

# The commemoration of the dead in contemporary Asiatic Yupik ritual space

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**Résumé:** La commémoration des morts dans l'espace rituel des Yupik asiatiques contemporains

Nourrir les esprits se fait sous la forme de pratiques diversifiées chez les Yupik asiatiques contemporains de la Choukotka (Russie). Les gens nourrissent les esprits pour des raisons spécifiques et dans différents lieux. Le rituel principal se déroule durant la cérémonie automnale de commémoration du défunt (*aghqesaghtuq*), qui est décrite dans cet article avec des exemples provenant de Novoe Tchaplino et de Sireniki. Cette cérémonie, en apparence assez simple, est riche en nuances et chaque famille la pratique d'une manière particulière. Les diverses formes du rituel et les modes de conduite dans l'espace rituel contemporain reflètent la diversité sociale. Les diverses façons de nourrir les esprits et le rituel particulier de commémoration du défunt sont les deux éléments clefs pour comprendre les différences sociales et culturelles dans les villages yupik.

**Abstract:** The commemoration of the dead in contemporary Asiatic Yupik ritual space

Contemporary Asiatic Yupik living in Chukotka (Russia) practise various types of ritual feeding of the spirits. People feed the spirits for specific purposes and at different places. The core ritual of feeding the deceased is an autumn commemoration of the dead (*aghqesaghtuq*), which is described in this article with examples from Novoe Chaplino and Sireniki. This seemingly simple ceremony is full of nuances, and each family practises it in its own manner. The variability of this ritual and the many models of behaviour within present-day ritual space reflect social diversity. Two aspects, the diverse practices of feeding the spirits and the specific ritual of commemoration of the dead, are key to understanding different social and cultural processes in Yupik villages.

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## Introduction

Until the early 2000s, the Russian Orthodox Church failed in its mission to evangelise the Indigenous peoples of Chukotka. The Chukchi and the Asiatic Yupik held onto their traditional beliefs and resisted the largely weak attempts to convert them

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to Christianity (Znamenski 1999). Soviet rule came late to Chukotka, and in the 1930s shamanistic practices were still widespread (Golovko and Schweitzer 2006: 107). Before the 1930s the maritime Chukchi and the Yupik experienced minimal Russian influence. If some of them could speak a language other than their own,<sup>1</sup> that language was English (Krupnik and Chlenov 1979: 27).

In the 1930s, with compulsory schooling and the onset of collectivisation and antireligious propaganda, there began a process of abandonment of traditional beliefs and ritual practices. Almost all of the traditional Yupik personal festivals<sup>2</sup> were abandoned (Krupnik 1979: 29). The 1940s-1950s saw closures of all small Yupik settlements and almost all larger ones. By the late 1950s, nearly 70% of the Asiatic Yupik (Krupnik and Chlenov 2007: 59) had moved to the urban settlement of Provideniya (established in 1937), the village of Novoe Chaplino (established in 1959), the old Yupik village of Sireniki, and the maritime Chukchi settlements of Lavrentiya and Lorino. The 1930s-1950s were certainly a time of much perturbation: antireligious propaganda; growing contacts with recently arrived Russian-speakers;<sup>3</sup> and establishment of the Soviet socio-cultural system (e.g., boarding schools, houses of culture, Communist Party). Nonetheless, the Asiatic Yupik preserved some elements of their traditional beliefs and ritual practices. One element was the commemoration of the deceased: *pominki* in Russian or *aghqesaghtuq*<sup>4</sup> in Siberian Yupik.

Unfortunately, there is not much evidence of Asiatic Yupik holding commemorative ceremonies before the relocations of the 1950s. The most detailed evidence comes from an abundant collection of accounts by Yupik elders that Krupnik (2000) collected in the 1970s. Of special interest is Voblov's (1952) article about traditional Yupik festivals and cultural practices of the mid-1930s. Maritime Chukchi commemorative traditions are recounted by Bogoras (1907).

In this article, I will describe the commemorative ceremony in detail and its variability by referring to specific features of its broader social and cultural context. This seemingly simple ceremony is full of nuances, and each family practises it in its own manner. The variability of the Yupik *pominki* and the many models of behaviour within present-day ritual space reflect the social diversity of Novoe Chaplino and Sireniki, where I did my fieldwork.<sup>5</sup> In these settlements, Yupik-Chukchi society is very heterogeneous. Some families "behave like Russians"; others are thought to be "traditional." Social and cultural diversity is expressed in diet, in interests, in ways of spending free time, in relations with relatives, and in the special features of each

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1 Chukchi-Yupik bilingualism was widespread among the Yupik during the pre-contact period.

2 Named after the leader of a hunting team, these are private winter festivals held within the clan or the family at the end of the hunting season.

3 From the 1960s to the 1980s, newcomers came to the region in great numbers.

4 Words in the Siberian Yupik language are spelled and translated using the dictionaries by Jacobson (2008) and Rubtsova (1971).

5 This article is based on data from my interviews with 35 people (28 women and 7 men) aged 25 to 79 years old.

family's ritual practices. I will show how this diversity is interpreted within ritual space. Such diversity is not just the differences between "traditional" and "non-traditional" lifestyles; nor is ritual diversity solely a function of social differences (level of income, educational level, degree of assimilation). This variability has multiple roots. Each family has its own micro-tradition that is part of a general Yupik legacy and shaped by individual experiences and perceptions of relations with the deceased.

