

**KRUPNIK, Igor and Michael CHLENOV, 2013 *Yupik Transitions: Change and Survival at Bering Strait, 1900-1960*, Fairbanks, University of Alaska Press, 400 pages**

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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## Recensions / Book Reviews

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KRUPNIK, Igor and Michael CHLENOV

2013 *Yupik Transitions: Change and Survival at Bering Strait, 1900-1960*, Fairbanks, University of Alaska Press, 400 pages.

The 6th Inuit Studies Conference, held in Copenhagen, Denmark, in the spring of 1988, witnessed the appearance of Igor Krupnik and Michael Chlenov.<sup>1</sup> It was perhaps one of the few times or even the first time the two young Russian anthropologists had presented papers beyond the Russian borders. During the conference, Krupnik, then in his 30s, approached me to discuss Charles Campbell Hughes and the Siberian Yupik (Eskimos) of St. Lawrence Island, Alaska. What I did not know then was that Krupnik and Chlenov had each been working in Chukotka since the 1970s, carrying out detailed and invaluable research on the social and cultural histories of Yupik (Eskimo) communities on the Russia's northeast Asian coast. Their focus was on the major social and economic shifts that the Yupik and, to some extent, their neighbors, the Chukchi, had experienced. Thus, by 1988, over a period of almost 20 years, the two men had already gathered an astounding compilation of information. Their data serve as the opening acts of *Yupik Transitions: Change and Survival at Bering Strait, 1900 to 1960*. The book in its entirety is a phenomenal and most impressive endeavour. It begins with a Foreword by anthropologist Ernest S. Burch, Jr., who passed away before the book's publication. To paraphrase Burch's words:

*Yupik Transitions* is, in the first instance, a general description of [Russian] Yupik life for the main portion of the 20th century [...]. [It] is also a superb study of social change; [and,] [...] this book could also play an interesting role in the history of ideas and concepts in anthropology, and social studies in general [...]. [N]ever again, ever, will anyone be able to reconstruct through field research the full range of phenomena Krupnik and Chlenov make available to us in this marvelous book (p. xxiii-xi).

In a very real sense, Burch's Foreword is *the* review of the book. As he touches on each of the text's general foci, one can only agree with him. What is particularly astounding for anyone who has worked with either the Russian or American Yupik populations is the immense effort, the obvious devotion, and the degree of deep and sensitive research that one finds here. Indeed, few can boast of focusing more than 40 years on a single project with such intensity and care. *Yupik Transitions* reflects quite magnificently the seemingly boundless intellectual and sheer physical energies of both authors.

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<sup>1</sup> Igor Krupnik, Ethnology Division Head, Arctic Studies Center, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, D.C.). Michael Chlenov, Professor, Maimonides State Jewish Academy of Sciences (Moscow). Positions as of 2015.

For those already familiar with Siberian Yupik communities, the appearance of a well-known name is likely to generate an “aha” moment—a sudden flash of light: “So this is where ‘that name’ comes from on the Russian (or American) side of Bering Strait.” Examples drawn from the experiences of Yupik individuals, lineages, clans, and tribes populate the text, bringing the plight of Indigenous communities faced with major social, political, and cultural changes directly into the reader’s personal viewing space. For instance, Krupnik records how “[...] the young hunter Walunga traveled by boat with his two wives and several children” from Avan, on the Russian side, to settle on St. Lawrence Island in 1922 (p. 142). In the text, Willis Kepeglu Walunga, one of Walunga’s descendants, is shown with his wife, Nancy Aghnaghagniq Walunga, Conrad Akulki Oozeva, and Krupnik. Krupnik worked closely with them to trace the histories of their St. Lawrence Island and Russian ancestors. If this were the only such example, the book would not be unusual. However, *Yupik Transitions* is filled with photographs, interview segments, and detailed descriptions that begin in 1971 with recollections of Russian Yupik elders, whose memories stretch back into the late 1800s, and continue forward to 1960. The book is simply alive with the people and their surroundings, both verbal and photographic, that are at the heart of the narrative Krupnik and Chlenov have written. Yet, most who appear in the text are now gone and, as Krupnik notes in the preface, “This work is, therefore, an *ethnohistory*, or simply a history” (p. xxvii).

