HOW THE DEVILS WENT DEAF: ETHNOMYCOLOGY, CUISINE, AND PERCEPTION OF LANDSCAPE IN THE RUSSIAN NORTH

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To Igor Pasternak

Thank you for your love, and for the mushrooms

Abstract

Arctic tundra is rich mushroom country and a number of high latitude fungi species can potentially be used as food. Different regions often play host to many of the same or similar mushroom varieties. Yet, people's attitudes toward the same mushrooms—and mushrooms in general—vary widely both in temporal and geographical senses. The given work presents a study in ethnomycology—a field of inquiry concerned with human beliefs and practices associated with mushrooms, carried out in the Bering Strait area of Chukotka, Russia. Once avoided by the Native people living on the Russian and American sides of the Bering Strait, wild mushrooms are now considered to be deliciously edible among the Yupiit and Chukchi of Chukotka. In addition to its dietary contribution, mushroom gathering is also valued as a social, spiritual, and recreational activity which cultivates particular relationships between the people and the land. Prior to the influences of the mushroom-loving Russian cuisine, Yupik people in Chukotka regarded mushrooms as "devil ears," while the Chukchi largely viewed them as reindeer food unfit for human consumption. As an ethnographic study of a single commodity, this thesis examines past and present meanings of mushrooms in Chukotka, exploring local beliefs, practices, and knowledge associated with their use. It shows that the transformations in Yupik and Chukchi ideas about mushrooms are deeply connected with multiple aspects of social change taking place in Chukotka during and after the Soviet period.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Acknowledgements

The surrounding world of the officially atheistic Soviet society, in which I was born and raised, was filled with metaphysical dangers. To prevent our plans from being jinxed, we knocked on wood while spitting three times over our left shoulder. As a precaution to having spoken "too soon," we talked about the future in the least definitive terms possible. When offered a compliment, we accepted it with a smile on the face and a *figa* in the pocket (*figa* is a Russian word for a special-shape fist, with the thumb end poking out between the middle finger and the pointer). A signifier for "you won't get it," the *figa* inside one's pocket is intended to offset the damage caused by the evil eye that praises, even the most sincere ones, are capable of inflicting. Having carefully taken the steps prescribed by these time-honored prophylactics, I would like to express my deepest and heartfelt gratitude for the incredibly good fortune I have had in my life and work thanks to the generous support of the following individuals and organizations:

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- Sharik and Ginger
- Igor Pasternak, my kind and loving husband, who never fails to impress and inspire me with his many talents, his prodigious creativity, and his infinite passion for learning new things.

Finally, I cannot help but reflect on the indisputable fact that my research agenda, stagnant at times, has landed onto a right path, bringing me much joy and fulfillment, ever since the corner of my mind's eye has caught the magnificent sight of the mighty mushroom.

Thank you. I am knocking on wood, and waiting for further guidance.

MUSHROOMS WITHOUT BORDERS:

MY PATHWAY TO BERINGIAN ETHNOMYCOLOGY

CHAPTER 1

"Kushai kartoshku s gribami i derzhi yazyk za zubami" ("Eat potatoes with mushrooms and keep your thoughts to yourself"): *Bábushka* Leah, my maternal grandmother, loves to utter this rhyme—her rendition of an old Russian proverb, which she modified to fit our setting. The known classic version actually instructs to eat mushrooms that are baked in pot pies, rather than stewed with potatoes. The latter, however, a recipe that is as common as it is scrumptious, had a regular spot on our menu. The home of my grandparents in Rechitsa, Belorussia (Belarus), where I lived as a child, stood adjacent to the town's marketplace. Whatever was not being cultivated in our sizable garden could be purchased on the other side of the fence. In season, we ate everything fresh. Although by the time I was born, my grandparents no longer kept chickens and goats, they continued to grow all kinds of produce. At the market they bought dairy goods and mushrooms. The latter were always chanterelles, affectionately called "lisíchki" (foxies) in Russian, harvested at the crack of dawn in the woods at the province outskirts. These fragrant golden-brown dainties served an incentive for good table manners and general compliance with all house rules. Salivating from the sheer sight, I would begin the bargaining, showering my *babushka* with endless promises to eat everything I am offered and to do everything I am told, not giving in until she would start negotiating with the vendor. Later that day, as I sat in front of the steaming plate, *babushka* inevitably caught me excavating the stew with my fork, nailing each of the buttery tidbits, ingesting them one by one, savoring every crunch. "Your plate must be cleaned," she would toss a

gentle reminder, implying that I should not pick out the mushrooms, but scoop up all the ingredients at once. When I attempted to subtly hint that the potato portion of the mix is a bit excessive, *babushka* swiftly returned with the all-too-familiar "eat potatoes with mushrooms and keep your thoughts to yourself."

I did not grow up in a family of mushroom picking experts able to distinguish dozens of varieties. No one in my immediate or extended kin is a gourmet chef or a connoisseur possessing a vast collection of recipes with a specialized indication for each kind of mushroom. However, we cooked and ate mushrooms regularly, as they were often the key ingredient in various soups, stews, and hors d'oeuvres. For us it was common knowledge that rain in the woods unearths myriad fungi, some of which are poisonous, some are edible and delicious, and some that are neither here nor there, offering little interest to savvy consumers. Virtually all the mushrooms we ate were purchased at the marketplace, directly from first-hand pickers. (We did some recreational gathering occasionally.) On the continuum of supply and distribution we were the second and the last. In elementary school, identifying the most popular types—the boletes, the russulas, the chanterelles, the fly-agaric—was a regular assignment in life sciences, while in art classes mushrooms made a frequent subject of collages and watercolors (Figure 1). All in all, whether an admirer or impartial onlooker, a revered expert or a marginal patron, growing up in Belarus one had an implicit awareness that the fungus was, in fact, among us.

Figure 1: A display of collages crafted by school children in Enmelen, Chukotka very similar to the ones assigned to us in elementary grades when I was growing up in the former Soviet Union. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

With immigration and relocation to Chicago in early 1990s, mushrooms had largely gone out of sight. The produce shops in our neighborhood did not carry any familiar varieties, and had they, the U.S. retail prices of wild mushrooms (of which I became aware of many years later) would have placed these luxurious items way beyond our reach.[1] The cultivated crimini and portobello[2] did not strike our fancy, as their texture and aroma compared poorly to the quality we were used to back home. Planted in the middle of a big Midwestern city, without any prior travel experience in the U.S., I was quite ignorant of any resources accessible in the wilderness or even a rural setting. In every way, the new urban west, seemingly masterminded for easy living, stood in diametric opposition to the old country, where food had to be grown and gathered or required waiting in line to be purchased, and even then, cooked "from scratch."

The new and the old were compared constantly: in contradiction to themselves, immigrants can simultaneously praise one, be nostalgic for the other, and adamantly criticize both. When mushrooms came up as a subject of conversation, their absence in shops was sarcastically explained with a quote from Autumn Marathon (Danelia 2000[1979]), a popular feature film, now a Soviet cinema classic.[3] The movie has a scene where a Leningrad resident is asking a visiting Dane about mushrooms in the forests "abroad";

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1 In all likelihood some specialty stores or sections in the supermarket did carry some wild mushrooms varieties, at least in dried form. However, those were uncharted territories for us at the time. As a commercial enterprise, wild mushroom harvesting in the U.S. began in the late 1970s. Although since then the number of harvesters and field buyers operating in the forests of Montana, Idaho, Pacific Northwest, and occasionally Alaska, has been increasing, the sales market is still predominantly in Western Europe. (I gathered this information during field research at a commercial morel mushroom harvest in interior Alaska, which I conducted in collaboration with the University of Alaska Cooperative Extension Service and the Boreal Ecology Research Unit of the U.S. Forest Service the summer of 2004.)

2 A brown crimini is actually a juvenile stage of portobello; the latter is often marketed as "portabella."

3 In the U.S. this film is a regular part of the university curricula in Russian Studies; it is also widely available in public libraries and commercial video rentals.

the latter replies: za rubezhom gribnykh lesov net "there are no mushrooms in the forests abroad" (Figure 2). Shortened to "there are no mushrooms abroad," the cliché has become an immigrant metaphor that captured all unsatisfied cravings for the food and places left behind. The allegory was true to life until I moved to Alaska.

The discovery of "mushrooms abroad" occurred on my first walk through the generously forested University of Alaska Fairbanks campus. At first, I mistook the orange blots spotting throughout the underbrush for pieces of last year's foliage that had marvelously retained their luscious fall color. However, looking closer I realized that the flawless, seemingly gravitating circles could not be anything but aspen boletes, caught in their prime. Kneeling with my pocket camera I embarked on my first-ever photo-shoot of the forest groundcover. With absolutely no research ambitions in mind, the images captured were entirely for the benefit of my Russian network in Chicago: "they won't believe until they see it—" I thought, "state of the art aspen boletes, right here, in the middle of the University campus." To learn what else is out there in the fall of 2000 I took an introductory mycology course with Professor Gary Laursen.

Until the first snowfall, *The Third Kingdom* was partially taught as a field class: a fungi taxonomist by trade, Gary Laursen is also an enthusiast who volunteers at a number of outreach activities and regularly organizes lively and enticing mushroom forays. Captivated with what I was learning about mushroom biology and ecological roles, I nevertheless remained an anthropologist at heart and, over the course of the semester, found myself pondering more and more upon the various human uses of fungi. At the time I was curious about every kind of utilization: recreational, culinary, medicinal, spiritual. Coincidently, Gary Laursen was also keen on delving into these subjects, particularly in the regions adjacent to the Bering Strait, where, as a principal investigator, he was leading a multi-year project entitled

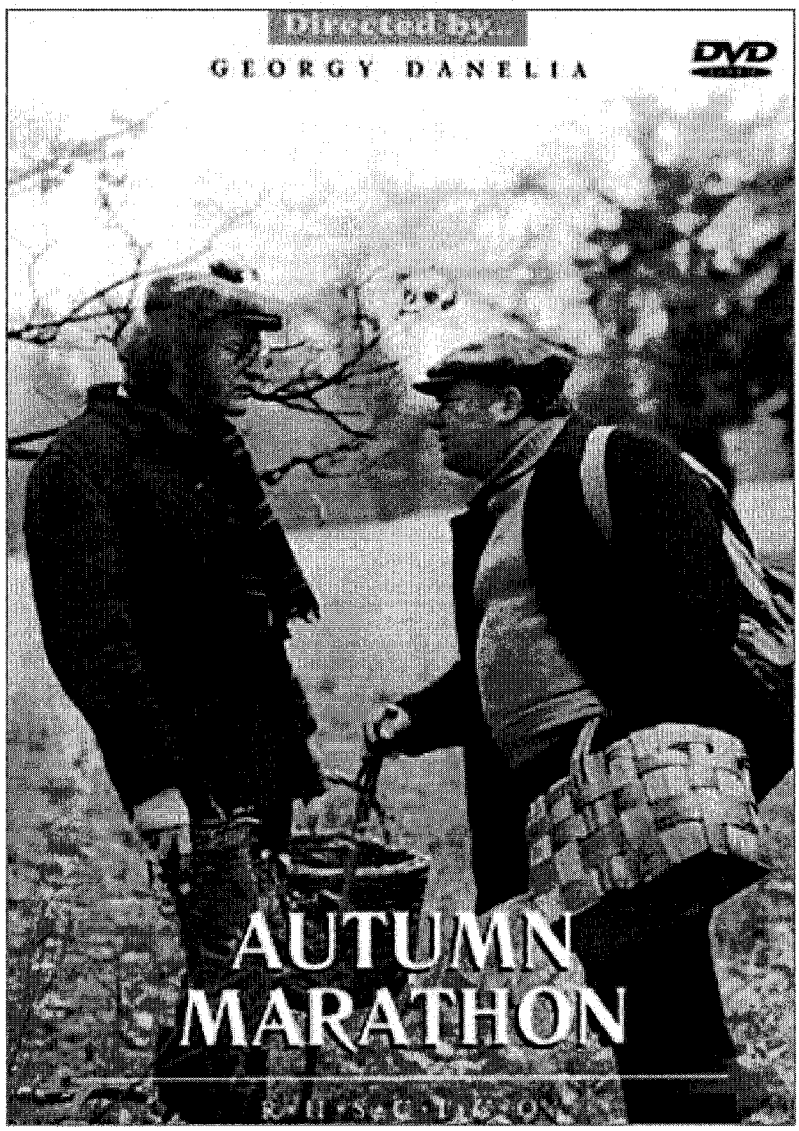

Figure 2: "There are no mushrooms abroad"—a popular Russian saying derived from Danelia's (2000[1979]) film *Autumn Marathon*. Although the subject of mushrooms takes up only a few minutes of the movie, the mushroom-picking scene, shown on the cover of its recently released DVD version, is one of the most memorable and most quoted by viewers.

Beringian Cryptogams.[4] Bering Strait also happened to be my long-term area of interest: having had the experience of living in other parts of the former Soviet Union and the United States, I wanted to explore how some of the national differences play out in the region where the two countries stand in such physical propinquity, and where cultural parallels and long-standing intercontinental social ties have been well-documented (e.g. Bogoras 1904-09, Nelson 1983 [1899], Ray 1975, Schweitzer 2003, Schweitzer and Golovko 1997, 1995, among others). Thus, Gary Laursen's invitation to develop an anthropological component in the ongoing study of Beringian fungi made an ideal opportunity to integrate the geographic and thematic dimensions of my emerging curiosities.

I started this work with a survey of literature and archival materials and soon began encountering examples of recreational, medicinal, spiritual, and practical household uses of various fungi throughout Alaska and northeastern Russia. Puffballs, for example, have been utilized in several culture areas to treat cuts, burns, eye irritation, and sores (Garibaldi 1999, Kari 1987). Several authors mention the use of arboreal shelf polypore to make snuff and chewing tobacco (e.g., Dolitsky 1996, Fienup-Riordan 2000, Kavasch 1996, Nelson 1983 [1899]), while both Ethnology and Archaeology collections at the University of Alaska Museum of the North hold a number of associated objects, such as snuff tubes, mortars, boxes, and pouches. The collections database suggests that these fungi also served as mosquito repellents and fire starters. Lantis (1959) writes about a medicinal application of the arboreal shelf polypore to treat stomach aches in the Cenral Yupik area. Wasson (1968) provides an

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4 The *Beringian Cryptogams* project was funded by the National Park Service, Beringian Heritage Program Service (Award Nos. PX9830-93-062, PX9830-92-385, PX9830-0-0451, PX9830-0-0451, PX9830-0-0512; Principal Investigator Gary Laursen, Institute of Arctic Biology, University of Alaska Fairbanks). See the Shared Beringian Heritage Program report entitled *Inventory and Survey of Fungi, Lichenized Fungi, Lichenicolous Fungi, Mycetozoans, and Bryophytes* (Laursen 2002) for more information about the project.

extensive compilation of sources that describe the spiritual and recreational uses of *Amanita muscaria* in Chukotka and Kamchatka.

From a historical point of view, descriptions of these various domains of fungi use emerged from the consulted sources rather unambiguously. Although some accounts left me wishing for more details, they did not generate any mysteries. With regard to culinary use the situation was not as clear. For the Alaska side of the Bering Strait, the literature suggested that mushrooms were not sought after in subsistence gathering or culinary practice. For example, in a regional overview of the period1650-1898, Ray comments that "no root, leaf, or berry that was edible was overlooked by the Eskimos, except mushrooms, which apparently were never eaten" (1975:119). Anore Jones seconds Ray's (ibid.) supposition and explains that absence of culinary mushroom use also extends into contemporary times:

> Traditionally, the local mushrooms were never eaten. *Argaignaq*, the local Inupiaq word for mushrooms means 'that which causes your hands to come off.' Long ago, *Anatkut* (shamans) fostered a strong taboo against eating mushrooms, some of it lingers yet today, making it difficult for Inupiat to consider eating them (1983:144).

In contrast, on the Chukotka side of the Bering Strait, some contemporary accounts suggested that wild mushrooms are admired as delicious edibles. The subsistence reports for the coastal communities on the Chukchi Peninsula (Ainana et all 2000, 1999) list a number of species harvested by residents in each village, while specifically in Sireniki, Kerttula observed that "only Chukchi and Yupik ate greens, but everyone enjoyed mushrooms and berries" (2000:109). "During mushroom season," the author continues, "the village's obsession with fungi borders on fetishism" (ibid.).

Thus, separated by the two national borders and the international dateline, the Native communities living in the Bering Strait area of Alaska and the Russian Far East share common histories, physical environments, and

subsistence diets consisting of land and sea mammal meat, fish, birds, berries, and greens. Mushrooms, however, albeit found on both sides of the Strait, appeared to be an exception. Intrigued by such opposing attitudes to an ever-present resource, I was eager to explore further the beliefs and practices surrounding the culinary mushroom use in Chukotka and Alaska. In the summer of 2001, I headed for the field to carry out what became the pilot study for my dissertation research.[5]

Preliminary Insights

The continental shores and islands of the Bering Strait are the indigenous homelands of the Inupiaq, the Yupik,[6] and the Chukchi people. Although not an uncommon focus in circumpolar studies, the boundaries of what constitutes the *Bering Strait* region are variably defined. Schweitzer and Golovko (1997), for example, only include the Native communities of Naukan, Big Diomede, Uelen, Little Diomede, Wales, and King Island in their definition of the Bering Strait area. Specifying that they intentionally chose the communities that historically were most actively participating in trans-Bering Strait contact, the authors also point out that Seward and Chukchi peninsulas "provide convenient alternative labels" (1997:169). Although the Alaska-Chukotka continuities also pertain to my research subject, for the summer of 2001 I chose to work in communities that would allow me to make cross-cultural, urban-rural, and international comparisons (Figure 3).

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5 My 2001 fieldwork in northwest Alaska (Kotzebue, Kivalina, Nome, Teller) and Provideniya, Chukotka was funded in part by a grant from the University of Alaska Museum of the North through the Geist Research Program for the project *Beringian Ethnomycology* (Principal Investigator Sveta Yamin), and a grant from the Shared Beringian Heritage Program for the project *Beringian Cryptogams* (see Footnote 4, this chapter).

6 Later in the text I also use the vernacular pural forms of these designations, i.e.:"Inupiat" and "Yupiit."

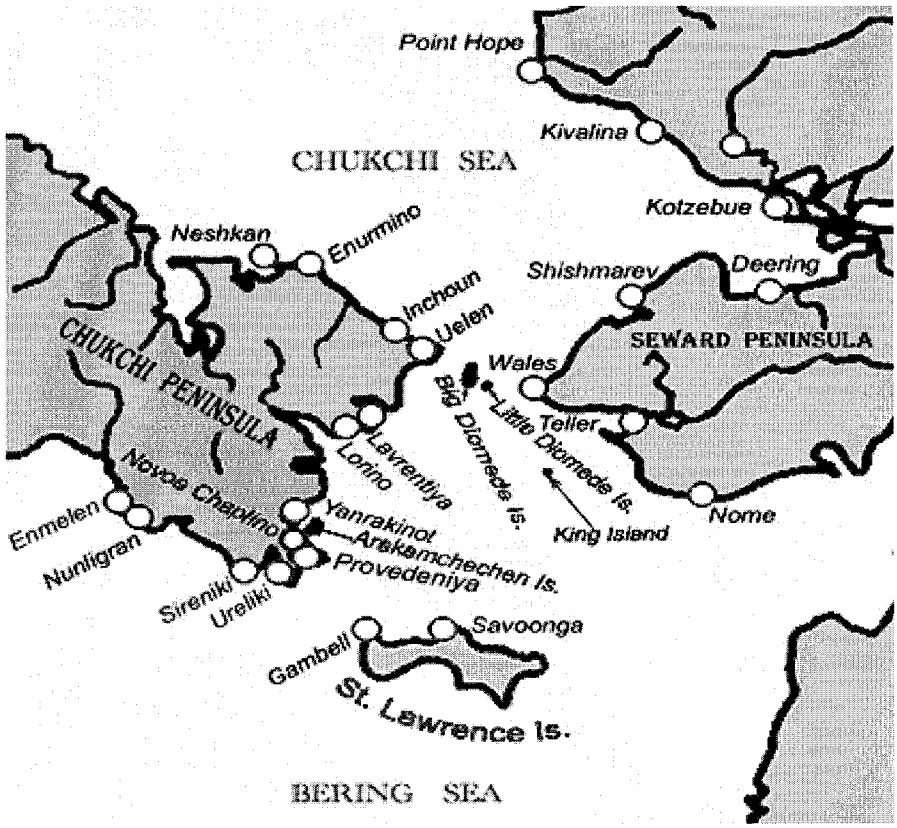

Figure 3: Map of the Bering Strait Area. (Drawn by Igor Pasternak)

On the Alaskan side, I conducted interviews in the settlements of Kotzebue, Kivalina, Nome, and Teller. Kotzebue and Nome are not very large towns, each populated by several thousand people. Nevertheless, they function as district centers, offering infrastructure and a service base that are significantly more developed than in the surrounding villages. Both are inhabited by mixed Native and settler populations and are frequently visited by residents of the nearby settlements. Kivalina is a small Inupiaq community north of Kotzebue. I chose Kivalina as one of my field sites, partially, because I had prior research experience there, hence could consult a good number of people in a short time, as I kept contact with several families in this village. Teller is also an Inupiaq community, the only one reachable from Nome by road, and was therefore logistically convenient for my purposes: with accommodations in Nome, I could make daytrips to conduct interviews in the village.

I began the fieldwork on the Alaska side in early June and continued through the end of July. My husband Igor Pasternak kept me company. Although these months, June especially, do not correspond to the prime fruiting time for some potentially edible genera (*Leccinum*, for instance), I could still productively conduct interviews on local knowledge and attitudes toward mushrooms.

On the whole, my 2001 fieldwork findings reinforced the contrast made apparent in the literature, showing largely avoidance of mushrooms—due either to fear or indifference—on the Alaska side (cf. Jones 1983, Ray 1975) and deep affection and extensive use in Chukotka (cf. Kerttula 2000). In northwest Alaska, whether in the villages or the district centers, the idea of mushrooms being inevitably harmful echoed in multiple stories. Many people recalled being instructed as children never to touch mushrooms and strongly advised us against picking them. Inupiaq speakers usually explained the avoidance principle in idiomatic terms, translating the meaning of

"mushroom" in Inupiaq: *argaignaq*—"something that causes your hands to come off." A few said they remember an occasion when a relative or someone in the community tried eating mushrooms. Ventures of this sort were regarded as unequivocally dangerous, the experimenters were thought to be "asking for trouble." While fear was a predominant sentiment in some reactions, others placed more emphasis on aversion, shrugging with disgust when I brought up the idea of cooking and eating wild mushrooms. Remarkably, the latter category included several individuals who without second thoughts consumed the prefabricated pizzas topped with mushrooms or other store-bought foods with mushrooms in the mix. Somehow within a slough of compounded ingredients, mushrooms looked and tasted "okay," whereas the idea of ingesting a buttery bowl of a fresh tundra harvest inspired a repulsed grimace, giving one's nose a texture of an accordion bellow. Apparently, the two were not considered the same. Another kind of reaction was mere indifference, as in "Mushrooms? No we don't pick them: we kick them, and step on them."

