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# Yupik Spells and the Yupik Language in the Contemporary Religious Ritual Context

## *Continuity, Secrecy, and Indeterminacy*

DMITRIY OPARIN

**Abstract:** It is generally believed that if the languages of indigenous peoples of Siberia are preserved anywhere, it would be within the spheres of traditional environmental management: reindeer husbandry, hunting, fishing, etc. However, among Yupik communities in coastal Chukotka, another domain where the Yupik language remains in use is the religious (ritual) sphere—in particular, in various practices for communicating with the spirits of ancestors. This article focuses on Yupik spells, and, more broadly, the Yupik language in a modern ritual context. This allows us to identify and reflect on some characteristic features of the indigenous ritual space that are often insufficiently discussed in ethnographic literature: secrecy and indeterminacy. In addition, the article raises key issues surrounding family memory and heritage as well as the (dis)continuity of ritual knowledge.

**Keywords:** memory, rituals, Siberian Yupik, spells, Yupik language

In the winter of 2020, a resident of the village of Novoe Chaplino (a coastal settlement with a predominantly Yupik population) showed me three spells written in a copybook by her mother in the Yupik language. All three of the spells were aimed at repelling the verbal and non-verbal evil eye. First, she showed just one of the texts, covering the rest with a piece of paper. Then she changed her mind and showed the remaining two and even allowed them to be photographed. I did not ask her to translate the spells into Russian, but instead turned to a resident of Anadyr (the capital of Chukotka) for help; this person had

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long since converted to Orthodoxy and was not a relative or neighbor of the owner of the spells. Why didn't I contact someone from the village? After all, in Novoe Chaplino there are people who could translate these spells from Yupik into Russian. Why was it necessary to turn specifically to a Christian woman who greatly disapproved of the animistic ideas of her fellow countrymen? I had not wanted to introduce the spells to anyone who would come into regular contact with their owner, especially someone who could use them for their own purposes. My fear was due to the special secrecy and caution with which this woman showed me her spells. After becoming acquainted with three spells, I soon became interested in this facet of Yupik culture. Returning to Novoe Chaplino in the fall of the same year, I began asking my research participants about various forms of spells. In the end, I managed to learn another Yupik language spell from another village resident, aimed at good luck. She was happy to provide it and translate the text into Russian for me.

This article is devoted to the social life of spells in the Yupik environment and the broader use of the Yupik language in the ritual context of Chukotka. In considering the "social life" of texts (Appadurai 1988), I am interested in how spells are transmitted, preserved, and protected; how they are used or forgotten; what is remembered by local residents about the practice of spells; and how the modern context, including the linguistic context, influences this practice.<sup>1</sup> I recorded, on the one hand, recollections about the use of spells by the ancestors of my interlocutors, and their childhood impressions of how their mothers or grandmothers used certain formulations in the Yupik language, primarily for the purpose of healing. On the other hand, my study also focused on modern cases of the use of the Yupik language in the religious ritual sphere. I am interested not only in the act of reproducing certain Yupik ritual formulations, but also in various ways of preserving "ritual speech" (people can memorize, write down spells and formulations of appeals to spirits, or store what was written down by their ancestors back in Soviet times), as well as forms of protection of ritual texts—that is, different modes of openness/secrecy.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, I write about animistic rituals that provide communication with the spirits of ancestors, and rituals for using spells. There are many definitions of ritual (Grimes 2014: 189), and it is not my intention to provide yet another. In my opinion, for this study it is only important to note what I understand by ritual and what my interlocutors understand. None of the locals use the words "ritual," "rite," or "ceremony." These words rarely appear in the everyday speech of

people who practice rituals; rather, they are the vocabulary of people describing ritual (Grimes 2014: 185). People denote their actions with verbs (feed [spirits], remember [ancestors]), or use Yupik terms in Russian speech, which will be described in further sections of this article. I count myself among those who describe the ritual, and by ritual, I mean various actions associated with communication with the spirits of ancestors, including the use of spells.

The local population in Chukotka regularly feeds the spirits of their ancestors, uses old things of their ancestors for the purpose of healing, turns to the spirits of their ancestors for help, and symbolically thanks them if help was provided.<sup>3</sup> Every action and word is part of a verbal and gestural dialogue with the spirits of the ancestors. Spells, to one degree or another, are also associated with the power of ancestral spirits. First, they constitute a legacy inherited from older relatives. Second, even if the spells themselves are not directly addressed to the spirits of ancestors, some of my interlocutors believe that spirits contribute to the implementation of the intentions inherent in the spell. Thus, the impulse for the agency of the ancestor's spirit is a ritual: feeding, casting a spell. As Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw write, offering their definition of ritual, "one will not be the author of one's acts" (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 97–98). That is, the person reproducing the ritual only indirectly influences reality; they only stimulate, or at least they try to induce the spirit to act.

Religious rituals, including the ritual of using spells, create "contexts of agency" (Traphagan 2012: 2), which simultaneously combine several elements: important communication with departed ancestors for every living person; updating of family heritage; symbolic capital and memory tools; concern for personal well-being and the well-being of loved ones; and reproduction of a sense of belonging to family, clan and indigenous culture. It is this diversity of feelings and identities, generated in a ritual context, that is the focus of this study. Also, several important points for understanding the modern culture of the aboriginal population of Chukotka are associated with the issues of using the Yupik language in a ritual context; these are the problems of secrecy; of continuity; and of understatement, ambiguity, and indeterminacy in a ritual context.

My fieldwork in Chukotka in two coastal villages of Providenskii District first began in 2011. In my research, I have focused primarily on the ritual practices and cosmologies of the indigenous population of Novoe Chaplino and Sireniki (Oparin 2012). Much of the material for this article was collected in 2020 as part of a project dedicated to memory and family heritage (Oparin 2020b; Oparin forthcoming).

In 2020, I spoke to 35 people in two villages. All the interviews were conducted in Russian with some phrases and words in Yupik.<sup>4</sup> For the most part, this was not a one-time conversation. With most of my interlocutors, we discussed the practice of using spells. Not everyone could share their experience or talk about the experience of their relatives; however, I was interested in any knowledge or ideas about spells, and this could include fear of using a spell, experience with such a practice, or reluctance to talk about this topic. Despite the small number of collected texts of the spells themselves (a total of four spells were collected and are provided in following sections), during long conversations about spell practices with residents of Novoe Chaplino and Sireniki, I wrote down people's recollections of the use of spells by older relatives. People shared their experiences and ideas about the features and forms of communication, including verbal, with the spirits of ancestors and, in general, about the use of the Yupik language in a ritual context.

First, I briefly describe the current linguistic situation among the Yupik population of Chukotka. Then I devote a separate section to the presence of the Yupik language in the religious ritual sphere; I discuss terms denoting and describing rituals, as well as phrases used by the local population when feeding the spirits of their ancestors. Next, I provide translations of the spells I collected in 2020, focusing on analysis of the practice of using spells. The penultimate section is devoted to secrecy in the religious ritual sphere and ways of preserving and transmitting verbal ritual knowledge. The last section of the article analyzes the concepts of indeterminacy and risk in the modern religious life of Yupik people of Chukotka.

