

Notes on the Islands of the Unalashka District

by Ivan Veniaminov

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A little history on the author (by Molly Odell):

Ivan Veniaminov was a Russian Orthodox priest born and educated in Russia. He lived in the village of Unalaska (also called Unalashka, Oonalashka, or Dutch Harbor) on the Island of Unalaska in the Eastern Aleutians between 1824 and 1834. He learned the Aleut language, created the first Aleut-Russian dictionary, and was able to collect valuable ethnographic information on the culture of the Aleuts.

A little history on Alaska and the Aleutians:

The first European explorers in Alaska were Russian fur traders who “discovered” the Aleutian Islands in 1744 in search of sea otter pelts. Alaska was then claimed as a Russian territory. Russian fur traders did not have a major presence in the Eastern Aleutians until the 1780’s at which time they began to enlist (or enslave) the help of the Aleuts for sea otter hunting. Aleuts were governed by the Russians and were settled into more permanent villages and were converted to the Russian Orthodox faith. The culture of the Aleuts had therefore undergone much change by the time Veniaminov was interviewing them about their pre-Russian contact customs. Veniaminov sought to preserve the amazing knowledge and ingenuity that had allowed the Aleuts to thrive in an isolated, harsh environment for thousands of years.

and travel until sunset, they are ready to sing and dance all night. At the end of these parties they generally thank each other--but not for the visit and not for being feasted (there is almost never anything offered, except water) but expressly for the songs which they had heard from each other. They always are pleased with each other if their own songs were well received by the others or if they themselves heard new or fine songs.

Method of warfare. Warfare or, to speak more justly, killing and plunder, were almost a permanent feature among Aleuts. Especially among the Aleuts of the middle ages, that is, in the times of the great-grandfathers and grandfathers of the present generation, the wars were extraordinarily frequent and most destructive. They were either internecine or foreign. The first were between lineages [rody] or tribes [plemena] of the Aleuts themselves while the others were against their external enemies, to wit the Aglegmiuts and Kad'iak people [Kad'iaktsy].

The causes of internecine wars were numberless. The desires of man, never satiable--and especially of man uneducated and free, knowing neither the measure nor the limits to his animal desires--were the first cause of that. A beauty of a wife or a pretty daughter, always and everywhere, has been one of the most important causes for discord and friendship. A detailed description of incidents and adventures of this kind (even if it is possible to say something about them) is wholly unnecessary because they are always and everywhere almost one and the same. Only the name, places, and circumstances are different, the rest is one and all the same. A second cause of internecine wars was in all respects the poor environment of their islands, which, with passage of time, was becoming ever poorer in respect to subsistence resources. Their treasures from the earth, such as pigments, stones,* and so on, found only in certain places, in time were becoming more expensive and more difficult of access and, hence, ever more attractive. Consequently, they ever more frequently became grounds for quarrels. It is known, for instance, that the weakest and poorest of kin groups [families--semeistva], being more and more constrained in the means of a livelihood, were forced to leave their homeland and seek means for existence in other places. And then, after having grown stronger in the new place, they became adversaries and even enemies of their former persecutors and afterwards of all the members of their [plemia] tribe.

In respect to the products of the land it is known that the stones, obsidian and porphyry, of which they made hatchets [toporiki], knives, and blades for spears are found in few places and the latter only on the northern side of Umnak. The best amber is also found only on the

* Veniaminov means here material suitable for weapon making, such as porphyry, obsidian, slate and so on. LB.

north side of Umnak, under the waterfall, Igiidgum siitxan. As not everyone could or wanted to buy or exchange these for something, many attempted to get them by stealth. Consequently, the owners of these localities, by right of possession, guarded them and killed the trespassers [khishchniki].