Discourse on ritual practices involves two key notions: *culture* and *tradition*. Culture is understood here, in Kulchyski's (2006: 158) words, "not as a residual element of some former purity but as an engaged and contemporary set of practices." I follow Oosten and Remie (1999: 2) in defining tradition as "a dynamic concept referring to ideas, practices and institutions that are handed down from one generation to the next and change in the process." As I will demonstrate, although the relations of contemporary Asiatic Yupik with the deceased, including the way they have been ritualised, are no doubt in transition, they nonetheless display cultural continuity as part of a dynamic tradition. Present-day Yupik tradition is the sum of family micro-traditions that are sometimes controversial for some Yupik but nonetheless legitimate and valuable for others.

### **Novoe Chaplino and Sireniki**

Most Asiatic Yupik live in Novoe Chaplino, Uelkal, and Sireniki. These coastal villages are unofficially called "national Eskimo settlements," and their inhabitants are thought to be predominantly Asiatic Yupik. My fieldwork took place from July to September 2011 in Novoe Chaplino and Sireniki, and from March to May 2012 in Novoe Chaplino.

Novoe Chaplino has 467 residents<sup>6</sup> and its origins go back to Staroe ('Old') Chaplino (Ungaziq<sup>7</sup> in Yupik), which the Soviet authorities closed in 1958. Its population was relocated to Tkachen Bay, a previously uninhabited area with some temporary camps of Chukchi herders. Staroe Chaplino was the largest Asiatic Yupik settlement in the first half of the 20th century, with some 500 people at its peak around 1900, as described by Bogoras (1904: 29). It was also a key node in the age-old Asiatic Yupik network of connections with the residents of St. Lawrence Island (Alaska) (Krupnik and Chlenov 2007: 68). Staroe Chaplino itself had received the residents of other smaller Yupik settlements in the 1930s and 1940s before the great relocation of 1958-1959.

The coerced relocation in 1958 took people away from the old memorial sites and the rural cemetery of Staroe Chaplino. Although some families soon set up new memorial sites near Novoe Chaplino and established a local cemetery, the practice of

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<sup>6</sup> The data were provided by the local administration in 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Yupik place names and clans have been transliterated into the Roman alphabet according to Krupnik and Chlenov (in press).

regular and organised feeding of the dead had been interrupted. In the 1970s the inhabitants of Novoe Chaplino had few if any commemorative days (Igor Krupnik, pers. comm. 2012). In contrast, this tradition had survived in Sireniki without interruption, and families were actively practising it. In Novoe Chaplino, the *pominki* came back into practice in the 1980s. The ceremony I observed in Novoe Chaplino has survived serious perturbation, decline, and revival. It is not a reinvented tradition, but rather a partially restored one within a new sacred landscape that has formed around the new village. It is worth noting that the *pominki* is connected with many other less consolidated and ritualised practices of feeding the deceased. These practices are unrelated to a specific location and were thus unaffected by the relocation.

Novoe Chaplino is the closest Yupik village (25 km) to the urban settlement of Provideniya, the region's administrative centre with local flight connections to Anadyr and Alaska. Novoe Chaplino is on Tkachen Bay, which is unsuitable for hunting as there are no marine mammals. The locals call it "a dead bay" and, referring to their coerced relocation, say "we were put into a sack by the Soviets." In summer, due to the absence of marine mammals, the hunters have to move to the specially built hunting camp of Inahpak, located 30 km away from the village (almost 1.5 hours by car). From January to May, they use another hunting camp, Ratwan, which is 12 km away.

Sireniki has 507 residents<sup>8</sup> and is unique, having been inhabited by the Yupik for nearly 2,000 years. Although in 2011 there were 240 Yupik and 181 Chukchi according to the local administration, Sireniki is considered to be a Yupik village unlike the neighbouring villages of Nunlingran, Yanrakynnot, and Enmelen, which are predominantly Chukchi. Its location allows Sireniki hunters to hunt from their village year-round. From a special lookout on the hill, they can spot migrating whales or walrus. The Yupik residents are mostly migrants from the abandoned neighbouring village of Imtuk, which was closed in the 1930s because of lack of drinking water and a growing population. The Yupik of Sireniki origin used to speak a distinct idiom, which was officially recognised in 1997 as an extinct language. In Soviet times, Sireniki was renowned for its collectively run economy based on a mixture of reindeer farming, marine hunting, and fur farming. As elsewhere in Chukotka, fur farming has ceased, and no households live from reindeer herding anymore.

### **Feeding the spirits**

Feeding the spirits is a diverse practice that is widespread among almost the entire Indigenous population of Novoe Chaplino and Sireniki, except for those who have converted recently to Christianity. The Yupik call all the deceased "spirits" (*dukhi* in Russian) but distinguish ancestors (recently dead parents and unknown long-gone relatives) from other deceased. The feeding of local nature spirits is less widespread while one is on the tundra or at sea. In general, feeding has a great variety of causes, occasions, and places. It is organised and ritualised the most in the ceremony to

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<sup>8</sup> The data were provided by the local administration in 2011.

commemorate the deceased (*pominki*), which I will refer to as the “commemorative ceremony.” Many less organised acts, however, are carried out over the whole year.

