

EDN: WTOAPE  
УДК 394

## Food Security and Paradoxes of Supply in Chukotka

Vladimir N. Davydov\* and Elena A. Davydova

*Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology  
and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) of the Russian Academy of Sciences  
St. Petersburg, Russian Federation*

Received 18.12.2022, received in revised form 28.02.2023, accepted 15.03.2023

**Abstract.** During the extensive fieldwork in Chukotka in 2017–2019, the authors investigated the problem of food supply in remote northern villages and in reindeer herder's camps in tundra. The assortment in rural shops usually does not meet all the nutritional needs of the local people; the products are often expired and too expensive for the income of many of them. Local micro-networks of food distribution, experiments of independent production of scarce foods, and a variety of techniques for preserving, processing and obtaining it in the context of interaction with the environment become the response of the local community. However, in addition to these practices, the paper pays attention to the specificity of local supply models and the discourse about the fresh and spoiled food. In this text, on the one hand, the authors consider how expired and officially prohibited for sale food gets a second life in the Arctic villages and tundra. On the other hand, they investigate the ideas about quality of the products formed under the influence of local supply and food production systems. The authors argue that the expired food in Chukotka is the result of infrastructural inequality and, accordingly, dissimilar opportunities for organizing high-quality supply.

**Keywords:** Chukotka, Arctic, supply, expired products, food security, food autonomy.

Research area: ethnography, ethnology and anthropology.

The present research was supported by the grant of the Russian Science Foundation (No. 19–78–10002), project «Food in the Russian Arctic: resources, technologies and innovations».

Citation: Davydov V.N., Davydova E.A. Food security and paradoxes of supply in Chukotka. *J. Sib. Fed. Univ. Humanit. soc. sci.* 2023, 16(4), 656–661. EDN: WTOAPE



## Пищевая безопасность и парадоксы снабжения на Чукотке

**В.Н. Давыдов, Е.А. Давыдова**

*Музей антропологии и этнографии им. Петра Великого  
(Кунсткамера) Российской академии наук  
Российская Федерация, Санкт-Петербург*

---

**Аннотация:** Опираясь на полевые материалы, собранные в ходе четырех экспедиций на Чукотку в 2017–2022 гг., авторы исследуют проблему обеспечения продовольствием отдаленных северных поселков и оленеводческих стойбищ в тундре. Ассортимент сельских магазинов обычно не удовлетворяет всем пищевым потребностям местного населения; продукты часто просрочены и довольно дорого стоят для доходов многих из них. Ответом местного сообщества становятся локальные микросети распределения пищевых продуктов, эксперименты по самостоятельному производству дефицитных продуктов, а также разнообразные техники их сохранения, переработки и приобретения в контексте взаимодействия с окружающей средой. Однако помимо этих практик в статье уделяется внимание специфике локальных моделей снабжения и дискурсу о свежих и испорченных продуктах. В данной работе авторы, с одной стороны, рассматривают, как просроченные и официально запрещенные к продаже товары получают вторую жизнь в арктических поселках и тундре. С другой стороны, они исследуют представления о качестве продуктов, сформировавшиеся под влиянием местных систем снабжения и производства пищевых продуктов. Авторы утверждают, что просроченная еда на Чукотке – результат инфраструктурного неравенства и, соответственно, неодинаковых возможностей организации качественного снабжения.

**Ключевые слова:** Чукотка, Арктика, снабжение, просроченные продукты, пищевая безопасность, пищевая автономия.

Научное направление: 07.00.07 – этнография, этнология и антропология.

Работа выполнена за счет гранта Российского научного фонда (проект № 19–78–10002), проект «Питание в Российской Арктике: ресурсы, технологии и инновации».

---

Цитирование: Давыдов В. Н., Давыдова Е. А. Пищевая безопасность и парадоксы снабжения на Чукотке. *Журн. Сиб. федер. ун-та. Гуманитарные науки*, 2023, 16(4), 656–661. EDN: WTOAPE

---

### Introduction

During fieldwork in Chukotka, we investigated the problem of food supply in remote northern villages and tundra. The assortment in local shops usually does not meet all the nutritional needs of the local population; the products are often expired and too expensive for the income of many people.

In our paper, we focus on the “social life” (Appadurai, 1986) of overdue products and

spoiled food which local shops sell in the Arctic communities. On the one hand, most settlements in Chukotka are remote from the resource distribution centers. On the other hand, people are engaged in small-scale food production and try to solve the problem of supply by their own.

