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The Commemoration Rite of Asiatic Yup'ik [Eskimos] and the Contemporary Ritual Space of Novoe Chaplino and Sirenkiki

The article examines the practice of feeding ancestors and spirits, widespread among the Asiatic Yup'ik. The most organized and ritualized way of feeding can be seen in the commemoration of the dead. The author describes in detail the contemporary commemoration rite of the Asiatic Yup'ik; he shows its variations as well as individual traits of the present social and ritual context in which the commemoration is performed.

Activities of the Orthodox mission among the native population of Chukotka had little success until the late twentieth century. Despite the efforts of a few individual missionaries, the Chukchi and Yup'ik Eskimos held on to their traditional beliefs and resisted weak efforts to convert them to Christianity (Znamenski 1999).^a The establishment of Soviet power took place rather late, and shamanist

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practices were still widespread in the middle of the 1930s (Golovko and Shvaittser 2006, p. 107). Russian influence on the coastal Chukchi and Yup'ik population was minimal. If individuals in the native population knew a language other than their native tongue,¹ it was usually English (Krupnik and Chlenov 1979, p. 27). In the 1930s, with the introduction of compulsory elementary education in school and the start of collectivization and antireligious propaganda, the process of breaking away from traditional beliefs and ritual practices began. Nearly all the traditional Eskimo "personal" [family-oriented] holidays² stopped being celebrated in the 1930s (Krupnik 1979, p. 29). In the 1940s–50s all the numerically small and nearly all the large settlements of Asiatic Yup'ik were closed down. Around 70 percent (Krupnik and Chlenov 2007, p. 59) of the entire Yup'ik population of Siberia was forced to abandon native places, and toward the end of the 1950s to settle in the urban-type settlement of Provideniia (founded in 1937), in the village of Novyi Chaplino (founded in 1958), in the only remaining old Eskimo village of Sireniki, and in the Chukchi coastal villages of Lavrentiia and Lorino. Despite the convulsions of the 1930s–50s, antireligious propaganda, intensification of contacts with the newly arrived Russian-speaking population, and the consolidation of the Soviet sociocultural system (boarding school, club, party organization), the Asiatic Yup'ik retained individual elements of traditional beliefs. One of the most enduring ritual practices is the ceremony of commemoration [*pominok*] of the dead, or *akh'kysiakh'tul'yk'* in the Chaplino dialect of the Yupik language.

Commemorations acquired new significance in the post-Soviet period, marked by individualization, ideological emptiness, and religious freedom. Reflected in the ceremony were such global processes for the Russian Arctic as "the general growth in pride in aboriginal life-ways all across . . . Russia" (Anderson 2011, p. 74), a narrowing of the ritual space, and an increase in the significance of the familial and the individual in the preservation and transformation of native cultures of Siberia.

My goal here is to specifically describe the contemporary commemoration rite of the Asiatic Yup'ik, to show its variations, and to identify individual features of its social and ritual context.

Despite the simplicity of memorial scripts, this ceremony is rich in nuances and is conducted in its own way in each family. Variations in Yup'ik commemorations and the pluralism of models of behavior within the framework of the contemporary ritual space reflect the social diversity of Novoe Chaplino and Sireniki.³ The mixed Yup'ik-Chukchi society of these settlements is very heterogeneous. Some people “live/conduct themselves like Russians,” other families are considered “traditional.” The social and cultural diversity is displayed in foods, interests, leisure activities, relations with relatives, and specific family ritual practices. I demonstrate how this sociocultural pluralism is refracted in the ritual space. What is discussed goes beyond social diversity and juxtapositions of traditional and nontraditional ways of life. Furthermore, ritual diversity is conditioned not only by social differences, for example levels of affluence, education, or assimilation. Every family has its own microtradition, a component of the Chukotka coastal population, formed by individual experience and personal notions about relations with the dead.

Culture and *tradition* are key concepts in a conversation about ritual practices. I regard *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” (Oosten and Remie 1999, p. 2). The commemoration rituals are unconditionally transformed, remaining part of a dynamic tradition for both the researchers and the Yup'ik. Yup'ik Eskimo tradition represents an aggregate of family microtraditions, sometimes in contradiction with one another without losing their value. Contemporary Yup'ik culture is understood here “not as a residual element of some former purity, but as an engaged and contemporary set of practices” (Kulchyski 2006, p. 158)—real actions, performed by my informants with varying degrees of regularity.^b

In the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug live 14,859⁴ representatives of native numerically small peoples: Chukchi (11,498), Yup'ik [listed as Eskimos] (1,165), Even (1,252), Chuvans (717), Yukagir (105), Koryaks (45), and others. The native population comprises slightly less than 30 percent of the overall number of residents of

Chukotka. Eskimos reside in three nationality-based settlements—Novoe Chaplino, Sireniki, and Uel'kal'. The fieldwork was conducted in July–September 2011 in Novoe Chaplino and Sireniki and in March–May 2012 in Novoe Chaplino.

Novoe Chaplino is a [nationality-based] village, found on the Tkachen inlet 20 kilometers north of the district [*raion*] center, the urban-type settlement of Provideniia. The village was formed in 1959 at the old Chukchi nomadic camping grounds. A large portion of Novoe Chaplino residents have either come from the Eskimo [Yup'ik] village of Staroe Chaplino (Unazik), closed by the authorities in 1959, or are their descendants. Staroe Chaplino was the largest settlement of Siberian Eskimos in the first half of the twentieth century, the most important point of contact between residents of the Chukotka peninsula and Alaska (St. Lawrence Island) (Krupnik and Chlenov 2007, p. 68). In the 1930s–40s, residents of numerically small Eskimo settlements that were being closed—Avana, Kivaka, Chechena, and Sikliuda—were resettled in Staroe Chaplino.

Novoe Chaplino is the closest village in the district to Provideniia and an airport. Thanks to its proximity to the center and its location on the calm Tkachen inlet, Novoe Chaplino regularly receives tourists. In the summer, because of the absence of marine mammals in the Tkachen inlet, hunters are forced to go to the special Inakhpak base, located 30 kilometers from the village. There are 467 residents⁵ in Novoe Chaplino, including 334 Yup'ik, 102 Chukchi, and 16 Russians. Chukchi constitute a significant population within the two nominally Yup'ik villages. They participate in the Yup'ik commemorations as relatives or invited guests. This article is based on interviews primarily with Yup'ik. The coastal Chukchi have other funeral and commemorative traditions, best preserved in the Chukchi littoral ethno-national villages of Yanrakynnot, Nunlingran, and Lorino.