In this section, I will briefly outline the general practice of feeding in all its diversity to present it in its spiritual context. Each feeding of the spirits is called an *aghqesaq*. The word *aghqesaq*, from the stem *aghqe-* ‘to make offering of food for the deceased’ (Jacobson 2008: 10), is a noun that originally meant ‘something designed to be given as an offering’<sup>9</sup>; today it is widely used in the predominately Russian speech of the Yupik as a verb meaning ‘to memorialise the ancestors.’ Most people use the word *aghqesaq*, but some say *aghquaq*. Once I was told that a more appropriate word was *tuni* (*tuune* in Siberian Yupik is ‘to give’; *tunusaq* – ‘a gift’).

### ***Everyday type of feeding***

First, there is an everyday type of feeding. In some families, people feed spirits several times a day before each meal. They pinch off tiny pieces of food, toss them into the air, or dip a finger into a beverage-filled glass or cup and sprinkle several drops. Some families feed the deceased only before eating some rare and hard-to-get food (foodstuffs from Alaska or smelt from Anadyr) or immediately after opening a new package of tea or cookies. Kerttula (2000: 77) writes that this practice “was so routine among the Chukchi and the Yupik that no new food entered a household that was not first given to the spirits.” Some of the informants disliked this routine feeding, seeing it as watering down the sacredness of the practice.

### ***On the tundra***

A special type of spirit feeding takes place on the tundra either at a resting place or in a newly occupied location. From July to September, Novoe Chaplino and Sireniki villagers spend much time away from their settlements, picking mushrooms, gathering herbs, berries, and roots, fishing on remote lakes and rivers, and just enjoying the countryside. To feed spirits on the tundra, they throw food into a campfire or toss it up into the air and then dedicate it to the deceased of a particular territory, whether Chukchi or Yupik. The aim is to show respect for the former owners of that place. It is essential to feed the spirits when one arrives at a new location:

We came to Senyavino hot springs [the most popular resort area among Novoe Chaplino villagers, located nearly 40 km away].<sup>10</sup> I came to the hunting hut, fed the ancestors, and everybody went to bed. I was sleeping and in my dream there appeared some Chukchi old woman. There were the *yarangas* (‘fur tent’ in Chukchi) of earlier times. The woman wore a *kamleika* (‘cloth anorak’ in Russian) and a headscarf. She was sitting with her back to me. I asked her: “Who are you?” She didn’t answer at all. I asked her again, she turned to me, and I saw that instead of a face there was emptiness. She came because I had forgotten to give

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<sup>9</sup> One anonymous reviewer made this clarification.

<sup>10</sup> Comments in square brackets are mine.

cigarettes to feed the ancestors tobacco. I woke up, went outside, and started feeding them (woman, b. 1959, Novoe Chaplino).<sup>11</sup>

### *In abandoned villages*

There is also the practice of feeding ancestors in abandoned villages. Whenever people visit Staroe Chaplino, Qiiwaq, Siqluk, Napakutak, or Imtuk, there will be feeding. From time to time, elders organise a bus trip to Staroe Chaplino. They gather sea girdles, drink tea, and then split up into families to commemorate deceased ancestors who are buried there. When marine hunters at sea pass by an abandoned settlement, they sometimes stop off the seashore and feed the ancestors who used to live there:

When we pass by Qiiwaq, we stop in front of the village and start feeding. Hunters tell me: “That is your native land!” You ask your ancestors about something, feed them, and go on your way (man, b. 1973, Novoe Chaplino).

We visit Staroe Chaplino almost every year in spring when there is still some ice. There we hunt walrus near the bird colony on the seashore. We go to Staroe Chaplino from Ratwan. By all means we feed our ancestors there from the boats. We give them a little bit, but we give (man, b. 1961, Novoe Chaplino).

### *For a particular purpose*

Sometimes Yupik start feeding ancestors for a particular purpose. They ask for recovery from illness, good dreams, good flying weather, or even a passing car while going on foot to some remote destination. In such cases they usually feed their closest deceased relatives:

The last time I went to the seashore to feed father was in 1998. It was the time when some of our villagers got lost at sea. They were adrift for a long time without water or food. Early in the morning I went alone to the shore, directly to the sea. I made a campfire. And I started tossing pieces into the sea—into the sea, not onto the land. I asked and asked and cried. In two to three days they were found. I asked my Dad and fed everybody who had been taken by the sea [her father had drowned at sea]. I asked everybody to help our lost villagers (woman, b. 1959, Novoe Chaplino).

Several times I heard that some people, when faced with certain obstacles, prefer to feed the spirits of non-kin rather than those of kin. They believe that the spirits of particular non-kin may help them in some situations. The time elapsed since death correlates to some degree with the spirit’s ability to help:

Last year my children couldn’t fly out from the airport. I went to L. She told me the name Anasyki. She said: “Ask him! He has been in the other world for a long time, it is he whom

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<sup>11</sup> I translated all of the interviews from Russian. To respect the privacy of the informants, I indicate only their sex, year of birth, and location of the interview.

you should request.” I asked him late in the evening, when it was already dark. I didn’t feed him. And when some children arrived I presented him with a bead. I just threw it from the window (woman, b. 1966, Novoe Chaplino).