## The Yupik Language in Contemporary Chukotka

The languages of the Siberian Yupik belong to the Eskimo-Aleut family. Nowadays, Siberian Yupik speak two different Yupik languages—Chaplino and Naukan. The most common is the Chaplino, or Central Siberian Yupik variety, spoken by the Yupik inhabitants of Novoe Chaplino, Sireniki (with some spoken differences), Uelkal, Provideniya and St. Lawrence Island (Alaska). The Chaplino Yupik language has several dialects—Avan, Kivak (or Qiwaaq, as in Krupnik and Chlenov 2013), Imtuk, and Siqlluk (Krupnik and Chlenov 2013: 47–48), which have practically disappeared due to the closure of small settlements and processes of linguistic unification associated with the introduction of school education.<sup>5</sup>

In the second half of the twentieth century, a “language shift” occurred in Chukotka in favor of the Russian language. The factors that influenced the total shift of the Yupik language in all spheres of life of the population are written in detail in the studies of Nikolai Vakhtin and Igor Krupnik (Vakhtin and Krupnik 1999; Vakhtin 1992; Vakhtin 2001). Daria Morgunova Schwalbe has also written about the current state of the Yupik language in Chukotka (Schwalbe 2015; 2020; 2022).

Despite the fact that the main language of communication is now Russian, one cannot say there is a complete absence of the Yupik language in one form or another in both the private and public spheres.<sup>6</sup> In everyday speech, individual Yupik words are used to refer to national dishes, plants, and elements of marine hunting (Schwalbe 2015: 8; 2020: 98). Many people, including young people, may use Yupik exclamations when talking with children (Schwalbe 2015: 14). Of the residents of Novoe Chaplino at the time of my last visit, a little more than twenty people could carry on a conversation in the Yupik language. Each of the local residents knew who could speak the Yupik language and how (and also why) that particular individual spoke it “well” or “badly.” My estimate of the number of people who spoke the language is based both on my own observations and on estimates given by locals. People who knew the language were not only respected, but they themselves were aware of their advantageous difference from the majority. Nikolai Vakhtin uses the phrase the “regressive restoration of language” to describe a person’s growing interest in language with age, as well as the emergence of “linguistic confidence” in an individual who once knew the language, but in their youth chose not to speak it (Vakhtin 2001). Those who are fluent in Yupik enjoy speaking the language, and try to speak it at home, on the bus, in a store, or at a chance meeting with another on the street. More than once I have witnessed situations when one person conducts a conversation in Yupik and tries to persuade the interlocutor to reply in their “native” language, but the latter is either not in the mood, or is inferior to the former in knowledge of the language, and thus answers in Russian.

A person’s knowledge of the Yupik language directly depends on their life circumstances during childhood and adolescence. Different representatives of one generation (about fifty years old), who grew up at the same time in the same village, might either speak fluently or practically not know the language at all. For example, one woman was raised by her great-aunt, always spoke the Yupik language in the family, and did not lose it, despite her boarding school experience. Another one grew up in a mixed family (Russian father, Yupik mother), had

virtually no contact with older relatives, and did not speak Yupik at all. This generation can be called, using the terminology of Nikolai Vakhtin, “the turning point generation” (Vakhtin 2001; Vakhtin 1992); most people over fifty years old speak the Yupik language well, while those under fifty years old either do not speak it at all and do not understand it, or use only certain phrases and words. Knowledge of the language turns out to be related to the characteristics of a person’s biography, as well as the level of his interest in the language and in Yupik culture more broadly. For example, one of my interlocutors spent several years on St. Lawrence Island (Alaska), where the Chaplino Yupik language, or Central Siberian Yupik, has been much better preserved than in Chukotka.<sup>7</sup> He tries to use the language whenever possible, although such opportunities are very limited in Novoe Chaplino. There are people who do not speak the language, but they work to learn it on their own, asking older relatives to explain anything they do not understand, and trying, whenever possible, to insert Yupik words into Russian-language speech. WhatsApp chats are very popular, where residents of Novoe Chaplino, Sireniki, Uelkal, and Provideniya and their former fellow villagers, now living throughout Russia, write in Yupik, analyze individual phrases, share poems, and ask each other how to correctly say this or that phrase (Oparin 2020a).

## The Yupik Language in the Religious Ritual Context

Despite the rhetoric about the “death” and “disappearance” of language, which even some indigenous peoples say about themselves (Mamontova 2019), the linguistic landscape of Novoe Chaplino is not exclusively Russian. The scope of the Yupik language has declined dramatically, with fewer and fewer people who can speak and write the language fluently. Nevertheless, many words and even expressions in Yupik are still widely used. Along with traditional environmental management, ritual becomes another area of applicability of Yupik. Daria Morgunova Schwalbe wrote about the presence of the Yupik language in the public sphere, particularly in dances, drum songs, and the performance of folklore, primarily fairy tales (Schwalbe 2020: 98). Here I want to focus on the life of language in a closed family religious context—during animist rituals.

Yupik cosmologies are based on communication with spirits, primarily the souls of deceased relatives. This communication is manifested in a variety of individual ritual practices, which often have no

name in Russian. Below I present several Yupik words that are associated with the religious ritual sphere and are often included in the Russian-speaking speech of local residents. There are no analogues in the Russian language for defining Yupik rituals or ritual objects, and further to this, the religious ritual sphere itself is distanced (as far as possible) from Russian-speaking everyday life. Although the ritual sphere is included in the current social context, it is located within the domain of privacy and secrecy, and closely connected with the “old world.” This sphere is itself based on continuity and is viewed as a vital part of Yupik ethnic heritage.

Feeding the spirits of dead people, including ancestors, is a ritual practice widespread among almost all indigenous inhabitants of Novoe Chaplino, with the exception of individual Christians (Oparin 2012). People break off small pieces of food and throw them out the window, put them outside the house, or place them into a fire made specifically for the ritual. The reasons, places, and material objects of feeding are varied (people often feed objects that symbolize the dead and contain their power). Yupik speakers call almost any feeding of spirits ах’к’ышак’ (*aghqeshaq*, from the stem *aghqe-* that signifies making an offering of food to the deceased, Jacobson 2008:10) and this word became widely used in the predominantly Russian speech of the Yupik population of Chukotka.<sup>8</sup> Collective commemorations for all ancestors and deceased relatives at once (both those known personally to the participants of the ceremony and those not) most often take place annually in early autumn or late spring (see Figure 1). These are the most organized and ritualized type of feeding, and this memorial ceremony is called ах’к’ысях’тудьык’ (*aghqesaghtuq*, Krupnik and Chlenov 2013: 157)—although sometimes, just like “everyday feeding,” they can be called ах’к’ышак’ (in Russian *pominki*, or “funeral”). While the word ах’к’ышак’ is known to all residents of Novoe Chaplino, regardless of age, level of language proficiency, and even ethnicity, the concept of ах’к’ысях’тудьык’ is less common and, according to my observations, is more often found in the speech of older people. To indicate the action of feeding, people may say: “Have you fed the spirits?” Similarly, we tend to hear: “Did you do ах’к’ышак’?” Both formulations can be used in the speech of local residents; however, the second is more common.