There were a few individuals who met my questions with a cautious curiosity. For example, our hosts in Kotzebue (one of them was my former classmate at UAF) said they would not mind trying some local mushrooms if Igor and I were willing to pick and prepare them. Later that week we came across a nice patch of puffballs, which we took home and pan-fried with potatoes. We each ate a small serving and left the rest to share with out hosts, who came a few hours later. "Have you already had some?" asked my classmate. I said that we each ate a little after we finished cooking. "About how long ago did you eat them?..." she continued with apprehension, "...and you are feeling okay still?" Satisfied with our answers she accepted a serving of my childhood's favorite recipe (albeit in a modified form, with puffballs in place of chanterelles), and after the first sampling quickly determined that it

was going to become "[her] thing." The taste tests performed by her adult daughter and a visiting cousin led to similar conclusions.

Especially provocative for me were the reactions similar to the elder, with whom I spoke at the Senior Center in Nome. "Mushrooms?!" he exclaimed "you must be Russian!" He, and others who deduced my identity through the same association, was speaking from experience, having hosted a visiting relative from Russia who turned out to be a mushroom connoisseur. In Nome, a number of Siberian Yupik and Inupiaq residents have kin ties in Chukotka. This is also true for the residents of St. Lawrence Island and Little Diomede as well as some families in Kotzebue and Seward Peninsula villages. In 1989, the indigenous residents on both sides of the Bering Straight gained the right of visa-free travel between the two coasts (although entry permits are still required by both sides, and an additional border pass is needed for Russia). Since then, many private visits and various cultural exchanges have taken place. Several individuals from Chukotka have made Alaska their permanent home, and new families formed as a result. Nowadays, the vast majority of people on the Alaska side of the Bering Strait who, with great pleasure and little competition, harvest and eat wild mushrooms are the immigrants from Chukotka. From some of them I heard stories of the panic they accidentally generated in the homes of their Alaska-born relatives, bringing the fresh tundra harvest with intentions to share the wealth.

In addition to the actual fieldwork in northwest Alaska, I had the advantage of being able to gain comparative information in Fairbanks, since many of my fellow-students in the UAF Inupiaq language classes at UAF were from the area, as were a number of Igor's classmates in Native Arts. Thus I had a chance to speak with some residents of St. Lawrence Island, Little Diomede, Shishmaref, Noatak, White Mountain, and Golovin, among others. All of their outlooks were consistent with one another and resembled those I already described. While people do not always explicitly speak of "a strong

taboo against eating mushrooms" (Jones 1983:144), their testimonies make it evident that in northwest Alaska, wild mushrooms are far from being valued as deliciously edible and were hardly regarded as food. Chukotka, on the other hand, turned out to be quite the opposite.

Constrained by a number of financial and logistical circumstances, in August 2001 I was able to spend just over two weeks in Chukotka together with three other researchers working on the *Beringian Cryptogams* project. During this time I visited Provideniya and the Novoe Chaplino community hunter camp known as Inakhpak. Despite the short timeframe, I was able to gain a considerable appreciation for the importance of mushroom picking on the Russian side of the Bering Strait, as the dates of my fieldwork there corresponded perfectly with the ongoing season. Picking was not only the central activity but also among the most popular subjects of conversation. Every public and private place offered opportunities for an enlightening interaction: on the streets, in the stores, in the bathhouse (*bania*), and in the bar. The hills surrounding Provideniya were crowded with mushroom hunters. "No reason to go up there, no mushrooms in sight" was the greeting I received one morning from a group of people I met on the trail. Anyone walking beyond the town's vicinity was assumed to be a mushroom hunter. A man who lived in the same building that our team was staying at approached me on the third day of our visit. "I see you out of my window in the mornings [I came outside after breakfast]. You look like you are bored. Next time you are bored, go up this hill. You will find mushrooms. But if you sleep too late, you will only find holes in the ground. Others will get them, if you sleep too much."

Because the surrounding areas are visited so frequently for the short half-day or morning hikes, a real successful mushroom hunt requires a trip out of town. However, the limited opportunities and high costs of transportation make such trips problematic for the local residents. That is why it is

especially important to stress that people go out of their way during the mushroom season, to take advantage of travel possibilities. For example, one hopeful person said: "I have some friends who arranged for a car. I have to work, but I will beg for a day off next week. Maybe I can come with them. Otherwise I will miss the mushrooms altogether." On Saturday, the women's bathing day, the *bania* was full of mushroom stories. Although some visitors were enjoying the steam for a good part of the day, others were running in near closing time. These women were that day's "lucky travelers." Having sacrificed a long luxurious cycle of steam and hot tea, they only had time for a short shower and a mushroom story. Still, they appeared to be quite content with the compromise. That is, of course, if they had luck out on the tundra.

The Providensky region has a number of breathtaking scenic spots. Different locations offer various opportunities for subsistence and recreation during certain parts of the year. In late August the availability of mushrooms is what determines the place's desirability. "*Tam mesto chudnoye: kuda ne glian', griby!* "("That place is magical: mushrooms are everywhere you look!") was a review I heard from several individuals. Not only outdoor localities, but weather conditions were also evaluated in relation to mushrooms' presense and abundance. When sharing my hopes for a sunny day, the response I got was: "*dozhd'—horosho, gribov budyet mnogo*" ("the rain is good, there will be lots of mushrooms").

Similar to Kerttula's (2000:109) observation in Sireniki, I found that mushrooms are regarded as a delicacy by both indigenous and non-Native people. For all three groups—the Yupik, the Chukhi, and the settlers who came to Chukotka from elsewhere in Russia or other former Soviet republics—the set of activities associated with harvesting, processing, preparing, and preserving mushrooms for future use is an integral part of summer and of the procurement cycle as a whole. The efforts and sacrifices made in order to pick mushrooms (such as gaining access to transportation,

working double shifts to earn time off, traveling long distances, and missing the day at the *bania*) attest to the importance of this activity. These factors, together with the local evaluations of weather and sites based on their contribution to a successful harvest, clearly manifest the presence of region-wide affection for mushrooms in contemporary times.

From a number of people I also learned that mushroom picking was not practiced in Chukotka in former times. Just as the indigenous residents of northwest Alaska continue to abstain largely from eating wild mushrooms, the Yupik and Chukchi on the other side in of the Bering Strait too had their own beliefs that, until recently, had kept the mushrooms outside their culinary spheres. Within a Chukchi worldview mushrooms were regarded as food for the reindeer, not humans. For the latter mushrooms were thought to be neither nutritious nor palatable. The Yupik conceptualization was more explicitly prohibiting, classifying mushrooms as "devil ears," belonging to certain malevolent beings inhabiting the tundra and causing contamination and decay upon physical contact with skin. Here, a connection can be drawn to the Inupiaq idea of mushrooms harming one's body, by making the hands come off.

Several informants in Provideniya and Inakhpak told me that Chukotka Natives first started picking mushrooms in the 1950s, on the influence of newcomers arriving from other parts of the Soviet Union. Until then, the situation in Chukotka was similar to that in Alaska: each for their own reasons, both Yupik and Chukchi people refrained from harvesting mushrooms or using them as food. The chance to observe and compare the two sides has turned my attention to Chukotka: reflecting on the scale of change it had seen in local attitude toward mushrooms, I pondered upon the significance and implications of this transition from aversion, avoidance, and fear to obsession [that] bordered on fetishism" (ibid.).

All but absent in the recent past, mushroom picking has developed into a practice that is now tremendously widespread, culturally meaningful, and—most importantly—implicitly local. Along with the acquired enjoyment of picking and eating wild mushrooms came a set of activities necessary for their processing and preservation for long-term storage, as well as new domains of ecological knowledge and culinary skill. Together with the utilitarian means developed the preferences for gathering certain types in certain places and with or without certain company, for consuming mushrooms in combination with some foods and not with others, and for serving particular recipes on particular occasions. Some individuals became known as experts and aficionados, famous for the quantities and qualities of their grand reserves. Others, with less luck or knowledge, or maybe fewer opportunities to pick, have come to rely on those more fortunate, thus forming new networks of distribution and exchange and perhaps modifying the existing ones. All of these innovations have permeated the cycle of procurement, the ways of seeing and making use of the land, and the patterns and preferences of cooking and eating. The particularities of each have become regarded as traditions for individuals, households, and various social groups. Presently, on the Alaskan side of the Bering Strait, as I have found, mushroom gathering even provides an identity marker, revealing the Russian or Russified heritage of the practitioner.

But I am getting ahead of myself. In the actual chronology of events, I returned to Fairbanks at the end of the summer 2001 feeling overwhelmed with the contrast that exists along the physical and temporal axis in the beliefs and activities, as well as in sensual perceptions, associated with mushrooms—a naturally occurring phenomenon that adorned the slopes of the Arctic tundra long before acquiring this assortment of past and present meanings. The subject beguiled me with its ethnographic richness, and thinking about it further produced more puzzles than conclusions. The one certainty I had at

that point was in knowing that the questions to which my pilot study gave rise, concerning food preferences, local history, land use, ethnomycology—beliefs and practices associated with fungi, deserve a deeper exploration. The present work is grounded in these questions to which I now turn.

Research Questions

In truth, the intellectual revenue of the exploratory fieldwork I conducted in 2001 had amounted to my grasping what can be considered "the beginning" and "the end." In other words, I learned in the past, due to different cultural inhibitions, Yupik and Chukchi people have categorically abstained from harvesting and utilizing as food the mushrooms that fruit on the Chukotka tundra. I also learned that presently they do that to a great extent, attributing an immense significance to these practices, and forming a striking contrast with the tastes and perspectives of the Siberian Yupik and Inupiaq people of Alaska. These facts begged the questions: what happened in the meantime, and how? Who were the first envoys and recipients of the novel idea of picking mushrooms for food? How did others in the household of a novice react to the undertaking? Thus the first goal of my inquiry, founded on this set of curiosities, is to uncover the process of change and to recapture some of its ethnographic texture.

The second set of concerns is prompted by the dietary component of the transition in question, as the conceptual change in attitudes toward mushrooms entails a transformation in food preferences and tastes. Looking to studies in the anthropology of food (e.g. Anderson 2005, Arutjunov and Voronina 2001, Counihan 1999, Farb and Armelagos 1980, Jolles 2002), we find that certain food practices are very persistent, remaining intact long after other aspects of culture—whether due to colonization, immigration, or

diffusion of ideas—are transformed or go out of practice. Still, cross-culturally, examples of dietary innovations are abundant (e.g. Gabaccia 1998, Goody 1982, Mintz 1986, Warde 1997, Watson and Caldwell 2005). The coexistence of conservatism and ongoing change, within the overall sphere of dietary practices, is what Sidney Mintz calls "a general paradox" (1996: 25) characteristic of the entire food habits issue. Mintz writes:

> We cannot easily imagine the Chinese people giving up rice to eat white bread, or the Russian people, black bread to eat maize. Such deeply cherished tastes are rooted in underlying economic and social conditions, and they are surely far more than simply nutritive. But they must also be viewed in terms of the equally telling fact that some preferences, even in diet turn out in fact to be quite readily surrendered... We do not understand at all well why it can be claimed both that people cling tenaciously to familiar old foods, yet readily replace some of them with others (1996:24).

Drawing on this observation and working toward a better understanding of continuity and change in dietary practices, I examine the conditions which—through a process of intertwining the social and the sensual—radically changed the mushroom's place within the spectra of taste, economic value, and socio-symbolic significance. As I show in Chapters 5 and 6, the wider historical context helps to divulge the succession of changes in the Yupik and Chukchi mushroom use, while the narratives on the subject, offered by local people, also shed light on how the trials of the Soviet period were perceived and experienced within the flow of everyday life. In this regard, the given study examines what kind of circumstances drive people to try and accept new food.

Among other perpetually mystifying aspects of food, especially in anthropological scholarship, are the vernacular logics dictating the suitability, delectableness, and nourishing capacity of specific items. As an innovation in

local diet, mushrooms are different from the commodities once imported through trade or the Soviet system of distribution. Unlike tea and flour, mushrooms are not exogenous to Chukotka in a physical sense, but how they are currently viewed is the product of outside influence. Their once prohibited status (still current for most in northwest Alaska) tunnels into the realm of forbidden food. Exploring the past and the present ideas of harm, wholesomeness, visual aesthetics, and palatal qualities ascribed to mushrooms invites a reflection on the symbolic and materialist approaches to food avoidances (e.g. Douglas 1966, Ferguson 1995, Harris 1985, Heston 1971, Levi-Strauss 1969, Sahlins 1976) and reasons for their abandonment or perseverance. Several authors point out that whether rebuked with disgust or embraced with desire, mushrooms often trigger strong reactions (e.g. Anderson 2005, Arora 1986, Berezkin 1997, Fine 1998, March and March 1982, Levi-Strauss 1969, Parker 1979, Schaechter 1997, Toporov 1985, Wasson 1973, Wasson and Wasson 1957). That is why I propose that within the wide-ranging domain of banned and cherished foodstuff, mushrooms may warrant a special attention.

Finally, having unearthed the spectrum and process of change, I ask: what are the implications? What does the transition in how the Yupik and Chukchi perceive and utilize the wild tundra mushrooms mean in terms of its impact on local knowledge and skills, land use patterns, dietary choices and food security, social identity, and changes in taste and in task-scape? What can we gain from this case to enlighten the broader methodological and theoretical concerns? These are the questions I attempt to address throughout the upcoming chapters. In 2004, having dealt with other degree requirements and funding issues, I returned to Chukotka in search of further clues.[7] Despite

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7 The fieldwork I carried ouy in 2004 was funded by the National Science Foundation Office of Polar Programs (Dissertation Improvement Grant, Award # 0329537) and Barrow Arctic Science Consortium.

the explicit instructions of my grandmother, I could not keep my thoughts to myself any longer.

Fieldwork and Methods

The chief sources of original data used in this thesis are my field observations, the semi-structured interviews I recorded in Chukotka, and (to a lesser extent) the semi-structured interviews I recorded with the retired migrant workers who formerly worked in Chukotka and have since returned to their homelands in Ukraine. My main activities during the months of February, March, and April were research in local archives and interviews, which I carried out in total of seven settlements: Enmelen, Nunligran, Sireniki, Provideniya, Novoe Chaplino, Lavrentiya, and Uelen. The local contacts I made in each village were established in a variety of ways. On the whole, it was not difficult for me to meet local people who responded positively, even enthusiastically, to my interests and requests for an interview. Being a new person in a small, rather isolated community, invariably I drew attention, and a number of people, curious to find out where I come from and why, simply approached me with greetings and questions. Oftentimes, these initial encounters were shortly followed by invitations to visit their homes. I think that the subject matter itself is the major reason for being able to solicit interviews with relative ease, as most people appeared genuinely to enjoy talking about mushrooms and mushroom picking. Occasionally, an interviewee would jokingly remark that winter and spring are not the right time "to study mushrooms," to which I always promptly agreed and then went on to describe my project in more detail. Explaining that I am more interested in the different uses, recipes, and stories about mushroom-picking usually cleared up the initial confusion. A number of people stressed that

although they can talk about mushrooms any time of year, I should make sure to come back in the summer to go picking with them, and in many cases I did.

In each settlement, I tried to visit every existing institution—schools, libraries, community centers, administrative offices, clinics, etc.—to meet with the employees, possibly make interview arrangements, and ask for further contacts. Nearly every person I met was able to put me in touch with another potential interviewee. The staff members at the village community centers were especially helpful: many of them were compelled to assist me as much as possible, feeling that doing so was part of their job, and often took the initiative to make interview appointments for me using their own discretion on selecting "interesting" candidates. My living situation differed from one occasion to the next, but wherever I was hosted by a local family (versus staying in a vacant house or a room in an administrative building) my hosts also provided useful information and contacts. During the winter visits in Nunligran and Sireniki, I was joined by Igor Zagrebin from the Provideniya Museum of Shared Beringian Heritage who was gathering information for the Museum. As a long-time resident and researcher in Chukotka, Igor is acquainted with a lot of people and was therefore also able to point me in the right direction. Finally, since kin and social networks extend throughout the region, traveling to my next destination I usually had several leads provided at the previously visited site. Between all these sources, my meeting agenda in each settlement filled up quickly.

During the months that were "off-season" for picking, my primary goal was to gather oral history information and data on contemporary mushroom uses. Because part of the undertaking was an ethnohistorical reconstruction of certain events that occurred during the Soviet period, it was essential that I hear the perspectives of people in different occupations and cultural affiliations. To assess how knowledge and use of mushrooms compares between generations, I tried to gather testimonies of people of different ages.

Finally, I wanted to be able to see how the past and present circumstances compare between villages. That is why I elected to dedicate the first three months to intensive interviewing, often getting through two to three meetings in a single day. Trying to make the information sharing to some degree reciprocal, during household visits I often gave my hosts a slideshow of various images from different parts of Alaska and Chukotka stored on my notebook computer.

To comply with the border zone regulations, I had to vacate Chukotka on the last day of April: although I had a one-year visa for the Russian Federation, the border zone permit, required for anyone who is not a resident of Chukotka, was only valid for three months. Part of the time during which my application for the new entrance permit was in review, I visited several towns and villages in Ukraine to meet and conduct interviews with former long-time residents of Chukotka. Most of them had resettled in Ukraine prior to the break-up of the Soviet Union having spent a good part of their working careers in the North. In addition to learning about mushroom picking, I was interested in learning more broadly about life in Soviet Chukotka from the perspectives of these migrant workers.

The second installment of my fieldwork in Chukotka, during August and September, corresponded with the mushroom-gathering season. Although I still conducted interviews, most of my time was devoted to partaking in mushroom collecting, processing, and preparation activities. Following up on the earlier established contacts, I worked closely with several key informants in Enmelen, Nunligran, Provideniya, and Novoe Chaplino. My main goal was to capture how the harvest of wild mushrooms plays out in contemporary times: who picks which kinds, where and with whom; how different mushrooms are selected, processed, prepared preserved, and distributed; who participates in each set of activities; which recipes are served on which occasions; and what social and economic significances people ascribe to each

part of the process. In addition to field notes, whenever appropriate I captured various activities on video and later looked to the footage to recall the specifics of certain tasks. This helped to ensure the accuracy of some of the descriptions provided in this work, especially in Chapter 3, which discusses the contemporary cycle of mushroom procurement in Chukotka.

Ethnographic Overview of the Chukchi Peninsula

Washed by the Bering and Chukchi Seas, the coast of Chukotka or the Chukchi Peninsula—the main geographic focus of this work—is the farthest northeastern shore of Eurasia and the Russian Federation. Administratively and politically it is a part of the Chukchi Autonomous Okrug, a 722,000 square kilometer territory of Russia (www.chukotka.org, accessed July 15, 2006). Although, technically, the Peninsula is only a small part of the Okrug, I use the terms "Chukotka" and "Chukchi Peninsula" interchangeably when referring to the main ethnographic setting of this work. The indigenous homeland of the Yupik and Chukchi people, the Chukchi Peninsula has significantly expanded its ethnic diversity over the course of the Soviet era due to the large in-migration of civil and military personnel coming from various regions of the former Soviet Union. Most of them turned out to be temporary migrants, attracted to the North by the generous package of incentives—higher wages, early retirement, long vacations, housing benefits, etc.—instituted by the Soviet system. To describe the contemporary social fabric of my host communities, I suggest grouping local populations into five socio-cultural identities: the Yupik, the coastal Chukchi, the tundra Chukchi, the long-time settlers, and the recent newcomers.

The Yupik people of Chukotka are also referred to as Siberian Yupik and, in older literature, as Siberian Eskimos or Asiatic Eskimos. The Yupik

are one of the two indigenous populations of the Chukchi Peninsula whose ancestors have inhabited its coastal regions for over three thousand years (Arutiunov and Fitzhugh 1988, Dikov 1974, Okhladnikov 1965). Their traditional mode of production, which continues to be a critical element of Yupik economy and cultural identity, is sea-mammal hunting. In addition to food, animals like seal, walrus, and whale provide the materials necessary for clothing and shelter, as well as arts and crafts.

The contemporary Chukotka settlements with predominantly Yupik populations are Novoe Chaplino and Sireniki. While Sireniki continues to occupy its prehistoric location, the village of Novoe Chaplino, literally "New Chaplino," was formally established in 1959. Like all the contemporary towns and villages in Chukotka, Novoe Chaplino is a consolidated settlement inhabited by the families that in the late 1950s have been relocated from smaller, more dispersed communities of Kivak, Seklyok, and Unazik (Callaway and Pilyasov 1993:25). In general, the Soviet government's decisions to close, relocate, or consolidate indigenous settlements were either grounded in administrative and economic circumstances or connected with various military operations. Thus, for example, the locations of Avan (its population was moved to Sireniki) and Unazik (Old Chaplino) were absorbed by the military, largely to carry out field training (Figures 4-5). On the other hand, Naukan, a former Yupik settlement located north of Cape Dezhnev, was closed in 1958 because its physical geography prohibited a construction of standardized Soviet housing; therefore, the whole site was deemed non-viable. At that time the Naukan people were relocated to the village of Nuniamo, which later was also closed down. Presently, the Naukan Yupik people reside in towns and villages throughout the Bering Strait area.