### *Feeding an object*

There is also the practice of feeding an object. This ceremony is the most private and least popular one among the Yupik. In one Yupik family after every successful hunt, the hunter’s wife would feed a small stone, hidden in her home. As her husband told me, the stone had been placed on her mother’s corpse during the funeral. The Yupik sometimes feed objects that once belonged to relatives:

After my father’s funeral I took his belt. I wrapped it tightly, tied it with a stitch, and hung it behind the cupboard so as not to be seen by non-kin. Before every meal I would smear the belt with some food: “I am eating with you.” First we fed the belt and then we would start to eat (woman, b. 1955, Novoe Chaplino).

Several times, however, I encountered unease with the idea of feeding objects at home. One Yupik woman told me a story about a Chukchi family from Novoe Chaplino who used to feed the old belt of an ancestor and then abandoned this practice. They remembered the belt only in the early 2000s while moving from one home to another. In her opinion, resumption of feeding led to misfortune for this family. Indeed, the Yupik believe it is dangerous to resume an abandoned ritual practice. For example, no family even thinks about recommencing long-forgotten personal festivals. Moreover, some informants justified their reluctance to resume abandoned ceremonies by pointing to the possibility of making a mistake through insufficient knowledge of traditional practices. Many times I was told that it was forbidden to visit an abandoned settlement if one had not been there for more than five years.

### *From a dream*

Feeding the spirits is tightly linked to the Yupik perception of dreams. A dream can lead to feeding. Feeding after a nightmare may reduce the chances of misfortune:

I had a bad dream—the dogs were eating my son. They ate his legs up to the knees. I was told to draw a dog on paper and to feed the drawing, to give a pinch of food I had. Then I went outdoors, tore the paper up, and said: “We fed you, don’t do anything bad.” Then I walked around the house and went inside (woman, b. 1969, Novoe Chaplino).

These examples do not exhaust the many facets of the feeding ritual. I provide them simply as a background before going on to describe and analyse the commemorative ceremony.

### **The commemorative ceremony (*pominki*)**

The sequence of the commemorative ceremony is quite simple. Early in the morning a group of villagers set off to the memorial site (a predetermined place outside the village or the cemetery). There a campfire is lit, and they cut tiny pieces from the food they have brought. These morsels are thrown into the fire with words of greeting, invitation and, sometimes, apology. The group then has a meal together. After eating, they exchange food with each other. The ceremony ends with a ritual purification that uses burnt wood or a bunch of grass. Sometimes, a small stone or a blade of grass is taken from the memorial site to be lost afterwards. This is a general outline of the ceremony. Each commemorative group has its own procedure.

### ***Time and place***

Traditionally the ceremony was in autumn: late September or early October before the first frosts—*kumlatystyhpengan nuna* (“before the land has closed/frozen) according to a Yupik woman (b. 1942) from Sireniki, since frozen land does not accept offerings. Bogoras (1907: 533) attributed the timing of this ceremony among the maritime Chukchi to the need to provide the ancestors with reindeer meat. Yupik elders remember that the commemorative meal required reindeer meat brought from the tundra after the autumn slaughter. Trade between Chukchi herders and Yupik hunters used to be vital before the relocation. The Chukchi provided maritime villagers with reindeer meat and hides. Vaté (2005: 61) pointed out that “both herders and hunters try to feed their spirits with the meat of the other group, which, because it is scarce, is more highly valued.” The Yupik called the reindeer meat “unsalted meat” (woman, b. 1950, Novoe Chaplino) because it tasted less salty than walrus, whale, or seal meat. Today reindeer sausage, *keviq*, purchased through trade with the Chukchi herders from the neighbouring village of Yanrakynnot, is used during the April hunting ritual of lowering boats into the water. At a funeral ceremony, reindeer sinew is tied around each visitor’s wrist to scare away evil spirits.

Nowadays, because trade is more difficult and reindeer herders less numerous in the area, few families bring reindeer meat to the commemorative meal. Nor does every family hold this ceremony in autumn. Most of the informants honoured two commemorative days a year: the first one in spring (May-June) and the second one in autumn (August-October). Usually, the spring ceremony is held near specific graves to commemorate one or more recently deceased relatives. It is sometimes on a specific date: the day of the deceased’s death or his/her birthday. The spring ceremony is limited to members of one family. The autumn ceremony is not on a specific date. All of the deceased relatives, whether known or unknown, are “invited” to the commemorative meal, there usually being more participants than at the spring one. The autumn ceremony most often takes place beyond the cemetery on the tundra near a certain stone or hole that serves as the campfire site.

On May 29th my brother died. Mom told us that even after her death we should continue going to his tomb on May 29th. We commemorate mom and a brother there. Mom died on May 22nd. In May only our family gathers together. We have our stone not far from the village. Every clan has its own stone. We go to the stone in August. In August we commemorate everybody. It is our family tradition to go to this stone. In August more people gather together than in May. We go early—early, at 6 a.m. We have two commemorative days. In August we take the Tagitutkaks with us [the informant and the Tagitutkak family are members of one clan, the *Sighunpaget*], not everybody, just one of them. The Tagitutkaks have their own commemorative day. I guess they go in May. These *pominki* don't differ from each other. In May we go to the graves, we paint them. In August we go to the stone. I don't know when we started going to the stone. As I remember we have always gone there (woman, b. 1963, Novoe Chaplino).