Sireniki is the only ancient Eskimo [Yup'ik] village where people still live. It is situated 50 kilometers to the south of Provideniia on the open sea. This geographic location allows for game hunting [*promysel*] to be conducted year-round. Of the 507 residents⁶ of Sireniki, 240 are Yup'ik and 181 are Chukchi. Novoe Chaplino was

considered in Soviet times to be the model cultural village of the district, with a strong school and a folk ensemble famous in the region. Sireniki was known for its high level of economic development of reindeer breeding, fur farming, and seal hunting. While Novoe Chaplino has retained its cultural and educational significance, in Sireniki the [fur-animal] farm closed in 1995, only one reindeer-breeding brigade is left, and the seal industry is in crisis. Sireniki is distinguished by its rich local cultural landscape—every hillock, stream, and mountain within the settlement and outside its boundaries has its Yup'ik name, known to practically all native residents irrespective of age.

Feeding spirits⁷ of dead people, including ancestors is a diverse ritual practice, widespread among practically all native inhabitants of Novoe Chaplino and Sireniki, with the exception of individual Christians. The variety of occasions, places, and material objects associated with this feeding (people often feed objects symbolizing the dead and possessing their force) presents certain difficulties in classifying this cultural phenomenon. The commemorative ceremony is the most organized and ritualized kind of feeding. However, a great many less programmed moments for feeding spirits are performed over the year. Before describing the commemoration rite, let us look at the practice of feeding in all its diversity, so as to present the ritual of commemorating the deceased in its spiritual context.

The most widespread kind of feeding of ancestors I would call *common or everyday feeding*. In some families they feed ancestors several times a day, before each meal. People break off small pieces of food and throw them to the side, they dip a finger in a glass or a cup holding a beverage and sprinkle a few drops. In some families, ancestors are fed only before consuming a rare product or one in short supply, such as the Alaskan smelt [*koriushka*] from Anadyr) or right after opening a new package of tea or cookies. Anna Kerttula writes that this practice “was so routine among the Chukchi and the Yup'ik that all new food entering a household was first given to the spirits” (Kerttula 2000, p. 77). Some of my informants have a negative attitude toward daily feeding, and toward the desacraliza-

tion of the practice as a whole. Yup'ik call practically any feeding of spirits *akh'k'yshak'*. This word has begun to be widely used as a noun in the predominantly Russian speech of the Yup'ik population, although it is a verb meaning *to commemorate*. A large number of people use *akh'k'yshak'*; some say *akh'k'uak'*. Only one informant said it is preferable to use the word *tu ni* (*tunk'ug'ak'a*—to give something to somebody):

“Akh'k'yshak” is a corrupted word. It was corrupted by Eskimos [Yup'ik] who don't know the language well. You've got to say not “akh'k'yshak',” but “akh'k'uak'”—this is presenting, offering. But it is even better to say “tuni.” If you've come to someplace where you are gathering to drink tea, then before drinking the tea you absolutely have to do “tuni.” This is an offering of respect to the departed. “Akh'k'yshak” is very coarse in relation to ancestors. It is even cynical. (Female, b. about 1950, Novoe Chaplino)⁸

Most informants did not agree that *akh'k'yshak'* is a coarse word in relation to ancestors. However, some said it is more correct to use *akh'k'uak'*.

Feeding spirits in the tundra during stops to make camp or at a new place that has not yet been made habitable. From July through September, residents of Novoe Chaplino and Sireniki spend considerable outside the villages, gathering wild plants, roots, berries, and mushrooms; catching fish in distant lakes and rivers; and simply spending leisure time outdoors. In such situations, morsels of food thrown into a fire or to the side is intended for deceased residents—Chukchi or Yup'ik—of a particular territory. This is a way of expressing respect toward the former masters of a tangible place. The feeding of spirits on arriving at a new place is considered mandatory.

We arrived at the Seniavin springs (hot springs 40 km from Novoe Chaplino, the most popular leisure destination for the village residents—D.O). I came into the gully, fed the ancestors, and everybody lay down to sleep. I'm sleeping, and it seems to me that some kind of Chukchi grandmother has appeared. Their *yarangas* [multilayered skin tents] used to be there before, you know. She was wearing a *kamleika* [slicker of marine mammal intestines] and a scarf. The grandmother sat with her back to me. I asked: “Who are you?” And she didn't answer

anything. I asked again, and she turned, but instead of a face she's got emptiness. She came because I'd forgotten to give cigarettes, to feed the spirits tobacco. I woke up, went out on the street and started feeding them tobacco. (Female 1, b. 1959, Novoe Chaplino)

A separate activity is *feeding ancestors in abandoned settlements*. Every visit to Staroe Chaplino (Unazik), Kivak, Sikliuk, Napakutak, or Imtuk is usually accompanied by feeding. From time to time, elderly villagers arrange for a bus so they can go to Staroe Chaplino, where a border post is now situated. There they gather sea kale and have a joint tea party, after which they split up by clans or families and perform the rite to commemorate deceased relatives. Hunters passing abandoned settlements in boats sometimes stop across from the shore and also feed the ancestors:

When we pass by Kivak, we stop across from it on the water and start to feed. The hunters tell me: "Ah, this is where you come from." You ask the ancestors for something, you feed them, and you move on. (Male, b. 1973, Novoe Chaplino)

We're in Staroe Chaplino practically every year in the spring. We club walrus there—in the area of the bird bazaar when there's still ice. We ride to Staroe Chaplino from Ratvan (a hut 11 km from Novoe Chaplino, from where the game hunting is conducted from January through May—D.O.). We always feed the ancestors over there. Just a little, but we give something. We sit in the boat and feed the ancestors. I try and make sure to always feed them. (Male, b. 1961, Novoe Chaplino)

Sometimes, when feeding ancestors, Yup'ik *people have a specific goal*. They ask for recovery from illness, good dreams, [good] flying weather, or even hope for a passing car to hitch a ride. In these cases, people usually feed their closest deceased relatives.

I heard on several occasions that if people encountered certain difficulties, they fed not the closest relatives, but strangers, who, it is considered, could affect a problem's solution. In Eskimo concepts, a correlation exists between the length of time since someone's death and the ability to help those who are alive:

Last year, my children could not fly home from the airport. I went to Aunt Liuba. She mentioned Anasyki's name, saying: "Appeal to him."