In many Yupik houses one can find “guards,” as the locals themselves call them, standing or hanging on the wall; these are old beaters for knocking snow out of fur clothes. Made from deer antler, they are also used for protecting the house and its inhabitants from evil influences. Even when otherwise speaking Russian, Yupiks call these





**Figure 1.** An ах'кысях'тулбък' (*aghqesaghtuq*) ritual in the tundra of the сиг'унпагыт (*Sighunpaget*) clan. 1972. Private archive of Nadezhda Paulina.

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**Figure 2.** This photo was taken during the same ceremony in 1972 (mentioned in Figure 1). The photographer, very likely a member of the clan, wanted to capture the feast dedicated to the spirits at its very beginning. Private archive of Nadezhda Paulina.

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beaters тигуйн'а (*tiguynḡa*).<sup>9</sup> From an interview with a resident of Novoe Chaplino born in the 1950s:

Now the snow is usually [knocked off] with a broom. Previously, they used to use тигуйн'а for this. The Chukchi came, stopped at the house, and they would straighten out their *torbasa* [fur boots made from reindeer hide]—they came from the snow, walked through the snow, and beat their *torbasa*—shook them out with their тигуйником [the woman used the Yupik word тигуйн'а with the Russian suffix -nik and in the masculine instrumental case]. My mom and dad had these, and those I grew up with had them too. It stood at the threshold, guarding. They said: stand and guard so that no one comes. From evil spirits, probably. That's what they said. Then they used it.

Сейчас метелочкой снег [сбивают]. Раньше прям этим тигуйн'а выбивали. Чукчи приезжали, останавливались, и они прям свои меховые торбаса—они же пришли со снега, по снегу шли и набили торбаса—вытряхивали своим тигуйником. У мамы с папой был, и у которых я росла, тоже был. Стоял у порога, охранял. Говорили: стой и охраняй, чтоб никто не приходил. Из злых духов, наверное. Так говорили. Потом вот пользовались.

An obligatory treat for spirits during the ritual of launching boats in April, marking the first hunt of the year on the high seas, is a sausage stuffed with reindeer fat, called к'век (*keviḡ*, from the Yupik “to stuff something with something”) or also кывиг' (*keviḡ*) (Jacobson 2008: 353).<sup>10</sup> Bogoraz wrote that the coastal Chukchi sacrificed “a stomach stuffed with reindeer meat as a sacrifice to the sea” (Bogoraz 2011: 98). Tein also mentioned that the main dish for the spirits was кивик (Naukan Yupik language), “the large intestine of a deer stuffed with pieces of reindeer meat and lard” (Tein 1977: 118). For reindeer sausage, к'век, Chaplino's hunters go to the Chukchi in the Yanrakynnot tundra. They bring with them тухтак', (*tuhtaḡ*, a large piece of walrus meat with fat, sewn into the skin of a walrus), ман'так' (*mangtaḡ*, or whale skin and fat), along with lasso straps made from bearded seal and walrus stomach necessary for making drums, to exchange for venison. These trading relations, which took shape between the coastal Chukchi and Yupiks and the inland reindeer herders in the pre-contact period, were reorganized in the Soviet period but did not lose their significance. This trade has survived to the present, and money does not figure into the exchange. People trade not just food, but the raw materials necessary for the manufacture of ritual objects—the stomach of a walrus, to stretch it onto the wooden frame of a drums, and venison. Yupiks still make protective amulets from

reindeer sinews, which are worn by participants in funeral ceremonies. Venison is the most common treat for spirits. And finally, without reindeer sausage, *к'век*, they almost never go through the ritual of launching boats. Thus, as Virginie Vaté puts it, “the need for ritual is associated with the need for exchange: ritual is needed to set the exchange in motion, exchange is needed to carry out the ritual” (Vaté 2005: 63).

Some locals use the word *тыг'ныг'ах'си* (*tygnyghakhsi*) to refer to a ritual to return the soul of a living person. This word was also translated to me as “renewed soul.” If a person is very frightened of something, or if in a dream a dead person calls him to come to him, then one of the relatives needs to go outside, take a pebble, bring it into the house, and put it on the clothes or on the bed of the person whose soul needs ritual “renewal.”

Next, I provide examples of the use of certain phrases in the Yupik language in a religious ritual context. During wakes (*ах'кысях'тулгык'*) and simply when feeding spirits (*ах'к'ышак'*), certain phrases are spoken. The main message of the phrases spoken during the rituals is to welcome the spirits and invite them to eat, drink, and smoke. These formulas can be pronounced in both Russian and Yupik languages. However, most often the eldest member of the family, who most likely speaks the Yupik language better than the others, leads the funeral, and they are given the responsibility of inviting the spirits to eat in the Yupik language. In the winter of 2020, I was invited to a funeral service at the cemetery, which was attended only by young people—women and men under 35 years of age (see Figure 3). The funeral was led by a Yupik hunter, considered knowledgeable. He began calling the spirits in Yupik: *к'амх'люси таг'итык'* (*qamaghlyusi taghityq*, “come everyone”), and ended in Russian: “eat, drink, be full.”

At a wake, the first words addressed to ancestors might sound like the following:

Here, we brought it for you so that you won't be hungry until we feed you next year (in Russian).<sup>11</sup>

Вот, мы вам принесли, чтобы вы не были голодны, пока мы вас не покормили в следующем году.

We came to you, we have not forgotten you and we are treating you (in Russian).<sup>12</sup>

Мы пришли к вам, мы вас не забыли и мы вас угощаем.

Hey, that's it, come over, drink, eat, smoke, drink tea (in Yupik).<sup>13</sup>

Ахкух'си, к'амах'люси кытфах'тык: мыг'итык', наг'итык, мылюхтык, к'аюх'тык.



**Figure 3.** A ceremony to “invite” the spirit of the deceased one year after death to a communal fire where all spirits related to the family gather during the wake. January, 2020. Source: Dmitriy Oparin.

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Thus, the Yupik language in one form or another is present both in everyday Russian-language speech when discussing ritual in the form of individual words, which have no analogues in the Russian language, and in ceremonial speech, which resists Russification more than everyday speech. The ritual presupposes a certain discipline in following the rules of its implementation for the sake of effectiveness of the action. These rules are not written down by anyone, but rather they are formulated in the family environment. They reflect a manifestation of individual/family ideas about Yupik traditions and display continuity with the ritual practices of older relatives. The verbal component of the ritual is also aimed at achieving a particular goal—so that the ancestors are satisfied, a loved one recovers, general good luck accompanies the family throughout the year, and so forth. The preferred use of the Yupik language or at least some expressions in Yupik is explained by the desire to follow tradition, maintain continuity in ritual practice with ancestors, and focus on the effect of the ritual.