The ceremony might be held outside the cemetery because of a popular aversion to frequent grave visits. Sometimes the Yupik link the first spring ceremony to the beginning of trips onto the tundra when the plant-picking season starts:

The cemetery visit should mark the first going out onto the tundra. That is my rule. I feel calm if I visit the graves first. I hold the *pominki* in June, when the route to the cemetery melts. Last year I was late. I had to hurry up because the *nunivak* (rosewort, *Rodiola atropurpurea*) had started to blossom on the tundra. I was held up by the weather. After visiting the graves I feel harmony and calm. And afterwards, I can go onto the tundra with no worry (woman, b. 1955, Novoe Chaplino).

Some informants explained the two commemorative days by a need in spring to open the summer season symbolically and in autumn to close it. Another explanation was the following: "In spring we go for everything to be good in summer and in autumn we go for everything to be good in winter." The spring ceremony is one of privacy and attachment to the family. The autumn ceremony has more participants and greater openness. These are the distinctive features of the commemorative cycle for those families who have two ceremonies a year.

In spring, the family repairs and paints the grave marker and cleans up everything after winter. The autumn memorial site is marked by a big stone surrounded by smaller ones. One year after the funeral, relatives bring a stone from the deceased's grave to the memorial site. Their recently deceased relative is thus included with their ancestors. The inclusion ritual is held on the anniversary of the death. Sometimes, it is accompanied by a symbolic catching of the deceased's soul with a lasso (*arkhan*):

P., my father's brother, died in January. In summer, our older sister came and our entire clan went to the cemetery. The weather was nice. N. told us: "Down!" It was funny a little bit. We laid down. N. threw the rope and caught him and then we could approach his grave and start eating in memory of him. He caught P. so that he could eat with us (woman, b. 1959, Novoe Chaplino).

The spring *pominki* shows the transformation not only of a commemorative rite, but also more broadly of the perceptions of relations with the deceased. According to the informants, several decades ago most Yupik families had only one commemorative

day in autumn. There is still a strong aversion to frequent cemetery visits among some so-called “traditional” families, but people are now visiting cemeteries more and more often. Some visit the graves of certain close kin every week. Obviously the visits do not include a full commemorative ceremony. There is a widespread practice of visiting graves before leaving on a long trip or before some other important event. People ask the deceased for help and, without even making a fire, will leave some offerings near the grave.

If a person died far away from the memorial site, the relatives would ask somebody to bring a stone, e.g., from Magadan or Lavrentiya, so that they could feed the deceased together with other ancestors and dead relatives. People sometimes have to move the memorial site. For example, in the 1970s cows started grazing on the memorial site of one Sireniki family, and one informant’s mother had to move the commemorative campfire. She called a knowledgeable elder, who lassoed the fire (man, b. 1948, Sireniki). But a memorial site is not always moved this way:

It became difficult for my grandmother N. to go to the cemetery, and we decided just to take the stones and put them closer to the house. Not far from the lake we have a memorial site. Our stones, a campfire hole, and a river are there. We chose this site to shorten the route for our grandmother (woman, b. 1975, Novoe Chaplino).

If the weather is bad or if the elders have trouble reaching the memorial site, the ceremony could be held next to the house or even in the hallway. Inside, the commemorative group lights a fire on a spade, and the ceremony is held the same way as on the tundra.

### ***Participants in the commemoration ceremony***

The autumn ceremony is held by an extended commemorative group that includes members of one’s clan or kin group. During the first half of the 20th century, Staroe Chaplino had a well-preserved clan structure that influenced the local economy, the system of settlement within the village, and the locations of the memorial sites (Krupnik 1980: 213). Until the 1930s, a clan was a preferentially endogamous group of non-kin and kin families united by the same territory, the same ritual cycle (personal winter festivals, autumn *pominki*), and the same story about the origin of its ancestors. The hunting collective was likewise clan-based (Sergeev 1962: 37). Staroe Chaplino used to be surrounded by several small settlements that were abandoned in the 1930s-1940s. Three of them—Uqighyaraq, Tefleq, and Ungiyeramket—were inhabited by the most numerous clan, the *Laakaghmiit*. According to the elders, people from the *Laakaghmiit* clan were the last ones to settle on the territory of Staroe Chaplino, having previously been reindeer herders. Until 1958, some *Laakaghmiit* families of Staroe Chaplino would try to hold their annual commemorative ceremony on their clan’s abandoned territories in Uqighyaraq, Tefleq, and Ungiyeramket. Their memorial sites could thus be far from their current place of residence, and going to one of them could take a whole day.

Nowadays, clan affiliation has no social significance. Some adults even find it hard to say which clan they belong to. Nonetheless, when discussing the commemorative ceremony, many told me that in autumn their “whole clan visits the memorial site,” where they feed all of the *Laakaghmiit* or all of the *Sanighmelngughmiit* (Staroe Chaplino clans). After their forced relocation to Novoe Chaplino, the former inhabitants of the abandoned settlements set up their new memorial sites in the direction of their native villages. Some memorial sites are associated with a particular family and its related families, but not with an entire clan. For example, because of a personal quarrel, several families of one clan will not gather together and will hold their commemorative ceremonies at different times and in separate places. With one Chaplino family, the ceremony commemorates the deceased inhabitants of a small settlement, Siqlluk, that was on the island of Yttygran and has been closed since 1950. That is the only case of a ceremony designed to commemorate the inhabitants of a whole village. It is worth noting that Siqlluk used to be inhabited mainly by members of one clan, the *Sighunpaget*.