He has been in the world beyond the grave for a long time, and you need to appeal to him. I appealed to him late in the evening, when it was dark. And did not feed him. But when the children flew in, I gave him a bead as a gift—I threw it through the window. (Female, b. 1966, Novoe Chaplino)

The practice of *feeding objects* is more closed off, [kept secret] from outsiders and less widespread among Yup'ik. In one village, after every successful hunt a hunter's wife feeds a small rock hidden near her house. As her husband told me, this rock had lain on her mother's chest during her funeral. Sometimes they feed objects that had belonged to close relatives:

I kept my father's belt after his funeral. I rolled it up really-really tight, tied it together with a rubber band, and hung it up far from prying eyes behind the wardrobe, so it couldn't be seen. Before every meal I go to it and rub it a bit with something or other: "I'm also eating with you." We feed it first and then sit down to eat ourselves. (Female, b. 1955, Novoe Chaplino)

Several times, I heard disapproval about feeding objects in the home. One Yup'ik woman told me the story of a Chukchi family from Novoe Chaplino that used to feed its ancestor's old belt, until they abandoned the practice. They remembered this only after moving to a new house in the early 2000s. They resumed the feeding but, in her opinion, this led to various misfortunes. Many Yup'ik believe that resuming an interrupted ritual practice is dangerous. For example, not a single family would consider reviving long-forgotten personal holidays. Informants attribute the lack of desire to revive forgotten ceremonies to a fear of making a mistake due to ignorance of traditional practices.

The practice of feeding spirits is closely interconnected with *Yup'ik concepts about dreams*. A dream can induce someone to begin feeding [a specific spirit]. Feeding after a bad dream presaging trouble is supposed to minimize possible misfortune:

I had a bad dream—dogs were eating my son. They ate his legs up to the knee. I was told I must draw a little figure of a dog on a piece of paper and feed it, to give it just a pinch of whatever I have. Then go outside, tear up the paper, and say: "We have fed you, do not do bad

things.” And then walk around the house, making a circle. And return inside the house. (Female, b. about 1969, Novoe Chaplino)

The feeding ritual exhibits abundant nuances and diversity, as suggested in these examples. I have merely outlined the contours of this complex cultural phenomenon.

The commemoration rite

The commemoration rite is rather simple. In the morning, the commemoration group sets off to the commemoration site or the cemetery. A bonfire is lit and prepared food is taken out. Small pieces are pinched off from new, just-opened items and thrown into the fire with words of greeting, invitation, and sometimes apology. The group eats, and then exchanges products. The commemoration ends with a ritual purification [smudging] using a charred piece of wood or a tuft of grass. Sometimes a small stone or a blade of grass is taken from the place of commemoration; after several days, these must be discarded. This is the general script of a commemoration; every group conducts the ritual in its own way.

The time and place of the commemoration rite. Traditionally, memorials were conducted in the fall, in late September–early October, or in the words of one elderly Eskimo woman from Sireniki, “before the frosts come”— “before the ground freezes” (“kumliatystykh-pynan nuna”) (female, b. 1942, Sireniki). Frozen ground does not receive offerings. Vladimir Bogoraz correctly explained the timing of the commemorative rite of maritime Chukchi by the need to treat ancestors with venison (Bogoraz 2011, p. 194). Elderly informants recall that deer meat brought by Eskimos from the tundra after the autumn kill was considered ritualistic and was an obligatory element of the commemoration repast:

We didn’t go without deer. Before, we used to wait for the frosts to come, when there would be deer, so as to kill them. Only now there are no deer, but we still go in the fall or at the end of August. (Male, b. 1948, Sireniki)

Yup’ik Eskimos called venison “unsalty meat” (female, b. 1950, Novoe Chaplino), as compared to walrus, whale, or ringed seal.

Venison sausage (*k'vek*) is used to this day during the hunters' rite of launching boats on the water, conducted in April with the start of the hunt on the water for walrus and bearded seals. Deer sinews are tied around the arms of everyone attending a funeral, to scare away evil spirits.

Today not every family brings deer meat to commemorations, or performs commemorations in the fall. More than half the families I surveyed have two commemoration days a year: one in the spring (May–June) and a second in the fall (August–October). Most often, springtime commemorations are conducted at the heads of specific graves at the village cemetery for one or several recently deceased close relatives. The spring commemorations sometimes have a specific date—the day of the dead relative's death or birth. Such a commemoration group is organized by a single family.

The autumn commemorations do not have a firm date. All known and unknown dead relatives are “invited” to the fall commemoration repast; the memorializing group is usually more numerous. The fall commemorations are usually celebrated either “without even getting to the cemetery” or in the tundra at a specific rock or special commemoration pit, in which a bonfire is built.

My brother died on 29 May. And Mama said that even after she dies we must keep going to his grave on 29 May. We commemorate my brother and my mother there, because she died on 22 May. Only our family gathers in May. We have our own stone not far from the village. Every kin-group has its own stone. We go there in August. In August we commemorate everybody. It just worked out that way in our family that Mama would always take us to this stone. But in August more people gather together. We go really early—at 6 in the morning. We have two commemoration days. In August we take the Tagitukaks (the informant and the Tagitukaks belong to the same sig'unpagyt kin-group—D.O.), maybe not all of them, but at least one. But the Tagitukaks also have a special commemoration day. I think theirs is in early May. There's no difference between these commemorations. In May we go to the graves, we paint them. But in August we go to the stone. I don't know when we started going to the stone. As long as I can remember, we've always gone to the stone. (Female, b. 1963, Novoe Chaplino)

Sometimes the first spring or early summer commemorations coincide with starting the treks into the tundra:

The first outing into the tundra has got to be specifically to the grave markers. I've made a rule like that for myself. I feel better if I first go to the graves. I celebrate a commemoration day when the road gets opened up, at the beginning of June. Last year I got held up. I had to hurry, because the *nunivak* (deep-purple stonecrop, *Rhodiola atropurpurea*.—D.O.) was already in bloom on the tundra. I missed it because of the weather. I knew that it was already flowering there and that I had to go. I feel how harmony and calmness flows in my soul after a commemoration. And then I go into the tundra for collecting with no worries, unafraid of anything. (Female, b. 1955, Novoe Chaplino)

Informants explain the necessity of performing commemorations twice a year by saying that in spring they are symbolically “opening” the summer season and in the fall they are “closing” it. Or in spring they go “so that everything would be good” in the summer, and in the fall “so that everything would be good” in the winter.

I don't know why we've got commemorations on the first Sunday in June, and then on the first Sunday in November. June is the beginning of summer, while in November everything's already coming to an end—the hunting, the fishing, the gathering of useful wild plants. (Female, b. 1961, Provideniia)

The intimacy and family orientation of the spring or early summer commemorations, compared to the many people and greater openness of the autumn ritual are the distinguishing features of the commemorative cycle for families that celebrate commemorations twice a year.