These [such] and similar occurrences [incidents] used to be primary causes of internecine wars, while vengeance for a wrong--the deep injury by spilled blood of one person --[resulted] in murder of many, often of innocent ones. Vengeance without any restraint fanned the flames [of conflicts], prolonged them and, in the end, itself became the endless source of many an atrocious bloodshed. Internecine wars, begun between [individual] members of kin groups, spread to the families, lineage [clans], and tribes and were ended only by annihilation, that is, the killing and taking captive, of the weakened side.

Of the great number of internecine conflicts, I shall only tell about one, the last of them. Once, several of the inhabitants of the village of Akutan, which was on the W side of Akutan Island, toward evening, during a calm, saw something at sea and two of them set out for it. Approaching closer, they saw that it was a baidara [with] some men of Umnak, exhausted from thirst and almost half-dead. The Akutan braves [udal'tsy], instead of giving help to the unfortunates, killed them and, having taken several articles, sent the baidara to the bottom. It is necessary to note that one of these braves was married to a [woman from Umnak]. Some time after the incident, Umnak Aleuts who came to visit him, recognized several familiar items worn by one young boy and learned from their kinswoman that her husband brought those things from the sea. Having questioned [her about] all the details and learned about the fate of their unfortunate countrymen, they set out for home without a word to anyone what they had learned about this matter. Some time afterward they again came to visit their son-in-law [ziat'] and, as a present, brought him the most festive [finely decorated] parka. Choosing a suitable time, they summoned their son-in-law to their barabora* with his wife and son to present him with this parka. Not suspecting anything, he began to put it on but the collar had been deliberately made narrow and was partly laced so that he could not put it on quickly. At this moment the men of Umnak seized him, in the parka, and killed him but only after a long resistance because he was very strong. They also killed his son, who defended his father with all his might. Then they immediately set out for home taking with them their kinswoman. The murdered man had a [full] brother--a warrior who, at the time, was absent. Upon his return, having learned what happened, he made up his mind to avenge the death of his beloved brother, whom he had loved so much that he even made a wooden statue resembling

* Veniaminov has in mind the special guest dwelling. LB.

him, dressed it in a parka and kept it in his own kamora* [chamber] in memory of [the deceased]. Quite a long time afterward he announced that he wanted to stage a raid against the Kad'iak people. He was joined by many volunteers, as he was famous for bravery. He also announced this to the Umnak Aleuts, very many of whom accepted his proposal. Tigalda Island was designated as the assembly point, at a place very near the present village. But his true intention was to entice the Umnak people to come and kill them in the same treacherous way. His accomplices knew his intention. Thus, when the men of Umnak arrived on Tigalda and were settled in camp on the shore, at a given signal from their leader, they [the Akutan men] attacked them from all sides and killed them to a man. And although the Aleuts of Umnak learned of the fate of their countrymen, they were not able to avenge them because of the arrival of the Russians.

The foreign wars of the Aleuts were with the Aglegmiuts and other inhabitants of the north side of Aliaksa, but especially with the Kad'iak people. With the Chugach and the Kenai people [Kenaitsy] they never fought, considering them to be of common descent [edinoplemennye]. With the Aglegmiuts the wars were only during the early times and very quickly were ended because the Aglegmiuts did not dare to go to Unalashka in their baidarkas, which were immeasurably inferior to those of the Aleuts. The Aleuts, on their part, ceased raiding the Aglegmiuts because the north coasts of Aliaksa are shallow, lack landing places, and most importantly, because these [shores] are poor in tide flats products.** But with the Kad'iak people they had constant wars since time immemorial. The Aleuts considered the Kad'iak people to be their irreconcilable enemies. The very word enemy, Angadutiĭ, was used instead of the Qanâgiĭ, an inhabitant of Kad'iak*** and vice-versa.

* Kamora: Veniaminov means the compartment in the multi-family dwelling allocated to this individual. LB.

** In emergencies, or on raids and long distance voyages, Aleuts obtained food by collecting mollusks, octopi and so on on offshore reefs and tide-flats. They seldom, if ever, burdened themselves with provisions carried from home, though water was carried in bladders. LB.