Over the river there is a memorial site for all Siqlluk villagers. L. has always told us to go there and commemorate the Siqlluk villagers. We go there. Nobody else. We commemorate the Siqlluk villagers in July and have our own commemorative day in August, sometimes in September (woman, b. 1975, Novoe Chaplino).

Often the ceremony is attended by strangers who are unrelated to other members of the commemorative group:

The rule here is to invite somebody unrelated. Somebody from the side. It doesn't matter whom. I don't know why. We always take somebody. For example our uncle A. has a second wife who is Chukchi. We invite her and that is enough. She is not from our clan (woman, b. 1965, Novoe Chaplino).

Non-kin are sometimes invited in order to help them. If you have no memorial site of your own but want to feed your ancestors, you may ask for permission to attend a ceremony with others. In Novoe Chaplino, a Yupik woman (b. 1959) told me that non-kin drive off “the devils”—“deceased people who have not returned.” The Yupik name their children after deceased relatives, who symbolically return via naming. After the meal, the members of the commemorative group exchange the food they have brought. Sometimes they share food with non-kin they meet on the way back. It is believed that the ceremony's hosts should not take the food back home. The *pominki* is considered to be open to almost anyone. Nobody told me about any prohibition against attending. The only condition is that the invitee should bring some food. There is some resentment of strangers who are looking only for a free drink, but they are not driven away. Nonetheless, most people are unaware of how such ceremonies are conducted in other families. Few will attend a ceremony held by non-kin without an invitation. Moreover, the Yupik will inform only potential invitees about a forthcoming ceremony.

### *Sequence of actions within the ceremony*

Food offerings are set aside in advance for a commemorative ceremony, being often rare and festive in nature but always new and not yet tasted. Special attention is paid to choosing food that the deceased will appreciate. As mentioned above, some families try to procure dry reindeer meat. Although in the past the Yupik did not feed their ancestors the meat of marine mammals (Krupnik 1980: 212), this prohibition is already forgotten. People bring *mangtak* (whale skin with blubber), *nuvquraq* (dried whale meat), and boiled walrus meat. Local or “national” food, as the Yupik call it themselves, is expected to be part of a commemorative meal (Figure 1). Pieces of cigarettes and a few drops of vodka or tea are thrown into the fire:

My husband died. Once S.K. came and said: “What’s up, T.? It seems that you feed him compote, tea, sugar, and sweets. Let him have vodka and cigarettes! You maybe don’t know that it is important to buy cigarettes.” I always call the smokers to the ceremony (woman, b. 1955, Novoe Chaplino).

The ceremony’s host/hostess pinches off tiny pieces from each food item and puts them on a special dish. Sometimes, ritual food is put on the lid of some box or even on paper. In the past, the Yupik used special tubs made of wood or walrus ivory.

The host tosses the food into the fire, pronouncing words of welcome. These words are usually spoken in Russian, but some elders told me that they talk to their ancestors only in the Yupik language. The words of welcome are quite similar among different families:

We’ve brought [something to] you here in order that you may not be hungry, till we feed you next year (woman, b. 1942, Sireniki).

We’ve come to you, we haven’t forgotten you, we feed you (woman, b. 1966, Novoe Chaplino).

Hey everybody, come, drink, eat, smoke, drink tea (woman, b. 1959, Novoe Chaplino).

After the words of welcome, the host starts enumerating the names of the deceased relatives he knew personally. The enumeration ends with a general invitation to all of the ancestors (“and now come the rest”). Some informants feed all of the dead villagers of the abandoned settlements, calling them *Qiwaaghmiit* (villagers of Qiiwaq), *Ungaazighmiit* (villagers of Staroe Chaplino), etc. To avoid leaving anybody hungry, the host separately calls out all of the unknown relatives: “Everybody we don’t know, everybody from our clan we didn’t find, come as well” (man, b. 1941, Novoe Chaplino). Being afraid to make a mistake, the Yupik may call for help from someone who knew the deceased: “As we didn’t know everything well, our older sister called our mom and asked her to invite others to the campfire: ‘Invite those you used to call yourself!’” (woman, b. 1934, Provideniya).



Figure 1. The representatives of the *Laakaghmiit* clan are starting the commemorative meal. Staroe Chaplino, 2011. Photo: Dmitriy Oparin.

According to the informants, if the campfire flares up fast and the wood burns down quickly, the ancestors will accept the offerings. To stoke the fire, the Yupik use a special herb called *coopik* (Arctic white heather, *Cassiope tetragona*) that, according to one informant, “blazes up like gasoline.” Many informants believed that fire is the best supporter of offerings to the ancestors. Some even distrusted feeding without fire. One elder told me, “It is indispensable to toss into the fire because if you just throw into the air, the ancestors will start fighting with each other” (woman, b. 1941, Novoe Chaplino).