In Chukotkathe accumulation of food resources occurs both from the outside (we mean centralized food supply made by the government and trade companies) and from the inside (local

production and of food). Moreover, people receive products within multiple channels of exchange, functioning in the context of the market economy. We will look at the relationship between people and food, both produced within the local community, and supplied by the state and large trading companies. We will show that small-scale food production and local grocery shopping practices have many intersections. In particular, in both cases, people attune their practices with the temporality of specific products that contributes to the food autonomy of local communities, making their representatives less dependent on state food supplies and its periodic shifts. To develop the argument, firstly, we will analyze the mechanics of overdue products' genesis in local shops. Secondly, we will consider small-scale forms of food production, namely vegetable growing, as allowing to go beyond the rhythms of official supplies of Chukotka and therefore as compensating for the lack of some types of products or the abundance of expired food in local stores.

In 2017–2019, we conducted three fieldwork trips to the Iul'tinskii district in Chukotka. We worked in the reindeer-herding village of Amguema, reindeer herding brigades in the tundra, the coastal village – Nutepel'men and the regional center of the Iul'tinskii district – Egvekinot. All of these places, as well as other villages, have their own specifics of the supply and its quality.

### **The supply system in Chukotka: “remoteness” and “overdue food”**

In Egvekinot, the district center, there are many chain stores, some of which have branches in small Villages (“Chukotka Trading Company”, “Nord”, “Zaliv Kresta”, etc.). For example, all these three branches of the chain stores work in Amguema – a reindeer herding village located on the Iul'tinskaia road, by which one can reach the village in two hours by vehicle from the regional center. In general, local people consider Amguema one of the most prosperous villages in the Iul'tinskii district with rather good food supply (Davydov, Davydova, 2020: 772–782). Nutepel'men is a more remote village, in this regard, there is only one official store, which is a social one,

that means that it sells basic products such as flour, sugar, potatoes, apples, etc., at fixed (reduced) prices. It should be noted that reindeer herders make purchases of food in different settlements throughout the year, depending on their migration routes and camps' locations. However, if they have the opportunity, they prefer to buy food in Egvekinot, where the assortment is larger, the goods are cheaper and of better quality. However, our own experience of staying in these locations has shown that the availability of places does not always correlate with the quality of the food sold in local shops.

When we had arrived in Amguema for the first time in winter of 2017–2018, we experienced a shortage of products needed for our usual diet and were dissatisfied with its quality. The feeling of insufficiency of local supplies was intensified by the presence of our son, who at the time of the first fieldwork trip was not yet two years old. Taking to the account his age and tendency to food allergies, we were sensitive to the problems of his diet. Sometimes, in conversations with local people, we shared our parental concerns about the lack of fresh vegetables and fruits, dairy products, and good meat in stores. In response, people gave an advice to come to Chukotka in summer, when, according to their opinion, navigation to the Northern Sea Rout begins and fresh food arrives. The second time we arrived to Chukotka at the end of July 2018. At first, we came to Egvekinot, the center of the Iul'tinskii district. Upon arrival, we immediately went to a local grocery store. We were looking forward to seeing the promised variety of products, but we came across half-empty shelves, and most of products were overdue. The winter assortment now seemed to us a lost abundance. Our acquaintance with the temporality of local supply happened this way.

In conversations with informants, we learned that ships with food had already arrived at the port, but the goods had not yet gone on sale. Stores continued to sell products from last year's delivery, which by that time were mostly all expired. As we could see, in fact, most of the summer is the time of an anticipation of fresh delivery that actually takes place closer to autumn. The time of arrival of ships with goods and refill of the assortment of stores

varies every year. This situation only increases the feeling of anticipation and its intensity for a fresh delivery. In general, in autumn and early winter, the range of products in grocery stores is the most diverse, fresh and cheap. In winter, a gradual rise in the price of goods, a narrowing of the assortment and a decrease in product quality begins. In the spring, the situation worsens significantly, and by the beginning of summer, the food shortage in local stores becomes obvious.

During the third field trip to Chukotka in 2019, we worked in the coastal village of Nutepel'men. Our previous experience of living in various places in the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug pointed that the prevalence of overdue food and food deficit correlates with the administrative status of the settlement and its transport accessibility. For example, the most "prosperous" in terms of food supply is Anadyr, the capital of the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug. The regional center Egvekinot is located between Anadyr and Amguema. Accordingly, even before arriving to Nutepel'men, our imaginations drew us an abundance of unfresh products on the shelves of the local store poorly fit for consumption. However, we were somewhat surprised when we saw that the remote Nutepel'men was supplied with rather fresh food compared to Amguema. The range of goods was much narrower than in the reindeer-herding village, but the quality of the products was much better.