*** They held most unflattering opinions about them [the Koniag of Kodiak], saying that the Kad'iak people were foremost provokers and inciters to disputes, that being unfamiliar with the rules of honor they were brave in words only, and then only prior to the opening of hostilities, and in battle they were fearful and yielding. [They were] boastful and loud, like a crow over refuse or offal. However, they spoke about the Aglegmiuts and the Chugach as brave and fearless, and called the first mentioned Aaglyun, or killer whales. Ven.

Their foreign wars or military raids (alitxuŝ txíðin itálik) the Aleuts considered as a sport and an occupation as profitable as it was glorious. Such expeditions they always made in baidarkas or baidaras. But as large and as strong as such a levy [opolchenie] might be, it was never a universal one [of all Aleuts] and it was even very rare for all the inhabitants of an entire island to undertake military expeditions together. Mostly their levies consisted only of kinsmen.

The [Aleuts'] military leaders [polkovodtsy] were always their lineage toions or their sons or nephews. Therefore, the warriors did not elect their commander but the commander assembled his warriors. To a vague proposal such as: I want to go to make war (or to wander, aguláŝan*), warriors responded, assembling in full armament. Not everyone, however, could call warriors together but only one who was famous for bravery, military skill, his knowledge of the enemy's territory, and his quickness of mind and ability to command. Such leaders were willingly joined by warriors, and not only his kinsmen, if he found it necessary to accept them in his levy. When, in his opinion, a sufficient number of warriors was gathered, he announced the cause for his undertaking, which was, in the first case, always vengeance for the blood of ancestors who had fallen in enemy land, or dishonor done to him or to his lineage [rod].

The warriors, having heard out his reason and purpose, instead of an oath, gave him their loyal word to obey him as a father and bestowed upon him the power to act as he wanted and as he knew how.

The leader then selected always several (from 4 to 8) assistants from among his nearest kin or experienced warriors, famous ones, who commanded detachments entrusted to them and together [they] constituted his council of war.

At the very departure of the entire host [opolchenie] on the proposed expedition, the leader, in the presence of all, including those seeing them off, made a solemn speech in which he explained that the man who did not expect to endure all the privations and hardships, unavoidable on such a distant and dangerous journey, the one who feared to meet death in battle and he who was not sure of his own prowess, were better to stay home and not set out from the place in order not to cause his lineage [rod] shame and humiliation. But he who, without a murmur, would undergo all hardships and with courage would fight the enemy, for him there would be glory and booty. And he, who should fall on the battle field with glory, would earn honor and fame for his

* They undertook military expeditions as well as those for curiosity and trade. About the latter more will be said below. Ven.

lineage [rod] and his body would be carried home to his native country. Then the leader talked about himself, that if he himself should fall gloriously in battle, they were not to become afraid and dispirited but listen to and obey his [senior assistant]. Finally, publicly and for the second time he bound each one (by his word*) to be obedient to him in every circumstance, to share with each other brotherly accord, to defend each other faithfully, not sparing one's self, to be enduring in battle with the enemy, as well as in the case of misfortunes and need, and so forth. After that they set out on their way.

When close to an enemy village, or [approaching] a party of enemies, they strove to move only at night. Having arrived, the leader arranged who was to be where at the time of attack and battle and who was to remain to tend the baidarkas and so forth.** The leader's place was always in the front of the fighters. The dispositions having been made, they went forward as cautiously as possible.

To attack enemies and fight them in the daytime and openly was believed more glorious. However, in such cases, the battles were prolonged considerably as the enemy, knowing his danger, offered a strong and desperate resistance. The attackers, in turn, were more afraid of death or captivity, even before the first blood was spilled. It could happen, then, that, because of the weakening of the strength of the warriors or a decrease in their number, they would have to surrender or ask for a shameful peace. Consequently, then, it was considered best to fall upon enemies secretly and unexpectedly. The best time for this was considered early dawn.