After the commemorative meal, people exchange the food. This minor ritual is called *minaq*. Next, everybody goes through the ritual of purification with fire (Figure 2). The aim is deliverance from diseases. The host will brush all members of the commemorative group with a burnt piece of wood or a bunch of grass: “You need to take grass and brush away your relatives while saying: *Tagi, tagi*. That means: ‘Come here, come here. I am taking away the diseases’” (woman, b. 1961, Provideniya). Then everybody takes a small stone or a blade of grass, sometimes from the bunch of grass used for the purification ritual. Relying on material he had collected in Staroe Chaplino and Sireniki in 1934-1936, Voblov (1952: 325) wrote that a Yupik man would take a stone or a blade of grass to symbolically bring home his shadow, which should not be left at the cemetery. The Yupik take a small stone from the grave after a funeral. A widespread practice is the accidental loss of a symbolic object (stone, blade of grass, wristlet made of reindeer sinew) that is obtained during a funeral or commemorative

ceremony. The ceremony ends with the use of a stone to smother the fire so as not to let “the fire go away” or “to put out the fire and not let the spirit go away.”



Figure 2. Lyudmila Aynana, a hostess of the commemorative ceremony, is purifying Valentina Seliakina with a piece of burnt wood, Staroe Chaplino, 2011. Photo: Dmitriy Oparin.

A change of weather during the ceremony or afterwards proves acceptance of the offerings:

When we started cutting up the bowhead, the weather was nice. And then suddenly it started raining. L. told us: “Maybe mom is very satisfied in the other world.” It was her favourite bowhead *mangtak*. She loved it very much (woman, b. 1949, Novoe Chaplino).

Once when we went to commemorate the ancestors in November there was a snowstorm. Mom told me: “We have to go.” We did everything quickly there. On the way back we were surprised. The snowstorm was over. Mom told us: “Look at the weather! They are thanking us because we did *aghqesaq*” (woman, b. 1961, Provideniya).

Dreams have always played a significant role in Yupik intellectual life. A lot of people told me about their dreams in relation to the commemorative ceremony. In dreams, the ancestors give thanks for the offerings and the attention paid to them:

My mom told me a dream she had after the *pominki*. She saw an old grey-haired lady who was sitting near the *yaranga*. The old lady told her: “Thank you! We ate so well! It was so

tasty. And a man from Magadan has arrived.” Mom woke up. The “man from Magadan” was her husband, who is buried in Magadan (woman, b. 1961, Provideniya).

Once I saw a dream. We were walking with T. We went over the river. The mist lifted, and I saw mom. I told her in Yupik: “Are you receiving our packages?” “Yes, I am,” she answered. I think maybe they really receive our offerings. For some reason I had this dream. One question, one answer. You give them a little bit, but for them it is a lot (woman, b. 1957, Novoe Chaplino).

Often the deceased makes a request in the dream, thus giving rise to an unplanned feeding. For example, one Yupik woman saw her deceased friend in a dream. The friend complained about a cold. The next day the woman went to Provideniya, bought a new shirt, and ripped it into pieces over the grave. Destruction of things at a funeral or while feeding is a continuing practice.

### **Micro-rituals of the *pominki***

The commemorative ceremony consists of several micro-rituals that may at other times be performed separately as independent minor rites or as components of other ceremonies. Moreover, both the micro-rituals and the complex ceremonies involve a special set of ritual objects: beads, reindeer sinew, herbal roots, blades of grass, stones, hooves, antlers. For example, some hunters feed their ancestors during the only surviving hunting ritual, i.e., the April lowering of boats into the water to launch the year’s first hunt on the open sea. Before lowering the boats, each crew performs a ritual of feeding the ancestors, the spirits, and the deceased hunters. Out of four crews in Novoe Chaplino only one makes a fire (Figure 3); the others throw pieces of food into the sea, although the elders insist that in the past each crew used to throw food into the fire. The firemaker is not the hunter who is most strongly attached to the traditions. Other *brygadirs* (crew leaders) are thought to be even more knowledgeable about hunting traditions. However, they do not seem to care about this particular element of the ritual. Making a fire is thus a display of the firemaker’s individual perception of tradition and his relationships with the deceased hunters.

An obligatory offering is a sausage filled with reindeer fat—*keviq* (from the Yupik *kevig* - ‘to stuff something’). Sometimes the hunters offer also ‘Russian sausage’ (that is how Yupik call the type of sausages sold in the shops). To get reindeer meat for the *keviq*, the hunters go to the Chukchi on the Yanrakynnot tundra. The sausage should be new and not yet tasted by anyone. If the crew leader has no *keviq* in April, he can symbolically buy it by giving a bead on a thread to another hunter who has a *keviq*.

The purification ritual that closes the *pominki* is not confined to the commemorative ceremony. If somebody dies in the village, the Yupik burn the roots of the *tepluk* (wild celery, *Angelica lucida*) and fumigate inside the house to scare away evil spirits. It is common to purify with a burning paper or a smoking *tepluk* root, e.g., after a nightmare or if somebody has taken ill. A person will touch the ill person’s body

with a leaf and ask the ancestors for help, and then tear up the leaf and throw it away. One woman showed me an old bighorn sheep's hoof that she had at home (Figure 4). If a family member is ill, she will burn the hoof and do the same as the host of the commemorative ceremony does with a piece of burnt wood—she will purify the person in need with the smoking hoof. She will then make a special offering of a bead by tying it to the reindeer sinew that encircles the hoof.



Figure 3. Pavel Lyneut is feeding the spirits with a *keviq* and cigarettes, Ratwan, 2012. Photo: Dmitriy Oparin.



Figure 4. Beads are tied to the reindeer sinews that encircle the hoof, Novoe Chaplino, 2012. Photo: Dmitriy Oparin.