## Spells Recorded in 2020

Spells have played a large role in the ritual life of Arctic peoples. Researchers have noted a wide variety of spells aimed at a variety of needs, and all have written about the special secrecy necessary for the transmission of spells, caution in talking about them, and even more so in their application. The pre-revolutionary and Soviet ethnographer and linguist Vladimir Bogoraz cites the texts of many Chukchi spells (Bogoraz 2011: 145–174), describing the forms of transmission of spells and cases of their use. Frédéric Laugrand and Jarich Oosten, together with their informants from among elderly Canadian Inuit, draw parallels between the traditional spells and Christian hymns and prayers; they see continuity in the conversion of spell practices into Christian formulas (Laugrand and Oosten 2010: 286–304). One woman in Novoe Chaplino told me in 2012 that her mother gave her a bighorn sheep's hoof, wrapped in deer sinews with beads strung on the sinews, with the words: "I'm not a shaman, I can't teach you prayers. All I have left is this hoof." In this case, the woman called Yupik spells "prayers" (Russian: *molitvi*) in the Christian (Russian) manner.

Ethnographers T. S. Tein (1981) and Vladimir Bogoraz (1919) wrote about Yupik spells in the past, along with linguist Ekaterina Rubtsova, who provides the texts of two spells in the Chaplino Yupik language with interlinear translation into Russian in her book on the language and folklore of the Yupik (Rubtsova 1954: 290–291). Spells in Yupik are called *к'анымсут* (*qanymsut*, plural) and *к'анымсюк* (*qanymsyuk*, singular). Below I provide translations of spells that I myself collected in 2020, which I mentioned at the very beginning of this article. The first three spells were received from one woman, whose mother wrote spells for her in a notebook in the Yupik language. I photographed the notes in the notebook and then, together with one elderly Yupik woman, translated the spells into Russian. These spells are directed against the evil intentions of strangers. The owner of the spells said that she used them extremely rarely and would reproduce the spell by reading it from a sheet of paper. She allowed me to publish the translation into any language. The only thing she asked me not to do was publish the spells in Yupik, since it is only in Yupik that she believes they possess power.

First spell: In this image I will walk.<sup>14</sup> These friends are variegated stones with spots. When they touch me, they leave me in the form of steam.<sup>15</sup>

Second spell: I am coming to you again in the form of a polar bear. An old bear. Half of his muzzle has turned black from old age.<sup>16</sup>

Third spell: I swallowed someone's slander or damage sent by this person. My belly was full and when it was full, I pooped and it came out as feces and no one else sees them and will not use them.

The following spell for good luck was received by me from another woman. She remembered it by heart, wrote it down for me, and translated it into Russian herself. She was not afraid of publishing this spell even in the Yupik language; however, here I provide only the translation: "I'm a wolverine. I have a lush, rich skin on me. The claws are pointed. I'm heading there. And there he is—a lousy fox with bad fur, with dull claws. I'm on top—he's below. I'm in front—he's behind. *Tjai!*"<sup>17</sup>

## **Security Regimes and Forms of Preserving Spells**

Openness, privacy, and secrecy often become subjects of discussion between ethnographers and interlocutors during fieldwork related to the study of ritual. In general, the modern ritual life of Novoe Chaplino is particularly closed—Yupik ritual practices are limited to a narrow family circle, and ritual knowledge is not widely distributed. Instead, it is transmitted exclusively within the family. People try not to show ritual objects and amulets, which they use as a link between living and deceased ancestors, on whose help in crisis situations many Yupik rely. Village residents try not to talk about ritual methods of treatment; they never talk about spells or family holidays, if such are still observed in individual families. People may share stories about how they feed the spirits of ancestors or how they celebrate wakes, but behind these widespread practices lies a rich and intense repertoire, including other forms of interaction with deceased relatives that often remain a family secret. "There must be a secret," as one middle-aged Yupik woman whom I have known for almost ten years told me—her family has been the one I have had the closest contact with during my fieldwork in Chukotka since 2011. She is considered one of the most knowledgeable in the village. She and I have spent a lot of time talking about rituals, the hidden and the sacred. I understood that this woman saw my interest and would like to tell me more from her point of view of what a stranger is allowed to know. One day she showed me a stone hidden in a closet,

wrapped in deer sinew. She would “feed” the stone that she got from her mother from time to time by crumbling pieces of food onto it or smearing drops of drinks on it. For many days after this woman showed me her stone, she smiled and regretted what she had done. However, I remember that a few months before the demonstration of the stone, also struggling with her secrecy, she laid out the contents of a glass jar in front of me. There were old beads, tickets, skins, buttons—valuable things inherited from her ancestors. During an interview, she told me:

Woman: Everyone has their own rules. Now we have become a little Russified, so we talk about them, but we wouldn't tell the most intimate secrets. [У каждого свои правила. Это сейчас мы немножко обрусели, поэтому рассказываем, а так свое не сказали бы.]

DO: Why is it considered important that you don't talk about it? [А почему считается, что нельзя рассказать?]

Woman: I'm telling you—you lose a part of yourself. [Я же говорю—частичку себя теряешь.]. (F, born 1959, Новое Чаплино).

People's reluctance to talk about the ritual and sacred and to display *pagitak'* (*pagitak*, ritual family objects that belonged to the ancestors) does not mean that they never show and explain. Such secrecy is the norm, but in certain situations the norm can be violated; however, the violation of the norm, that is, the denormalization of the usual treatment of the ritual and sacred, must be leveled out. When demonstrating something secret associated with the power of ancestors, a partial desacralization of knowledge or subject occurs. However, desacralization must be followed by reverse sacralization, the normalization of relations between the owner of the object/knowledge and the ancestors with whom communication takes place through this object or through secret knowledge, and who are most likely the “donors” of this object or knowledge. From an interview with a female resident of Новое Чаплино born in the 1960s:

Woman: I showed you the medicine one time. Dad's. You scrolled through. [Я тебе показывала в свое время лекарство. Папин. Ты пролистал.]

DO: Dad's what? [Папин что?]

Woman: Dad's notebook. You scrolled through. I'll remove it now after you. I'll sleep with it: it's ours, mine. I showed it to you, you scrolled through it—probably all this flew away. It must be always closed. Now I'll sleep with it in the evening. When you get sick, I tear off a

piece of paper. I don't tell anyone about this because the power of the notebook might be lost. But it is so effective, it helps. My *lialia* [a baby] got sick, I tore off a leaf and just like that I was tearing at it, telling dad to help, mom to help. *Lialia* will sleep. And then, in the morning, she will wash her face. This is the most effective! [Папин блокнот. Ты пролистал. Я его сейчас после тебя уберу. Я с ним посплю: это наше, мое. Я тебе показала, ты пролистал—наверное, улетело вот это вот все. Надо, чтобы оно было всегда закрыто. Сейчас я вечером с ним посплю. Вот когда заболеешь, я отрываю листок. Никому об этом не рассказываю, потому что может потеряться сила блокнота. Но она такая действенная, помогает. Ляля моя заболела, я листочек оторвала и вот так вот рву над ним, говоря, чтобы папа помог, мама помогла. Ляля поспит. А потом, утром, умылся. Вот это—самое наидейственное!]