The Chukchi population, in contemporary times, is considered to be composed of two groups: the tundra Chukchi and the coastal Chukchi. Speaking the same language, the tundra and the coastal people occupied

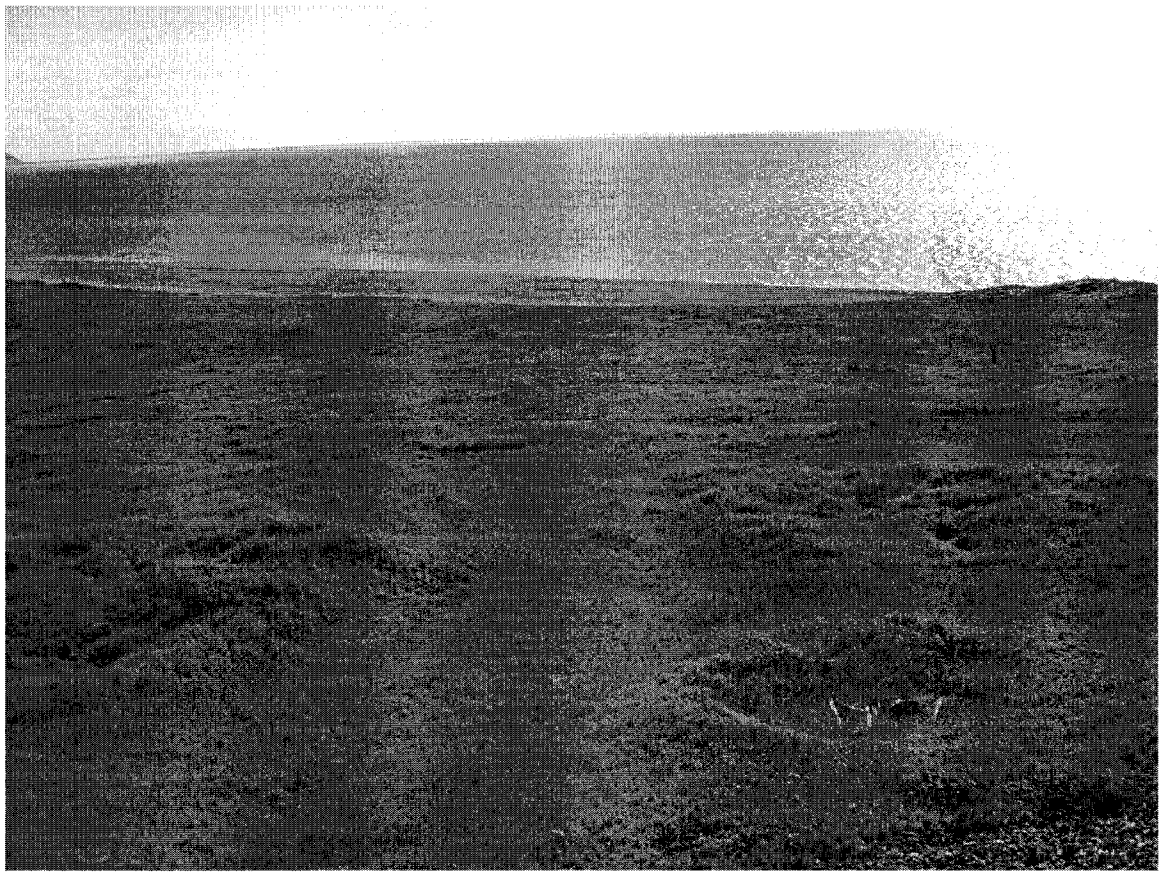

Figure 4: Remains of coastal dwellings at the old settlement of Avan located at the southern tip of Emma Bay. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

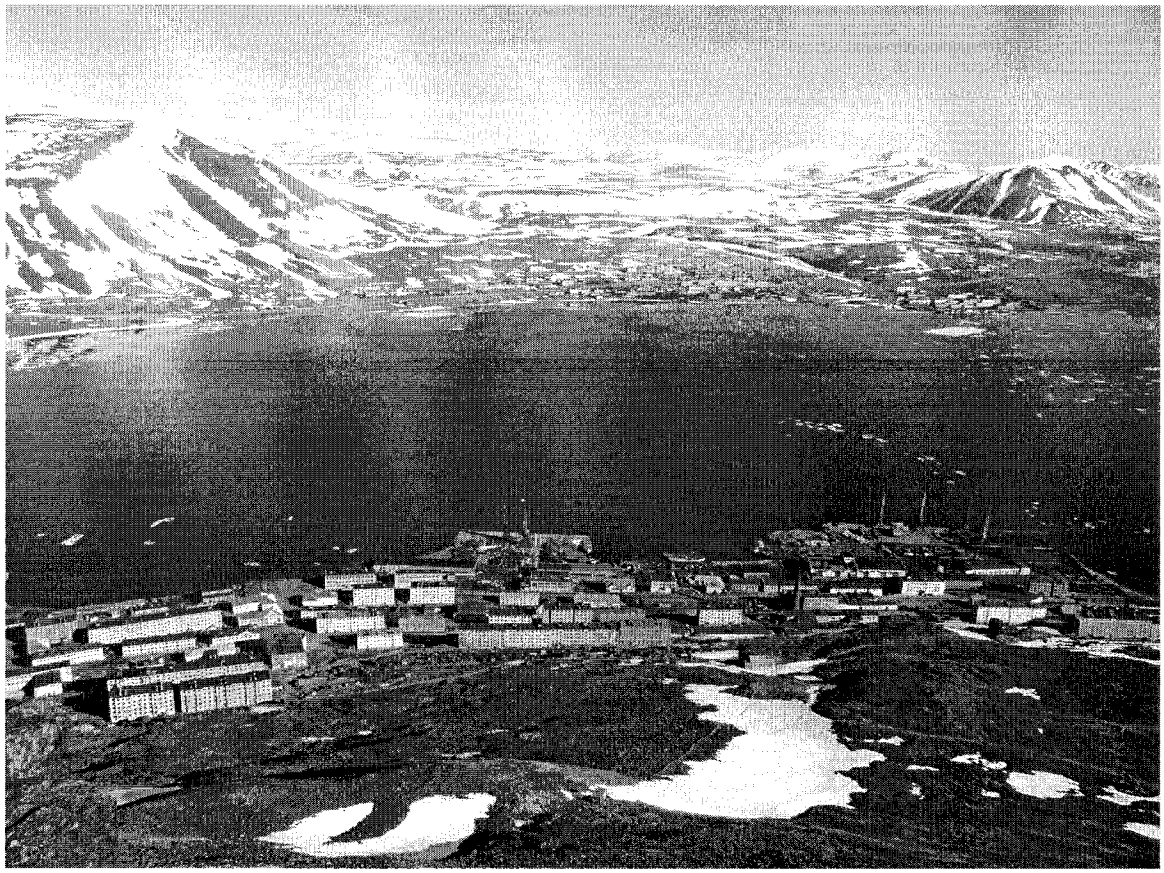

Figure 5: The Soviet-built towns of Provideniya (in close view) and Ureliki (seen on the other shore of Emma Bay), situated just north of Avan. (Photo by Igor Zagrebin)

different ecological niches. Prior to the Soviet efforts to settle the nomadic people, the tundra Chukchi used to migrate with their reindeer herds (Figures 6-7) while the maritime Chukchi lived in semi-permanent coastal settlements, using the sea as their primary source of livelihood. Thus their predominant adaptation modes, and thereby their diets and material culture, differed in a number of ways. Although several scholars have suggested that the social and economic division between the two groups in the past have not been as rigid as their titles convey (Bogoras 1904-09, Vdovin 1965, Krushanov 1987)[8], I found that the contemporary Chukchi people do recognize the distinction. When, for example, I would ask a Chukchi informant to recommend other potential interviewees, immediately after listing a name, he or she would specify whether this person comes from coastal [beregovyie] or tundra [tundroviki or tundrovyie] families. The tundra people are also called "reindeer Chukchi" in some literature sources; in everyday speech, nowadays, a Chukchi woman is typically called by a Russified construction *chukchanka*. Of the villages where I conducted fieldwork, Enmelen, Nunligran, and Uelen are the ones that, prior to Sovietization, were inhabited by the beregovyie Chukchi. The population of these settlements remains predominantly Chukchi, but now it includes both beregovyie and tundroviki. The influx of a non-Native population in Chukotka peaked between the years of 1955 and 1985. Over 140,000 civilians and 50,000 soldiers (Thompson 2002) have immigrated or were relocated to the region to facilitate collectivization and industrial development, strengthen military power in

8 The differences in the older and contemporary self-designations are common throughout the Bering Strait region. In former times, instead of self-designations based on broad linguistic categories (which up to the nineteenth century had little significance for the Bering Strait peoples (Burch 1998, Schweitzer and Golovko 1995:50)), groups of people identified themselves in connection with the names of their settlements. *Nyvuk'akh'mit*, for example, was the common self-designation of the residents of Naukan, *Sig'inygmit* is that of the Yupik-speaking people of Sireniki (Menovshchikov 1959:15), while King Islanders call themselves *Ugiuvangmiut*, which translates as people of Ugiuvak—a derivation from the Inupiaq word for big winter (Kaplan 1988:257).

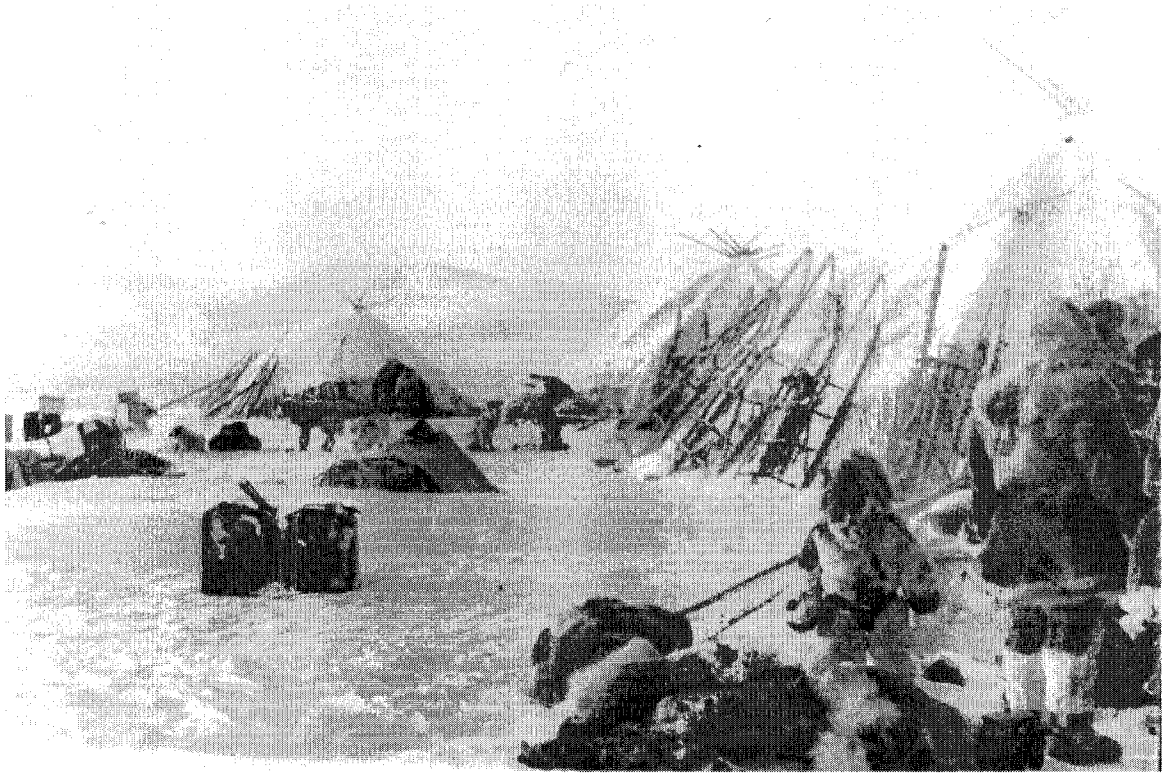

Figure 6: Large camp of the tundra Chukchi showing a row of three dwellings called *yaranga*. (Courtesy of Ivan Vasilievich Vukvun, Lavrentiya)

Figure 7: Day-camp of four reindeer herders who migrate with the herd. Standing behind the tent is the track vehicle called vezdekhod, the transportation we used to get to the camp. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

connection with Cold War politics, and instill Soviet ideological values among the Yupik and Chukchi Natives (Figure 8). The incoming residents remained in Chukotka for variable perods of time: some lasted for just a few years, others stayed for the duration of their working careers. The latter either returned to their previous homelands or chose to resettle elsewhere in the former Soviet Union upon retirement. For various reasons, a number of the first and second-generation migrants have made Chukotka a permanent home.

While the indigenous cultures of Chukotka have for over a century captured the interest of historians and anthropologists (e.g. Bogoraz 1904-09, Forsyth 1992, Gray 2005, Koskey 2003, Krupnik 1995, 1993, Menovshchikov 1977, 1959, Schweitzer and Golovko 1997, 1995, Schweitzer and Gray 2000, Van Deusen 1999), the experience of the migrant or settler populations seldom becomes the focus of an ethnographic study.[9] In contemporary everyday discourse, non-indigenous residents of the Russian North are commonly referred to as *priezzhie*, translated as either "incomers" or "newcomers" by western scholars (Kerttula 2000, Thompson 2005, 2003). The term is derived from the verb *priezhat'*, which means "to visit or to arrive by means other than on-foot" and implies that one comes from afar. In her ethnography of Sireniki, carried out during the late Soviet period, Anna Kerttula (2000) found that the majority of newcomers saw their life in Chukotka as temporary, a means to achieve economic security through the higher wages and other material benefits awarded to migrant workers as compensation for living in the harsh conditions of the North. For the non-indigenous residents the village was a harbor, not a true home. Even those

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9 Niobe Thompson (2005, 2003, 2002) and, to a lesser degree, Anna Kerttula (2000) do explore questions of identity, community formation, and sense of place among the Soviet-era migrants to Chukotka. It should be noted that this population is differenteated from the one called "Russian old settlers" (cf. Vakhtin et al 2004), which has been inhabiting Siberia and the Russian Far East for many generations.

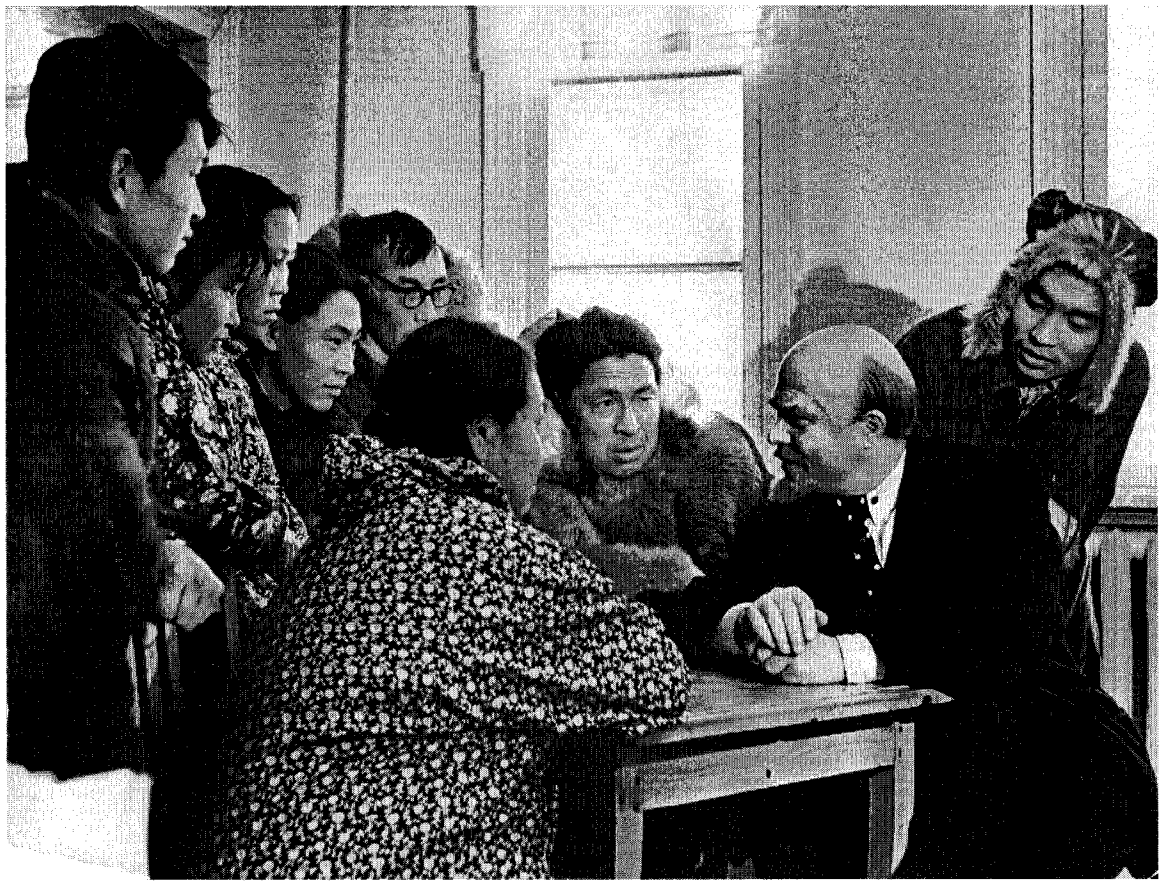

Figure 8: "Lenin in Chukotka." This photomontage, propagating a myth that Lenin personally met with Chukotka Natives in order to talk about building socialism in the North, is part of an award package presented to certain indigenous activists in the early 1980s. (Courtesy of Ivan Vasilievich Vukvun, Lavrentiya)

who were born in the village continued to regard the birthplace of their parents as their real motherland.

In a more recent examination Niobi Thompson (2005, 2002) observes that in contemporary times the status of perpetual outsiders no longer reflects the identity of long-term non-indigenous northern residents. Having remained in the North and having survived the dire socio-economic conditions of the post-Soviet period, the so-called "transient population" has transformed into permanent settlers, whose social networks, production modes, and emotional attachments are tied to the northern communities and landscapes. Reflecting on Thompson's ideas in connection to my own experiences in Chukotka, I find that "settler" is a useful concept to demarcate the identity of the non-Native residents who consider Chukotka their home. Therefore, whenever I talk about contemporary times, I distinguish between settlers and newcomers, the latter including the seasonal laborers[10] and the people who live in Chukotka year-round but still consider it a temporary residence. Sometimes I use the term "incomer population" to refer to all the groups of non-Native residents in Chukotka. Of course during the period of early influx, the majority of incomers were, in fact, newcomers.

Because this thesis is in itself a work of ethnography and ethnohistory, many details of the local setting—both the synchronic and the diachronic views—are presented in forthcoming sections and are therefore omitted from this overview. Thus, for instance, the final section of Chapter 2, which discusses the Yupik and Chukchi beliefs about mushrooms prior to Russian influence, also covers more general aspects of the indigenous folklore and cosmologies. Chapters 3 and 4 describe the contemporary mushroom procurement and consumption against the background of the overall food

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10 In the given case these are mainly construction workers from central Russia, contracted to build or remodel various public buildings and housing units. The post-Soviet phase of large-scale construction was launched throughout the Okrug since the election of Governor Roman Abramovich in 2001. In the Peninsula settlements it began in 2000-2003 and is still ongoing.

practices and preferences in Chukotka at different time periods. Similarly, the discussion of transition in the Yupik and Chukchi beliefs about mushrooms contextualizes these within a wider historical framework (Chapters 5-7).

On the whole, the most powerful and lasting impression that I took away from my Chukotka experience draws from the wit and the humor with which the local people face the everyday difficulties of life. Be they social problems or weather-related obstacles, one always found a way to poke fun at the situation. Of course the dispositions varied between individual personalities, but the overall optimistic spirit was very perceptible, especially in a group setting. For example, at various workplaces the day often began with people cheerfully swapping stories of how they managed their morning commute: how many times they were knocked off their feet by the raging blizzard or how deep the snow bank was into which they fell. Watching their tea cups spill over as the house was shaking from the wind, my hosts would playfully turn into train passengers, asking one another what the next stop is and looking out of the window to check out the "passing" scenery. Retrieving their parcels from the post offices, which usually took weeks or even months to arrive, people often teased the attendant to check whether there is any electronic mail received in their name (the villages were not equipped with internet service; although the schools and the village office typically had a few aged computers, people's knowledge of information technology largely came from movies and television commercials).

Russian and Soviet legacies as well as elements of contemporary Western culture, in Chukotka are satirized left and right. The three large mountains rising in the background of Novoe Chaplino are nicknamed the Pioneer [Leninist Youth], the Komsomol, and the Communist. The sharp peak occasionally visible on the Nunligran horizon is called the Kremlin. The shacks used as seasonal housing on Lake Achchen each display a distinct street address, such as Pushkin Boulevard or Central Avenue 6, apartment 9.

Rusting fuel barrels and random pieces of scrap metal protruding from the tundra surface are often tagged as "top-secret military installations." Various relics, flags, and official signs are nailed onto the oddest of places, looking drolly out of context. One morning waiting for the helicopter at the Provideniya airport, I was browsing through the writing on the wall and found what appeared to be a homesick lamentation of a Sireniki resident who was longing to return to his village. The note was signed "Harry Potter." Examples of this type are rich and numerous, and they probably deserve to be examined in their own right. Although such an endeavor is beyond the scope of this work, many of the interview narratives included in this thesis serve well to reflect this kind of humoresque outlook on life (Figures 9-11).

Taste Them, Don't Waste Them: a Note on Ethics

In addition to its historical dimension, this work provides an overview of the mushroom harvest as it is practiced in contemporary Chukotka. By focusing on mushroom picking my inquiry contributes toward a more complete understanding of the food systems in the Arctic. Although today we find a vast body of literature devoted to resource procurement in Chukotka and the Arctic, the importance of gathering practices is somewhat marginalized compared to the extensive exploration of hunting and reindeer herding (e.g. Anderson 2000, Anderson and Nuttal 2004, Brody 1987, Caulfield 1997, Ingold 1980, Krupnik 1993). Ethnobotanical surveys document the medicinal, recreational, and other non-food uses of fungi (e.g. Garibaldi 1999, Kari 1987). In areas outside of Russia, where the culinary consumption of mushrooms appears to be all but absent (cf. Jones 1983), focus on other uses of fungi is clearly understandable. However, within the scope of the ethnography on the Russian North, mushroom picking is treated briefly (e.g. Kerttula 2000, Vitebsky 2005, Ziker 2002) or not discussed at all.

Figure 9: A shack that serves as seasonal housing at Lake Achchen, designated with an urban-style street address of "Central Avenue 6, apt. 9." Standing just behind it is a structure addressed "Pushkin Bulevard, 1." (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

Figure 10: "Stagecoach" of Sireniki. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

Figure 11: Storage shed displaying the official placard of the National Bank of USSR. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

While the economic and spiritual significance of hunting in the Arctic cannot be overstated, collection and consumption of gathered resources occupy multiple niches in the overall quality of life. I follow the lead of Shannon (2003) who stresses that "in order to understand people's interaction with the land and how people sustain a livelihood, it is crucial to investigate how other [non-hunted] resources are procured" (2003:200). Earlier, I explain that my interest in ethnomycology in Chukotka was partially inspired by Kerttula's ethnography in which she comments on the importance of the mushroom season for the people of Sireniki. Wasson (1957) and Caldwell (2004) talk about mushroom picking in western Russia, each depicting the elevated aura that this activity is ascribed. The documentation of the mushroom harvest that is presented here fosters continuity with the existing ethnographic material, as well as expands the scope of understanding contemporary land uses— especially with regard to the gathering activities in the Arctic.

Aside from its scholarly potential, this thesis also contains recipe information that can be applied directly by readers interested in testing its culinary potential. In this connection, I must emphasize that respecting the privacy and intellectual property rights of all participants has been my utmost concern throughout all phases of this study. Whether working with individuals or groups I have always explicitly stated the purpose of my inquiry and asked for permission to share the information I record with a wider audience. As an outcome, I am able to impress upon readers that the people who participated in this study offered their ideas openly and in the spirit of sharing, upholding their faith in the benefits of inter-cultural knowledge exchange. One young man in Sireniki asked whether I am collecting information for "agitation purposes, to urge the people back home to pick mushrooms." I answered that although I am not specifically pursuing this goal, some people may choose to use parts of my dissertation as an informal

reference or a "cook book." "That would be good," he replied, "why should the mushrooms be wasted?!"