## Christianity and the *pominki*

After the borders were opened, Western Protestant missionaries started visiting Chukotka. In 2005, the Pentecostal missionary in Anadyr announced that at least 14 Chukotka settlements already had their own official groups of active converts (Vaté 2009: 41). Novoe Chaplino has around 12 active converts, mostly women over 40. They meet every week in a private home, listen to sermons on TV, and sing in Russian, Yupik, and Chukchi. In Sireniki, the Evangelical community is more organised and numerous. They meet more than once a week, and there are several young participants. They deliver the sermons on their own by talking to the congregation and sharing their personal stories with them. Sireniki's Evangelical community has another small group consisting of elderly Chukchi women who meet separately. At these religious services they speak only the Chukchi language. Recently, there have been more and more Orthodox Chukchi and Yupik. Whereas the Orthodox syncretise traditional beliefs with Christianity, most of the Indigenous Pentecostals reject family rites and feeding of spirits:

We stopped doing it. At work everybody knows that I don't do it. I even forgot the word. And not long ago they told me: "Do *aghqesaq*." And I replied: "What is that?" We don't hold commemorative ceremonies and don't have any clan festivals. There are idols there! There are people among the youth who stick to pagan traditions. And they criticise us for renouncing (woman, b. 1976, Novoe Chaplino).

Some Pentecostals, however, both attend Sunday services and hold commemorative ceremonies. By converting to Protestantism and entering a local Evangelical community, people may be taking part in a socio-cultural activity and satisfying a need to belong to some structured group. Clearly, Christianity has a growing role, and the religious situation in Chukotka is becoming more complex. One of the reasons why Evangelical religious movements are becoming popular in Chukotka among the Indigenous population is the lack of public space—people have nowhere else to go. They want to meet somewhere, to drink tea and to talk to each other beyond the little world of each household and family.

The villagers generally distrust the Evangelical community. They call the Sunday services a "sect" or "alleluia" because of the religious hymns they sing. Vakhtin (2005: 28) described a conflict in Sireniki between a mother who was preparing for the commemorative ceremony and a daughter who refused to help her in a "sinful feeding of the devils."

As already mentioned, the Yupik feed non-kin as well. When a deceased's closest relatives become Christians, they neglect traditional practices and no longer feed their ancestors. So a non-kin will have to play the role:

I saw F.K. in my dream. He told me: "I am hungry." They [F.K.'s relatives] believe in God, they don't do *aghqesaq*, it is not accepted among them. I woke up and fed him. He is not my relative. I don't even know to which clan he belongs (woman, b. 1959, Novoe Chaplino).

## Conclusion

At first glance, the commemorative ceremony described by Voblov's (1952) and Krupnik's (2000) informants differs from my own observations only in details. Based on this previous ethnographic material and the accounts I took down from elders, someone might conclude that the commemorative ceremony is one of the most conservative elements of contemporary Yupik culture. Yet such a conclusion is flawed at best. The ceremony seems to be tenacious and dynamic at the same time.

Each family performs the *pominki* in its own manner. Relations with the deceased are private, intimate, individual, and flexible. Thus, individuals may include some elements in their family ceremony or leave out others according to their own perceptions of tradition and the relative wealth of the deceased. Such variation, however, exists only within a well known, simple, and therefore stable ritual framework. The succession of ritual actions within the commemorative ceremony is well preserved, perhaps because of the simplicity of the procedure and because the ceremony itself may be deconstructed into several micro-rituals that were and still are held throughout the year.

The commemorative ceremony has continued against a background of almost complete loss of traditional ceremonial culture. Personal festivals are not conducted anymore, memories of the last secret shamanistic performances go back to the 1960s, and the only preserved hunting ritual is the already mentioned lowering of boats into the water. Nowadays, the commemorative ceremony is the most organised and ritualised regular event in the intellectual life of the Asiatic Yupik, a special culmination of many acts of feeding the deceased that accompany an individual during the year.

This ritual has received new meaning in the post-Soviet period, with its individualisation, ideological emptiness, and spiritual freedom. The commemoration of the dead reflects several different contemporary processes, such as the "general growth in pride in aboriginal life-ways all across the Russian Federation" (Anderson 2011: 74), the shrinking of ritual space, and the growing importance of individual endeavour and family pride in the formation of Indigenous culture and tradition. With reduced application of traditional knowledge, ritual space has been narrowed (Krupnik and Vakhtin 1997: 245), and rituals have been restricted to the sphere of family life.

Contemporary Yupik traditional culture is finding more and more ways of expression within the family framework. Because the commemoration of the dead is strongly linked to the family, this ceremony will continue to be viable and common among this Indigenous people. People feed mostly those of their direct ancestors whose well-being they care about and from whom they expect help. Knowing that their parents and grandparents had performed the very same ceremony, sometimes in the very same place (e.g., Sireniki), many informants felt compelled to preserve its rules and thereby pass on to their children a complex system of relationships with their ancestors. When children are brought up by their grandmothers, they can speak or

understand their native language better than can the other children. When learning this language, pupils show the most interest in such tasks as drawing family trees and collecting information on family history. At present, there are no serious state or local initiatives to preserve the language or to teach traditional knowledge. It is now only within the family that Indigenous cultural practices are being preserved and transformed. The family has become the sole vehicle for transmission of Yupik tradition, as vividly shown by the commemorative ceremony and a diverse array of rituals and micro-rituals that concern relations with the deceased.

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