Having stolen up as close as possible, suddenly with the cry, "Strike! [B'iem] We conquered! [Nashi pobedili!]", and sometimes to the beat of drums, the attackers fell upon their sleepy enemies. And if in a single assault they were successful in taking the village, which, with such a way of making war, almost always occurred, then they killed the very old men and women without any mercy and took the young of both sexes prisoner. At the finish of the battle they presented them to the leader. In an assault on a fortified place or a barabora, each warrior, despising danger to his own life, cleared the road for his comrades and tried to be the first to enter and force the enemy to surrender--which was considered the most glorious exploit.

* The point here is that the warriors publicly repeated their pledge of honor, apparently each one individually. LB.

** See the historical tradition related by Atkans in the early 50's to Knut Bergsland (Bergsland, 1978) how they left the Eastern raiders to die of starvation on Unalga (Andreanof Islands), when the baidarka sentry fell asleep and the Atkans utilized the opportunity and captured or destroyed all their vessels. LB.

For this reason those who had gained access to the enemy [stronghold] were not to kill the defeated, but to take each one by hand [without weapons]. Having branded them [the captives] [with their own] weapons, the latter were sent outside. Those destined for captivity were marked with blood spots on the face and on the forehead while the ones whom they intended to kill had an ear or some other part of the body cut off, for instance, a part of the scalp.* They even cut out the genital organs of men as well as of the women. And these parts cut off or excised out of the body, and the weapons taken from the enemy were the most important trophies of the victors, who passed them on to their descendants for the glory of their lineage as living memorials of their military exploits; a few of the conquerors ordered that such trophies be put into their graves.

Upon the successful finish of an action, warriors presented all the booty to the leader who, taking an appropriate part for himself, gave the rest back to them.

Prisoners, according to the rules of war, belonged only to those who had proven themselves, indeed, fearless in battle and real conquerors. But these, out of vanity, right away gave away [their captives] as slaves to those who, by the rules of war, could not obtain prisoners. However, a warrior of low status, that is, a kalga [slave] or an Aleut without kindred, never was given captives. Their share was a portion of the enemy's possessions--clothing, ornaments, utensils, and weapons.

The Aleuts had battles at sea, but [these occurred] very seldom and almost only when they came unexpectedly upon an enemy. However, having a superiority over the Kad'iak people in the speed of their baidarkas, the Aleuts sought out the latter. Meeting up with the enemy, they did not attack immediately, but first made sorties, [throwing] spears, driving** the enemy. When they saw that the enemy was weakening, they moved in ferociously [s iarostiui] to drown him without any mercy until the vanquished begged for peace. Victory at sea brought them no gain except glory. Those who were the first to put down their arms [at sea] were spared and given their freedom.

In any case [in war], if, after several encounters, they saw that they were not able to conquer the enemy and were apprehensive of his strength, then they concluded peace agreements or truces for a fixed time and exchanged

* Veniaminov's exact wording: "part of the head hair with skin"--chast' volosov s golovy so shkuroiu. LB.

** Veniaminov uses the term gon'iat', which is the technical term used to indicate action against a sea otter by the surround method. In general, the following description of the tactic parallels the sea otter hunt by the surround. LB.

hostages [amanaty, plural]. Then, after negotiations between the leaders, they concluded an eternal peace which was called angaduti txidi il'lyaliili.* The latter was concluded, however, only with people of kindred tribes [svoeplemennyel] or with the Aglegmiut, never with the Kad'iak inhabitants.

The power of the leader, and especially a famous and experienced one, was almost unlimited during the time of an expedition and battle. His every order, no matter how difficult and dangerous it might be, was performed with trepidation and without any contradiction. But if it happened that their leader turned out to be cowardly or inexperienced and that, precisely because of his inexperience and imprudent arrangements, they were likely to be defeated by the enemy, suffer losses when traversing the straits or during storms, or suffer extreme scarcity of food, then the warriors themselves killed their leader, according to a common judgment, and elected another.