A TASTE OF MUSHROOMS:

SAVORING CULTURAL SENTIMENTS

CHAPTER 2

"'Hey, Maaaaaaaaan, do any psilocybin mushrooms grow around here?' I am asked this question more often than any other, and I must confess it irritates me" (Arora 1986:31, his spelling). David Arora, one of the most illustrious mycologists in North America, made this admission twenty years ago, at the time of the second printing of his *Mushrooms Demystified*—a remarkably comprehensive and user-friendly volume that continues to be a hit in the mushroom-studying world among professionals and amateurs alike. Arora remains active in the field, and, speaking from my own, comparatively minute experience, I imagine that by now the number of times he has been asked about psychoactive mushrooms must be approaching infinity.

In the last five years, since I completed my preliminary fieldwork in the Bering Strait and decided to make mushroom use the subject of my dissertation, the amount of random information about hallucinogenic drugs that various acquaintances offered for my benefit has nearly killed my interest in these substances. I am not only talking about the casual party chatter within my neo-bohemian social circles: in numerous scholarly exchanges the theme inevitably comes up as soon as I bring up a question or a comment that somehow pertains to my dissertation. Not always, but often, when I ask another ethnographer about mushroom picking in his or her geographic area of study, the responses I receive are along the lines of "shamanism nowadays is a sensitive subject, so it is hard to inquire about mushroom use" or "you ought to read Bogoras, he talks about the Chukchi shamans using hallucinogenic mushrooms." On one occasion, a library staff member literally sabotaged my quest in the archives. Emphasizing, time and again, that my

research is on culinary uses only bolstered her enthusiasm. She seemed incapable of keeping herself from returning to my desk, insisting that "psychedelic mushrooms are far more fascinating than edible ones" and suggesting further readings on the theme.

While some people blabber indiscriminately about "psychedelic mushrooms," others, aware of its shamanic use in certain Siberian cultures, specifically bring up *Amanita muscaria*. Thus, in my case, the most frequently mentioned (or implied) compounds are not psilocybin as in Arora's experience, but muscimol and muscarine.[11] Technicalities notwithstanding, I think responses of this sort are likely to recur indefinitely. I am largely at peace with the predicament: true, dealing with it may get old at times, but its consistent nature, as I have found, is also a telling fact. What this tendency suggests is that, nowadays, for many people in North America the first intuitive association with wild mushroom gathering lands outside the spheres of food and culinary practice. Hearing about mushroom picking propels them to think and talk about the use of hallucinogens, recreationally or ritually, and not about hours of fervent scouting through the tundra or the woods with a walking-poking stick and a basket in search of an aromatic, mouth-watering bouquet of earthy treasures. (There are exceptions to this characterization and I discuss their significances later in this chapter.)

On the other hand, among the persons of Eastern European background, reactions to my field of inquiry more frequently resemble the latter. People respond by asking what kind of mushrooms can be found in Alaska and Chukotka and, in turn, offer their own recipes and hunting tales. Hearing about the quality and quantities of mushrooms in the arctic tundra

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11 Psilocybin is a toxin found in eighty-some species of genus *Psilocybe* and in several species of *Panaeolus*, *Pluteus*, *Gymnopilus*, *Conocybe*, and *Inocybe* (Staments 1996). Muscimol is found in several *Amanita* species, including *Amanita muscaria*. Initially, the extraordinary states of body and mind the ingestion of *Amanita muscaria* is capable of inducing were attributed to the workings of muscarine, rather than muscimol. Although muscarine was first discovered in *Amanita muscaria*, its quantities in that mushroom are low (Arora 1986).

arouses in them part envy and part disbelief. Among the first generation immigrants the subject also stirs up nostalgic sentiments. For example, a family acquaintance from Ukraine said she often dreams of her favorite mushrooming spots and claims that, despite years of absence, she is able not only to visualize those areas perfectly, but also imagine their scent, as well as the sound-scape, the cool air, and the foliage texture during the mushroom season.

Parallel to this discussion, I must emphasize that I do not view the spiritual or recreational and culinary mushroom uses as unrelated subjects. In fact, shamanic use of *Amanita muscaria* is a known practice among the reindeer Chukchi and later in this chapter I try to consider its role in shaping the Chukchi beliefs about mushrooms. Still, the main intention of the present work is to explore the meanings and history of mushroom gathering as a subsistence practice in the context of a wider social transition. Because the study of fungi is called *Mycology*, I have come to think of my perspective as "myco-scopic," or a view of history and culture through the "myco-scope." The questions I address delve into matters of land use and landscape perceptions, foodways—understood as "cultural attitudes and patterns of behavior toward food" Simoons (1994:297), and the crossroads of indigenous, Russian, Soviet, and Euro-American legacies in the Bering Strait. This ethnography can be characterized as being similar to Sidney Mintz's reflection on monographs, in which a focus on a single substance yields an investigation of broader socio-political processes (e.g. Atwood 1992, Scheper-Hughes 1992, Mazumdar 1998, Morales 1995, Ortiz 1947). Like his own *Sweetness and Power*, Mintz says, "none of these books is only about sugar; even though each of them is very much about sugar" (Mintz 2003:10). Analogously, although my inquiry is centered on mushroom picking in Chukotka, it is not just about mushrooms. Nevertheless, the fact that they are a focal matter of this work warrants a discussion of what—if anything—is so

special about mushrooms and how an investigation of the beliefs and practices surrounding their use may serve to inform on more extensive systems of meaning.

Ethnomycology as an Anthropological Inquiry

"Mushrooms," in the context of this work, refers to the fleshy fruiting bodies of certain fungi, organisms of the kingdom *Myceteae*. Examples from the vast literature on mycology and different everyday usages of this word exhibit notable variation in interpreting what constitutes a mushroom, employing either a more inclusive or a more restrictive definition of the term. In certain nomenclatures various molds, yeasts, and fungal skin infections are also called "mushrooms." By fleshy, I mean "one that has substance" (Arora 1986:4). In Russian, for example, the "athlete's foot" fungus is called *gribok*, which is a diminutive of *grib*—a word that translates as "mushroom" and is used in references to the fleshy fruiting bodies of all wild and cultivated fungi. Although the principles guiding these various classifications are arguable on numerous technicalities, they do not need much rendering here as I will not be discussing the fungi that are molds, yeasts, and skin infections. (It is, however, worth noting the nomenclatorial cognates found in certain classificatory systems indicate that these different classes of fungi may often be conceptually linked).[12]

The words "mushrooms" and "fungi" are often used interchangeably. However, if one subscribes to the notion that the mushroom is a fruiting body, similar to a potato or an apple, then mushrooms are to be understood not as autonomous life forms, but as parts of a larger organism—the fungus. This

12 To this connection, biologist Elio Schaechter shares the following anecdote: "An American friend of mine living in Paris was diagnosed by her local physician as having an oral *Candida* yeast infection. What the doctor actually said to her, in his best English, was: 'Madame, you have a mushroom in your mouth!'" (1997:39).

text, for the most part, refers to the fungal fruiting bodies as "mushrooms," but "fungus" or "fungi" is occasionally employed under the same meaning, mostly when it is necessary to quote another author who uses the word as such. Like fruiting bodies of other organisms, the chief role of the mushroom is reproduction. In terrestrial species, which are most prominent in this work, mushrooms are usually the only parts of a fungus that are visible above ground, protruding from the mycrospcopic subsurface mass called "mycelium" or "spawn." Fungi reproduce by dropping from their fruiting bodies the microscopic spores that germinate to produce mycelium-forming networks of twining cells.[13] Because mushrooms drop spores episodically on a continual basis, even after they have been picked, mushroom gathering is not directly harmful for their propagation and survival. That is not to say that certain secondary activities, such as excessive littering, all-terrain vehicle use, and anthropogenic fires that are sometimes associated with mushroom picking (especially at the sites of large-scale commercial harvesting), do not carry an environmental impact.

Most books devoted to mushroom classification and identification offer quite eloquent, and often well-illustrated, descriptions of the mushroom components, explaining how they vary among the genera and species (e.g. Arora 1986, Christensen 1943, Lincoff 1981, Tribe 1977). This literature can also be consulted to infer the characteristics used to group the different genera of fungi into larger Classes, Orders, and Families. The ethnographic material that I relate in this dissertation centers predominantly on groups of Hymenomycetes (a sub-class of Division Basidiomycotina) known as "agarics" and "boletes" (Figures 12-13). Both agarics and boletes are umbrella-shaped

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13 An excellent description of the mechanism by which different kinds of fungi drop and spread their spores is found in the book *Fungal Spores: Their Liberation and Dispersal* by C. T. Ingold (1971). Incidently, C.T. Ingold happens to be the father of anthropologist Tim Ingold, who actually mentions the field mycology lessons that he received from his father as a child in *The Perceptions of the Environment* (2000:20-21).

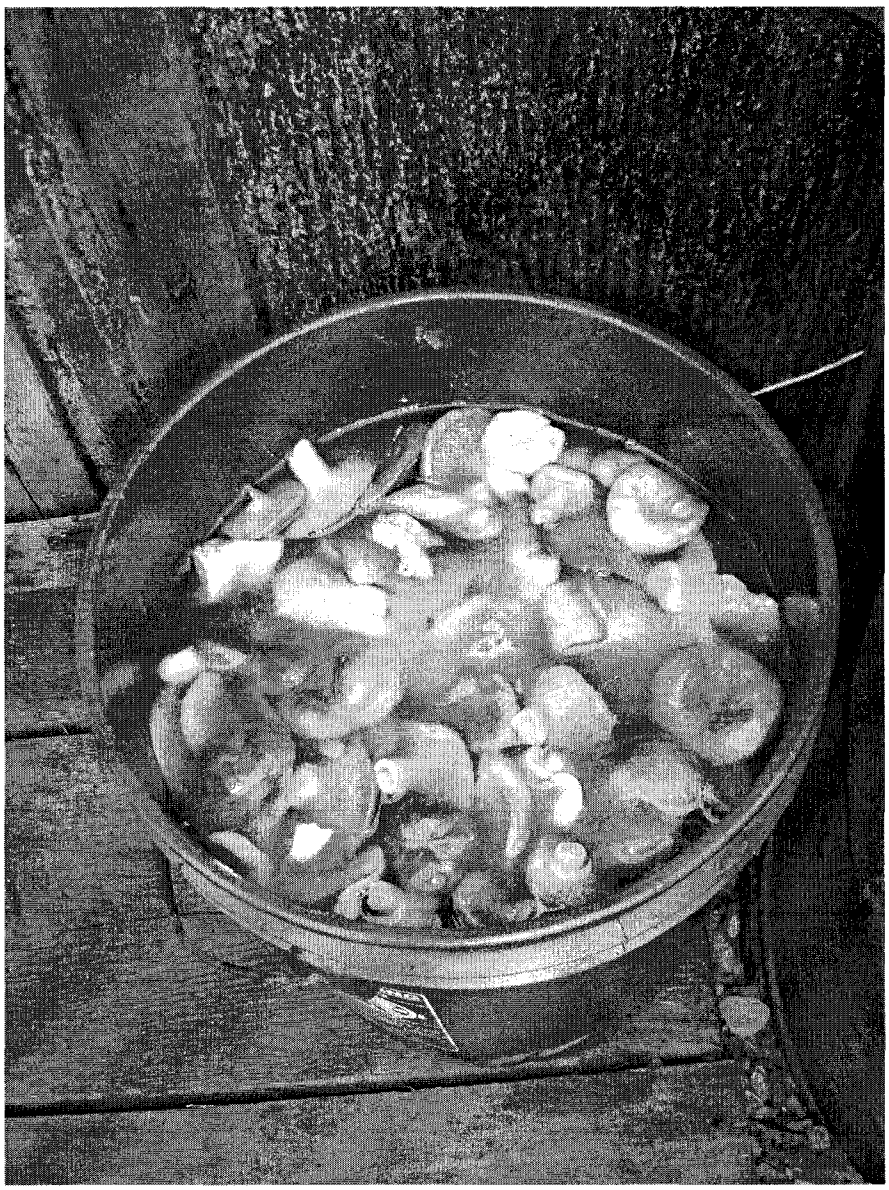

Figure 12: One of the two most popular *Lactarius* species harvested in Chukotka is the agarics known as "yellow *gruzd.*'" (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasteranak)

Figure 13: A preferred *Leccinum* variety known in Chukotka under the names of "aspen bolete" and "mountain mushroom." (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

mushrooms that, in addition to other components, have a rounded cap sitting atop a stalk or a stem. The key visual differences between the two is that the texture of the inner (earth-facing), spore-producing surface of the agaric cap is corrugated and composed of gill plates, while that of the bolete is spongy, consisting of pores or tubes. Among the kinds of agarics that are harvested in Chukotka are species of *Russula*, *Lactarius*, and those known in Russian as *opiata* (likely an *Armillariella mellea*, "honey mushroom"). The earlier mentioned *Amanita muscaria* also belongs to this group, as reflected in its common name "fly-agaric." The most widely gathered boletes are the *Leccinum* species known by their English common names of "birch bolete" and "aspen bolete."

These names reflect an ecological principle of symbioses, where a fungus forms a mutually beneficial relationship, penetrating the outer sheath of a plant root structure with a growth of fungal cells or *hyphae*. Ecologically speaking, this type of fungi is called *ectomycorrhizal*, which refers to the idea of fungus (*myco*) relating to plant root (*rhiza*) through an outer (*ecto*) sheath formed by the plant specifically for that purpose. By means of this relationship the fungus is able to obtain essential organic substances from the plant while protecting it from parasites and pathogens in the soil and helping it retain water, metabolites, and mineral salts. Fungi, therefore, perform functions that are critical for plants' survival, and the health of the ecosystem as a whole, especially in high-latitude environments where soils are not particularly rich in nutrient content.

To a lesser extent, I will also discuss the use of puffball varieties. Puffballs are spherical mushrooms belonging to the Gasteromycetes, another sub-class of Basidiomycota. In comparative ethnographic contexts, I will occasionally refer to morels (genus *Morchella* of the Ascomycotina Division) and varieties of chanterelles (another group within Basidiomycotina). Mentioned a few times are polypores: these bracket fungi or shelf fungi are

also Basidiomycetes, but unlike all the previous terrestrial varieties, they grow on wood and have a woody consistency; I leave it up to the reader to classify these fungi as mushrooms or otherwise. Polypores and bracket fungi are known in some areas of the Bering Strait, where they are obtained through trade and used as snuff or a tobacco additive (Dolitsky 1996, Fienup-Riordan 2000, Kavasch 1996, Nelson 1983 [1899]).

Certain biological realities of mushrooms, such as their seemingly seedless reproduction, textures, shapes, and multiple ecological idiosyncrasies, have undoubtedly played a role in constructing their mysterious character, turning them into an ethnographically provocative subject. David Arora writes:

> Fungi are neither plants nor animals. They don't contain chlorophyll like green plants, and as a result cannot manufacture their own food. In this respect they resemble animals, because they feed themselves by digesting other organic matter. However, they lack the nervous system, specialized organs, and mobility characteristic of most animals (1986:4).

Even from these introductory remarks to a mushroom-identification guidebook we can discern a number of classificatory ambiguities similar to the ones that Mary Douglas (1966:41-87) outlines in her discussion of prohibitions within the Jewish dietary laws. Schaechter notes that a number of Greek and Roman scholars "were appropriately perplexed about the origin of mushrooms and seem to have given much thought to the matter" (1997:6). Their supposition that mushrooms are sprouted by thunderbolts is also found in regions as diverse as Mexico, Philippines (ibid.:29), Malaysia, India, Oceania, and Iran (Toporov 1985). The natural growth of the mycelia, which occurs in an outward circular fashion and, in open fields and lawns, can sometimes be observable via ring-forming mushroom patches, has also found its way into world mythologies. Often referred to as "fairy rings" these

mushroom circles are associated with a wide range of ideas about underworld inhabitants and beliefs prescribing, upon encounter, an omen of good or bad luck (Marshall 1901, Parker and Jenkins1979).

One of the most celebrated bits of mushroom trivia is the high regard for mushrooms allegedly shown by Julius Caesar. The name *Amanita caesarea*, supposedly his choice variety, is intended to commemorate this fondness. "It was only served to the Emperor, and only on the most precious dishes (*boletaria*)" writes Olle Persson, the author of *The Chanterelle Book*, "the rest of the guests had to content themselves with *fungi suilli* (swine mushrooms of what is now known as genus *Suillus*)" (1997:88). With the latter title, incidentally, were endowed none other than the Russian-venerated boletes, including the highly prized *Boletus edulis*.[14] The more general mushroom connoisseurship in ancient Greece and Rome seems to be a popular selling point for the mushroom collecting enterprise, invoked by a number of field guides in English and in Russian alike (e.g. Christensen 1943, Lincoff 1981, March and March 1982, Marshall 1901, Perededentseva and Perevedentsev1995, Stubbs 1980).[15] Proof of this fondness is often

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14 In several literature sources, as well as in casual conversations on the subject I have repeatedly encountered confusing statements derived from mistranslations of the Latin scientific nomenclature, Latin common names for boletes, and the Italian common name for *Boletus edulis* or King Bolete frequently employed in culinary discourse. Schaechter's text helps clarify the matter, explaining that:

> ...Boletus [is] the name the Romans used for any mushroom with lamellae or gills on the underside of the cap. Linnaeus adopted a completely different meaning of the word nearly two hundred years ago. Outside of Catalonia and a few other places, bolete now means a mushroom with tubes instead of gills underneath the cap. In Roman times, mushrooms with tubes had the quaint name of *suilli*, 'little pigs,' hence the Italian *porcini*' (1997:58, his italics).

In the contemporary Italian cuisine, the name porcini, which to some extent is used internationally, refers chiefly to *Boletus edulis*. On the other hand, the genus *Suillus*—the name derived from the Roman times *suilli*—encompasses a group of other Boletaceae family varieties known as "Slippery Jacks."

15 In contrast to these sources, *Mushrooms, Russia and History* proclaims: "The Greeks have always been mycophobes. All of the early Greek poets—Homer through the dramatists—ignore the mushrooms. The earliest references to them are in the fifth century, and, as is fitting in a mycophobic world, both refer to poisonings" (Wasson and Wasson 1957:337).

substantiated by Martial's (43-104 AD) epigram: "Silver and gold and a fine cloak—these are easy to send with a messenger. To trust him with mushrooms—that is difficult!" (quoted in Acton and Sandler 2001:17, Persson 1997:88, Schaechter 1997:7, among others). Schaechter cites a number of Greek and Roman sources that speak of "the joys and dangers of eating mushrooms" (1997:6), including the writings of Euripides, Hippocrates, Theophrastus, Pliny the Elder, Galen, Diodcorides, Suetonius, and Porphyry.

Another perpetual question that field mycology books continue dutifully to address has to do with telling apart a mushroom and a toadstool. Certain folk taxonomies suggest that each must have a distinct set of apparent characteristics, designating "mushrooms" as edibles and "toadstools" as poisonous. The year-span of literature sources trying to dispel this belief ranges from the Nina Marshall's 1901, *The Mushroom Book,* to the 1986 edition of Arora's *Mushrooms Demystified.* Although scientifically speaking toadstools do not exist, Adrian Morgan's (1995) *Toads and Toadstools* informs of the numerous mythological associations between toads, frogs, and mushrooms that are found the world over. Curiously, while toads are alleged to have a habit of resting on the fleshy terrestrial stools, the arboreal bracket fungi seem be popular among certain classes of primates living in parts of Cheba, Japan, where the tree-inhabiting polypores double as "monkey seats" (Wasson 1973:22).

Lastly, a trait that is notably applicable across the scope of geographically diverse social dispositions toward wild mushrooms is the polarity of attitudes pertaining to the theme. "The contempt for fungi lavished by writers in Europe, particularly those from England, is sweeping and condemnatory," observes Adrian Morgan (1995:49). This verdict is well-evidenced in the *Mushrooms and the English* essay by Valentina and Gordon Wasson (1957). Drawing on myriad examples of prose and poetry, naturalist and travel accounts, and visual depictions produced in different historical

periods, the Wassons bestow a vivid portrait of the cavernous disdain for mushrooms in English culture, as well as among the North American inhabitants of Anglo-Saxon descent. Even a mycology author, a contemporary of theirs, states in the book called *Mushrooms in their Natural Habitats*: "It is impossible for me to discuss the edibility of even the highly recommended species authoritatively from my own experience since I seldom eat them myself" (Smith quoted in Wasson and Wasson:19). A number of English-language field guides list as their purpose "to help dispel an *unreasonable* fear of wild mushrooms (Stubbs 1980:x, his italics) presumed to characterize their prospective audiences. Arora's volume starts out with a section *Fungophobia*, where he asserts: 'there are few things that strike as much fear in your average American as the mere mention of wild mushrooms or 'toadstools" (1986:1). Trying to challenge the reader, he conjures the irony:

> Bring home what looks like a wild onion for dinner, and no one gives it a second thought—despite the fact it might be a death camas you have... But bring home a wild mushroom for dinner, and watch the faces of your friends crawl with various combinations of fear, anxiety, loathing, and distrust! Appetites are suddenly and mysteriously misplaced, vague announcements are hurriedly mumbled as to dinner engagements elsewhere, until you are finally left alone to 'enjoy' your meal in total silence.

Although never having been pushed to such a piteous degree of isolation, I have occasionally generated similar reactions by contributing mushroom-bearing platters to various potluck-style gatherings.

By contrast, the Russian lore—and that of other Slavic peoples— is bounteous with the affectionate and admiring imagery of wild mushrooms, as well as mushroom collecting and cookery. Albeit seldom an ethnographic

subject in itself,[16] several ethnographers, as well as mycologists, folklorists, linguists, and various nature writers comment on the "elevated status" (Belova 1996:317) of mushrooms in Slavic worldviews. In a survey of regional vernaculars Merkulova (1967) documented 350 Russian names for different kinds of mushrooms and also found that in Ukrainian and Byelorussian mushroom names are just as numerous. Anthropomorphic depictions of mushrooms in fairytales relate not only the gender and personality of individual characters, but also portray complex, socially-stratified fungal societies, in which mushrooms experience joys and sorrows caused by deceit, friendship, love, and war (Afanas'ev 1974; see Barag et al 1979:101 for references on comparative plots) (Figure 14). Mushrooms are romanticized and eroticized in limericks, poems, and proverbs (Belova 1996). Certain mushroom-cooking recipes share their titles with courting and matrimony rituals (Sokolova 1979:38, 88).