As noted, spring commemorations are usually celebrated at the cemetery and the autumn ones at a commemoration stone. In the spring, the family repairs the memorial, painting its enclosure or fixing its obelisk, and after the winter cleans the graves of relatives. The commemoration place is designated either by a large stone around which smaller stones are piled, or a small pit covered with a stone. A year after a funeral, relatives bring a stone from the grave to the commemoration place, in this way including the recently deceased in the overall group of ancestors. The ritual of inclusion is usually conducted on the first anniversary of a person's death. Sometimes it is accompanied by a symbolic capturing of the relative's soul with a lasso:

We are going to catch her in the summer. On the day she died, we will need to catch her. We will sneak up, fling the rope on the monument and it will be as if we are catching her. And then we will take a stone and bring it to the place where we commemorate the rest of them. (Female, b. about 1975, Novoe Chaplino)

Paulin, Papa's brother, died in January. In the summer our older sister came, and all of us went, the whole clan. The weather was excellent. And Nosu told us how: "Lie down everybody!" This was a little funny. We lay down. And Nosukak first threw the rope, as if though he'd caught him, and only then could we approach his grave and start the commemoration. He caught Paulin so that he'd eat with us too. This is probably a Kivak (an Eskimo-Chukchi settlement closed in 1952—D.O.) custom. (Female 2, b. 1959, Novoe Chaplino)

Spring commemorations are one manifestation of social and cultural pluralism, of the process of change not only of the commemoration rite, but also concepts of relations with the dead. Just a few decades ago, most families celebrated a commemoration day only once a year, in the fall. Certain families still strongly believe that that it is not appropriate to visit graves often. However, today people tend to go to the cemetery more frequently; some visit graves every week. Naturally, these visits are not accompanied by a full-fledged commemoration ceremony. The practice of outings to graves before leaving for the mainland [*materik*], and also before some important event is widespread.^c People ask ancestors for help and simply leave offerings at the graves without lighting a fire. Sometimes they time a commemoration ritual to coincide with the return of children from schooling from Anadyr or from the mainland, so that everybody can go to the graves together.

If a person has died far from a Chaplino or Sireniki commemoration site, then relatives ask somebody or they themselves bring back a little stone, for example, from Magadan or Lavrentiia. Then they can feed the person together with the rest of the ancestors.

For a various reasons, it is sometimes necessary to relocate a commemoration place. For example, in the 1970s, cows were treading on top of one Sireniki family's commemoration site,⁹ and my informant's mother was forced to relocate the "fire hearth." For this, she called a knowledgeable elder, who lassoed the "fire

hearth.” Relocation of the commemoration place is not always accompanied by a lasso:

It was already getting hard for my grandmother Nutal_’naun to walk to the graves, and we decided that we would simply take the little stones and move them to a place closer to the house. There are three big stones before you get to the lake. There we sited a pit for a fire, at a river. We chose the place so it would not be far for grandmother to get there. (Female, b. 1975, Novoe Chaplino)

In cases of bad weather or if it is hard for elderly or ill family members to walk to a commemoration place, the ritual can be performed right by the house or even in a corridor. Indoors, the fire is lit on the blade of a shovel or other flat iron surface, and the ritual takes place the same way as in the tundra.

Offerings to the dead are not always left at graves. Sometimes friends and relatives come home to the family that has lost a member on the anniversary of a death or the deceased’s birthday. The commemorations are performed at a well-provisioned table, according to the Russian custom. However, people bring not only food for the seated repast [*zastol’e*], but also the dead person’s favorite products, which can be gathered by his or her photograph, and later taken by relatives to the grave.

Yup’ik of St. Lawrence Island used to perform commemoration rites until the 1920s–30s. Each clan, as in Staroe Chaplino, had one or even several commemoration places (Krupnik, Mason, and Horton 2004, p. 215). The ceremony had the same name as among the Asiatic Yup’ik Eskimos—*aghqesaghtuq*. Yup’ik of Nelson Island (Alaska) continue practices of feeding ancestors in the tundra when stopping to make camp and of making occasional spontaneous offerings to graves. Children are not permitted to pick up berries that have fallen and scattered, because it is considered that this is how ancestors signify their desire to receive these berries as a gift (Fienup-Riordan 1994, p. 214).

The commemoration group. The autumnal commemorations are conducted by an expanded commemoration group that includes members of a clan, or a kin-group. Staroe Chaplino used to be distinguished by a *clan structure* that was well preserved until the

twentieth century (Krupnik 1980, p. 213). It had an impact on the economic life of the village, on how the inhabitants settled within a system, and on the locale of commemoration places. Until the 1930s, the clan represented a group of families united by a common territory, rite cycle (personal winter holidays, autumnal commemorations), and mythical history about its ancestors. The makeup of a *baidara* [large open-sea kayak] artel was likewise based on the clan principle (Sergeev 1962, p. 37). Members of the same artel are not always one another's kin; until the resettlement of 1958 they were united primarily on the territorial principle. Although exogamic paternal lineage did not exist among the Yup'ik Eskimos in the past, the clan is considered by its members as a kin group (Arutiunov, Krupnik, and Chlenov 1982, p. 78). To designate this collective Yup'ik use the [Russian] word *rod* [kin-group].

Several small settlements existed around Staroe Chaplino that were abandoned in the 1930s–40s. Three—Ukig'iarak, Tyfliak, and Uniyramkyt—were populated by the largest Unazik clan, the *liakag'mit*. According to elderly informants, people from the *liakag'mit* clan settled the territory of Staroe Chaplino later than everybody else, and until their resettlement they had deer herds. It is noteworthy that up to 1958, individual *liakag'mit* families residing in Staroe Chaplino tried to celebrate commemorations not at the cemetery or close to the village, but on their empty “kin-group” lands—in Ukig'iarak, Tyfliak, and Uniyramkyt. Thus commemorative places could be situated rather far from habitation places, and in this case commemoration together with travel time took up an entire day.