I have always been interested in the topic of closedness and secrecy of ritual and sacred knowledge. The focus of such interest is the relationship between myself, as a researcher interested in ritual space, and my research participants—the creators of the ritual space. Who can be told and shown rituals or ritual objects, and who cannot? How does the reluctance to reveal a secret relate to the need to share? In what category do I find myself, as someone not participating in the ritual life of the village and not intending to use the spell for its intended purpose? Do I fall into the category of those with whom it is safe to share or, on the contrary, in the category of those with whom it is unsafe to share, since I am not a relative and could publish, for example, something that is strictly prohibited to publish? More often than not, all interlocutors treat me as someone who can be told and shown to, as a stranger—unlike, for example, fellow Yupik or Chukchi villagers, who, having learned about it, could then deprive the ritual of its power.

The local population has had half a century of experience interacting with professional ethnographers, linguists, biologists, demographers, as well as a shorter but still impressive experience of working with documentarians, journalists, and tourists—all those visitors who might film, ask, record, and then publish the results of their fieldwork. Every local resident understands perfectly well what ethnography is and the importance of the research work carried out by scientists from Moscow, St. Petersburg, Anadyr, and abroad. And this understanding, as well as what is most often a positive experience of the parents and grandparents of current village residents working with such researchers, allows them to be more open and to rethink the boundaries of the secret versus the public. At the same time, I often



encountered a reluctance to share knowledge with fellow villagers and a willingness to share with researchers.

Currently, spells are the most closed manifestation of Yupik culture. Most of the local population does not know any spells; some retain the memory of their use by their older relatives, but they cannot reproduce a single spell. A small number of families keep notebooks with spells written down by their ancestors and do not open them. Frédéric Laugrand and Jarich Oosten write that, in workshops in the Canadian Arctic with elderly Inuit, they encountered the difficulties of writing down spells. Informants were willing to share only parts of the spell, since a fully publicly revealed spell loses its power (Laugrand and Oosten 2010: 288). Linguist Ekaterina Rubtsova, who worked among Yupiks in Chukotka in the 1930s and 1940s, wrote down only two spells when compiling her first volume on Yupik folklore. In the preface, she points out that all the texts were recorded from a blind twenty-six-year-old narrator, Aivukhak, with the exception of spells: “The spells were recorded from another person,” Rubtsova writes; however, she does not clarify who that person was (Rubtsova 1954: 11). Probably, the spells were also recorded from Aivukhak. Ekaterina Rubtsova, given the political context of the persecution of religion, could have hidden the name of the informant for their own safety, but I think there may be another reason. Here, in my opinion, we see the ethics of a researcher working with a very delicate sphere of culture. Liudmila Ainana (1934–2021), a well-known expert on the language and culture of Siberian Yupik, told me in 2020 about how Rubtsova kept secret the name of the informant who shared the text with her:

LA: But she [Rubtsova] didn't tell anyone who she learned [the spells] from. No one! She was generally such an honest woman. [Но она никому не сказала, у кого она узнала. Никому! Она вообще была такая честная женщина.]

DO: But it's strange why they told her. [Но странно, почему ей сказали.]

LA: She was very respected in Chaplino. She spoke Yupik. She asked questions herself, without an interpreter. They trusted her. [Очень уважали ее в Чаплино. Она же говорила по-эскимосски. Она расспрашивала сама, без переводчика. Доверяли ей.]

In the village of Sireniki (a Chukchi-Yupik village in Providenskii District of Chukotka), I met one family who kept a notebook with spells, inherited from my interlocutor's mother: “I remember my mother did

this ... she was always worried about the children. And she kept a notebook. For all occasions there were *канымсюки* [using the Yupik word inflected with case and in the Russian plural, although the plural of the word *канымсюк* is *к'анымсут*].” To my questions about where the notebook itself was and whether it was possible to see the mother and daughter (that is, the daughter and granddaughter of the woman who wrote down the spells), they answered that the notebook was somewhere in a container (many families have steel shipping containers; they store various things in them, as well as meat), but they didn’t know where exactly. Another argument for refusing to show the notebook sounded like this: “It was just her personal thing, she didn’t trust anyone, she was worried about it, that someone might read it.” According to my interlocutors, the spells written in this notebook were different: “If hunters went hunting, there was a separate one. If someone gets sick. If someone is going far away, there must be a way.” I never managed to get acquainted with the spells of this family.

Revealing spells may be regarded by some people as a betrayal of those older relatives who once wrote down these texts for their children and grandchildren. In addition, many still remember the Soviet era well and grew up feeling the need to hide everything connected with ritual life and connections with Alaska. From an interview with the woman who did not show me a notebook with spells: “Even earlier, this communism. I remember they hid everything. I remember my grandmother knew a song in English. She immediately said: don’t tell anyone, otherwise they’ll put me in prison.”

In my fieldwork, I encountered not only a lack of knowledge of spells, but also a reluctance to know them, much less use them. The practice of using spells is regarded by people not only as a secret, but also as a dangerous realm. Parents who remembered spells sometimes believed that it was better not to pass on this knowledge to their children, and children might be afraid to approach the unknown and incomprehensible areas with which spells are very much associated. However, according to my observations, the main fears are spells aimed at causing harm to another. This is an excerpt from an interview with a middle-aged Yupik man, whose mother “had an evil tongue,” as her fellow villagers told me when I first arrived in Chukotka in 2011.<sup>18</sup>

DO: Did she [the interlocutor’s mother] use [spells]? [Она пользовалась?]

Man: Not once. She said—I remember, as a child—you get tired of a person, and you can do this and that, and you will remove that

person. You can easily remove them, but you will have to give up two of your own, two will be taken away, two will leave. [Ни разу. Она говорила: я помню, в детстве надоест человек, и ты сможешь то-то-то сделать, что ты уберешь того человека. Ты-то запросто уберешь, но двоих своих отдашь, двоих заберут, уйдут двое.]

DO: A very heavy price. [Очень плохая плата.]

Man: Very. I've never used it. [Очень. Я никогда не пользовался.]

DO: What do you have to do if you are sick and tired of a person? [А что нужно сделать, если тебе надоел человек?]

Man: No, it's better to forget it altogether. A bad price ... Why the hell would you want to lose two of your own? And she said that it would easily work, only you'd lose two relatives. [Нет, лучше это забыть вообще. Плохая плата ... Нахрена своих двоих потерять? А так говорила, что запросто сработает, только двоих родственников потеряешь.]

DO: Do you have to say something? [Это надо сказать что-то?]

Man: You need to go to the tundra, do a ritual, a spell, and take something else from it. [Надо в тундру идти, делать типа обряд, заговор и еще что-то у этого взять.]

DO: The enemy? [У врага?]

Man: Take a piece [of something thing] from someone you want to remove. [У того, кого хочешь убрать, кусочек чего-нибудь взять.]