Often, as with the Walunga example, the impact of change is illustrated in clear and yet poignant ways. Sometimes, for example, a family migrated to St. Lawrence Island hoping to retain their Yupik traditions even as other Yupiget (pl.) in Chukotka were losing elements of what the authors call “contact-traditional” ways. Increasingly, those on the Russian side had to adjust their lifeways to fit the new social and cultural world dictated by the developing communist shift in Russian society.

*Yupik Transitions* opens gently, even sentimentally, as the authors acknowledge contributions by individuals from both sides of Bering Strait. The opening is followed by a prologue and a preface that outline the research path and its final products. Only then does Chapter 1 begin with a summary that is, in one sense, a broad introduction to the Russian/pre-Soviet presence and to the contact-traditional Yupik. The Yupik at that time, in the early 1900s, still lived more in keeping with their traditional ways than as Russian citizens coping with the developments surrounding the soon-to-emerge Soviet/communist system. Chapters 2 and 3 are perhaps the most dense of the chapters for anyone not familiar with the geography and history of Yupik communities in Russia or related Yupik communities on St. Lawrence Island. These chapters are filled with references to Yupik geographic locations, Yupik place names, Yupik *ramka* (clan names), and Yupik family names, each with accompanying detailed descriptions. However, these chapters also offer a more general view of the life and times of the Yupik, as they deal with a vast collection of economic and social changes and adaptations, including those that characterized the whaling era in the north Bering Sea in the mid and late 1800s.

What then follows is a series of chapters in which the authors set out in detail the characteristics of individual communities and their ways of dealing with the changes

dealt them by the reshaping of the Russian/Soviet/communist world. Chapter 4 focuses on the social organization of Yupik societies and its role in aiding the Yupik to deal with years of stressful and wrenching changes. To do so, the authors introduce new terminology and a reassessment of older terms to explain both how the social organization of Yupik society functions and why it has been an effective tool as the Yupik adapted and have continued to adapt to the changes in the larger Russian society. Given the flexibility and complexity of Yupik social organization, this chapter is not only necessary for understanding the nature of the adaptations described, it is a welcome and innovative description of Yupik social organization.

*Yupik Transitions* is also designed to fulfill a promise to contemporary Yupiget. The words and experiences of elders and ancestors and the tremendous collection of information in the maps, charts, genealogies, glossaries, and extensive appendices are of particular relevance to them. It is clear that this book was written for them to read and to use as a reference. At the same time, *Yupik Transitions* will, I have no doubt, become an important reference source for all who engage in social science research in the Arctic.

The later chapters trace what increasingly becomes, for the reader, a mental roller coaster history of dramatic and brutal changes not only in the social and economic world of the Yupik, but also in the geographic context of the Yupik as they are moved again and again to new places to carry out their lives. As the authors point out, the experiences of the Yupik are not entirely unique. The encounters of Native peoples with non-Native peoples have been traumatic and brutal throughout recent history. Nevertheless, it is both compelling and disturbing to read of these descriptions of change as carefully planned, staged events meant to move the Yupik step-by-step away from their homeland locations and force them into necessary changes in their lifeways in order to survive. Toward the end of *Yupik Transitions*, the authors shift the mood of the Yupik story to one more hopeful. Only here does the text lose some of its force, perhaps because the emotional foundation of the Yupik story is profoundly moving, and it is difficult to conceive of hope as suggested in the closing paragraphs.

*Yupik Transitions* is a most important book. Anyone concerned with social and economic change, Indigenous peoples, and the human condition should read it, as should all those with an interest in the Arctic and sub-Arctic worlds. As the late Ernest “Tiger” Burch said, “[...] never again, ever, will anyone be able to reconstruct through field research the full range of phenomena Krupnik and Chlenov make available to us in this marvelous book (p. xix).”

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