We suppose that the logic according to which transport accessibility leads to an improvement in the quality of imported products is imagined one. In particular, the Iul'tinskaia road has become a means of regular supply of Amguema with expired and low-quality goods that are difficult to sell elsewhere. Despite the fact that the road potentially makes it possible to arrange the supply of fresh food to Amguema, the quantity of overdue products supplied to the most accessible village is often greater than in remote coastal villages. In other words, the presence of the road made it possible to establish regular deliveries of "overdue food (*prosrochka*)". Thus, the concept of "remoteness" remains an object of manipulation and is used to generate income by increasing the cost

of goods sold, and creates the opportunity to sell expired products.

The official law presume that expired products must not enter the market, and their sale is subject to fines. Nevertheless, instead of spending money on disposal of expired products, trade enterprises arrange their massive deliveries to places with a supply shortage. In Chukotka, a system of distribution of expired goods has developed, and the market value of overdue products significantly exceeds the cost of fresh food sold in other regions of the Far East located to the south.

Thanks to the Iul'tinskaia road, the turnover of goods that cannot be sold from the point of view of official rules is established not only in the port-district center, but also in remote villages. Through this process happens an expanding of the sphere of the informal economy, which allows getting away from official legislation and unofficial rules regulate it. Most of the food on sale in the district stores is made up of expired food products. Through infrastructure, the informal economy finds its niche in the Chukotka Peninsula, making it possible to distribute products to remote places, making a profit instead of the costs required for their disposal. In Amguema, overdue food (*prosrochka*) gets a second, and sometimes a third, chance for being consumed: local companies take those products that were not sold in Egvekinot to Amguema. From Amguema, expired products go to the tundra to reindeer herders. Thus, the remoteness of places is imagined and actualized by different people in order to acquire specific benefits, as well as to explain the situation of abundance of expired products in local stores, that is, embedding it in existing ideas about the "normality" of this situation. In addition to the discursive pressure about the "normality" of the presence of "overdue products" in such remote and hard-to-reach places, one should note another factor that leads to the relative loyalty of local residents to the shortages of the supply.

#### **Local food security strategies**

The longer we stayed in Chukotka, the more we noticed practices aimed at compensating for imperfections in the assortments of local

stores. Small-scale food production is one of local strategies which allows people to cope with the temporality of both local supplies and food.

This immediately forces us to think about ways of getting different types of food by local people outside state and private trading systems of distribution. A significant part of the food resource is produced in the course of human interaction with the environment: the tundra and the sea, as well as through the creation and maintenance of local micro-networks for the distribution of products. Many inhabitants of Amguema, Nutepel'men, Egvekinot and even Anadyr obtain venison, fish, meat and fat of sea animals, meat of land mammals and birds, eggs, berries, herbs and roots themselves. Of course, access to different types of food varies from place to place. Thus, in Nutepel'men, people produce meat and fat of marine mammals, in the tundra, and partly in Amguema, people, as a rule, have access to reindeer meat production. As a result, both food and people circulate between campsites in the tundra, reindeer and coastal villages, as well as the district center and the capital of Chukotka. The exchange of coastal and tundra products always played an important role in food security strategies and was described in the classical ethnographic texts (Bogoras, 1904: 53; Bogoraz, 1934).

All the above-mentioned places in Chukotka are interconnected: there are kin, friendly, professional ties between their inhabitants, so people constantly move between the villages, the regional center and campsites in the tundra, and food moves with them. It is obvious that material objects move along with the movement of people (Urry, 2012: 98). Moreover, the need in foodstuffs is often the main motif of motion. Self-sufficient food production and its subsequent mobility contributes to food autonomy of local communities, making them less dependent on food supplies from the other parts of Russia, including their quality and temporal shifts.

At the same time, it should be noted that local people prefer to eat not just exclusively vernacular or, as they say, "Chukchi" food. They also consume "Russian" food sold in stores: cereals, flour and flour products, pasta, vegetables, fruits, milk, butter, eggs, sweets, canned

food, sausages, even chicken and pork have become a part of the diet of indigenous people, including reindeer herders in the tundra. A similar division into "Russian" and "Chukchi" involves other material objects, such as sledges (Golovnev et al., 2018: 93, 94), clothing and firewood. Imported products can be purchased mostly in stores. However, seeking to increase their autonomy, that is, in fact, independence from external supplies, local people have learned to produce some types of "Russian" food. Therefore, in Anadyr, Egvekinot, Amguema and Vankarem, the growing of vegetables and herbs in greenhouses and in beds built in boxes raised above the ground is becoming more and more widespread. People who do not have greenhouses can receive "freshness (*svezhesti*)" from relatives and friends as a gift. Moreover, some greenhouse owners grow vegetables for sale. For example, an informant from Amguema who maintains a large greenhouse sells his cucumbers and tomatoes in Egvekinot. According to him, there is always demand, despite the fact that there are also many greenhouses in the district center itself. Nevertheless, not everyone has them; at the same time, locally produced vegetables are cheaper and are considered to be of better quality. One of local dwellers emphasized: "We have some green products in Amguema. But what a quality! Everything is in hydroponics. Though a tomato, even a cucumber, is mostly water with water, but poisoning is possible here". Some people prefer not to purchase these products in the local shops because they are afraid of poisoning.