North American scholars of different interests and backgrounds seem to be equally impressed by Russia's mushroom quest. This nearly uniform awe is reflected in a number of epithets and metaphors employed in various accounts. "Nowhere else does mushroom picking reach the level of passion that is seen in Russia," unequivocally states biologist Elio Schaechter, who finds the activity to be "approach[ing] a national craze" (1997:19). In *The Food and Cooking of Russia* Lesley Chamberlain offers her rendition of the trade:

> By August every year a huge signboard identifying a score of the commoner varieties of mushroom has gone up in Moscow's Central Market, midnight mushroom trains are departing regularly from the railway stations, and the newspapers are carrying reports of giant discoveries in this or that province. The Russian pursuit of mushrooms, which the nineteenth-century writer Sergei Aksakov called 'the third

16 I delve more into this issue in the closing remarks of this chapter.

Figure 14: An illustrated interpretation of the children's story "The Mushroom War" (Blinov 2005:22) composed by artist Elena Polenova. Valentina Wasson calls this story by the title "Panic among the Mushrooms" and provides the following paraphrase referring to the story characters—mushrooms—by their Russian common names to which I try to provide their possible English equivalents:

> **...Colonel *Borovik* ['bog bolete'], Commander-in-Chief of the mushroom host, summons his minions to war. The red-coated *muckhomory* ['fly-agarics'] decline to serve, for they are senators. The *beljanki* ['bearded milk caps'] say no, for they are aristocratic ladies and exempt. The *opjonki* ['honey mushrooms'] refuse, since they must do duty as ladies-in-waiting. The morels beg off, for they are gray-headed oldsters. The *maslyata* ['slippery jacks'] say they are needed in factories, the ink-caps point to their spindly legs, the *volnushki* ['weeping milk caps'] are just simple peasant folk and useless as soldiers, and *volui* ['fragrant russulas'] duck their duty by reminding the Colonel that they are nothing but the village loafers. Then up step the valiant *gruzdi* ['golden milk caps'], willing fellows, who will gladly go to war and smite the enemy. And so, with a loud 'Oo-rah! oo-rah! oo-rah!' off they march (Wasson and Wasson 1957:14).**

> hunt' cannot be described merely as a pastime. It is love, recreation, closeness to nature, passionate science and national heritage. Men, women and children go mushroom-picking for food, for profit, for the sheer pleasure of being in the forest and for the delight of an unusual find or a rich crop (1983:207).

A culinary expert, Chamberlain concludes that "Russian cooking makes greater and more varied use of mushrooms than any other cuisine in the world" (1983:208). Given the sweeping change that continues to penetrate all aspects of Russian life in the post-Soviet period, it is remarkable how similar these 1980s Moscow area observations are to the related notes in Melissa Caldwell's recent ethnographic portrait of the region:

> ...no account of Russia's natural economy would be complete without a description of mushroom picking, probably the most evocative example of Russians' appreciation for the countryside as a place where the economic, social, and spiritual merge. Mushrooms (*griby*) occupy such an integral place in Russian social life that the progression of time is marked according to the natural rhythms of the different mushroom seasons, and social worth is measured in terms of an individual's knowledge and skills in gathering and preparing mushrooms (2004:125).

Even the cover-image of Caldwell's book, which explores different channels of social support in post-Soviet Russia—zooms-in on a sidewalk display of fresh mushrooms offered for sale by a Moscow street vendor. Incidentally, Nancy Ries' discussion of Muscovite cultivation and foraging practices during perestroika is illustrated by a "Selling Dried Mushrooms" (Einarsen and Kowalczyk in Ries 1997:134) photograph showing a woman holding up strands of dried goods tied up in a bundle. Her mohair mittens and shawl, at the background of grayish-white city landscape, suggests that

dealing with mushrooms in Russia is, in one way or another, a year-round enterprise.

In the opening chapter I explain that the contrasting attitudes toward mushrooms found in Chukotka and Alaska stem from the corresponding colonial influences present on the two sides of the Bering Strait. The current discussion of mushroom imagery in England, United States, and parts of Eastern Europe shows that cultural outlooks on the subject are, in fact, polarized on national levels. But how did these differences come to pervade the Russian and Anglo-Saxon cultures in the first place? And how can we explain the apparent polarity of views toward mushrooms found the world over (cf. Anderson 2005, Arora 1986, Berezkin 1997, Fine 1998, March and March 1982, Levi-Strauss 1969, Parker 1979, Schaechter 1997, Simoons 1994:430*n*, Toporov 1985, Wasson 1973, Wasson and Wasson 1957)?

Several authors attempt to tackle the issue. Simoons (1998:188), for example, suggests that the mushrooms' association with decay is what rouses the feeling of aversion. He points out that because of their unclean origin, mushrooms were outlawed by the Dharma-sûtras[17] and (though consumed widely in the mainstream) continue to be a concern in present-day India for persons striving for ritual purity. It is worth noting that although mushrooms were never prohibited by the Jewish Kashrus laws, including the ones that are specific to Passover, their ambiguous status within the taxonomy of animals, plants, vegetables, and fruit has raised questions as to which food blessing (*Beracha*) is most appropriate for their consumption (Blech 2002).[18] Levi-

17 Simoons acknowledges that this information runs somewhat contrary to Gordon Wasson's rather famous delineation of the "Soma plant" invoked in the hymns of Rig-Veda is *Amanita muscaria*. "If Wasson is right," Simoons says, "we are dealing with a mushroom that was highly regarded, consumed by Brahmins, and even deified in ancient India (1998:188). I think it is quite plausible that both scholars are correct: perhaps *Amanita muscaria* was viewed as distinct and separate from other mushrooms because of its psychogenic qualities, unique visual characteristics, and ritual use.

Strauss thinks that the frequent associations of mushrooms with "thunder or lightning, or the devil, or madness" points to the fact that our attitudes toward them "reflect very old traditions, going back no doubt to Neolithic or even Paleolithic times" (1976:224). Drawing on various cross-cultural surveys and extending Levi-Strauss' (1969) raw and cooked schemes into the field of semiotics, Toporov finds that mushrooms hold an "exceptional role... in the semiotic systems of the corresponding traditions" (1985:295). Proclaiming mushrooms "a universal semiotic signifier" Toporov calls for an examination of the cultural phenomena that reflect "archaic layers of mythological conceptions," which, he says, is necessary "for the reconstruction of mythological conceptions about mushrooms" (1985:303).

The idea suggested by several noted scholars that cultural dispositions toward mushrooms may be deep-seated and rooted in antiquity is quite significant, for it underscores the scale of the transition in Chukotka that this

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18 The Talmud prescribes that *Shehakol*—the *Beracha* (blessing) for all foods that are not plants—is recited for mushrooms because their main sustenance is considered not to come from soil. At the same time, Talmud does consider mushrooms to be terrestrial growths, and that is why some Talmud scholars hold that *Ho'Adama*—the blessing for fruit that grows on the ground, recited for plants—is acceptable if said by mistake. Rabbi Zushe Blech discusses several other examples of ramifications stemming from mushrooms' ambiguous nature, including the following:

> The Talmud (Shabbos 30b) relates that Rabban Gamliel was teaching his students about the wondrous events that would take place at the time of redemption. In one example he notes that the Land of Israel will produce fresh cakes every morning, basing this on the verse in Tehillim (72:16) "May there be abundant grain on the earth of the mountaintops." When one of his disciples expressed skepticism on the feasibility of such a miracle, Rabban Gamliel merely told him to look at the mushrooms that sprout from the ground overnight. The Avnei Nezer (O.C. 111) explains that the allusion to mushrooms was more than just a convenient example. From the time of Adam, the earth was cursed and man was condemned to work for his food – "By the sweat of your brow thou shalt eat bread" (Bereishis 3:19). As we have seen, mushrooms differ from conventional vegetation in that they do not grow from the ground, and therefore, according to the Avnei Nezer are considered a source of blessing untainted by the curse bestowed upon the earth. Mushrooms come from the ground "ready-to-eat" without the need for further processing, as do grains, and he explains the Beracha of Rabban Gamliel to mean that, in the future, all grain will be similarly blessed. The Halachos of mushrooms, therefore, should serve as a tantalizing mor(s)el in our understanding of Halacha and Kashrus (http://www.kashrut.com/articles/mushroom/, accessed August 12, 2006)

dissertation explores. At the same time, what I show in this work is that in certain contemporary contexts a study of mushrooms' place in a culture can shed light not only on the "very old traditions," but also on the courses and implications of recent social processes. Establishing the epitomes that drive the fear or love for mushrooms found in different societies is a captivating pursuit indeed, but also one that extends beyond the immediate concerns of this dissertation. My purpose, rather than trying to demarcate what causes these conditions, is to examine the transition from one kind of outlook to the other.

Defining Mycophobia and Mycophilia

Within the body of scholarship devoted to the subject, social dispositions synonymous to either fear or love for mushrooms are known as *mycophobia* and *mycophilia*, respectively. The coinage of these terms is credited to the monumental 1957 work of Valentina and Gordon Wasson entitled *Mushrooms, Russia and History*, which, in the words of Levi-Strauss, "opened for our research a new and prodigiously fertile field of ethnomycology" (1976:224). The author-couple had first arrived at the idea of mycophobic and mycophillic attitudes while on their honeymoon in the Catskill Mountains in 1927. There and then, much to the dismay of her American husband, Russian-born Valentina Pavlovna indulged in gathering bountiful chanterelles, bearing no more than an implicit gastronomic intention. She narrates the event in the book's introductory pages:

> With what astonishment my husband saw me, on our first walk, dart with ecstasy to this fungus and that, and on bended knee strike what seemed to him poses of adoration! With what horror he strove, unsuccessfully, to keep me from bringing home and eating a mess of

> fragrant *lisichki* [chanterelles]! He behaved, as we both at once perceived, like the hen that has hatched ducklings and sees them swim away (Wasson and Wasson 1957:4-5).

The conflicting emotions first coming to the fore in 1927 turned out, as the young couple had soon discovered, to be the classic symptoms of wider cultural outlooks pervading the worldviews of Slavic and Anglo-Saxon peoples. The former the Wassons classified as mycophiles and the latter as mycophobes. With further research, the authors of *Mushrooms, Russia and History* have found that sentiments of this kind are not restricted to their own respective backgrounds, but exist in many other societies that show strong feelings towards mushrooms, categorically holding them as either objects of reverence and affection or those of fear and dislike.

The Wassons' joint discovery in 1927 had fueled the young couple's enthusiasm and laid the foundation for what became their life-long pursuit. He, a professional banker, and she, a pediatrician, the Wassons conceived ethnomycology as a field that is interdisciplinary and rich. The range of interests they addressed (Gordon continued this work after Valentina's death in 1958) encompasses myriad unsolved mysteries related to mushroom depictions in visual and verbal arts dating to different time periods and found in diverse geographic locations, as well as to contemporary meanings and uses of mushrooms for ritual, recreational, and culinary purposes. The colossal intellectual wealth turned out by their tireless inquiry is reflected in the scores of published material as well as in the magnificent, one of a kind *Tina and Gordon Wasson Ethnomycological Collection* containing over 4000 items, including books, manuscripts, correspondences, documents in visual and audio media, prints, watercolors, and archaeological objects. This extraordinary collection ended up a gift made to the Harvard Botanical Museum in 1983 (Brown 1997:22).

Still, through the decades of scrupulous and multi-faceted research, their experience in the Catskills remained a telling anecdote. More than thirty years past the incident, in a presentation at the New York Academy of Sciences, Gordon Wasson gave his version of the story:[19]

> My wife and I began to gather our material long ago, in 1927, on an August afternoon in the Catskills, as we strolled along a mountain path on the edge of a forest. She was of Russian birth and I of Anglo-Saxon ancestry. I knew nothing of mushrooms and cared less. They were for me rather repellent, and likely as not, deadly poisonous. In the years that we had known each other, I had never discussed mushrooms with my wife. Suddenly she darted away from my side: she had seen the forest floor carpeted with mushrooms of many kinds. She knelt before them, calling them by endearing Russian names,[20] and over my protests insisted on gathering them in her dress and taking them back to the lodge, where she went so far as to cook them—alone... This episode made so deep an impression on us that from then on, as circumstances permitted, we gathered all the information that we could about the attitude of various peoples toward mushrooms—what kinds they know, their names for them, the etymology of those names, the

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19 I find it noteworthy and rather amusing that in an essay written in memoriam of her parents Masha Wasson Britten states: "As much as I respected my father's integrity, I recall that for years I did not believe him when he said his interests in mushrooms began on his honeymoon in 1927. Such an explanation seemed to me like a Hollywood soap opera, something out of character for my father. Eventually, however, I concluded the story was true, for he told it sincerely and consistently" (1997:33-34).

20 This narration by Gordon Wasson, as well as Valentina's passage presented earlier, are highly evocative of the Marakulin's ode to mushrooming:

> You cut a Russula, and next to it appears a Milk Cap, collect the Milk Cap and at slight distance you see a flock of Chanterelles, shining like gold of the purest grade. And then, here it is—your heart skips a beat: right by your foot, in the blueberries, exuding its apple-blush glow is the King Bolete, so beautiful that you kneel in front of it and remain in this prayer pose for at least five minutes, not being able to catch your breath from the sudden, unexpected bliss (1992:24).

folklore and legends in which mushrooms figure, references to them in proverbs and literature and mythology (Wasson quoted in Lowy 1997:161).

From the inception of their trail-blazing research, Gordon and Valentina have developed lasting collaborative relationships with respected scholars in a number of disciplines, as well as with artists and photographers who were also mushroom enthusiasts. The urge to investigate ritual mushroom use recorded in Mesoamerica by early Spanish chroniclers had eventually brought Valentina, Gordon, and their daughter Masha to the Mexican village of Huautla, where in 1955[21] they became the first westerners allowed to take part in a ceremony involving the ingestion of psychoactive mushrooms. Wassons' reflections on this experience, and others that followed, laid the groundwork for other pioneers of psychedelic research culminating in the first conference and the subsequent printed volume devoted to exploring the roles of hallucinogens in religious practices (Furst 1972). It is remarkable that the theme nowadays most frequently associated with mushrooms (at least in North America), as I cannot stop finding out from everyday interactions, was practically unknown until that time.

Appropriately, I find it a high honor that my dissertation research had unintentionally set me into the footsteps of such extraordinary individuals. Similar to the legendary couple, I too was blessed with the good fortune of, rather than searching for a stimulating subject, having the research questions come to find me: first in the childhood memories, then in the woods and in a University classroom, and finally amidst the magnificent vistas of the Bering Strait shores. Although the Wassons' quests were inspired by the couple's palatal disagreements, it is the outcomes of their research on psychedelic

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21 Gordon Wasson's subsequent 1956 expedition was infiltrated by a CIA operative delegated with obtaining samples of hallucinogenic mushrooms thought to be useful in developing mind-control drugs (Richardson 1997:199, Riedlinger 1997:212-213).

mushrooms that constitute their most celebrated achievements (cf. Riedlinger 1997). The given work, therefore, may serve to slightly offset that legacy, repatriating ethnomycology to the culinary realm, where back in 1927, during Gordon and Valentina's honeymoon, the "mycophile and mycophobe" framework saw its early beginnings.

Perhaps not as romantic as the clash in the Catskills, my research questions had also come to the fore in a contrasting setting, with the predominant fear and dislike (or impartiality, at best) of mushrooms found on the Alaska side of the Bering Strait and deep affection in Chukotka. Clearly, these attitudes parallel the Wassonian notions of mycophobia and mycophilia, respectively. However, I believe my understanding of these terms, constructed on the basis of personal reflections and field ethnography, deviate from that of the Wassons. Perusing the volumes of *Mushrooms, Russia and History* one gains an image of mycophillic societies as those where mushroom lore is vastly elaborate and dates to antiquity, and where throughout the population dozens of mushroom varieties are known and harvested, each one bearing a unique name and purpose. Although it is possible to think of certain countries that on the collective level rise to such expectation, I seriously doubt that every citizen of these nations is a high-level expert and a passionate fan of the mushroom world. As illustrated by the experience of my family, characteristic for many in my native Belarus, individuals and groups can hold a general idea that, on the whole, many varieties of mushrooms make delicious food, while in the context of their everyday lives they only recognize and enjoy a select few. In Chukotka, nowadays, mushroom picking is a beloved activity, albeit recently acquired. Overwhelmingly, however, people give preference to *Leccinum* and *Lactarius* species, either neglecting or rejecting a multitude of other fungal choices.[22]

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22 Incidentally, Marakulin (1992) notes that this pattern is typical for northerners, spoiled by the plethora of these highly regarded fungi.

Nevertheless, mushroom picking and consumption are highly meaningful activities, and the contemporary practices, beliefs, and attitudes associated with mushrooms certainly qualify as mycophillic, from the perspective of local people and outsiders alike. In light of that, I suggest we modify the Wassons' view, making it less restrictive and thus more accurately reflective of ethnographic realities.

Biologist Richard Evans Schultes, a long-time collaborator of the Wassons, effectively summarizes their classification of mycophiles as "those who love and know intimately their mushrooms" (1997:16) and mycophobes as "those who fear and abhor and do not know their mushrooms" (ibid.). It is, of course, extremely subjective what it means "to love and intimately know" mushrooms. How does one set the standards? Should we judge by the number of recognizable varieties or amounts of per capita consumption? As often the case with categorical dichotomies, this one may also be problematic. For example, in a comparative ethnomycological study, Mapes et al found that while in Amazonia and in Mesoamerican lowlands mushroom utilization is far more limited compared to the highland regions of Mesoamerica, it is difficult to speak of these differences "in terms of the opposition between micophily and mycophoby" (2000:186). What also may pose a conceptual obstacle is that in some regions mushrooms are seldom used as food, but find a number of medicinal and practical applications. Whether such tendencies are mycophobic or mycophillic can make a captivating discussion, but since the given work largely focuses on culinary mushroom uses, this concern extends beyond its scope.

Just as in mycophillic societies the knowledge and use of mushrooms varies from person to person, the places known for their predominant mycophobia may also exhibit a range of attitudes. North America, for instance, is not without its share of devout mushroom lovers: while the vast majority are immigrants from Eastern Europe, Italy, and parts of Asia, the

number of Anglo-Saxon ancestry connoisseurs continues to rise. The expanding body of mushroom-appreciation literature is likely a reflection of the public's growing interest: reading through the English-language accounts such as Friedman's (1986) *Celebrating the Wild Mushroom*, Williamson's (2002) *Reflections on the Fungaloids*, Schaechter's 1997 *In the Company of Mushrooms*, we find that the discourse admiring the physical beauty, taste, texture, and mysterious character of mushrooms is certainly comparable to that of Russian nature writers like Marakulin (1992) and Soloukhin (1968). To the same effect, David Arora's (1991, 1986) mushroom identification guides remain long-standing blockbusters. A recent hard-cover volume by British authors Acton and Sandler (2001), attractively packaged and illustrated with succulent images, makes an attempt to popularize mushroom picking in traditionally mycophobic England. Although the prospects of a mass conversion of the English into mushroom lovers are rather dubious at this point, some changes could be in store.

Circumstances driving the mushroom's transforming status among the previously uninterested groups are likely connected with the emergence of global cuisine and increasing preference for consuming natural foods—a category perceived as fitting for wild mushrooms. Rising market demands parallel the expansion of the commercial industry, which in the United States has been growing steadily since the late 1970s (McLain 2000). Among the social impacts of large-scale commercial mushroom harvesting in the regions of the Pacific Northwest, Montana, Idaho, northern California, and sometimes Alaska, is the seasonal influx of mushroom buyers and harvesters into communities bordering the crop's fruitful grounds, which serves to acquaint local people with various aspects of the trade. In 2005, for example, hundreds of interior Alaska residents tried their luck for the first-time during the commercial harvesting season of morel mushrooms. The vast majority of them were personal-use pickers who, having learned of the opportunities

from local media, interaction with migrant workers, or University of Alaska workshops, went out and gathered small quantities of morels for curiosity's sake. These first-timers may or may not do it again, but the experience has gained them familiarity with at least one kind of mushroom hunt.[23] Thus while mainly targeting patrons of the high-end restaurant and retail ventures, through its field operations the commercial mushroom industry manages to influence and even directly involve the local, often culturally-diverse contingents.

Other venues fostering the growing mushroom connoisseurship are the various mycological societies and hobbyist groups dedicated to some form of mushroom exploration. Fine's (1998) ethnography *Morel Tales: The Culture of Mushrooming* shows that such organizations enjoy quite a sundry membership, including the scientifically-inclined amateurs interested in taxonomy and ecology, various nature enthusiasts, as well as "pot hunters" driven primarily by gastronomic concerns. With differences in interests often being the cause of internal conflicts, occasionally disrupting mushroom forays and other activities, group members nevertheless feel bonded to one another by the uniqueness of their pursuit. Collectively, they take pride in their ability to identify wild mushrooms—a skill they think is all but absent in the mainstream. Their specialized knowledge, they feel, is more than a mere competence: it is an awareness of nature's certain beauty, a gourmet food access, or a gateway to a quality outdoor experience closed off to most people who are ignorant of the mushroom. Thus the consciously embraced mycophilia of such groups thrives on the mycophobia of the larger society.

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23 This information comes out of the data I collected during field research in interior Alaska in the summer 2005, documenting harvest of morel mushrooms for the University of Alaska Cooperative Extension and the Boreal Ecology Research Unit of the U.S. Forest Service. The wildfires of 2004 that burned over 6.7 million acres have made interior Alaska an attractive site for the commercial harvest of morels—the wild mushrooms that fruit during the spring of the first year following the disturbance.

The variability of mushroom use from one locality to another suggests that arriving at a uniform definition of either mycophilia or mycophobia is neither practical nor likely. At the same time, to an interested observer both conditions manifest themselves quite perceptibly and, just as one day the Wassons had promptly gained awareness of the differences in the ways they regarded mushrooms, so had the contrast in Chukotkan and Alaskan outlooks become evident to me at once in the course of a summer. The veracity of Wassons' classification, perhaps less visible elsewhere (e.g. Mapes et al 2000), was, in this case, clear beyond a reasonable doubt. The all-around thrill of the mushroom season, quite literally audible at every social venue in Chukotka, was all but absent in Alaska, where other than a few Chukotka immigrants, no one showed any signs of being enthused with anticipation. Yet to a great extent, the setting I found in northwest Alaska resembles Chukotka's fairly recent mycophobic past. The remainder of this chapter discusses the mushroom-related ideas stemming from Yupik and Chukchi indigenous worldviews. Nowadays, the vast majority of Chukotka Natives, including elders, attribute these notions to the beliefs and practices of the recent past.

Views of the Chukotka Yupiit and Chukchi Prior to Russian Influence

In the past mushroom-picking was equally absent from both Yupik and Chukchi subsistence milieus, but each group had its own reasons for the avoidance. The views held by both groups were substantiated by cosmological orders and empirical observations that are notably allied with their traditional occupations and production modes. Today, when conversing in Russian with a Yupik person knowledgeable about the prohibitions of the former times, he or she will likely say that "mushrooms," according to the

indigenous Yupik beliefs, are *chertovy ushi*, which translates as "devil ears." Devils (*cherti*), in this case, are the copious malevolent spirits inhabiting the tundra. These powerful harmful entities can hypnotize tundra travelers, divert them from taking the right path, and cause them to get lost or to wander around for days in circles (cf. Kerttula 2000:141).