The Aleuts say that, although they were not always victors, they were never cowards and that the cause for their lack of success or death [gibel'] was always due to the mistakes or lack of skill of their leaders. They also say that the Kad'iak people suffered more from them than they from the Kad'iaks. The latter is probable because the Kad'iaks, although they made attacks on the Aleuts, did so far more rarely. Besides, their most audacious raids extended only to Unimak while the Unalashkans and even the Umnak Aleuts went to Kad'iak.

The Aleut's [war] weapons consisted in two kinds of darts [spears] thrown with a [small] board, of the well-known bow with arrows and two kinds of knives or daggers. For bodily defense they used shields and armor.

One type of spear, thrown from the board, was the same as those which are used now for hunting sea lions, called igixan [igiiqan] (darts--drotiki) with a single bone foreshaft. The other type of spear was longer with several heads**made of hard wood. Into each of these were inserted

* Note the phonetic resemblance of the last term to modern Illiuliuk [Illiuliuk], the name of the settlement said to have been founded by Ivan Solov'ev ca. 1772-1775 [and which early on was called in Russian the settlement or harbor of Good Accord [Dobrogo soglasia] = location of the modern city of Unalaska]. Contemporary Aleut informants do not know the meaning (etymology) of the place name Illiuliuk. In literature, the naming of the settlement Good Accord is frequently ascribed to Rezanov, though there is no direct evidence for this. In my opinion, it is more likely that the name originated with Solov'ev upon cessation of hostilities following the years of 1763-6. LB.

** Veniaminov apparently refers with complex foreshaft and interchangeable blades. LB.

blades of obsidian, sometimes dipped in a poison, which was known to but very few. The dart did not completely enter a man's body, but just the foreshaft with the blade. With effort, the foreshaft could be removed from the body, but the blade always remained [in him] and consequently always, although not quickly, but surely brought death. The use of a bow and arrows is [well known]. The arrows were soaked in poison.

War knives or daggers, used in place of cold arms [*kholodnoe oruzhie*] were usually of stone. One type was double-edged about 6 vershok in length. The other, called *qamlituŭ*, was almost the same size as the first but it had a single sharp edge and was somewhat curved toward the haft [handle] end. Their armor was made of round rods, worked smooth, about 5 chetvert' long, which were interwoven tightly together with sinew threads. This armor was worn under outer clothing, bound around the torso, leaving arms and legs free. They say that such armor, in appearance not very reliable, was very rarely pierced by an arrow. Their shield was made simply of two fitted [folding] boards, 5 chetvert' long, and each 2 chetvert' wide. They were used to defend the head from flying arrows, holding on with the left hand to a grip [*dushka*] in the middle. The shields were used only in open battle or in an assault on a fortified place.

Various customs. a) Every woman, during her period, *ayaŭigŭliŭ*, was considered unclean for seven days (and a widow until the end of her mourning). During this time she must not [carnally] know her husband and must bathe herself three times. Every girl [at her first menses], notwithstanding her rank and quality, was immediately segregated from society and shut in an especially constructed *barabora*, which she was not permitted to leave for any reason whatsoever and was strictly prohibited from showing herself to people but especially to men. Only her mother and nearest female relatives could visit her and then not for long and not without need. The girl had to remain in such seclusion the first time for 40 days; the second for 20; and on the third and subsequent times usually for 7 days. Upon the expiration of her seclusion she had to wash herself for five days. Married women were exempt from seclusion.*

To carry out such customs of purification was enjoined on them by a law or tradition which says that the girl, who does not observe this custom beginning with the first [menses] will in subsequent years become black as coal and in addition to that become a carrier of numerous diseases, with which she will infect the others. A married woman,

* The custom persisted until recent times, and was observed as recently as the 1930's. See Charles I. Shake (1951). The girls' puberty ceremony of Umnak, Aleutian Islands [*American Anthropologist*, 53:145-148.] LB.