makers? Given the increasing effect that global climate change is having on local populations across the globe and the highly charged geopolitical arena in which action must be taken, understanding anthropologists’ role in the field as we encounter, communicate, and act in response to global climate change is paramount. In our field contexts we see that the effects of climate change are prompting the adoption of different subsistence strategies to suit new ecosystem regimes or with more rapid change, the displacement and resettlement of peoples who are losing areas of the earth they once used. In this context, global climate change is a human rights issue because it affects the myriad of rights necessary to lead a productive and healthy existence including subsistence rights, economic rights, cultural rights, intellectual property rights, and the like. Similarly, these adaptations and movements clarify how global climate change is ultimately about culture—as global warming proceeds, more and more of the intimate human-environment relations, integral to the world’s cultural diversity, lose place. The transformation of place-based peoples’ subsistence and of their symbolic culture reframes the implications of unprecedented climate change. I argue that climate change, in causes, effects, and amelioration, is intimately and ultimately about culture. Accordingly, anthropologists are strategically well-suited to interpret, facilitate, translate, communicate, advocate and act both in the field and at home in response to the cultural implications facing communities. This paper uses a case study to explore the cultural implications of and anthropology’s role(s) in global climate change. Viliui Sakha are Turkic-speaking native horse and cattle breeders of northeastern Siberia, Russia who have adapted to a sub-arctic climate, Russian colonization and the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Their newest adaptive challenge is climate change. 90% of 2004 survey participants confirmed that climate change is causing unprecedented change in their local areas and threatens to undermine their subsistence. In tandem, global climate change also has cultural implications for Viliui Sakha. Sakha personify winter in the form of the a white bull with blue spots, huge horns and frosty breath whose legacy explains the extreme 100°C annual temperature range of Sakhas’ subarctic habitat. In December the bull arrives from the Arctic Ocean to hold temperatures at their coldest through January. Although I had heard the story many times while working with Viliui Sakha since 1991, in 2005 it had an unexpected ending. The bull of winter is a legendary Sakha creature whose presence explains the turning from the frigid winter to the warming spring. The legend tells that the bull of winter, who keeps the cold in winter, loses his first horn at the end of January as the cold begins to let go to warmth, then his second horn melts off at the end of February and finally, by the end of March, he loses his head as spring is sure to have arrived. It seems that now with the warming, perhaps the bull of winter will no longer be . . . -male Sakha elder, b. 1935 The realization that a cultural story, which for centuries had explained the annual
temperature event of sub-arctic winter, could perhaps become a story of how things used to be, alerted me to the cultural implications of climate change. This elder’s new way of recounting the Sakhas’ age-old story of Jyl Oghuha was my “ethnographic moment” to enter the field of climate change research. In response, I am conducting a three-year NSF-funded research project, entitled: Assessing Knowledge, Resilience & Adaptation and Policy Needs in Viliui Sakha Villages of Northeastern Siberia, Russia Facing Unprecedented Climate Change. The project seeks to advance knowledge through partnering with Viliui Sakha communities, to explore ways to effectively address the local issues of climate change. The four-village, three-year study is a collaborative effort involving the active participation of village inhabitants, native specialists and field assistants, an in-country research community and international collaboration. The project is founded on the PI’s fifteen years of ongoing research and work with Viliui Sakha communities and on her fluency in both the Sakha and Russian languages. The project objectives are to:

1) Develop community-levels rosters of past and present knowledge of and adaptation to climate change;
2) Operationalize those roster data to develop measures and gauge the resilience and adaptive capacity of households and communities facing GCC;
3) Document local elders’ knowledge about climate change that is both applicable and pragmatic for use in contemporary village-level adaptive schemes;
4) Survey the relevant western science on GCC (beginning in-country and moving to international) in order to fill the gaps in local knowledge to facilitate community-level adaptation and understanding;
5) Appraise policy efforts at the local, regional, Republic and national levels for their utility and make recommendations accordingly.

Methods employed include: focus groups, semi-structured interviews, surveys and secondary data analysis. In this paper I first take my audience to my field site to encounter Viliui Sakhas’ climate change observations, perceptions, adaptations and actions, providing a general overview and context for the project and preliminary findings from the first summer field season, 2008. I next highlight the cultural implications of climate change and anthropology’s privileged approaches to understanding different ways of knowing to move anthropologists from impartial observers into the realm of action-oriented researchers.

References Cited: