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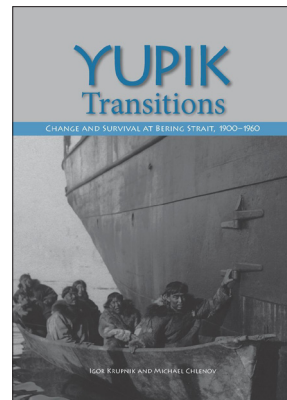
CHANGE AND SURVIVAL AT BERING STRAIT

Igor Krupnik & Michael Chlenov. *Yupik Transitions: Change and Survival at Bering Strait, 1900–1960*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2013. 391 pp.

The fundamental treatise, *Yupik Transitions*, written by Washington-based anthropologist Igor Krupnik and his Moscow co-author, anthropologist Michael Chlenov, is devoted to the history of the Asian Yupik society in the 20th century, more precisely 1900–1960. The book is mostly based on the research conducted by the authors in Soviet Chukotka between 1971 and 1990. Igor Krupnik and Michael Chlenov interviewed elders who remembered the 1910s–1950s. These informants had been actors and observers of crucial changes in coastal Chukotka. It is impossible to overestimate the value of the memories of these

Yupik elders, enabling the anthropologists to reconstruct not only such historic events as the onset of collectivisation, establishment of the Soviet socio-cultural system and relocations of the 1950s, but also the complicated cultural traits of a so-called contact-traditional society. An abundant collection of Yupik accounts gathered by Igor Krupnik was published in Russian in 2000.¹ Here the authors draw a fascinating picture of the pre-relocation society based on the interviews published in the former book.

The structure of the book under review is a little confusing and requires attention to understand its logic. The first chapter – *Contact-Traditional Society, 1900–1923* – is dedicated to the description of the Yupik-newcomers' relations in the first quarter of the 20th century; mostly interaction between the indigenous population and American



traders and whalers. It is a common strategy of the authors to destroy the most likely myths and stereotypes about the Yupik. The perception of their old society as a backward and untouched community (an idea that became popular during Soviet times) is proved to be wrong and far-fetched. The Asiatic Yupik were engaged in the American sphere of economic and cultural influence:

The image of the Russian Yupik around 1900 as 'primitive bands of half-savage aliens' was nothing but a myth [--] Perhaps the most compelling proof to the contrary came from the old garbage heaps that we examined at the abandoned Yupik sites from the same era. They contained a little of everything: shards of porcelain dishes, ruined American gramophones with broken records, remains of sewing machines, broken Winchester rifles, cartridge cases, bottles, American tobacco boxes, and a wide range of jars that once held various imported food, from biscuits to olive oil. (p. 4)

Before the 1930s, the Yupik experienced minimal Russian influence. If some of them could speak a language other than their own, that language was English. In the second chapter, *The "Olden Times", 1850–1900*, the authors trace the early history of Yupik communities, most of which were inhabited until the relocations that began in the 1930s and reached their peak in the 1950s. The core chapter, *The Yupik System: A Model*, is dedicated to the complicated social organisation of the Yupik. The authors examine such notions as locus, tribe, tribal group, clan, and lineage, and depict Yupik social system as adaptive to different ecological, economic and political changes. They deconstruct contact-traditional society, showing us the complexity, adaptability, and dynamics of a social system that was preserved to some extent into the 1950s. In the later chapters, the researchers provide the reader with post-trauma reflection of the elders on social losses, and show how a system once thought to be solid and flexible was destroyed by the dramatic Soviet reforms. The fourth chapter, *Along the Shores of Yupik Land in Asia*, is a valuable historic guide through the Yupik oecumene that contains social topography and explanations close to the domain of cultural ecology. In the next chapter, *Community Affairs*, the research focus is narrowed. Here the anthropologists examine the social architecture of the village, travelling patterns, contacts between communities, tribes, and relations with the Chukchi herders. The sixth chapter, *Family and Kinship*, examines family and marriage patterns as well as such social institutions as the boat crew and lineage. In the next chapter, *"Upstreaming": Lifetime of the Yupik Social System*, the authors go backwards and trace the recollections of early travellers back into the 18th century.

The three last chapters are of great ethnographic and historical value. They represent an elaborate investigation of the changes that occurred in the 1920s–1950s. Another myth is then clearly deflated: the 1930s–1940s that are fairly thought to be the most destructive years for the country turned out to be different for this small nation on the edge of the continent. The Yupik did not suffer terribly from the well-known Soviet social intrusions. It was the 1950s that proved most dramatic for Yupik society. By the late 1950s, nearly 70% of the Asiatic Yupik were forcibly relocated. The relocation destroyed their social system, ruined the established wildlife management, and indirectly caused the loss of language and self-identity crisis of this small-numbered Arctic people.

One of the distinctive features of the book is its focus on the social, cultural, and economic dynamic of the Asiatic Yupik society through the course of the 20th century. The research does not describe a stable situation within a short historic framework. It shows a society in transition (as the title itself implies). This methodology enables the authors to reveal the core features of Yupik society – adaptability and in some cases vulnerability, and a capacity to absorb and adjust various external influences. The investigation is far any mere case study or a piece of historic ethnography. The geographical and chronological scope and extent of elaboration are a clear evidence of this. The treatise embraces a range of contemporary anthropological domains – Soviet studies, colonial studies, anthropology of transition, anthropology of trauma, and human ecology.

I would like to finish the review by asserting the potential social impact and value of the book. In 2011 and 2012, I conducted research among the Asiatic Yupik in Chukotka. I was not surprised when I saw, in almost every house, Igor Krupnik's abovementioned collection of accounts by Yupik elders published in 2000 in Russian. This work has become a literal handbook of Yupik culture for present-day coastal villagers. Igor Krupnik managed to preserve the memory of a whole (albeit small-numbered) nation. The reviewed research behind this anthology could be of extreme importance and interest for the Yupik in Chukotka if translated into Russian.

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Note

¹ Igor Krupnik. *Pust' govoriat nashi stariki. Rasskazy aziatskikh eskimosov-yupik: Zapisi 1975–1987 gg.* (Let Our Elders Speak. Stories of the Yupik Eskimo, 1975–1987). Moscow, 2000.