Another reason for people's secrecy in the ritual sphere is their lack of confidence in their own knowledge, their frustration with interrupted continuity, or insufficient ritual details passed on by older relatives—everything that Nikolai Vakhtin calls a “deficit of cultural information” (Vakhtin 2001). People may not want to talk about things they do not think they understand. One woman in Novoe Chaplino explained to me why she could not share the spells: “... I forgot a lot, I have now become Russian, I can't, I have forgotten a lot of Yupik words.” The departure of the Yupik language from everyday use cannot but affect the level of applicability of this language in the ritual sphere. The Yupik-speaking environment is becoming less and less saturated, and this cannot but affect the frequency and completeness of the use of the Yupik language in rituals. It seems to me that the loss of fluency in the language and, in general, the fear of losing the language are constructing new forms of preservation of Yupik ritual formulas and their application. Of course, there is an idea that a spell must be spoken word

for word, and there is no place for improvisation in this genre. And if in the preliterate period memorization was the only way to preserve a spell, then in Soviet times, in view of the advent of writing, spells began to be written down. From an interview with a former Yupik language teacher born in the 1950s:

Teacher: Mom was very, very sick when I was giving her injections, her cough did not go away. She lost a lot of weight, and we started to worry. Grandmother was no longer there. And now I still have my grandmother's beads, except for the red ones.<sup>19</sup> Black, green, yellow. There's not much left anymore. Take this bead and put it under the pillow, too, if the person is sick, the person will sleep on it. Early in the morning (very early, when it is still dark, so that there is no one outside), you need to shake off with this bead a person who is sick, even if he is sleeping, go outside and say the words in Yupik. I did everything. I remembered the words for the rest of my life. I first wrote them down, and then I knew them myself and remembered them. And she recovered, she was cured. [Мама сильно-сильно болела когда, я ей уколы ставила, кашель не проходил. Она прям похудела, мы стали волноваться. Уже бабушки не было. И вот у меня бусинки бабушкины остались, кроме красных. Черные, зеленые, желтые. Уже мало осталось. Возьмешь эту бусинку, положишь тоже под подушку, если человек больной, человек поспит на ней. Утром рано (рано-рано, чтоб темно еще было, чтобы никого на улице не было) надо отряхнуть этой бусинкой человека, кто больной, пусть даже спящий, выйти на улицу и по-эскимосски сказать слова. Я все сделала. Я слова запомнила на всю жизнь. Я сначала записала их, а потом уже сама знаю, запомнила. И она поправилась, вылечилась.]

DO: So you cured your mother with what she gave you? [То есть вы маму вылечили тем, что она вам передала?]

Teacher: Yes. She told me that, I didn't know. She told me, she taught me. And I became scared: What if I do something wrong? What if I say something wrong? And I just memorized these words. [Да. Это она мне так сказала, я не знала. Она мне сказала, она научила. А мне стало страшно: вдруг я что-то неправильно сделаю? Вдруг я что-то неправильно скажу? И я прям заучивала эти слова.]

DO: What if you said something wrong? [А если бы что-то неправильно сказали?]

Teacher: What if she got even worse? [А вдруг бы ей еще хуже стало?]

Now some representatives of the young and middle generations even write these phrases down in notebooks (phrases of greeting and

inviting spirits to eat, etc.). They are trying to preserve and record the Yupik-language verbal component of the religious ritual, so that later, when they have to conduct a funeral themselves, they do not confuse anything, do not make any mistakes, and thereby maintain continuity with their older relatives in ritual practice.

## Indeterminacy and Chance in Yupik Culture

A significant part of the ethnographic information regarding spells was recorded from people who do not use spells, do not know them themselves, but have retained memories of how their older relatives used spells. Vague narratives about spells provide an opportunity to consider what I find to be key characteristics of Yupik ritual life—uncertainty and randomness.

If a lot of anthropological work is devoted to failure and doubt in a religious ritual context (Hüsken 2007; Stevenson 2009; Beekers and Kloos, 2018; Schielke and Debevec 2012), then the concepts of chance and uncertainty still await conceptualization. This is partly due to the fact that randomness does not represent a deviation from the norm, but is itself part of the logic of ritual and a component of many ritual practices. For example, at a funeral, each person present must put a rope made of deer sinew on their wrist to protect them from spirits and their possible evil intentions. Later, this bracelet should disappear as if by accident. After a funeral, people sometimes take stones from a cemetery or from the tundra, which also after some time should accidentally disappear or get lost. Often the impulse for one or another ritual action (feeding the spirit of an ancestor, giving him clothes) is a dream. In dreams, people also understand which of the ancestors is showing the desire to return through the newborn. Dreams are a space of uncertainty, understatement; symbols, signs, and hints are interpreted by dreamers and then, depending on their interpretation, ritual activity is built. Ambiguity and vagueness accompany the sacred ideas and practices of the local indigenous population throughout their entire life journey, and chance is an integral element of a particular ritual cycle—be it a wake, a funeral, or treatment.

Ritual verbal formulas, including spells, are not pronounced loudly and clearly. They are reproduced in a whisper, as if the person is shy and secretive. Every time there was a conversation about spirits, rituals, and the sacred, my interlocutors switched to speaking in a quiet,

insinuating manner. No one felt confident enough in the context of complex communication with spirits, not even the most knowledgeable Yupik people I met. Below I provide excerpts from an interview with a Yupik woman who recalls how her older relatives used spells. These memories illustrate the perception of the practice of using spells as a particularly closed and secret sphere, where even those for whom these spells are used are not allowed. In turn, this closedness creates a space of uncertainty, a lack of involvement in the ritual and, therefore, ignorance (boldface indicates author's emphasis):

I come home—oh, something is twisting my liver! I barely made it home, my husband helped me. It doesn't let go and that's it. I bent over and could not straighten up. And K. [the interlocutor's relative] came over sober. For him to be drunk—no. He asked, there was something he didn't have: either tea or sugar. I'm a dying swan there, and I can only call the doctors tomorrow, but it's better to go to the outpatient clinic by nine. I say: "I have something wrong with my stomach." He came up to me: "What do you have?" "The liver, this place in general!" "Come on!" It was **as if** he touched, **maybe whispered something**, and that's all! He stepped away. And immediately, I felt better.

Прихожу домой—ой, что-то мне печень скрутило! Еле домой дошла, муж мне помог. Не отпускает и все. Согнулась и не могла разогнуться. И К. [родственник информантки] пришел трезвый. Чтобы он выпивший—нет. Попросил, чего-то у него не было: то ли чая, то ли сахара. Я там умирающий лебедь, а завтра только врачей вызывать, а лучше к девяти пойти в амбулаторию. Говорю: "у меня что-то с животом." Подошел ко мне: "что у тебя?" "Печень, вот это место вообще!" "Ну-ка!" Он **как будто** потрогал, **может, чего-то нашептал**, и все! И отошел. И сразу же как будто бы.

Grandma—she also had some spells. I was little and was very sick. She **whispered, whispered something**. Of course, I couldn't remember all sorts of spells. Maybe she still had one for some reason. Maybe I already understood what she was saying, whispering in my ear. I already understood, and it was as if, perhaps, it was a suggestion to a person, and that person recovered.