Today, belonging to one or another clan has no practical social significance. Some adults even have a hard time naming their kin-group. However, when talking about commemorations, many mentioned that their “entire kin-group” goes to the commemoration place in the fall, that they feed all the *liakag'mit* or all the *sianig'myl'n'ut* (Staroe Chaplino kin-groups) there. With the move to Novoe Chaplino, people who had come from the abandoned settlements chose commemoration places in the direction nearest to their original settlement relative to Novoe Chaplino. Today, individual commemoration places are associated more with a specific family and other related

families, rather than with the entire kin-group. Thus, for example, because of a personal quarrel, several families of the *sianig'myl'n'ut* kin-group (the oldest of the Unazik clans) do not gather together, but perform commemorations at different times and at different commemoration places. One Chaplino family performs separate commemorations for the dead residents of the small settlement of Sikliuk; it had been on Yttygran island and was closed in 1950. This is the only example of a separate place for the commemoration of residents of an entire settlement, although primarily members of just one *sig'unpagyt* kin-group lived in Sikliuk:

On the other side of the river is a place for commemorations of the Sikliuks. Before you get to Karman [an inlet 2 km from Novoe Chaplino—D.O.], before the low flat bald hill. Aunt Liuba always used to say that we should go there and commemorate all the Sikliuks. Nobody else goes there besides us. We commemorate the Sikliuks in July, while the commemoration for ancestors we do in August, sometimes in September. (Female, b. about 1975, Novoe Chaplino)

Women who marry members of another kin-group perform commemorations with their husband's family. I was present at a commemoration rite in Staroe Chaplino. Members of the two largest kin-groups—*sianig'myl'n'ut* and *liakag'mit*—came by bus. An elderly Yup'ik woman from the *liakag'mit* clan, who had married a man from the *sianig'myl'n'ut* clan, conducted the commemoration, together with her daughters, separately from members of her own clan. This served as a pretext for a multitude of jokes about “betrayal.”

Outside people who have no kinship connections with the rest of the commemoration group often participate in a commemoration rite:

It is customary for someone from the outside to be at a commemoration. A single outside person. It does not matter who it is. I do not know why. We always take someone along. For example, our uncle Anatolii Tagitutkak's second wife is a Chukchi. And that is enough, that she comes. She is not from our kin-group. (Female, b. about 1965, Novoe Chaplino)

Outsiders are taken to render them a service. If one does not have one's own commemoration place but would like to feed one's

ancestors, then one can ask to come along to other people's commemorations. One Yup'ik woman told me that an outsider at a commemoration drives away "little beings" [*chertikov*]—"who have gone away to the world on the other side but who have not yet come into the family, not yet returned as anybody" (Female 3, b. about 1959, Novoe Chaplino). Yup'ik name their children in honor of relatives who have died, who symbolically return after the naming. After the repast, members of the commemoration group exchange the remaining food. Sometimes they give it out to strangers they encounter on the way back. It is considered that the hosts of a commemoration cannot take anything home for themselves after the repast. The ritual is a rather open ceremony, to which practically anybody can come. Nobody mentioned any prohibitions on attending commemorations. The only condition is that guests must bring food. Outsiders who come to a commemoration just to get a drink create a negative attitude, but nobody turns them away. Nevertheless, more often than not, people do not know how commemorations take place in other families. Few would come to someone else's commemoration rite for no particular reason. By the same token, people inform only those whom they want to see at the ceremony of their decision to perform a commemoration in the near future. The particulars of the commemoration rite are discussed among acquaintances.

Individual elements of the ritual. Products for a commemoration are set aside well in advance. Memorial food is often in short supply, for holidays, but always new, not yet opened. Particular attention is devoted to treats that their closest dead relatives would prize. Individual families attempt to obtain venison, sometimes dried. While at one time Yup'ik clans did not eat marine mammal meat (Krupnik 1980, p. 212), this prohibition is forgotten now—they often bring *man'tak'* (whale skin with blubber), *nuvkurak* (sun-dried hard whale-meat jerky), and cooked walrus meat. "Local" or "food of their nationality," as the Yup'ik call it, always has to be present at a commemoration repast. Tobacco from a newly opened package and drops of vodka and tea are thrown into the fire:

My husband died. It so happened that Sergei Kutylin came to me and said: "What do you say, Tamara? I suppose you are feeding him only

stewed fruits, tea, sugar, and sweets? Why don't I treat him with vodka and let him have a smoke? You probably do not know that you're supposed to buy smokes too." I am definitely going to call smokers to the commemoration. (Female, b. 1955, Novoe Chaplino)

While distributing the food, the memorial's host or hostess pinches off small pieces from each item and sets them aside on a special saucer. Sometimes a jar lid, a flat piece of wood, or a sheet of paper serves as the vessel for the ritual food. Earlier, special ritual deep-dish platters [*korytsa*] of wood or stained, carved-out walrus tusk were used.

The host throws food morsels into the fire with words of greeting to the ancestors, inviting them to the repast or apologizing. The greeting is usually said in Russian, but some elders told me that they converse with ancestors only in Yup'ik. At most commemorations, the first words addressed to the ancestors sound something like this:

Here, we have brought you something, so you won't be hungry until we feed you next year. (Female, b. about 1942, Sireniki)

We have come to you, we have not forgotten you and we are treating you. (Female, b. 1966, Novoe Chaplino).

Hey everybody, everybody, come on up, drink, eat, smoke, drink tea (*Akhkukh'si, k'amakhl''iusi kytfakh'tyk: myg'ityk', nag'ityk, myli-ukhtyk, k'aiukh'tyk*). (Female 2, b. about 1959, Novoe Chaplino)

This phrase is said by the hostess of the fire in the Yup'ik language.

After words of greeting, the host of the fire begins enumerating by name the relatives he knew personally. Most often this ends with a generalized invitation to all the ancestors ("and now the rest of you come"). Some explain that they feed all former residents of the abandoned settlements, calling them, for example, *kivag'mit* (residents of Kivak), *tasug'mit* (residents of Chechena), or *un'azig'mit* (residents of Staroe Chaplino). So that nobody would be left hungry, the host of the commemoration separately summons relatives unknown to him:

Everyone we do not know, everyone we missed from the kin-group, come up too. (Male, b. about 1941, Novoe Chaplino)

Fearful of making a mistake, Yup'ik can summon a knowledgeable dead relative to themselves for assistance:

Because we did not know all the subtleties, my older sister called on Mama and asked her to invite everybody who was supposed to be invited to this fire: "Whoever you wish to call, invite them to the fire"—"*Tukh'l' iuk'akh'tyn takh'sikh'k'i khliugnun.*" (Female, b. about 1934, Provideniia)

Sometimes the host apologizes to the ancestors for being late or for not coming to the previous commemoration, as well as for his forgetfulness in naming deceased relatives.