People distribute foodstuffs using the Iul'tinskaia road. This highway serves as a channel for the import of overdue food to Amguema and at the same time for the export of fresh vegetables from this village to Egvekinot. People grow vegetables and greens in local greenhouses and garden beds by the use of turf taken from the tundra. According to vegetable growers, this turf practically does not need to be fertilized, since it is a powerful organic mixture. Informants say that for several years it can only be watered. Further, fertilization with various biological substances is possible: fish, deer blood, food waste. In Soviet

times, when animal husbandry existed, it was fertilized with manure.

People heat these greenhouses made of glass or polycarbonate by iron stoves. The construction, insulation and heating of these buildings is due to the old non-operating power lines, abandoned buildings, repair and replacement of existing infrastructure facilities. People actively employ the remains of the former infrastructure for building: “The heating line is being dismantled this year and last year it was also repaired. People throw out the old mineral wool, and I took it and used for insulation of walls. The new one is expensive, but they will take it to the landfill, and I collected it, so they were still glad that they had less work with this mineral wool. Then, the old coral for reindeer was taken apart, a new one was made. So, I found materials there. This slaughter site is old, people built a modern venison production complex here. I brought wooden planks from there. I employed some of them as materials for construction, some – as firewood”.

Being heated and insulated, greenhouses in Chukotka are capable of producing their first harvest at the beginning of spring. This means that at the moment when the last year’s import of fresh vegetables has ended, and the new import is far ahead (in a few months); people are enjoying the first harvests from the greenhouses. It is noteworthy that some local dwellers have plans for breeding animals “I plan to have chickens, I have a chicken coop room. When we will go on vacation after the New Year, we want to go to Khabarovsk, to Vietnam with my daughter, but on the way back I want came back with chickens”.

## References

- Appadurai A. (ed.) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Bogoras V. G. *The Chukchee. Material culture*. Leiden: Brill, New York: Stechert, 1904.
- Bogoras V. G. *Chukchi* [The Chukchi.]. Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo instituta narodov Severa TsIK SSSR, 1934 (In Russian).
- Davydov V. N., Davydova E. A. Routs of Sustenance: Infrastructure and Food Security Strategies in Chukotka. In *Journal of Siberian Federal University. Humanities & Social Sciences*, 2020, 13 (5), 772–782.
- Golovnev A. V., Kukanov D. A., Perevalova E. V. *Arktika: Atlas kochevykh tekhnologii* [Arctic: The Atlas of Nomadic Technologies]. St. Petersburg: MAE RAS, 2018 (In Russian).
- Urry J. *Sotsiologiia za predelami obshchestv: Vidy mobil'nosti XXI stoletia* [Sociology beyond Societies. Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century]. Moscow: Izdatel'skii dom NIU VShE, NIU VShE, 2012 (In Russian).

These practices, bypassing the temporality of official supply cycles have their own logic. Local people harvest cucumbers in greenhouses in spring and summer, and in the fall, when the number of sunny days decreases sharply, they switch to vegetables brought during the summer on Northern Sea Rout, or completely exclude them from their diet. Thus, greenhouse and store products increase a period of potential consumption of vegetables and greens.

## Conclusion

We see that the infrastructure facilities, including the Iul'tinskaia road which has become a distribution channel for the overdue food, simultaneously, is a resource that helps local population to create a system parallel to the northern supply system that provides people with food. Local people in the remote places in Chukotka avoid food scarcity using local micro-networks of food distribution, experiments of independent production of scarce foods, and a variety of techniques for preserving and processing food, obtaining products in the course of interaction with the environment. In order to minimize dependence on supplies from public and private trading companies in a context of limited and low-quality supply, they try to maintain food autonomy. We conclude that expired food is the result of infrastructural inequality and, accordingly, unequal opportunities for organizing high-quality supply. Therefore, overdue food products act simultaneously as a temporal and spatial phenomenon. They appear as a result of a combination of both multiple displacements and states of immobility.