Бабушка—у нее еще заговоры какие-то были. Я маленькая была—сильно болела. Она **шептала, нашептывала что-то**. Конечно, я не могла запомнить заговоры всякие. Может, у нее по какому-то поводу еще были. Может, я уже понимала то, что она говорила, мне на ушко нашептывала. Я уже понимала, и как будто, может, внушение человеку, и он выздоравливал.

The use of spells was so unclear to her that she describes what happened with a high level of uncertainty: “maybe she whispered something,” “as if she touched it,” “whispered something.” The first memory is from the 1960s, the second from the 1980s. My interlocutor remembers something that happened relatively long ago and could already have forgotten not only the details of the events, but also the very words that her relatives spoke to her. However, she did not forget the feeling of uncertainty of the ritual performed on her: both memories are shrouded in secrecy, the performers of the spells did not pronounce them loudly, did not explain their actions to her.

One of my friends recalled how he twisted his ankle at school, and when he came home, he showed his injury to his grandmother (boldface indicates author’s emphasis):

She looked: “Oh!” And **in our way, something** [i.e., she said something in Yupik]. She took my leg and seemed to suck out the pain [shows in his voice how his grandmother sucked out the pain]. Only air. “Now,” she says, “wait.” And **she went somewhere alone**. And so she left, and I went to bed after dinner and in a dream I dreamed of the same incident, how I fell. I say: “I dreamed about how I fell.” “I’ve already done everything” [says grandma].

Она посмотрела: “ой!” И **по-нашему что-то** [то есть, сказала что-то по-эскимосски]. Она взяла мою ногу и как будто высасывает боль [показывает голосом, как бабушка высасывала боль]. Только воздух. “Сейчас,” говорит, “подожди.” И **куда-то ушла одна**. И вот она ушла, а я спать лег после обеда и во сне мне этот же случай снился, как я упал. Я говорю: “мне снилось, как я упал.” “Я уже все сделала” [говорит бабушка].

What she did, what she spoke in Yupik, remained unclear and incomprehensible to my interlocutor. After some time, the boy recovered:

“Grandma,” I say. “What?” “Look!” And I got up and went. “Ay!” And she ran out again. Probably, she said some words of thanksgiving there ... my grandmother cured me. **All sorts of spells**.

“Бабушка,” говорю. “Чего?” “Смотри!” И я встал и пошел. “Ай!” И она опять выбежала. Наверное, благодарение там сказала ... бабушка меня вылечила. **Всякими** заговорами.

He did not understand what his grandmother said, nor where she went and what she did outside alone. Apparently, the grandmother herself did not really want her grandson to witness the use of the spell. This example is interesting from another angle as well. My interlocutor

mentions how his grandmother sucked out pain. Using the concept of “shared breath,” practices of sucking out sickness can be considered in the same category as the culture of using spells. Breathing, as a movement of air in the context of communication with nonhumans, is a “key image and metaphor in and of itself, exemplifying exchange of life force in an animist context” (Siragusa, Westman, and Moritz 2020: 472).

The ambiguity in the ritual context, on the one hand, is due to a violation of continuity, a “deficit of cultural information”: older relatives did not want to—or were afraid to—convey ritual knowledge. On the other hand, uncertainty is explained by the fact that, in general, ritual space is a subtle and intuitive sphere, within which effectiveness is not guaranteed, and the correctness of a particular action is subjective (Oparin 2012). And, finally, there is also uncertainty regarding the methods and forms of interaction with spirits for the sake of good hunting, healing, flying weather, and so forth. This is due to the fact that this area is still perceived by many as Yupik-speaking, and therefore largely inaccessible to the majority of representatives of the indigenous population. Spells, for example, are effective only if pronounced in the Yupik language; at funerals, greetings and invitations to spirits also begin with Yupik. Of course, the modern ritual space of Chukotka is not exclusively Yupik-speaking. Since ritual practices and ideas are individualized, and everyone independently builds interactions with the dead (based on their own experience and their own idea of tradition), the Russian language is gaining a presence in the sphere of communication with spirits. Yupik formulas, often learned from older ancestors, only formally precede impromptu live communication in Russian. Moreover, in recent times, a significant part of already deceased older relatives who are personally known to those living today spoke Russian fluently.

## **Conclusion**

The existence of the Yupik language in the modern ritual sphere is closely intertwined with family heritage. Spells or other ritual formulations are passed down within the same family from elders to younger family members. Thus, the Yupik-language ritual heritage is associated with the memory of ancestors: of older relatives who wrote down spells for their descendants in a notebook, or those who orally transmitted words with which to greet spirits. The Yupik language in a ritual context is now a marker of continuity, a sign of the preservation of family heritage, the cultural wealth of an individual family, often preserved by



the family and associated with a specific close relative who passed on the knowledge of ritual language.

At the same time, the Yupik language in a ritual context is a sphere of uncertainty and secrecy. It is unclear, just as the ritual itself is often unclear in regards to how to build correct communication with ancestors. Language is disappearing just as the transmission of ritual knowledge has been interrupted. Many of the middle-generation research interlocutors complained that their parents or grandparents did not pass on the language to them, just as they did not pass on the ritual knowledge of how to heal, for example, or celebrate a family holiday. Parents believed that children should first of all master the Russian language, and the “old” forms of treatment were no longer needed, since there was Soviet medicine, just as there is no need for a family holiday since everyone is now celebrating the New Year.<sup>20</sup> The phenomenon of refusal to transmit language or traditional knowledge (see, for example, Siragusa 2017: 79) is due to the social and political context in which the indigenous peoples of the North were placed. The awareness of the “uselessness” of a language or religious ritual is not a free choice of this or that person; rather, this feeling was dictated by the pressure of the social system that was thoroughly established in the North by the post-war period (Ferguson 2019; Vakhtin 2004). The already closed ritual religious sphere became even more closed during the period of Soviet modernization, in which there was plentiful anti-religious propaganda and an imposed disregard for the “old life.”

The applicability or inapplicability of the Yupik language in a ritual context is colored by various emotions: annoyance at the loss of language, doubt about the correctness of actions and words, fear due to the possibility of making a mistake, a sense of uncertainty. Nevertheless, the Yupik language continues to exist in the ritual space and, according to my observations in recent years, it exists more intensely there than, for instance, in the sphere of traditional wildlife management. All conversations during the hunt for sea animals are conducted in Russian; only individual Yupik words denoting hunting equipment, names of parts of the animals, and the animals themselves or the Yupik toponyms of the hunting area are found in the hunters’ vocabulary. None of the hunters use entire Yupik sentences during the hunt, whereas relatively long phrases are used during rituals.