To the Yup'ik, if the fire kindles well, burns intensely, and the firewood burns up quickly, this means the ancestors have accepted the treat. In the past, *k'upik* grass ([Arctic bell heather,] *Cassiope tetragona*) was used to kindle the fire. In the words of one informant, it "flares up like gasoline." Many of my informants consider that fire is the best conductor of treats to ancestors. Some distrust feeding without a fire. One elderly woman told me that "you must always throw it into the fire, because when you just toss it [away], they (the ancestors—D.O.) fight" (female, b. 1941, Novoe Chaplino).

After treating the ancestors and consuming the repast, members of the commemoration group *exchange food*. This ceremony is called *minal'yk'*. (Figure 1.) After that, each person goes through a rite of purification by fire from sicknesses. The host takes a charred piece of wood or a clump of grass and fans participants with the [smudge] smoke, in their front and back:

You should take blades of grass and fan your relatives with them saying: "Tag'i, tag'i," which means "Come, come here!" That is, I am taking away sicknesses." (Female, b. 1961, Provideniia)

Then each person takes a little stone, or a blade of grass, sometimes from the tuft with which the host was fanning people. The blade of grass or the little stone must subsequently somehow become lost. On the basis of material gathered in Staroe Chaplino and Sireniki in 1934–36, I.K. Voblov wrote that in taking away a little stone or a blade of grass after a commemoration, Yup'iks capture their shadow, which must not be left at the cemetery (Voblov 1952, p. 325). They likewise take a stone from the grave immediately



Figure 1. **The Exchange of Products (*Minal'yk'*) After the Commemorative Feast. Staroe Chaplino.** Photograph by the author, 2011

after a funeral. The accidental loss of a symbolic item (a stone, a blade of grass, a wristband made of reindeer sinew) obtained from a funeral or commemoration ceremony is a widespread element of the rituals. The commemoration ends with closing the place where the fire had burned with a stone, “so that the fire will not escape” or “to put out the fire and not let the spirit out.”

A change in the weather in the course of a commemoration or after the rite serves as proof that the ancestors accepted the treat:

When we started to cut the Greenland [bowhead] whale [*Balaena mysticetus*], the weather was good, but then it suddenly started raining. But Larisa says: “Probably in that world Mama is very satisfied.” This is her favorite Greenland *man'tak'*, you know. She really loved the *man'tak'* of Greenland whale. (Female, b. 1949, Novoe Chaplino)

Many people told me about their *dreams* connected with commemorations. In such dreams, the ancestors say thanks for the treat and the attention of the living relatives:

I once saw a dream. We were going with Trapeznikova. There's a small river there, and we went on beyond the river. The fog around

us gradually lifted, and I look—Mama’s sitting there. I say in Yup’ik: “So do our little packages get to all of you?” “Yes, yes, they do,” she answers. I think that maybe they really do reach her. For some reason I all of a sudden dreamed it. One question, one answer. You give them just a teeny little bit, but for them this is a lot. (Female, b. 1957, Novoe Chaplino)

Often, the deceased’s requests in a dream induce people to offer an unplanned feeding. For example, one woman dreamed of her deceased friend complaining about the cold. The next day, the woman went to Provideniia, bought a new nightgown, and tore it up on her friend’s grave. The destruction of various goods at a funeral and during feeding is an element of traditional funeral and commemoration rituals that has survived in Novoe Chaplino and Sireniki.^d According to elders, the practice of leaving gifts on a grave used to be very widespread, but was forgotten. In the Christian Canadian Arctic, the old tradition of occasional offerings of objects and small pieces of food at graves has survived today (Laugrand, Oosten 2010, p. 286). The objects are not broken, but must remain on the grave; no one can borrow them unless they are replaced by something equivalent.

Micro-rituals of the commemoration rite. The commemoration rite consists of several micro-rituals, which in another context could be offered separately, as small rites or as components of other ceremonies. For example, during the only surviving hunters’ ritual—the launching of boats into [water recently freed from ice] in April—some hunters feed the spirits and ancestors through a fire. First, the hunters drive the boats and their motors from the village for twelve kilometers along the ice to the Ratvan base. Sometimes all the brigades together, sometimes each brigade separately, launch the boats and begin the first open sea hunt of the year. Before the launching, each brigade performs a ritual of feeding ancestors, spirits, and hunters who have died. Of the four brigades in Novoe Chaplino, only one lights a fire. The rest make the offering by throwing pieces of food and tobacco into the sea. The brigade leader who considers it necessary to retain a fire as part of the ritual is not considered the most “traditional” or “superstitious” of the hunters. Feeding through the fire manifests his personal notion of

the tradition, his way of displaying respect to spirits. An obligatory treat is sausage stuffed with reindeer fat—*k'vek* (from Yup'ik “to stuff”—*kyvig*). As in all other instances of feeding, only pieces of new products and cigarettes from freshly opened packs are offered to ancestors. Sometimes they feed *nunivak* (*Rhodiola atropurpurea*), bearded seal [*Erignathus barbatus*; *ugruk* in Yup'ik] meat, *man'tak*, bread, or “Russian sausage” (what they call ordinary store-bought sausage). For venison sausage, *k'vek*, the Chaplino hunters travel to the Chukchi in the Iangrakynnot tundra. The sausage must be new, not yet touched by anyone. One brigade leader showed me a *k'vek* before the ritual, but forbade me to touch it. It sometimes happens that the brigade leader does not have any venison sausage by April. In that case, he can symbolically purchase it:

The *k'vek* [another brigade leader.—D.O.] bought it from me. He gave me a bead on a piece of thread, and I gave him the sausage. Last year I did not have any, but I bought some from Yura. We used to string beads on reindeer sinews, but now it is just on an ordinary string. You must not give the sausage in pieces. It always must be whole. (Male, b. 1973, Novoe Chaplino)

As in the commemoration rite, the ritual of launching boats can be conducted several times a year. For example, bad luck pursued one hunter, so in despair he brought the boat back to shore and began the ritual again. This ritual is conducted twice by those hunters who, in addition to a small boat, also have a large one. These are launched right at the settlement in June, when the Tkachen inlet is free of ice.

Purification that concludes a memorial is performed not only within the commemoration ceremony. (Figure 2.) Yup'ik set fire to the root of the *typl'iuk* plant (sea-watch, *Angelica lucida*). They fumigate the house and purify their family with it. This is usually done if someone has died in the settlement, to scare away evil spirits. A widespread practice is purification with paper, for example after a bad dream or during an illness—one must take a piece of paper, run it over one's body, ask ancestors for help, and then tear up the paper and throw it out. One woman showed me the hoof of a bighorn sheep she kept in her home. If one of her close kin gets



Figure 2. **A Purification Ritual (Smudging) Using Fire and Smoke, After the Memorial at Staroe Chaplino.** Photograph by the author, 2011

sick, she conducts the same purification rite as the host of a commemoration does with a charred piece of wood—she sets fire to the hoof and dispels the sickness. Then she offers a bead to her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, from whom, according to family legend, the hoof had passed down to those living today. The hoof is wrapped in reindeer sinews strung with beads—each one, “as a memory of feeding.”