The ethnomycological vocabulary provided to me by Yupik speakers in Chukotka and in Nome contains a total of four items: *tuutaghuaq*, *sigutmeketak*, *tuughneghaam sigutanga*, and *tuughneghaam ayaviigha*.[24] *Sigutmeketaq* is a Chaplino Yupik term for "mushroom," which is a cluster of *sigut* (ear) and a suffix that implies aversion.[25] The last two are used in Sireniki, translating as "devil's ear," or "devil's cane." *Tuughneghaam* can also stand for "shaman's helping spirit" (Fortesque et al 1994:346), thereby turning the whole cluster into "shaman's helping spirit ears" rather than "devil's ear." Perhaps what the language memory reflects in this case is that, at one time, mushrooms were associated with different kinds of spirits, good and bad, rather than with exclusively malignant entities. Although conceivable, this more antique connotation does not seem to echo in the contemporary ideas: it has either been transformed long ago for reasons that are now unknown, or has been lost fairly recently, with the increasing use of the Russian translation. An evidence of the latter is the fact that none of the bilingual speakers I interviewed has translated *tuughneghaam sigutanga* and *tuughneghaam ayaviigha* as "shaman's helping spirits' ears" (or even just "spirit's ear") or "spirit's cane," respectively. Although the Russian-speaking Yupik talk about *dúkhi*—Russian for "spirits"—extensively (as the customs of paying respect to

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24 The original words were written down by Yupik interviewees in the Yupik adaptation of the Cyrillic alphabet. Professor Michael Krauss at the Alaska Native Language Center, University of Alaska Fairbanks, helped me with the Latin spelling of these words as well as with their interpretation.

25 The interpretation of *–meketaq* as a suffix that implies aversion was provided by a Yupik elder in Novoe Chaplino.

and feeding the spirits are practiced widely), mushrooms are only referred to as properties of *cherti*—a Russian equivalent of "devils" or "demons."[26]

Tuutaghuak is the word for "mushroom" in Naukan, where Yupik language is appreciably different from the way it is spoken in Chaplino and Sireniki. According to one of the two Naukan speakers whom I interviewed in Chukotka (there are only a few of them today), *-ghuak* is a suffix that indicates that the subject "looks like something else" (Interview Transcript 32, Lavrentiya). She could not tell with certainty what "something else" in this case might be, but was inclined to draw a connection with *tuttu*—the Inupiaq word for "caribou"; her reasoning was grounded in the fact that Naukan generally shows a much greater resemblance with the Inupiaq language than do the Sireniki and Chaplino Yupik. In a private consultation, Professor Michael Krauss at the UAF Alaska Native Language Center pointed out to me that *tuutaghuak* shares its root with *tuutaq*, Naukan for "chin bead" or "labret"—a facial decoration that in the past used to be popular among the Alaska Yupiit and Inupiat. On the one hand, what both interpretations may suggest is that Naukan ideas about mushrooms may have been quite different from the Sireniki and Chaplino Yupik concepts. On the other hand, we may delineate certain trans-regional commonalities, observing that to some extent all the presented terms encapsulate a naming principle that is based on visual

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26 Ernest Burch (1971:157), in his discussion of cosmological ideas of the Inupiaq people in northwestern Alaska touches on a similar issue, where the "chief" of the wicked metaphysical beings known in Inupiaq as *tunrat* (singular *tunraq*) have, with the language shift, come to be called "the Devil" in English. Possibly, the translation played a role in shaping a new conceptualization of this being; Burch writes:

> Some informants told me that a *tunraq* is shaped like a man. Then they proceeded to give a perfect description of the Devil as conceived in Western characterization, complete with horns and a pointed tail. Other informants told me that this picture was borrowed from the whites and that, in the traditional Eskimo view, *tunraq* was not anthropomorphized in this way (ibid.)

resemblance that mushrooms share with the corresponding objects, appearing "labret-like" to some and "ear-like" to others.[27]

While the linguistic evidence may indicate that the Yupik words discussed here are based more on the mushrooms' physical appearance rather than certain cosmological ideas, the oral history data speaks to the contrary. The recollections I was able to record suggest that among all the Siberian Yupik groups, mushrooms drew the emotions of repugnance and fear of contamination. Touching mushrooms with bare fingers was prohibited: on the occasion of an accidental skin contact, the person had to immediately blow at the exposed surface. This practice, which I saw being demonstrated many times, was grounded in the belief that mushrooms are capable of causing skin to become rancid and subsequently infecting the rest of the body (Figure 15). Notably, this hazardous characteristic is analogous to one of the ecological roles fulfilled by fungi—the decomposition of organic matter. Thus the contaminative powers once attributed to mushrooms could be based on a homeopathic contagion principle, where the general association of fungi with decay, observable in the natural world, is perceived to include the living humans. Their presence as a form of life that arises after death may serve to magnify the mushrooms' malevolent capabilities and further saturate the ideas of infectivity.

The apprehension about the mushrooms' corrosive faculties fits well within the wider Yupik beliefs about the tundra. In her ethnographic portrait of Sireniki, Kerttula points out that for the coast-dwelling Yupik, traditionally

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27 I find it difficult to offer a more conclusive interpretation of the Naukan material from the data I was able to collect. Furthermore, due to the multiple relocations imposed on the Naukan diaspora, whose members since village closure in 1958 have been scattered throughout the Bering Strait region, a unified Naukan view may no longer exist. My friend Nadezhda, for example, who prior to moving to Nome lived mostly in Provideniya, is more familiar with the perspectives found on the south of the Peninsula than with those that existed in Naukan, where she spent her childhood. On the whole, therefore, the Yupik views discussed in this thesis largely represent those of the Chaplino and Sireniki Yupik speakers and their descendents.

Figure 15: A Sireniki elder, explaining the practice of blowing air at one's hand in order to avoid contamination that mushrooms were believed to cause. (Photo by Igor Zagrebin)

oriented toward the sea, "the tundra was a dangerous place filled with quicksand and evil spirits" (2000:141). Among the perils believed to inhabit this treacherous landscape are the hypnotizing *cherti* [devils, evil sprits] and flesh-eating *cherviaki* [worms] eager to infest the bodies of incautious travelers. Consistently, in the Yupik worldview the tundra appears as a malevolently magical space, where physical bodies are subjected to some kind of deterioration by callous energies. The ecological link of fungi with the posthumous processes handily corresponds with this notion. Thus it is possible that the view of mushrooms as devil ears encompasses a number of Yupik beliefs about the tundra, synctretizing certain ecological phenomena with knowledge of cosmic geography and metaphysical elements. Similarly to the Yupik, prior to the Russian influence the Chukchi people largely abstained from consuming mushrooms, at least in the culinary sense. However, compared to the Yupik, whose outlook was explicitly restrictive, the Chukchi stance seems neither proscribing nor fearful. The commonplace view, remarkably similar among the tundra and the coastal Chukchi, is that mushrooms are "reindeer food" that, until recently, was simply gastronomically uninteresting for people (cf. Diachkova 2001). Even in the present time, long since mushroom picking has become a regular part of their procurement cycle, most Chukchi people are well aware that reindeer find mushrooms irresistible. For reindeer herders the mushroom season is a nuisance. Controlling the herd during fruiting time becomes, they say, nearly impossible: having caught the whiff of a mushroom-rich country, the animals begin dispersing into every direction, galloping through the tundra in a gluttonous compulsion, often to the point of getting stomach-sick. Kerttula's ethnography includes a similar observation in that when coming upon a mushroom patch, the reindeer "would charge the field, jumping and frolicking until an observer could believe that the mushrooms had a

psychedelic effect on the animals" (2000:109). Appropriately, reindeer herders often refer to mushrooms as "reindeer drugs."[28]

Just as I did with the Yupik, when interviewing Chukchi speakers I asked them to provide any mushroom-related words known to them in the Chukchi language. Individual vocabularies in this domain range from two to four items, with the shortest list consisting always of *poŋpoŋ* and *wapaq*: the former is a generic term for "mushroom" and the latter stands for "fly-agaric." Some people divide the *poŋpoŋ* order into *lgepoŋpoŋ* [real mushroom] and *gorapoŋpoŋ* [reindeer mushroom]. *Lgepoŋpoŋ* refers exclusively to puffballs (Figure 16). Of all the varieties, puffballs are the only mushrooms subjected to some culinary use prior to the Russian influence. The recollections I was able to capture suggest that puffball gathering in Chukotka enjoyed neither the scale nor the significance attributed to mushroom-picking in contemporary times. Chukchi utilization of puffballs seems to have been rather incidental: roasted on a skewer over a fire, they were consumed as an occasional picnic snack rather than part of a meal. This by no means implies that this activity may not have been meaningful on its own—perhaps it was an important component of leisure time spent in the tundra, similar, for instance, to how roasted marshmallows in the United States often mark a wholesome campfire experience. Still, this kind of use greatly differs from the extensively multi-faceted activity of mushroom-picking that takes place in Chukotka at the present time. Considering the voluminous harvests of other mushrooms,

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28 I elaborate on this subject in greater detail in Chapter 4. In connection with the herder's perspective on the reindeer behavior, it is worth noting that Inuit hunters talk about mushrooms as an important water source for the caribou (Thorpe et al 2001:134-135, 172). Incidentally, the Tepehuan people of Northwest Mexico, who collect and consume over a dozen varieties of wild mushrooms, abstain from gathering *Boletus edulis*, which they consider animal food because cows are known to eat them (Elizondo 1991:172). Marakulin, whose observations are based on a Siberian experience, also states that the cattle herders in forested areas are well aware that "cows are partial to all kinds of mushrooms, and are especially fond of the *Boletus edulis*" (1992:19).

Figure 16: Puffball, *Caltavia* sp. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

especially the popular varieties of *Lactarius* and *Leccinum*, the consumption of puffballs is comparatively minute.

Gorapoŋpoŋ [reindeer mushroom] is a catch-all Chukchi term for fleshy fungi, with the exception of *Amanita muscaria*. The distinction between *lgepoŋpoŋ* and *gorapoŋpoŋ* may create a false impression that puffballs, for some reason, are inimitably unappealing for the animals. In reality, I was told, reindeer like all mushrooms: the categorization merely singles out puffballs as the only mushroom historically consumed by people, hence the designation "the real mushroom" to communicate its edible status.

Another curious aspect of the Chukchi ethnomycological terminology comes from Gordon Wasson's (1968) delineation of word cognates in Paleosiberian languages, which Levi-Strauss calls "Mr. Wasson's ingenious speculations on a verbal form of the *poŋ* type" (1976:231). Wasson had found that while in some Siberian languages the words with the root *poŋ* (or similar to *poŋ*) refer to mushrooms, in others they mean "loss of consciousness," "drum," and "inebriation."[29] Perpetually fascinated with the ritual use of *Amanita muscaria,* in his celebrated work *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality*, Wasson attempts to trace the trans-Eurasian diffusion of ideas associated with the fly-agaric. Given that both the drum and the fly-agaric make integral tools for achieving and maintaining the shamanic state of consciousness in a number of Siberian cultures, Wasson may well be right in suggesting that these connections are not accidental. At the same time, it is important to note that in the Chukchi case, the fly-agaric is tagged not by a *poŋ* derivative, but by a name of its own: *wapaq*. Rather than other mushrooms, the term is homonymous with the name of a wolf-catching

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29 Wasson draws further parallels of the "poŋ cluster" (1968:167) with the Greek *sphongos* and Latin *fungus*. Keewaydinoquay (1978), a Great Lakes Ahnishinaubeg medicine woman and a collaborator of Wasson, translates "puhpohwee" (a word for "mushroom" in her native Ahnishinaubeg Algonkian that sounds notably similar to *poŋpoŋ*) as "to swell up in stature suddenly and silently from an unseen source of power" (ibid.:vii).

contrivance (Bogoras 1904-09:141),[30] and the believed to be poisonous herbs stored in mice hideouts. The latter are called *elgu-wapaq*, literally "white agaric."[31]

Elaborating on the description of wolf-traps made by the reindeer Chukchi, Bogoras does not only observe that the device shares its name with the fly-agaric but also makes the following analogy: "The Chukchi and the Koriak are very fond of this mushroom; and when they find it in the woods, they pick it off just as eagerly as the wolves snatch after the greased whalebone spits" (1904-05:141). Elsewhere in the monograph, discussing the spiritual beliefs of the Chukchi, Bogoras explains the anthropomorphic, personified status of the *Amantia muscaria* mushrooms in their metaphysical world:

> ...the intoxicating mushrooms of the species fly-agaric are a 'separate tribe' (yanra-varat). They are very strong, and when growing up they lift upon their soft heads the heavy trunks of trees, and split them in two. A mushroom of this species grows through the heart of stone and breaks it into minute fragments. Mushrooms appear to intoxicated men in strange forms somewhat related to their real shapes. One, for example, will be a man with one hand and one foot; another will have a shapeless body. These are not spirits, but the mushrooms themselves. The number of them seen depends on the number of mushrooms consumed... They will grasp [the user] by his arms and lead him through the entire world, showing him some real things, and deluding

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30 This device is made from baleen (also called whalebone), which is folded together, sharpened at the tip, and covered with meat and blubber. Once the animal swallows the bait, the folded baleen strips expand, causing collapse of the stomach and quick death (Bogoras 1904-09:198).

31 Bogoras explains that although nests of mice are sometimes tapped as a food source, the practice is considered dangerous because of the possibility of revenge. The mice may punish the robbers by means of magic or poisonous contents deliberately put in place with the intent of retaliation.

him with many unreal apparitions. The paths they follow are very intricate. They delight in visiting the places where the dead live (ibid.: 282).

Bogoras' ethnographic insight on the "mushroom tribe" is drawn from the southern regions of Chukotka. Yet, his vivid description shows a phenomenal semblance with the petroglyph images created ca.1460 BP (Dikov 1999 [1971]) on the cliffs of the Pegtymel' River valley not far from the coast of the Eastern-Siberian Sea (Figures 17-18).

First documented in the late 1960s, Pegtymel' petroglyphs include a total of 267 compositional illustrations (Devlet 2006:267), 34 of which portray humanlike silhouettes with clearly exaggerated depictions of mushrooms placed above their heads.[32] In some of the images the mushroom sits directly atop the figure while in others it appears to be unattached, gravitating over the individual bodies. The figures themselves are realistic, with gender characteristics, often recognizable by clothes and hairdos[33] or by the shape of the torso and genitalia, pronounced clearly in several portraits. Some characters, on the other hand, are depicted with disproportionate or missing

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32 Since Dikov's (1999 [1971]) initial documentation of 104 illustrations on the Pegtymel' cliffs, the site continues to reveal more and more petroglyph images. The most recent survey reports a total of 267 compositions (Devlet 2006), but does not specify how many of those included the depictions of mushrooms or "mushroom people." For that number I use Dikov's (ibid) figure of 34, which he provides in the *Mysteries in the Rocks of Ancient Chukotka*—the most comprehensive work that exists, to date, on the Pegtymel' petroglyphs.

33 A few years ago at a meeting of the International PhD School for the Study of Arctic Societies, a fellow-student who is a Native Greenlander, called my attention to the fact that the mushroom images at Pegtymel' are most accentuated in compositions where they are places atop the female, rather than male figures. Although the "mushroom crowns" do not appear exclusively in association with female silhouettes, this observation is quite correct: the mushrooms adorning the female forms are especially monstrous. In her view, the Pegtymel' mushroom crowns visually resemble the kind of top-knot coiffure now considered a traditional women's hairstyle among the Greenlandic Inuit. In a similar vein, Dikov, while asserting that the mushroom crowns "do not share the identifying characteristic of any hairdo or headdress," (1999[1971]:22) notes that atop the head of certain Thule period statuettes the shapes "provisionally called a coiffure is very reminiscent of a mushroom" (ibid.:89).

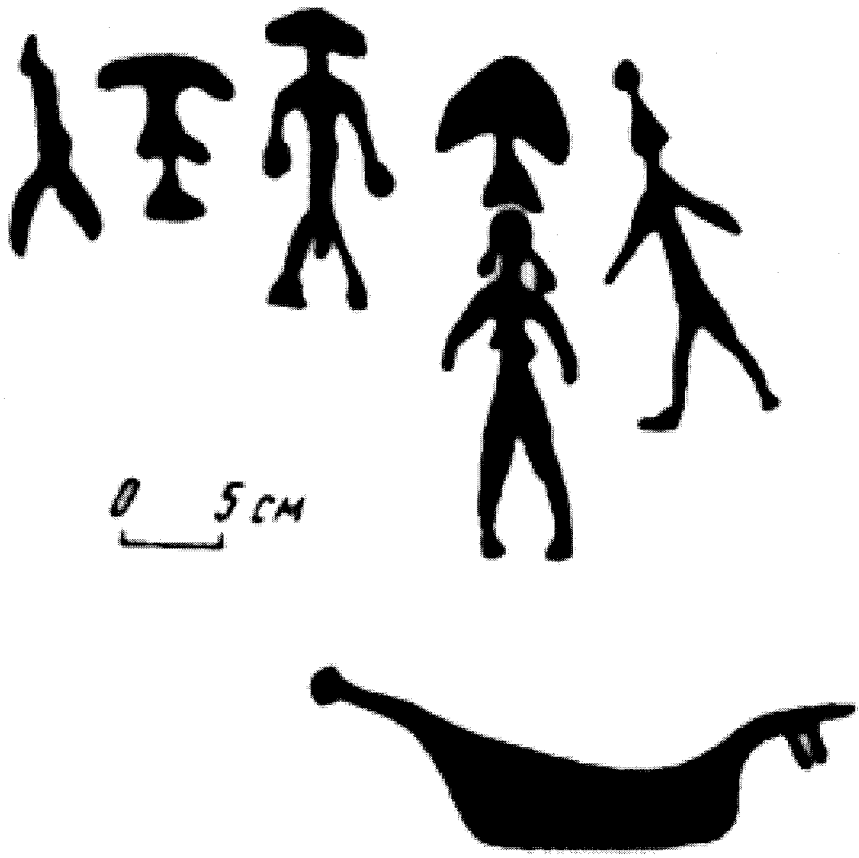

Figure 17: An illustration from the Pegtymel' composition labeled as "Stone IX" (Dikov (1999 [1971]:150)).

Figure 18: A larger composition from "Stone III" of the Pegtymel' complex (Dikov (1999[1971]:129).

limbs— the traits similar to those of the "mushroom people" described by Bogoras' informants.

The Pegtymel' silhouettes are interspersed with images of reindeer, watercraft, and other humanlike figures, often portrayed with a spear-shaped object. Concluding that the Pegtymel' complex does not correspond to any particular culture known from historic sources, Dikov (1999 [1971]) nevertheless contemplates two regionally-based ethnographic analogies: one in connection with Bogoras' account of the "mushroom tribe," and the other pertaining to the mushroom-reindeer association found in today's Chukotka.[34] The second hypothesis, which Dikov considers a less plausible one, proposes that the illustrations "were pecked in by hunters with a magical purpose: for the regeneration and reproduction of this greatest delicacy of the deer and ultimately for attracting the latter" (ibid.:68). This explanation, he says, can be inferred from the assumption that the mushrooms illustrated on the Pegtymel' cliffs are "nonpoisonous." However, because a noted Soviet mycologist whom he consulted on the matter found "no definite deer mushrooms (boletus)" and identified the petroglyphs as images of amanitas (Vasil'kov cited in Dikov (1999 [1971]), Dikov concludes that the given interpretation may not hold up.

Although it is true that that the Pegtymel' silhouettes correspond rather closely to the verbal portrayals of the "mushroom tribe" gathered by Bogoras in the southern regions of Chukotka, I do not think that the hypothesis built on the Chukchi association of mushrooms and reindeer should be ruled out. Though not an expert mycologist, living in the boreal forest I regularly encounter both boletes and amanitas in my natural surroundings and I frequently turn to professional literature for help with mushroom

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34 Ethnoarchaeologist Andrei Golovnev (2001) explores both of these angles in his documentary film *Pegtymel*.

identification. Based on these experiences, I cannot share Dikov's conviction that the Pegtymel' images "are not mushrooms in general, but more probably amanitas in particular—their characteristic stem widening at the base" (ibid.:22).[35] First of all, the stalk that expands at the base is not a signature mark of any particular species: it is found on a number of mushrooms including some bolete varieties. Hence we can fairly confidently eliminate certain possibilities (for example, the images are most likely not of the straight-stem *Russula* or *Lactarius* species), but a firm identification of the depicted mushrooms as fly-agarics is nevertheless a stretch. Secondly, as I note earlier the reindeer are said to be fond of different kinds of mushrooms, including *Amanita muscaria*.[36] Therefore, if the glyphs are actually depicting the fly-agarics, the mushroom-reindeer association may still be a valid connection.

Finally, when reflecting on the close similarity of Bogoras' description of the "mushroom tribe" and the visual treasures of the Pegtymel' cliffs, we should not forget the vast physical space separating the two sources and consider the implications this distance suggests. Most obviously, it allows us to ponder how widespread and long-standing the "mushroom tribe" may have been, its apparitions stretching over five hundred kilometers and nearly fifteen hundred years. The fact that the natural distribution of *Amanita muscaria* only scarcely extends into Chukotka's Arctic[37] could, on the one

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35 In a personal consultation mycologist József Geml', an Amanita muscaria specialist (see Geml et al 2006), suggested using the ring around the stalk, rather than widening at the base, as an identifying characteristic. So far I have not been able to decipher clearly this sign in the Pegtymel' images.

36 This point makes the central premise of a recent paper by Alana Cordy-Collins (2005). Asking "why do Santa's reindeer fly?"—a question she has had since childhood, Cordy-Collins proposes that, dressed in the contrasting red and white, the podgy master of the flying sledge is a human personification of *Anamita muscaria*—a fleshy mushroom that wears the same colors and guides his transporters through journeys between earth and sky.

37 I derive this information from several sources. The primary one consists of the several dozen testimonies that I recorded in the field. Virtually everyone who spoke on this subject

hand, indicate that the diffusion of ideas, migration of people, and trade of goods have been in place for quite some time. Bridging the southern Bering and Arctic shores these exchanges long preceded any Russian or American presence in the region or the known formal trade venues like the Aniui Fair. If the shapes depicted atop the figures on the Pegtymel' cliffs are in fact amanitas, their emergence in rock art situated so far from the fungi's physical source may point to the exceptional social and spiritual significance once ascribed to these mushrooms. On the other hand, it may indicate that the spatial distribution of this (and possibly other) fungi, and by extension the appearance of their symbiotic partners and associated geo-climatic circumstances of the region's past, could have differed from the conditions we find today.

To a contemporary observer acquainted with comparable ethnographic and historical materials on Chukotka, the Pegtymel' complex is more likely to appear as a multi-vocal visual conglomerate that expresses a number of ecological and cosmological associations, rather than a reflection of a specific purpose, or a set of ideas that can be clearly defined. As is evident from the discussion above, a number of connections encapsulated in these

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said they have never encountered *Amanita muscaria* anywhere on the Peninsula. For the most part, people specified that fly-agarics are found in the tundra surrounding the district of Anadyr; some learned it from direct observations they made while living or working in the area, some heard about it from other people, and some said they read about it in the book by Bogoras, where (in the English version) he states: "Fly-agaric is the only means of intoxication discovered by the natives of northeastern Asia. Its use is more common in the Koryak tribe as agaric does not grow outside the forest border. For the same reason only the Southern Pacific Chukchee—e.g., those around Anadyr, Big River, and Opuka River—are supplied with the intoxicating mushroom" (1904-09:205). Dikov also acknowledges that "the amanita appears only sporadically in Arctic Chukotka on the Arctic Ocean..." (1999 [1971]). By the way of comparison I turn to the recent study by Geml et al (2006) that delves into questions of evolution and speciation of *Amanita muscaria*. Among the Alaska specimens subjected to the laboratory analysis in this study were several samples collected around Nome and one sample collected at mile 122 of the Dalton Highway, only 7 miles north of the Arctic Circle. In a recent private consultation Geml reaffirmed that *Amanita muscaria* does not grow in the Arctic tundra, but also pointed to the possibility of both a change in climate and vegetation since the time the Pegtymel' images were created and migration of people transporting these mushrooms from more southern regions.

petroglyphs, such as those between mushrooms and reindeer and certain metaphysical entities, continues to surface in contemporary worldviews or echo in the knowledge people have about the past.