Ritual formulas for greeting and inviting spirits, or asking spirits for good weather, do not require a specific verbal order. They can be pronounced arbitrarily, using different expressions. However, due to the ignorance of the Yupik language by a significant part of the Siberian

Yupik population, these seemingly improvisational forms tend to be fixed and memorized word for word, approaching the level of spells in their “conservativeness.” In one family, a grandmother recorded for her children and grandchildren all the necessary expressions for appealing to spirits on a telephone voice recorder. In many families, older relatives convey these “ceremonial speeches” in written form. The secrecy of spells’ texts and the types of speeches pronounced at funerals presupposes special forms of preservation and transmission of this linguistic heritage. Spells cannot be demonstrated, children will not make presentations about this facet of Yupik culture at school, and these texts will not be discussed in the aforementioned WhatsApp chats. The texts of spells and the formulations of appeals to spirits are preserved within some families (written down or memorized), while within other families these texts are “lost” and the transmission is deliberately interrupted. While marine mammal vocabulary is openly transmitted to young hunters from childhood, just as entire folkloric works are transmitted in national ensembles, ritual formulations, especially spells, can be deliberately consigned to oblivion, as, in the opinion of the older generation, they are labeled “unnecessary” in “modern” life or even dangerous for the younger generation. Thus, one of the manifestations of the language shift and the dynamics of the sociolinguistic situation among indigenous communities of the Russian North is in some cases the impossibility of using a minority language in a religious context—or in other cases, a firm belief in the “uselessness” of this language. The language shift changes not only the linguistic landscape and linguistic everyday life of indigenous Chukotka, but also affects the relationship of people with spirits, who now increasingly hear Russian speech rather than Yupik. On the other hand, the Yupik language continues to be present in the ritual sphere. As I have already written above, people learn phrases, use recordings of older relatives, create such recordings themselves, and use certain vocabulary or even separate phrases.

Cases of deliberate destruction of copybooks with spells and conscious refusal to pass on the spells to children can be compared with similar examples of burning ritual objects due to, for example, conversion to Christianity or spoiling of these objects by animals (see, for example, Vaté 2021a on tundra Chukchi or Vallikivi 2011 on Nenets). While to the ethnographer, museum worker, or even ethnic activist such cases of deliberate destruction of heritage may seem at least unfortunate and very undesirable, for the actors of these processes, the owners of ritual objects or spells, on the contrary, they are logical and necessary, embedded in the living biographies of things and knowledge

that can be not only preserved, transmitted, and multiplied, but also destroyed and subjected to willful oblivion. Therefore, the language shift in communication with spirits or the deliberate ignoring of spells can be perceived not only as a loss of heritage, but as part of a living and responsive cosmology, a family dialogue of the living with the dead, and the practice of caring for the well-being of the family.

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## Notes

1. See, for example, Dmitrii Arzyutov's article on the "social life" of sacred and environmental texts written by adherents of the "White Faith" in Altai (Arzyutov 2018) or Laura Siragusa's part of the collective paper dedicated to human and nonhuman copresence through ritualized words among the Veps, an indigenous ethnic group of north-western Russia (Siragusa, Westman, Moritz 2020: 474). Here a local Veps interlocutor did not disclose to the researcher the spells, but shared with Siragusa her life experience that involved *puheged* (spells in Vepsian language).

2. According to my own observations, the protection of spells and, in general, knowledge about rituals comes under different regimes and takes different forms—ranging from complete secrecy and a categorical refusal to tell anything all the way to a general openness and readiness to share the texts of spells, demonstrate sacred objects, and invite outsiders to observe rituals. I call the variety of levels of access that an "other" may gain to a family's ritual heritage different regimes of openness/secrecy. The "other"—depending on the situation—may be a researcher, a fellow Yupik individual, or even a relative.

3. For example, people may offer old beads in gratitude to the spirits.

4. I started learning Yupik when I first came to Chukotka in 2011. Every time I visited Chukotka, I regularly took private lessons from a local Yupik language teacher, Alexandra Ivanovna Mumikhtykak (Mumigtekaq). I realized that I could not and still cannot maintain a full-fledged conversation in the Yupik language, but I needed a basic knowledge of the language in order to write down proper names correctly, to understand separate phrases and words that fill the speech of local people, even those who have almost no command of the language, and to feel the culture more deeply. When I was in Novoe Chaplino for the first time in 2011, Liubov' Kutyliina (1938–2011), the only native Yupik speaker who could speak Yupik more easily than Russian, died. For all current residents, even the elderly, conversation in Yupik is more difficult to maintain than in Russian.

5. The names are given according to the names of small settlements closed from the 1930s to the 1950s included in the orbit of Ungaziq (Staroe Chaplino)—the largest settlement of Siberian Yupik, which was liquidated in 1958. The population was resettled to the village of Novoe Chaplino, created in 1958.

6. Daria Morgounova Schwalbe, who worked in the 2000s and 2010s in Novoe Chaplino, writes: "code-switching and language mixing in the village were a rather common phenomena, and the everyday speech of the village inhabitants in general was interspersed with Yupik words and phrases" (Schwalbe 2015).

7. On the relationship between the Yupiks of Chukotka and St. Lawrence Island, including the difference in the "linguistic biography" of these two groups of people, see Schwalbe 2017.

8. All Yupik words reproduced in this article are written in Cyrillic based on Rubtsova's dictionary (Rubtsova 1971) or/and my Yupik-speaking research participants. Transliteration into the Latin alphabet is done based on Jacobson's *St. Lawrence Island / Siberian Yupik Eskimo Dictionary* (Jacobson 2008) in some cases (these are specifically noted). I also used Krupnik and Chlenov's (2013) approach writing down some terms and especially geographical and clan names (specifically noted). In other cases, I used the Library of Congress Cyrillic-Latin transliteration rules with minor simplifications.

9. From the Yupik-Russian dictionary of Ekaterina Rubtsova: The тигуйн'а[ыт] is a beater (a stick made of deer antler, which is used to remove snow from clothes before entering a room). This word entered the Chaplino Yupik language from Chukchi (Jacobson 2008). Virginie Vaté writes that тивичгын or тивийгын (names for тигуйн'а in the Chukchi language) is still used by the tundra Chukchi to knock snow off the iaranga (Vaté 2021b: 67). She also notes that тивичгын serves as a guard against evil spirits. This is especially true after a funeral: the тивичгын is placed on the threshold of the iaranga so that the deceased does not return to take away living people.

10. Linguist Ekaterina Rubtsova uses three different variants of the word: квек', кывик', квик' (kvek', kyvik', kvik') (Rubtsova 2019: 510, 779).

11. Author's field materials, 2011. F, 1942, Sireniki.

12. Author's field materials, 2011. F, 1966, Novoe Chaplino.

13. Author's field materials, 2011. F, 1959, Novoe Chaplino.

14. Alternate translation: "I want to fulfill, I intend to go."

15. Alternate translation: "When someone sends me spotted stones, they steam away from me."

16. Alternate translation: "I intend to approach you again. I'm a dangerous old polar bear. Because I'm old, half of my face is in shadow."

17. Spitting, denoted in Yupik by the word "tfai" or "tfu," is a ritual for ending any action (Rubtsova 2008: 206).

18. "To have an evil tongue" means to have the ability to harm with a word: to curse, to put the evil eye on.

19. Beads perform protective functions, and may also serve as a symbolic gift, presented both to spirits in gratitude and to people.

20. See more about the dynamics of the prestige of the "native" language among the indigenous peoples of the North in Vakhtin (2001), and about the status of the Russian language in Yupik families in Schwalbe (2015: 18; 2020: 97).

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