Mama was saying before she died: “Do not abandon this, do not lose it. You too have grandchildren.” If my hand or foot hurts, I take a jar lid or something else, make a small fire and set fire to the hoof a little bit and start talking: “This is a sheep’s foot, it is going to save me from everything.” Our mother’s and her mother’s strength is here. This is also Papulia’s [the informant’s grandmother—D.O.]. Even Papulia’s parents used it. Mama gave this to me before she died. When I have done everything to myself, I slip a bead on a piece of sinew and tie it. This is in gratitude, so they will keep saving us. I keep it safe. This is done as a last resort, not every day. This is feeding too. Mama used to say: “I am not a shaman, I cannot teach you prayers. All I have left is this hoof.” Every family has got to have something like this. (Female, b. 1949, Novoe Chaplino)

A set of ritual objects comprising beads, reindeer sinews, *typl'iuk* root, blades of grass, and stones are used in micro-rituals and in more formalized and complex ceremonies (funerals, launching boats, commemoration). Yup'ik carry blades of grass and stones with them after commemorations and funeral; these items then should be lost accidentally. They exchange a venison sausage for a bead to conduct the ritual launching of a boat into the water; in some families, beads of different colors are thrown out the window (symbolically offered to spirits) after a good dream so that it will come to pass, or after a bad dream to ward off misfortune. (Figure 3.)

Christianity and the feeding of spirits. A related issue is the co-existence of Christians and adherents of traditional beliefs. With the opening of the borders, Protestant missionaries have begun coming to Chukotka. People who lived in a religious vacuum in the Soviet period and had not experienced the strong influence of Orthodoxy readily received the teachings of Western missionaries. In 2005, fourteen Chukotka settlements officially registered communities of Pentecostals (Vaté 2009, p. 41). In Novoe Chaplino, such a community comprises twelve active new converts, mainly female pensioners. There are two parishes in Sireniki—one Russian-speaking (the largest group), another Chukchi-speaking (for elderly Chukchi women). Increasing numbers of Yup'ik and Chukchi are Orthodox. While syncretism of traditional beliefs and Christianity is characteristic of Orthodoxy, most Pentecostals from the native peoples have rejected family ritualism and the feeding of spirits:

We have stopped doing this. At work they know that I do not do this. I have even forgotten this word. But recently they say to me: “Do an akh'k'yshak'.” But I say: “What is this anyway?” We do not go to commemorations. We do not celebrate any kin-group holidays. There are idols there, you know. Some young people keep the pagan traditions. And they really criticize us, saying that we have renounced them. (Female, b. 1976, Novoe Chaplino)

However, some Pentecostals attend both Sunday services and commemorations. Converting to Protestantism and joining the local evangelical community can be viewed as manifesting sociocultural



Figure 3. **The Ritual of Boat Launching. Ratvan.** Photograph by the author, 2012

activeness and satisfying the need to belong to some structure or community. The increasing role of Christianity and the complication of the religious situation as a whole on Chukotka are obvious. The popularity of evangelical religious currents among the native population is connected with the point that they have practically nowhere to go in the nationality-based villages, yet people need someplace to get together, drink tea, and talk.

Many native residents who adhere to traditional beliefs treat local Christians with distrust and ridicule, calling the village Sunday meetings a “sect” or a “hallelujah” because of the religious songs sung by the believers. N[ikolai] B. Vakhtin cites an intriguing example of a conflict in Sireniki between a mother preparing for a commemoration and a daughter who refuses to help her with the “sinful feeding of devils” (Vakhtin 2005, p. 28).

As noted, sometimes Yup’ik feed dead strangers as well. One reason may be that the deceased closest Christian relatives disdain traditional practices:

I once happened to see Kuiapa Fedia in a dream. And he said: “I am starving.” They are “god-believers,” you know (Kuiapa’s relatives.—

D.O.), they do not do *akh'k'yshak'*, they shun this kind of thing. I woke up and fed him. He is not my relative, I do not even know what kin-group he is from. (Female, b. 1959, Novoe Chaplino)

Conclusion

Little testimony survives about how Asiatic Yup'ik Eskimo conducted commemoration rites before their resettlement from Staroe Chaplino to the new settlement. The ceremony was reflected in the greatest detail in recollections of elderly people born in the first quarter of the twentieth century, as collected by I[gor] I. Krupnik in the 1970s (Krupnik 2000). Material about Yup'ik holidays, including remembrance of the dead, gathered by I.K. Voblov in the mid-1930s is interesting. Waldemar B. Bogoraz wrote about the commemoration traditions of the maritime native inhabitants in his *Chukchi. Religiiä*. At first glance, the commemoration ritual described by Voblov's and Krupnik's informants differs only in insignificant details from the commemoration rituals I observed in 2001. Based on this historical material and the recollections of individual elders about earlier ritual actions, one could conclude that the commemoration ceremony is one of the most conservative elements in the contemporary intellectual culture of Asiatic Yup'ik Eskimo. However, in this situation it is inappropriate to speak of conservatism. First, because of the closing of Staroe Chaplino and the resettlement of all residents to the Tkachen inlet's Novoe Chaplino settlement in 1958, people lost access to old commemoration places and to the village cemetery. Although some families designated new commemoration places almost immediately, the practice of regular and organized feeding of ancestors had been interrupted. I. Krupnik noted in a personal conversation that in the 1970s, Novoe Chaplino residents rarely conducted commemoration days, while in Sireniki nothing stood in the way of the ritual's continuity, and all the families maintained this custom. Commemorations began to be revived in Novoe Chaplino starting in the 1980s. The ritual I observed in Novoe Chaplino is to some extent a reconstructed ceremony, or a ceremony that has survived serious shock, decline, and revival. This represents not the invention of a tradition, but the partial revival of a

rite, the creation of a new sacral landscape around a new settlement. The commemorations are connected with a multitude of other less formalized and ritualized practices of feeding the dead. These practices often do not have any geographic ties and cannot be forgotten by reason of a changed place of residence. Today, both in Sireniki and in Novoe Chaplino, the commemoration ritual is for many the most important, if not the only, regular family ceremony.