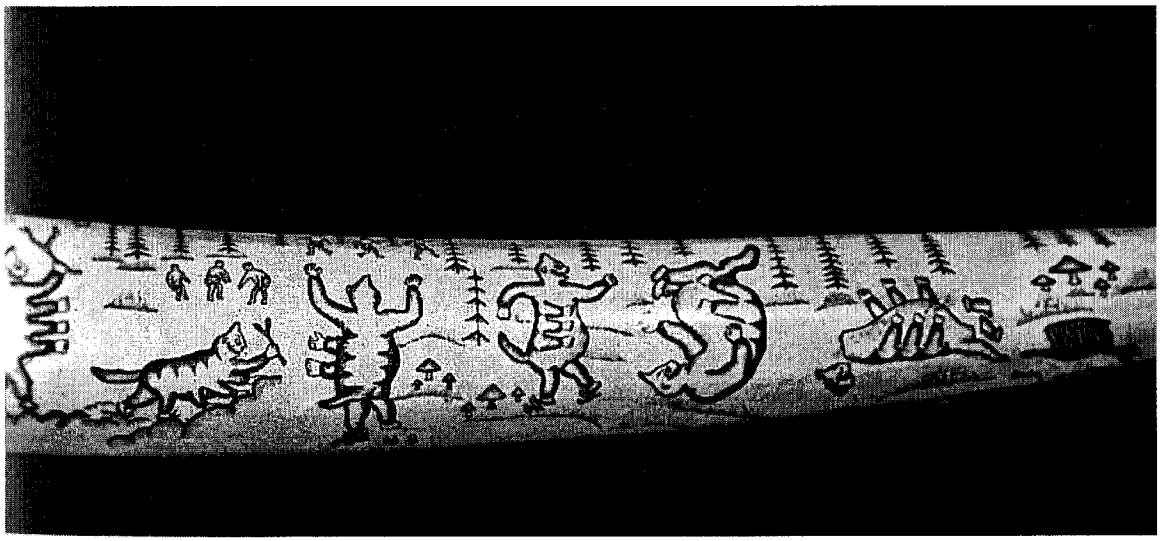
The mushroom images appearing in far more recent material culture—twentieth century ivory works— can also be interpreted in a similar way. Often realized as condensed narrative-based illustrations, the carvings and engravings completed at the Uelen Carving Studio (the main art and handicraft school of the Chukchi Peninsula since the 1930s), explicitly communicate the storyline while shedding light on the implicit perceptions held by the artists. Among the subjects of the 3-D sculptures and ivory tusk engravings are Chukchi and Eskimo traditional tales, human-animal transformations, realistic hunting and herding scenes, landscape portraits, and historical events. Having examined the collection at the Uelen Carving Studio Museum, I found that mushrooms appear exclusively in one type of work: the engravings of the Chukchi tale called *Kele and the Maidens*. The story's central character is the malevolent Kele who tries to capture a group of young women, but instead is deceived and comes to his death at the end. Although in the story it figures as the hero's proper name, *kele* or *kelet* (when plural) is a generic term denoting a whole universe of evil metaphysical beings who live in a separate world but regularly enter the human domain to bring death, diseases and various misfortunes (Bogoras 1904-09:291-302).

Kele and the Maidens originates in the Kolyma region—a forested country in the Omolon River basin that expands through Chukotka's west end. Although according to Mitlyanskaya the tundra version of the story unfolds at a different background, the works made in Uelen each show a tree-filled landscape (e.g. Efimova and Klitina 1981, Mitlyanskaya and Karakhan 1987:1985, Mitlyanskaya 1976:118, 119, Serov 1988:242). In the Kolyma version a group of young women are walking through the forest picking berries when they get abducted by Kele who hangs them upside down on a

tree and then takes a temporary departure. (Bogoras (1904-09:292) informs of a distinct class of anthropophagic and cannibalistic *kelet*. We can, therefore, hypothesize that in the given case Kele captures the girls in order to eat them.) While he is gone, an old-woman fox helps the girls escape, but in order to trick Kele, leaves their *kerkers* (coverall-type outfits) hung in place. The girls then wade across the river. Returning to find that his prey had escaped, Kele screams at the swindlers demanding to know how they managed to get over to the other shore. The girls come up with another prank and convince Kele to drink all the water out of the river, which he does and gets over-bloated as a result. Clumsily moving his ballooned torso, Kele with difficulty takes on the hilly terrain, but soon crashes and falls victim to a fatal tumble down the slope (Figures 19 (a, b)-20 (a, b)).

From the several publications that illustrate the ivory engravings of the story (ibid.), we are able to gain some sense of how the specifics of the tale are interpreted by different artists. Of the numerous works preserved in museum collections around the world, the images that can be easily accessed through library sources are those of the Uelen engravings by Vera Emkul' (completed in 1945, see Mitlyanskaya and Karakhan 1987:185), Rypkhyrgyn (completed ca.1934, see Efimova and Klitina 1981 and Mitlyanskaya 1976:76-77), Kleimit (completed in 1945, see Mitlyanskaya 1976:118-199), and Nadia Krasnova (completed ca.1940s, see Mitlyanskaya (ibid.)). Another tusk is pictured in *Guardians and Spirit Masters of Siberia* (Serov 1988:242), where the artist's name is not provided. Consistent in the arrangement of the story episodes, these different renditions of the tale each exhibit unique elements of composition and depictions of characters and landscape. Kele, for instance, has a fluctuating number of limbs ranging from six to ten, and assumes different postures while making his way through the forest of

(a)



(b)

Figure 19 (a, b): "The Story of Kele," a walrus tusk engraving by Kmeimit (Mitlyanskaya 1976 (pages not enumerated)).

(a)

(b)

Figure 20 (a, b): "The Story of Kele," a walrus tusk engraving by Nadia Krasnova (Mitlyanskaya 1976 (pages not enumerated)).

hulking willows and rather frail-looking conifers. Invariable in all the pieces is the abundance of mushrooms in Kele's surroundings. Missing in the beginning of the picturesque essay, they amass profusely toward the peak of the plot, when, suffering from over-hydration, the rapacious Kele maladroitly wobbles about. In his final step, each of Kele's feet lands directly atop the mushroom. Presumably, its slippery surface causes Kele to lose his balance and fall down. The works by Kleimit and Rypkhyrgyn show a cluster of mushrooms that rise especially tall near Kele's skeleton, which remains at the site after his flesh has disintegrated (or been eaten by birds, as shown in other engravings).

Today we are not in a position to speak directly with the authors of these works, which were created in the 1930s and 1940s. To the living artists in Uelen, including the descendents of the early masters, the appearance of mushrooms and the decisive role they play in Kele's ordeal does not entail any special significance: they are simply part of the landscape, creatively employed to resolve the plot. Curiously, the written version of the story, recorded by Bogoras in the late 1800s, contains no mention of mushrooms: their presence in the visual rendering is apparently a product of artistic imagination. It is also possible, and I think quite likely, that the idea of integrating mushrooms into the storyline was developed by Native artists in collaboration with Alexander Gorbunkov—the first professionally-trained Russian artist in Uelen who in 1933, after completing rigorous preparation at the Department of Far Eastern Studies of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, came to Chukotka and took on a leadership role at the Uelen Carving Studio. In a personal letter to art historian Tamara Mitlyanskaya (quoted in Mitlyanskaya 1996:70) Gorbunkov discusses the methods he employed in working with Native artists. From that we learn that each of the original pieces was developed in a collective setting. After choosing the baseline story, Gorbunkov would lead a series of workshops where, together with other

knowledgeable people in the community, he and the artists shared ideas on how to transfer the plot into a visual medium. Incidentally, *Kele and the Maidens* happens to be the tale that Gorbunkov chose to develop in the very first engraving completed via this method. For one reason or another he decided to stick with the story the way it was recorded by Bogoras in Kolyma, rather than adopting the eastern, tundra-based variation. Because of that, informs Mitlyanskaya, he found it necessary to add "A Tale of the Kolyma Chukchi" to the main title of the work.

The narrative's beginning, which states "young girls were walking in the forest, picking berries," became the scene depicted in the first engraved episode. Perhaps as a newcomer to the tundra setting, Gorbunkov felt more comfortable situating his first attempt in creating Chukotka art within the forested landscape instead of a vast open space. The characters of a malicious forest creature, young and innocent prey, and a wise crafty fox also come out as more familiar to a person from western Russia compared, for instance, to those of mammals inhabiting the northern seas. Thus, I suggest, mushrooms may have entered the scene at Gorbunkov's guidance, as an expected feature of forest environments, both in a secular and magical sense, commonly depicted in the Russian juvenile literature and animated films. And once the idea of using mushrooms as the cause of Kele's death was brought to the table, perhaps the Chukchi and Yupik artists working with Gorbunkov incorporated their own associations into the message and composition of the piece. Possibly that is why they appear in connection with evil spirit, putrefaction, and posthumous remains. While these are conceivable speculations, the fact that no part of this strikingly detailed visual essay shows mushrooms being gathered for food is unmistakably evident and certainly worth noting. The narrative specifically states that the girls taking a stroll through the woods are there to pick berries, and in the space they inhabit along the smooth bowed surface of the tusk, not a mushroom can be found.

In search for a sound interpretation of these images, I was somewhat perplexed, at first, to discover that the subject of mushrooms, which play a resolute part in all the visual enactments of *Kele and the Maidens*, is entirely absent in the literature. Being the first engraving accomplished via Gorbunkov's method in the early days of the Uelen Studio, the original piece by Rypkhyrgyn is important not only as a work of art, but also as a historical artifact. Therefore, it is not surprising that noted scholars of art in the North, like Serov (e.g. 1991, 1988), and Mitlianskaya (e.g. 1996, 1976, Milianskaya and Karakhan 1987), in their discussions of Chukotka materials, pay special attention to Rypkhyrgyn's piece and the later works based on the plot of *Kele and the Maidens*. However, amidst the generously written reviews, which cover various technical and artistic merits of the engravings, we find not even as much as a single mention of the mushrooms. In a paper that fragment-by-fragment explicates several *Kele and the Maidens* adaptations, describing the scene where Kele steps on the mushrooms and tumbles, Serov simply states "Kele falls down" (1991:16). To the same effect, Mitlyanskaya, aside from talking about the story characters, comments on myriad landscape elements, observing that in one work the trees have "portly trunks and long hanging branches" and "thin trunks with horizontal branches" in the other, that the water is pictured in "skewed saturated lines" (1987:181), and so on, but does not say a word about the mushrooms. It is worth recalling that in each of the mentioned pieces mushrooms are not merely a decorative, but also a functional component of the landscape—the very facet on which Kele trips. Why then, in the context of such elaborate discussion of the compositions, would the authors known for their attentiveness to the visual realm, choose to omit such an operative part of the story from their commentary?

I mentioned to several Russian colleagues, well-versed in Chukotka mythology and material culture, of not being able to find any text pertaining to mushrooms in the engravings of *Kele and the Maidens*. Every one of them

was somewhat taken aback by my concern. The question, to them, seemed excessively trivial, while the answer was glaringly obvious: "when you are in the forest you always find mushrooms, so when you illustrate the forest, you put them there too." True, from this point of view it is not a big mystery; however, when I asked why, then, we never see mushrooms in any other engraved summer scenes, the response was along the lines of "I have never given it much thought." What kept emerging in the course of these interactions is an implicit assumption that as a natural part of an outdoors landscape, mushrooms are more or less taken for granted: when out of sight, they are out of mind, and when in sight, they do not warrant commentary, even as part of a visual narrative or an artistic composition. By analogy, my hypothesis is that even in the case of Russian scholars who are experts on the subject of Chukotka art, the mushrooms in *Kele and the Maidens* remained within the same kind of ethnocentric blind-spot. And perhaps that is also why broader ethnomycological inquiries, or even casual observations, seldom find their way into Russian ethnography, be it a diet, land use, or folklore discussion. That propels me to strongly oppose the assertion of Yurii Berezkin, who claims that "had the world ethnography been dominated by scholars of Slavic descent, the subject of mushrooms would likely be far more prominent [than what we now find]" (1997:119). While Berezkin (ibid.) may well be right in observing that "the majority of western-European and American scholars, particularly those of Anglo-Saxon or Nordic ancestry, do not connect mushrooms with personal experiences and tend to regard the subject as one that is neither significant nor particularly pleasant," Russian or Slavic heritage alone is not a sure-ticket to "ethnomycological enlightenment." My saga with *Kele and the Maidens* serves as a case in point. As evident from the story of the Wassons' revelation that I discuss earlier in this chapter, and as my experience reaffirms, ethnomycological curiosities tend to arise in the context of cross-cultural contact.

The given work, therefore, is a step toward quenching the void of ethnomycology that exists in northern scholarship, both in Russian and English-language alike. Having shed light on the beliefs about mushrooms that the Yupik and Chukchi people had in the past, I now turn to the current procurement and culinary practices, where the activities of picking and cooking mushrooms have taken an amply prominent place.

MUSHROOM HARVEST IN CONTEMPORARY CHUKOTKA

CHAPTER 3

In the last week of April Dasha and I were hovering over an ice hole two hundred meters out of Novoe Chaplino. Pulling on a long line with a small rake tied to its end, Dasha was showing me how to get *upa*—orange-colored ascidians or so-called "sea peaches"—from under the ice. Its flesh, with taste and texture similar to pickled ginger, is consumed fresh; the long crawler worms, which it often harbors at its base, come handy in the next day's fishing. The north end of Tkachen Bay is reportedly the only place on the Peninsula coast where *upa* can be retrieved from the fjord bottom, giving Chaplino residents an unprecedented advantage in access to this resource, which provides food and bait at the same time.

Turning away from the blowing snow, we faced the snow-covered village, rows of identical houses protruding from the sheet of harsh, blinding white. The down coat I wore over five winters in interior Alaska turned out disappointingly inept for the gusting wet winds of the Chukotka coast. Nevertheless, the ice edge was clearly visible to my right, the seagulls had arrived, and the sun stayed high and late into the evenings. Increasing dramatically over the next month, the sunlight will eliminate the snow cover, most of which will partly melt, partly evaporate by mid-June. The surrounding slopes will turn their summer colors, acquiring patches of green amidst the rocky surfaces of brown and black. The air will warm up enough to absorb and transport the smell of the surroundings. Between the third and fourth week of July it will bring about *gribnoy zapashok* "the mushroom scent"—a moist earthy fragrance, signifying the beginning of the gathering season. *Gribi poshli* "the mushrooms have surfaced" will become the verbal headline quickly spreading from house to house. After a long cold winter, people are

anxious to get out on the tundra, to walk on its snow-free surface and accept its first gifts (Figure 21). Mushroom season usually begins around the third week of July with the appearance of *podberezovik*—a *Leccinum* known as the "birch bolete." Season beginning is awaited with much anxiety and anticipation. People speculate where and when the first "sighting" will occur. Word of the first discovery brings about village-wide "mushroom fever."

When asked why mushroom season is greeted with such overwhelming enthusiasm, people offered three general explanations. Personal preference is the first and most frequent response: people explain that they simply find mushrooms very tasty. Some add that the appearance of mushrooms also marks the beginning of a productive summer, when the tundra regains its energy and comes alive. The second explanation has to do with the short duration of the season and summer in general: one has to take advantage of every opportunity before the winter returns. Longing for a culinary innovation after many months of dietary homogeneity is the third explanation.

The first mushrooms do, in fact, become an immediate menu item. *Pervye vsegda na zharku* (the first are always for frying) is the rule I heard from nearly every mushroom picker. Thus it is the fried *podberezovik* that marks the first summer meal. Three varieties of *Lactarius* ("white dry *gruzdi*," "yellow wet *gruzdi*," and *volnushki*), which come the second week of August, are not consumed while fresh: in most households they are set aside for pickling and long-term storage. Between the third and fourth week of August, collecting *gorniy grib* (literally: "mountain mushroom"—another variety of *Leccinum*) gains preference among most pickers. While similar in taste with the birch bolete, *gorniy grib* is less likely to be infested with worms and is much firmer in texture. Therefore, it is easier to transport and is equally suitable for frying, drying, and marinating.

While varieties of *Leccinum* and *Lactarius* are the most popular edibles, *syroezhki* (*Russula*), *dozhdeviki* (*Calvatia*—puffballs), and *opiata* (likely an

Figure 21: The summer hours of the village library, closed on a week-day afternoon, are covered-up with a "sticky note," displaying a simple explanation "Left for the tundra." The gathering season has begun. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

Armillariella mellea) are consumed as well. Finally, one Provideniya resident is known for her fondness of "LBMs"—a category of look-alike mushroom species so numerous that even most mycologists have elected to tag it simply as "little brown mushrooms" (Arora 1986:32). Liuba calls her favorite collectibles *poganki*, which Valentina Wasson interprets as "little pagans"—a label used for "all merely tasteless or insignificant mushrooms that [Russians] dismiss with affectionate contempt..."(1957:6). Liuba marinates these mushrooms, preserving up to twenty liters each year. Despite the terminology, to her they taste delicious and are definitely not insignificant.

In each of the seven settlements where I conducted interviews, there was a widely held belief that all Chukotka mushrooms are edible. Of all the interactions I had during fieldwork, only one long-time Russian settler reported encountering the so-called "false birch boletes," which he said were poisonous. Everyone else, regardless of age or ethnicity, was adamant in asserting that there are no poisonous mushrooms in Chukotka. The only restriction people listed had to do with picking too close to the roads or wherever motorized transport is likely to be passing because the mushrooms exposed to vehicle traffic accumulate dust and exhaust fumes.

Unless the year is one when "winter is impatient"—a local reference to September snow storms, the orange caps of the mountain mushrooms will continue to adorn the rocky tundra slopes through the first week of October. For the next nine months, in search of creative solutions to chronically undersupplied village stores, a Chukotka cook will reach for a canvas bag of dried boletes, re-hydrate a handful, and make a hearty soup or a potato-mushroom sauté. Steam from the boiling pot will defrost her icy window providing a temporary view of the snow-covered mountain slope that, come next summer, will generously offer its fleshy fruit once again. New Years, national and traditional holidays, and birthday celebrations will warrant the sound of a jar popping open: having sniffed the special marinade, the host will

nod approvingly and make a plate of pickled *Lactarius* (Figure 22). Each of the guests will be served a few mushrooms, someone will pronounce a toast—to health, to our parents, to our children, to our friendship, bottoms up—and the decadent hors d'oeuvre will chase the bitter taste of vodka. "No holiday table," writes Anna Kerttula (2000:109), "especially when the guests are invited, was considered complete without mushrooms." Being an important part of the annual cycle of celebrations, mushroom procurement and consumption are embedded in both the ecological and the social calendars.

Picking

> Everywhere else you have to walk far, but in our village *podberezoviki* are right here, just walk behind those shacks by the river. I can drop my daughter off at the daycare and run over to pick some mushrooms before work, and then all day I know that dinner is ready; well, not yet ready, but taken care of. The only bad part is when you are in a hurry, you want to harvest a patch and run back, but you can't: all the mushrooms that at first were hiding will reveal themselves on the way back, just to spite you. (Interview Transcript 12, Nunligran 2004)
>
> When I go out for mushrooms, I don't mow them with a scythe or run headlong to get every last one. I like to find a beautiful meadow, lie down, look around and just admire everything that surrounds me, take note of all that's around. When I am ready to move on, I take the mushrooms that appeal to me and leave the rest. The rotten ones I make sure to step on and smear that porridge around with my foot. This way all the seeds stay in the soil, and the mushrooms will come up again next year, perhaps even more abundant. Going to the tundra is a

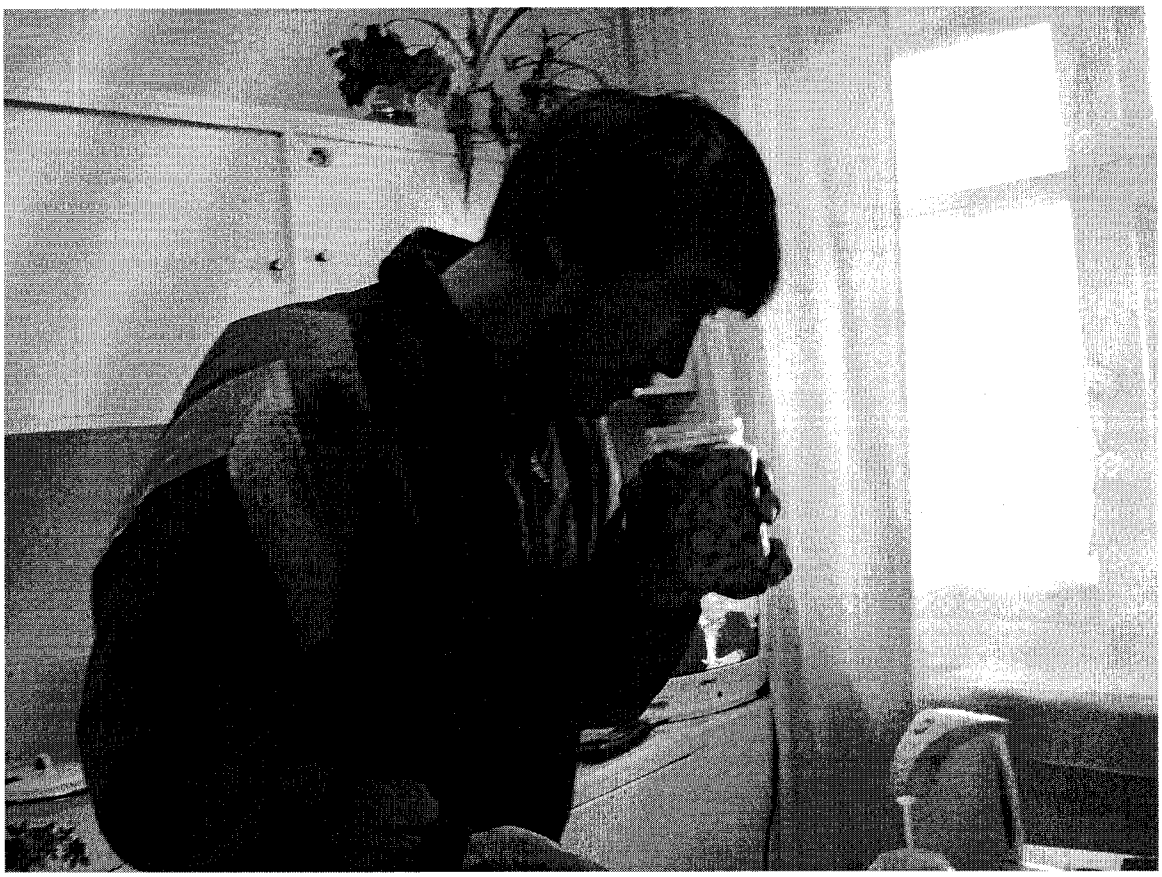


Figure 22: Pickled mushrooms are tested for aroma. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

means to relax, and harvesting mushrooms while you are out there is part of the relaxation. (Interview Transcript 47, Provideniya 2004)

> We usually hire a transport and go to a place called Imtuk, in Sireniki tundra. My husband and I and our friends go for the weekend. We have picnics in the tundra, drink a little, laugh, and tell stories. Part of the day we go our separate ways, each with a bucket or two and then reconvene again later for another picnic. Part of the mushrooms we clean and fry right there. That's simply wonderful: to be eating them fresh while you are still in the tundra. And of course we do not return home empty-handed either. (Interview Transcript 77, Provideniya 2004)

> Some people only pick in particular spots that they like to think are their own secret patches. But they are not secret: everybody knows about them... In Provideniya they pick everything, even the ones that are big and flabby, like bast slippers. Here we are choosy—spoiled with abundance one could say. Why go for the big rotten wormy ones when there are so many that are small and firm, simply ideal mushrooms! (Interview Transcript 03, Enmelen 2004)

Mushroom picking is an activity that can be practical, recreational, and social. Some like to emphasize one aspect as particularly important; for others the three are inseparable. Strategies and perspectives vary among individuals and also depend on the options available in each particular village. While Enmelen tundra is known as the richest mushroom ground in the region, Nunligran offers the easiest access to the productive patches (Figures 23-24). Nevertheless, in both villages it is common for people to make short mushroom runs in early morning hours before work to gather fresh mushrooms for dinner. People who are employed and prefer regular evening outings tend to go picking on alternate nights, spending one night in the tundra and the other at home preparing the mushrooms for long-term

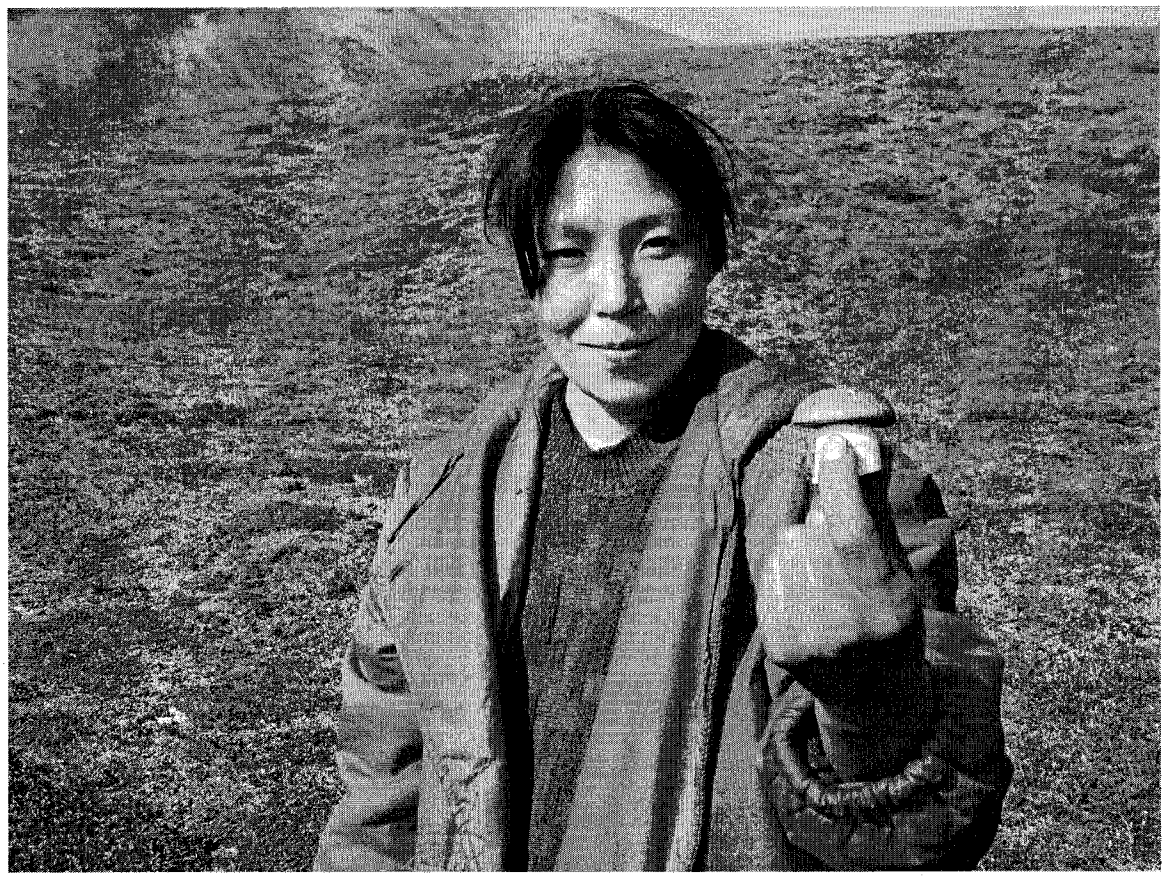


Figure 23: Posing with the finest specimens, Lake Achchen area. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

Figure 24: Posing with the finest specimens, Nunligran area. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

storage. Day or weekend trips are usually taken in families or groups of friends. These have a more festive atmosphere and are accompanied with frequent picnics and heavy socializing. At the fishing cooperative on Achchen Lake, where twenty-five people live and work on a seasonal basis, the camp cooks prepare fresh mushrooms several times a week; they either go picking themselves or use the mushrooms harvested by others in the camp. A number of times I took part in an opportunistic mushroom hunt during road trips. Once, a friend and I witnessed a vezdekhod (a tank-line track vehicle shown in Figure 7) make a sudden stop in the tundra and a group of people jumped out with buckets in their hands. Even from the distance mushroom gatherers can be easily distinguished from berry pickers: the former bend down frequently moving swiftly from one cluster to the next, while the latter remain in one spot and the same position for a long time.

In the summer every village school hosts a youth summer camp, where mushroom picking is one of the many outdoor activities that children perform as part of their curricular tasks. The summer camp curricula include cultural performances, arts and crafts workshops, village clean-up, and applied ecology fieldtrips that involve various procurement activities. Depending on the time of season, camp educators (who usually work as school teachers during the academic year) take the children out on the tundra to collect various bird eggs, mushrooms, berries, and greens. The scope of activity varies from teacher to teacher: in addition to identification, some teachers get involved in processing and preparing the tundra products together with the students, some let the students take their finds home, and others may assign collection projects that will supply herbarium materials for the natural history displays at the school. Collected mushrooms may also be handed over to the school cafeteria chefs and be used for the camp meal.

In nearly every interaction I had on the subject of mushrooms, plethora was a recurring theme: Native residents, long-term settlers, and recent

newcomers have in one way or another commented on the sheer abundance of mushrooms in the tundra. Rather than talking about secret spots, many people described certain special mushroom patches that were important for them aesthetically, spiritually, or sentimentally. Descriptions of these localities were somewhat circular: after relating that a certain place is rich in mushrooms, the narrator would marvel at the natural beauty of this place or share a special memory it evokes, and then again recall the admirable quantity and quality of mushrooms that it offers.

Of the seven settlements that I visited, the Provideniya tundra has the fewest *Leccinum* and *Lactarius* patches. Because these are the most preferred varieties, Provideniya residents feel that the best mushroom country is elsewhere. During the Soviet period, scheduled harvesting days were organized though the employment establishments which provided transportation for its staff.[38] Some establishments continue to offer this opportunity, although to a much lesser extent. Nowadays most Provideniya residents have to rely on private transportation or connections to reach Lake Imtuk, near Sireniki, or Chaplino Hot Springs—the two most popular mushroom picking destinations reachable by road; Enmelen and Nunligran were considered too remote for such undertakings. Since only a handful of people own vehicles and hardly anyone can afford a special hire, most people needing transportation have to arrange for a *vezdekhod* on an informal basis. When making various deliveries to villages, *vezdekhodchiki* (*vezdekhod*-drivers) are generally willing to take passengers "first come, first served" and free of charge.

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38 Thus, the power plant, the hospital, the brewery, various administrative departments, and other establishments would each designate a day for an organized outing at the request of its employees. This practice was common throughout the former Soviet Union, and to my knowledge, it involved considerably less bureaucracy than most other official collectivized efforts. Requiring no outside approval, this matter could be resolved internally: when a group of workers were interested in going hunting, fishing, or collecting, a senior staff member would ask an appropriate committee within the establishment for permission to use its vehicle.

A Mushrooming Vacation

The three days in early August that I spent in Providensky airport awaiting a flight to Enmelen provided ample opportunities to interact with people from every community in the district. One helicopter serves the entire Peninsula. Alternate weeks are reserved for the Chukotsky and Providensky districts, but the pilot lives in Lavrentiya where he returns at the end of each day, weather permitting. If on the scheduled day conditions between Lavrentiya and Provideniya are suitable for flying, the helicopter changes hubs and attempts to complete the route between Enmelen, Nunligran, Sireniki, Provideniya, and Yanrakinnot. Most of the year bad weather prevents the completion of one or more sections of the route, making the helicopter operations highly unpredictable and chronically off-schedule. Having reserved a seat, a person has to travel to the airport located across the Emma Bay in Ureliki and wait for announcements, which often inform that the flight is delayed, delayed indefinitely, or canceled. Nevertheless, occasionally flights do take place between villages: shortly after our fourth arrival to the airport Valya, Oleg, and I boarded the Chukot-Avia helicopter headed for Enmelen.

The majority of passengers on the flight were village residents returning home from the district center. That is not, however, the case for Oleg and Valya and their two children: the family's permanent home is in Provideniya. Valya is a Chukotka-born Russian; Oleg is a Chukchi from a coastal village of Yanrakinnot. With a bag of condiments and two cardboard boxes packed with glass jars, the family was on the way to spend their vacation time in Enmelen with plans to return home hauling a cargo of tundra products. A daughter of Soviet settlers, Valya spent her childhood in Enmelen and likes to revisit her birthplace every few years. Most of her schoolmates still live there, she is comfortable and familiar with the pace of life and

surroundings, and enjoys the scenery very much. But like most tundra outings during the months of August, this is not only a social visit for Valya and her family, but also a procurement trip. Getting on the Provideniya-Enmelen helicopter flight on the fourth day of waiting was only the beginning of the transportation struggle that they endured for the next month.

While we were together in Enmelen, Oleg and Valya went to the tundra every other day; most times they walked, but occasionally they managed to catch rides with the *vezdekhod* serving the seasonal construction workers. On the nights they returned from the tundra, the little old house (otherwise empty) that became the couple's "vacation home" turned into a mini-production plant. With the help of their daughter and son (ages nine and eleven), Valya and Oleg cleaned and sorted the mushrooms, separating the ones selected for marinating from those to be dried, filled the sterilized jars with marinade and spices, strung and hung mushrooms for drying, and made cranberry and blueberry preserves. These activities went on until two, three, or four in the morning. On alternate days the family slept in, rested, and made social visits around the village: "this is, after all, our vacation," Valya explained.

Transporting thirty-eight liters of perishable cargo from Enmelen to Provideniya is no small task. The couple could not afford a helicopter transfer and ended up moving most of the load, little by little, on occasional *vezdekhods*. The drivers who agreed to do them this favor were, of course, each thanked with a jar of marinated mushrooms. Valya and Oleg packed and padded every jar to make sure it would survive the rough, twenty-hour ride across the tundra.

In the second week of September, having visited Novoe Chaplino and Nunligran, I was back in Provideniya drinking tea at a friend's apartment. Over the course of her life she has lived in three different villages and now works in the Chukot-Avia ticketing office. Needing an update on the

helicopter situation, people from all over the Providensky District feel free to call her at home; she tries to be helpful to everyone. One of the phone calls that night was from Valya and Oleg, who had been unable to get out of Enmelen for some time and were anxious to return home. It took a few more days for the skies to clear for the family to finally come home to Provideniya.

Processing and Preserving

In August 2001, with a few preliminary research ideas in mind, I was heading out for my first trans-Beringian flight from Nome, Alaska, to Provideniya. Earlier that summer I had become friends with Nadezhda, a Native of Naukan and a former Provideniya resident who now lives in Nome. Prior to my departure for the Russian side of the Bering Strait, Nadezhda handed me a note to take to her relatives. In the note she was instructing her sister to give me the key to Nadezhda's Provideniya apartment. "Pardon our mess," the woman at the door said when our group arrived at the address provided by Nadezhda, "we are dealing with the mushrooms, as you can see." Liudmila's husband and little daughter, sitting on each side of the mushroom pile, knives in hands, waived a greeting. Surrounding them were pots, buckets, and trays that appeared to hold different varieties of mushrooms. Remarkably, it so happened that even the first interaction with a Chukotkan family, on the very first day of my arrival in the field, began with a mushroom-picking story. The scene that presented itself that evening bears resemblance to dozens of similar ones that I have witnessed and participated in since then (Figures 25-26). In the following pages, I try to capture the overall spirit and logistics of "dealing with mushrooms" and the various tasks, techniques, decisive factors, and information exchanges inherent in the scope of this chore.

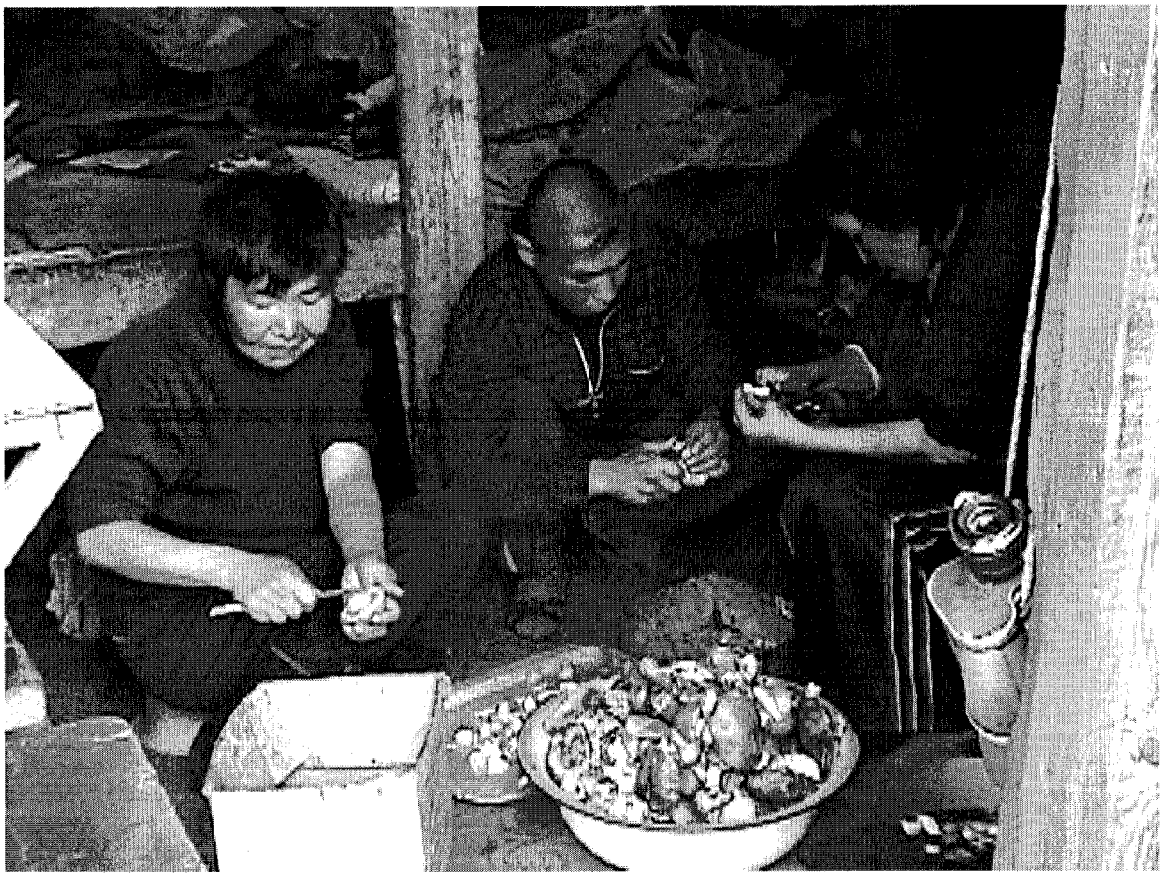

Figure 25: Cleaning and sorting fresh mushrooms at the summer camp shack in the vicinity of Novoe Chaplino. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

Figure 26: Cleaning and sorting fresh mushrooms, just off a Nunligran street, with a stock pot already in place for the next step. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

For the overall thesis, the data on processing harvested mushrooms is significant not only because of its ethnographic richness and relevance to the subject matter. Taking part in the post-harvest work, I found that the scope of tasks associated with cleaning, sorting, preparing, and preserving mushrooms is more than the means to an end. As I will show in the forthcoming sections, knowledge exchange and connectedness with the social world and the land are both facilitated and reinforced by this process.

Cleansing and sorting

Whether collected for immediate consumption or long-term storage, mushrooms need to be rid of dirt and other perceived contamination. Some people take the time to clean mushrooms while they are on the tundra, handling each one before it even reaches the collection vessel. This helps reduce the amount of dirt one transports together with the harvest. However, when parts of the harvest are intended for different purposes (i.e.: frying, drying, pickling), the sorting still has to be done at home (Figure 27).

Despite the seeming advantages of dealing with each specimen on the spot, I have noticed that most people prefer to clean their freshly collected mushrooms all at once, usually after they return from the tundra. First, the soil remnants are scraped off with a knife. Larger mushrooms are cut in quarters, sometimes revealing internal blemishes which are then carved out of each piece.

Although everyone I interviewed attested that mushrooms cannot be eaten raw and require some form of cleansing, people had different opinions on the processing steps and precautions necessary for safety. Compared to the Chukchi and Yupik, Russians (those living in Chukotka or elsewhere) employ a more elaborate protocol in decontaminating mushrooms. The main difference has to do with boiling the mushrooms as part of the preparation:

Figure 27: Fresh harvest of boletes and yellow *gruzdi*, partly sorted. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

while many Chukotka Natives think that boiling is not necessary and only ruins the taste and texture of the mushrooms, most Russians maintain it is critical for safety. Boiling, they say, helps eliminate dangerous elements such as worms, bacteria, and various toxins and microbes. While insisting that some boiling time is essential, several people admitted to overextending it: "mushrooms should be boiled for twenty minutes, but I go for half-hour, just in case," said a Russian woman who twenty-two years ago moved from the Kolyma region to Uelen.

The mushrooms collected at the start of the season are likely to be fried and consumed the same day they are harvested. Most Native Chukotkans fried fresh mushrooms immediately after washing them, without boiling first. Alla and Irina, the two Chukchi women who worked as camp cooks at a fishing cooperative on Achchen Lake, usually poured boiling water over the cleaned mushrooms and then drained them immediately. Coming from a mushroom-boiling household myself, I was curious to get their perspective on this shortcut. The camp cooks considered both taste preferences and cooking logistics. Irina pointed out that all the food in the camp kitchen, which serves twenty-five people, is prepared atop one wood stove. The stove is always harboring a large tea kettle and a number of steaming pots and pans, so space is at a premium. The two women also have their hands full with chores and always tried to be as efficient as possible. According to Irina, even a momentary exposure to hot boiling water does away with any sort of contamination the mushrooms may have.[39] From a practical standpoint, therefore, frying alone suffices. It also serves to better please the palate as it helps to preserve the crunchy texture, which the ladies said everyone in the

39 I found that the physiologically dangerous elements in mushrooms are conceptualized rather broadly and referred to as "microbes," "toxins," or "harmful molecules" that can cause ill effects. People often used these terms interchangeably.

fish camp enjoys.[40] I noticed that the only Russian man who works at the cooperative does not recoil from Alla and Irina's mushrooms, but does include the boiling step when he cooks for himself.

Texture is an important component of the mushrooms' palatal appeal for both Natives and settlers, but is worth compromising for the latter, who tend to be more preoccupied with safety concerns.[41] I interviewed two married couples, one lives in Enmelen and the other in Nunligran; where all spouses were mushroom aficionados and cooks. In both cases, Russian husbands would boil the mushrooms they were preparing for frying, pickling, or marinating. On the other hand, the wives, who were *Chukchanki* (plural of *Chukchanka*, "Chukchi female"), viewed their husbands' precautions as a bit of an overkill. The men, however, maintained that it is better to be safe than sorry; one also observed that he cooks meat (of any kind) longer than his wife and all other Native people he met over his 18 years in Chukotka. Just like in an earlier case, the spouses in both families enjoyed one another's mushroom dishes, but each continued to follow his or her own techniques.

Since early in the season boletes are likely to be fried and consumed the same day they are harvested, the first mushrooms usually are not sorted by types and purposes. Most mushroom gathering, however, is intended for multiple uses, where at the same time people procure for immediate consumption as well as for canning and drying. After returning from the tundra, pickers sort through their catch separating the mushrooms according to species, quality, and size. Although sometimes performed individually, mushroom sorting is more likely to be conducted in groups and usually turns

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40 David Arora (1986) also advises the least possible exposure to water, when cooking mushrooms, for the sake of retaining the most texture and taste.

41 The mushroom buyers and pickers of Euro-American, Southeast Asian, and Mexican descent whom I met while documenting the 2005 commercial morel harvest in Tok do not boil any of the mushrooms they eat. When I mentioned that this practice exists in my family, one buyer jokingly warned that I better not let him catch me doing that.

into a social activity. When a person comes back from the tundra with mushrooms, others in the household usually join him or her to do the processing work; a family that went out on the tundra together also stays together for the sorting part. While working, the sorting crew periodically consult one another, asking whether a particular specimen should be allocated for marinating, drying, etc.

If the weather is pleasant, people may do the sorting outside, sitting in a scenic location of the village not far from their living quarters. On one occasion shortly after stepping out of my apartment building in Nunligran, I spotted four silhouettes at the village edge. Galina and her two teenage children had returned from the tundra with multiple buckets and bags of mushrooms: mixed *Lactarius*, *gorniye gribi*, and some russulas. Having seen Galina and the children through her window, an elderly neighbor decided to join them. When I approached, the four were converging over a large piece of cardboard with piles of fungal refuse atop. Each armed with a knife, they were scraping the dirt off the white *gruzdi*, carving out occasional blemishes or wormy spots. Periodically, other village residents who happened to be passing by took part in the workshop. A hefty pot of salty water was steaming over a fire pit, awaiting the first batch of mushrooms selected for marinating. Once all the *gruzdi* were ready, Galina put them in the pot, stirred the water, and proposed that we should now have tea. Her offer was met with enthusiasm; the children and I made quick runs to our apartments to fetch some utensils and sweets.

Pickling and Marinating

> