

TRAVELING BETWEEN CONTINENTS: THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF INTERETHNIC CONTACTS ACROSS BERING STRAIT

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Little Diomed Island, August 1994: The village residents are accumulating cash and grocery supplies and local dancers are practicing almost every night. The islanders are preparing for a visit of more than one hundred friends and relatives from "Siberia," and they are eager to be hospitable and generous hosts.

Little Diomed Island, January through July 1944: According to records kept by the local schoolteachers one hundred and seventy eight people from Big Diomed and the Siberian mainland had been visiting the island within these six months.

These two headlines might create the impression that little has changed over the last fifty years of intercontinental contacts. However, we all know that official contacts were forcefully disrupted in 1948 and it was not until after 1988 that they were permitted again. Before we can deal with structural changes that must have happened due to this disruption, we have to understand the nature of the pre1948 contacts.

In order to achieve this understanding, the joint project "Traveling Between Continents" was launched in 1993 and financed by the National Park Service, Alaska Region. Fieldwork in 1993 was conducted on the Russian side of the Bering Strait, and in 1994 we undertook a one-month field trip to Alaskan Bering Strait communities.

The area under consideration - the Bering Strait region - is historically heterogeneous. If one only counts broad ethnic and linguistic categories, Chukchi, Naukan Yupik, and Unupiaq have to be considered. Chaplinski Yupik (including St. Lawrence Island Yupik) and Central Alaskan Yupik are not taken into account at this point, although they belong to the wider Bering Strait area. However, up to the nineteenth century, these ethnic categories were rather meaningless to the peoples themselves. Instead, smaller units - societies, consisting most often of one larger settlement and several smaller ones - were the basis of self identification.

The focus of our study was on the communities most active in transcontinental contacts during the first half of the 20th century: Naukan, Big Diomed and Uelen on the Russian side of the Bering Strait, Little Diomed, Wales, King Island, and Nome on the American side. The Eskimo communities of Naukan and Big Diomed are now both abandoned and the overwhelming majority of their former residents lives now in Anadyr, Provideniya, Lavrentiya, Lorino, and Uelen. Uelen was and is, besides being an "Eskimo asylum," a predominantly Chukchi village. All the communities on the Alaskan side were and are inhabited by Inupiat and three of them (Little Diomed, Wales, and Nome) are still in existence, while the King Islanders were involuntarily relocated, mostly to Nome.

Our theoretical orientation was led by the conviction that a regional perspective, rather than one focusing on ethnic groups or categories, had to be applied. Eric Wolf's question of 1982, "if there are connections everywhere, why do we persist in turning dynamic, interconnected phenomena into static, disconnected things?" (Wolf 1982:4), has not lost its validity. Thus, our goal was to explore the dynamics of the relations between different communities as well as the range of their connectedness.

Furthermore, we think that what is commonly called the "world system approach" (Wallerstein 1974) cannot be neglected in such a project. This means that beyond the regional perspective of who was participating in this intercontinental network and how, a global perspective has to be adopted. Especially when dealing with the twentiethcentury history of these contacts, it is evident that the development of international markets for, e.g., baleen and fox furs, as well as the political relationships between the U.S. and the Soviet Union have to be taken into consideration. However, the worldsystem approach contains the inherent problem of overemphasizing the capitalist expansion and of neglecting the dynamics of the "periphery" (Wolf 1982:23). Thus, we are not looking at

Native travels as a mere response to the cycles of the world system, but as an indigenous cultural, economic, and social network adapting to outside influence.

Unfortunately, during the so-called Cold War neither side of the "Ice Curtain" - i.e., neither the Soviet Union nor the U.S. - had any interest in dealing with cultural ties cutting across the curtain. On the contrary, it was a time when mutual negative stereotypes were erected and when the people inhabiting the other side were made into enemies. As will be shown later, the key word to characterize this regional social network is exchange: names, goods, services, marriage partners etc. had to be exchanged to guarantee the social survival of individuals and groups. Thus, contrary to earlier treatments of Bering Strait societies, our focus is intersocietal. Interaction between societies was not a luxury but a necessity.

Our temporal focus, the period between 1898 and 1948, is necessitated by our data - interviews with now living participants in these contacts. However, even the half century under consideration should not be perceived as a unified period. For analytical purposes, two main phases can be differentiated:

1) from 1898, when the goldrush hit Nome, until approximately 1918/22, when two different but equally decisive events hit the two sides of the Bering Strait: the influenza epidemic of 1918 wiping out large segments of the population of the southern Seward Peninsula, and the Russian Revolution of 1917 that reached Chukotka by the early 1920s.

2) from 1918/22 until 1948, when the Cold War created an "Ice Curtain" that put a halt on all kinds of intercontinental contacts.

The second phase can be subdivided around 1938, when a U.S. U.S.S.R. agreement formalized native travel across the strait, i.e. when passports and permits became a necessity. However, despite these formal changes, the essence of intercontinental contacts remained largely the same.

The Data

The various forms of contact throughout all these phases bore a complex and holistic character. However, in order to reach an analysis, this complex whole will be divided into the following categories: demography, economy,

kinship, and cognitive aspects. All these aspects could serve as topics of separate inquiries. By trying to cover all of them, they will - by necessity - be presented in a condensed and incomplete form.

Demography:

The first years of the twentieth century saw the rise of the goldrush boomtown of Nome which heavily affected the demographic situation in the region. One of its results was a generally eastward population drift (see Krupnik's 1994 article in *Inuit Studies* for a more detailed treatment of the subject). Nome attracted many residents of Western Alaskan communities, e.g., King Island, Wales, and Little Diomed. At the same time, many Big Diomeders filled the demographic void on Little Diomed, while some people from Naukan resettled to Big Diomed. Up to the present day, many kinship links between Chukotka and Alaska stem from those population movements. Of course, the above mentioned influenza epidemic of 1918 on the American side and the forceful relocations on both sides during the 1940s and 1950s had far-reaching effects on the demographic structure of the area.

Economy:

Native goods exchange patterns had remained relatively stable over the last few centuries. Reindeer herders of interior Chukotka exchanged their products for sea-mammal products with coastal communities on the Asiatic and American sides of the Bering Strait. Exchange between maritime communities on different sides of the strait focused on locally not available goods, some of which were acquired through longdistance trade.

Starting with the eighteenth century, European goods - acquired at Russian trading posts west of Chukotka - came into circulation in the area under consideration. By the second half of the nineteenth century, Yankee whalers who traded Euro-American goods for baleen and ivory had become the main outside agents of exchange. Their counterparts in the maritime communities of the Bering Strait area were local "rich men" who overtook the role of intermediaries from the Reindeer Chukchi. Some of these local rich men are still well remembered today and figure prominently in family histories that reach across the Bering Strait. The decline of the whaling industry in the early 1900s and the establishment of Nome around 1900 led to a reorientation of trade with Euro-American goods. Seattle and Nome based trading vessels took over the role

of the whalers and fox furs replaced baleen. Between the late 1920s and 1948, the Native part in the actual transportation of goods across the Bering Strait increased, due to the absence of Alaskabased nonNative traders who had dominated during the first two decades of the century. The difference between the two sides of the exchange was that the Chukotkans brought raw materials or goods of native production to Alaska (e.g., old ivory, fox skins, native boots), while from Alaska to Chukotka went mainly goods of Euro- American production (e.g., rifles, chewing tobacco, food, ready made clothes). At the same time, Naukan, and to a lesser degree Uelen, continued to play a major role as intermediaries between Chukotkan reindeer herders (who provided meat and skins) and Alaskan seamammal hunters (who provided blubber, native cloths, and American goods). Elements of gift exchange and of barter dominated in trade with reindeer herders as well as in intercontinental trade until 1948.

Warfare in the Bering Strait area had similar goals as economic and social exchange: the acquisition of necessary goods and sometimes of women; it thus can be called negative reciprocity. There are, of course, no reported instances of warfare during the twentieth century. Most of the historically documented cases occurred during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. However, memories of them are still preserved in the area. Interestingly, they are not preserved in a balanced or matching way, i.e. while almost nobody of the former Naukan residents remembers any warfare activities with the American side, most people of Seward Peninsula have kept oral traditions of Siberian attacks. The Little Diomeders report that there were war parties to both sides but that they normally did not join them. Together with the available historical evidence, this leads us to assume, firstly, that there were more raids from the Asiatic side, and secondly, that the oral traditions of both sides exhibit partial structural amnesia (the recollection of offensive action is eradicated in favor of successful defensive action, which seemingly took place more often on the American side). In addition, our interviews show some evidence that the generation raised on Seward Peninsula during the Cold War is more outspoken regarding Siberian attacks.

Kinship:

All the kinship links between the communities of the Bering Strait area are based on either naming, marriage,

adoption, or migration. However, the boundary between kinsmen and partners was often fluid: this became visible to us when informants distinguished "relatives" (i.e., partners) from "real relatives" (i.e., kinsmen), and by the fact that personal genealogies in the second or third ascending generation often fail to draw the distinction (e.g., if somebody was a sibling or a "friend" of the maternal grandfather). Thus, kinship links recognized by the actors were not always perceived as such from an outsider's perspective.

The frequency of kinship links between individual communities can be partially explained by geographical proximity, but social proximity is even more decisive. Between the 1920s and 1948 most newly established kinship links were Uelen and Naukan on the one side and Little Diomed Island on the other side. Between 1898 and 1918/22 some Alaskan communities (like King Island or Wales) were part of this kinship network, while in some cases (like Kauwerak, Kotzebue, or Shishmaref) this dates back to the nineteenth century.

Existing kinship or friendship links were a precondition for so called social visits, i.e. for travels which did not have a pure economical rationale. The only negative category that made intercontinental contacts impossible was that of a stranger. In order to visit any community other than your home community you needed preexisting kinship/partnership links with somebody from the other community, or at least your social identity had to be traceable within the genealogical memory of the host community.

Cognitive Aspects:

Languages: Due to its geographical position, Naukan occupied a special place as regards socio-linguistic peculiarities. It had close contacts with various Chukchi communities, as well as with the Eskimo communities of the two Diomed Islands and around Cape Prince of Wales. Besides their mother tongue, the Naukan people had fairly good command of Chukchi, while almost no Chukchi could speak Naukanski.

Between the Yupik speakers of Naukan and the and Inupiaq speakers of the Diomed Islands there was an approximately equal level of bilingualism which probably reflects a more balanced social relationship. According to our oldest informants who went on visits together with their parents, many Naukan people - mostly men, who

were traditionally more active in these contacts - spoke Inupiaq at least to some extent. Also some men took wives from the other side, which was favorable for bilingualism. The level of passive knowledge of the other group's language was very high: many people who could not speak the other group's language still understood it fairly well.

An inevitable effect of interethnic contacts and bilingualism/ multi-lingualism is a fair number of borrowings in all the languages under consideration. Chukchi, Naukanski, the Inupiaq dialects of the two Diomed Islands, Wales and King Island show a certain mutual interaction of their vocabularies, as well as certain influence of English and Russian, in all the cases depending on the timelength and intensity of contacts. Before 1920 Naukan hardly had any contacts with Russians. A very few Russian loanwords came via Chukchi, while a fair number of English loans were adopted through direct contact with the crews of American whaling ships.

For a long time the notion was prevalent that there were no cases of pidginized Eskimo or Chukchi in the Chukotka area (Krupnik and Chlenov 1979:26; Comrie 1992). Willem de Reuse (1988) was the first to provide linguistic and historic evidence that there were indeed several simplified trade languages in the area under discussion. With de Reuse (1988:492), we think that these languages contributed to the spread of Chukchi influence on Naukanski and probably to the Inupiaq idioms spoken on the Diomed Islands.

De Reuse (1988:506) posits that in the course of history there have been at least three, and maybe four, unstable trade jargons in use in the Bering Strait area. Chukchi, Naukanski, Sireniski, Chaplinski (including Saint Lawrence Island), and the Imaklikski idiom of Inupiaq served as sources against the background of Pidgin English which was in use among whalers (de Reuse 1988:503; Gerland 1883:207).

During our fieldwork we failed to obtain evidence of the existence of any jargonlike language system. However, there is some evidence that could be taken as an indirect indication to the existence of such jargons in the past: our Naukanski informants gave us the names of some Naukan men who could speak "English"; the oldest informants in Wales, who remember these Naukanski men, claim that they could not speak English at all. We admit that the

"English" language spoken by those Naukanski men might have been an Englishbased jargon which was only good enough to communicate with whalers. However, the assumption of an Chukchibased jargon, at least on the Chukotkan side, seems to be more substantive.

Naming: The specifics of Eskimo naming are also present in the Bering Strait area, i.e. a personal name is, upon the death of a person, bestowed to a newborn. Through this process of recycling of names the social identity and obligations of the namesake are transferred to the name-receiver. However, kinship relations are created with the relatives of the deceased even if there are no biological links present.

A specific feature of this naming system, which up to the present has received little attention in anthropological literature, is the fact that an individual may have more than one personal name. This circumstance caused an initial confusion, when we tried to match personal genealogies from both sides of the Bering Strait: there are instances when one and the same person is known under different names on the two sides of the strait. These multiple names were not necessarily from one and the same language. Thus, the common view that Eskimo societal boundaries coincide with a particular name universe (e.g., Fienup-Riordan 1983), does not seem applicable to the area under consideration. It should also be noted that the considerable number of Chukchi names in Alaskan Inupiat societies seems rather to be a result of Naukan's role as an intermediary than of direct Chukchi-Inupiat naming relationships. In addition, this multi-language namepool was not equally distributed: Chukchi names are more often met in Eskimo societies than Naukanski and Inupiaq names among the Chukchi. This distribution could be interpreted as an indication of social dominance on the Chukchi part; however, it is still too early to pass a final judgement, since we are still in need of more complete data on Chukchi naming.

Songs and dances: As was mentioned above, the idea of exchange is the key quality characterizing the relationships between native societies in the Bering Strait area. Native songs and dances are no exception here: they were presented as gifts by one individual to an individual of another community, who thus received the right to perform them and gave another song in exchange. Interestingly, most songs received from the respective

other side were performed in the original, i.e. in a foreign language.

Contemporary contacts

Since 1989 a USUSSR agreement facilitates visa-free travel between Alaska and Chukotka for native people with kinship or cultural links to the other side. By the 1990s regular travels between the Russian and the US side of the Bering Strait have become a regular appearance. The basis for today's contacts are contacts that had been in existence before 1948. With the exception of St. Lawrence Island, there has so far been no case of marriage, adoption, or emigration that could reinforce or strengthen the still existing links. However, past experience has shown that even a small number of newly created kinship links would guarantee the continuation of social proximity.

Among the two abovementioned forms of exchange that had been in use earlier (barter and giftexchange), presently only the latter one is practiced. Since the exchange of gifts was taken up anew and since both sides are still in the process of finding out the other's needs and tastes, the items of exchange are yet variable and sometimes even odd. However, certain regularities are already visible which structurally resemble the exchange patterns of the 1920 through 1948 period. From the American side mainly Euro-American items, like hi-tech equipment, groceries, and clothes are brought, while native handicrafts, raw materials, and various Russian souvenirs came from Chukotka. The US Marine Mammal Protection Act prohibiting the import of walrus tusk and seamammal hides excludes certain traditionally important items and, thus, narrows the potential of the exchange framework. While most visits are short-term, there have been some visitors who used a prolonged stay for both cash employment and subsistence hunting.

Currently, communication between the two shores of the Bering Strait is handicapped by the virtual nonexistence of mutual bilingualism. Undoubtedly, a vehicle of communication will appear, although it is most unlikely that it will be a native language of the area but English.

The exchange and joint performance of dances and songs continues between Chukotkan communities and those Alaskan communities, like Little Diomed and King Island, where "Eskimo dancing" was not exorcised by rigorous missionaries. The exchange of names, i.e. the

naming of newborns after deceased persons from the other side, has to our knowledge not yet occurred since 1989, although we have heard of the intention to do so.

Conclusions

Generally, it seems evident that this intercontinental network has gone through a series of changes over the centuries. The recent reopening of the border and the resulting resumption of travels demonstrate that. Thus, the network of contacts across the Bering Strait can be viewed as an enduring, flexible, and ever-changing social mechanism that is affected and influenced by regional and international developments.

While on the surface a multitude of new elements has appeared within this intercontinental network, the core seems to have remained the same: exchange. However, there are also structural changes essentially narrowing the realm of exchange. There are two aspects we would like to mention at this point. On the one hand, travels have lost their trading significance. On the other hand, especially in Chukotka skin boat travels have ceased to be an integral part of everyday life. The overwhelming majority of hunters still does not own the boats they use and thus have little influence over where and when to travel. Even worse, it still happens that they have to wait for days in order to get cleared by border guards before visiting a neighboring Chukotkan village, to say nothing of travels between continents.

Nevertheless, it seems evident that the contemporary contacts are both continuation and innovation. The world, including Chukotka and Alaska, has obviously changed tremendously between 1948 and 1989, and ever since then. There is no way of reenacting the outward appearance of pre-1948 travels. However, after decades of focusing on the aspect of change in analyzing the twentieth century, it seems necessary to pay more attention to structural continuities beneath the rapid change of material forms characterizing our age. Despite missionaries and party bosses, snowmobiles and TV-sets, the cultural memory of transcultural contacts has been preserved and it thus secures their future. Dealing with cultural processes in a diachronic perspective, we are sometimes forced to admit, quite unexpectedly, that the question is not one of continuity or change, but of how the continuity of change shapes the development of tradition.

Note:

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