Second, commemoration cannot be called a conservative ceremony because, as discussed earlier, each family conducts this ritual in its own way. Commemoration is a flexible and variable ceremony. Relations with dead relatives are localized in the field of the private and the individual. Each person can add individual elements to the ceremony, disregard some of the rules, or change ritual details, according to individual ideas about the tradition and well-being of dead relatives.

But these liberties are limited by a framework of the ritual that is simple and known to all. The sequence of ritual actions in the commemoration ceremony is retained. This is due to the script's simplicity and because commemoration can be divided into several micro-rituals, conducted earlier and today over the entire year. Although venison has stopped being an obligatory treat, the host of the commemoration most often converses with ancestors in the Russian language, far from all observe the rule that memorials should occur a year after a funeral, and not all practise the rite of symbolically catching the soul with a lasso, the continuity of the ceremony is obvious even in Novoe Chaplino, despite the shocks associated with resettlement.

This continuity stands out against the background of a practically complete loss of traditional ceremonial culture. Personal holidays are no longer celebrated, and recollections about the last of secret shamanic seances [*kamlanii*] belong to the 1960. Only the rite of launching boats has survived, when extensive game hunting rituals were once common.

The commemoration ceremony is now the most organized and ritualized regular event in the intellectual life of the Asiatic Yup'ik, a distinctive culmination of the whole sequence of spirit feeding that characterize individual ritual life throughout the year.

The narrowing of the field of application of traditional knowledge is manifested not only in the narrowing of ritual space, studied by I.I. Krupnik and N.B. Vakhtin (Krupnik and Vakhtin 1997, p. 245), but also in the displacement of this ritual space into the family sphere. Tradition and contemporary Yup'ik culture find outlets for expression in a family framework. It is precisely the family orientation of the commemoration ceremony that is the guarantee of the preservation of its relevancy for the native population of these villages. Yup'ik do not feed unpersonified spirits from a forgotten traditional pantheon; they make offerings to concrete dead relatives and ancestors, about whose well-being they are concerned and from whom they expect assistance. Awareness that one's parents or grandparents conducted the same kind of ritual, sometimes at the same place (for example in Sireniki), compels many to preserve the order of the ceremony, and to transfer knowledge to their children about the complex system of how to relate to ancestors. (Figure 4.)

In school, during lessons teaching the mother tongue, the greatest interest is generated by drawing genealogical trees and collecting family legends about ancestors. Only children raised by grandmothers, who have consciously instilled in them knowledge of the native language, have at least some ability to speak the native language in comparison with exclusively Russian-speaking peers. Serious state or local initiatives with respect to preservation of the language or incorporation of traditional knowledge into a contemporary context do not come from members of the native population. And only within the framework of the family are traditional cultural practices preserved and transformed. The family has become the sole means of transmission of Yup'ik Eskimo tradition. Some of its most vivid manifestations are the commemoration rite and the diverse sequence of rituals and micro-rituals for feeding the dead.

Notes

1. Chukchi–Eskimo bilingualism was widespread among the Yup'ik Eskimo population in the precontact period.
2. Intimate winter holidays, observed by individual families.
3. The place where fieldwork was conducted.

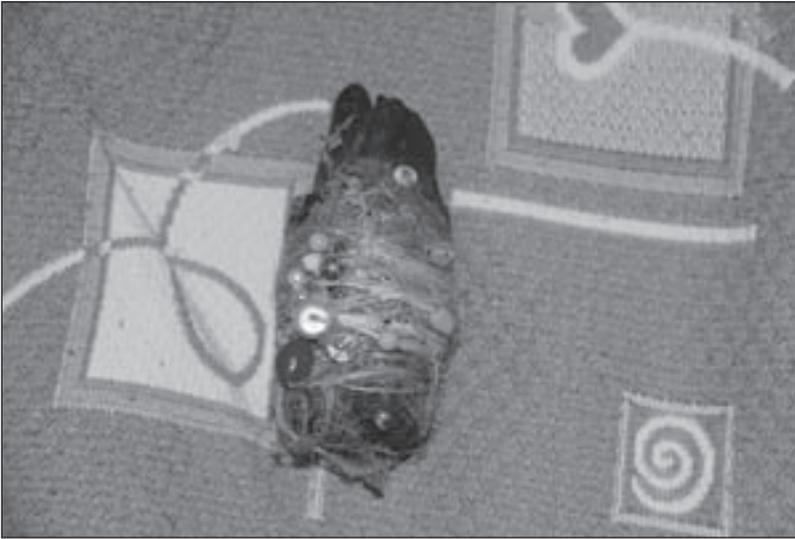


Figure 4. **An Amulet—the Hoof of a Bighorn Sheep, Surrounded by Deer Hide, with Attached Beads.** Novoe Chaplino. Photograph by the author, 2012

4. As of 1 January 2009.

5. As of 1 April 2012.

6. As of 1 January 2011.

7. Yup'ik call the dead people whom they feed spirits [*dukhi*].

8. I do not provide informants' first names and surnames, just gender, year of birth, and place of residence. If several informants of one gender were born in the same year and now live in the same village, there is an ordinal number after their gender.

9. There was a cow-herding collective-farm in Sireniki in the Soviet period.

Editor's notes

a. The original English abstract for this article translates the featured group termed "Eskimo" in Russian as Yup'ik. Assuming the author approved that abstract, and given that Yup'ik is the preferred term by kindred groups in Alaska, I have changed most "Eskimo" to "Yup'ik" in the text. However, where the historical term is relevant, "Eskimo" has been kept. Natives themselves in Chukotka when speaking Russian often continue to refer to themselves as Eskimo, but when speaking the Yup'ik language would prefer Yup'ik. "Inuit" is a broader term for related groups across the whole circumpolar North, for example as used by the umbrella activist group "Inuit Circumpolar Conference."

An important film that depicts the forced abandonment of many Yup'ik vil-

lages along the northern coast of Chukotka is “Chukotka Coast of Memories,” directed by Andres Slapinch (Riga, Latvia, 1989).

See also Igor Krupnik and Michael Chlenov, *Yupik Transitions: Change and Survival at Bering Strait, 1900–1960* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2014).

b. The English text original was used here for the translation. Dmitri Oparin uses the term “informants,” although a range of relationships is suggested by his text.

c. The use of the common term “mainland” for the European part of Russia reveals the psychological distance people feel, not only in Chukotka but elsewhere in the Far East.

d. Destruction or braking in half of grave goods and offerings at memorials is widespread among Siberian peoples, throughout the Far North. Their reasoning is frequently that the “other world” is the reverse of our ordinary world.

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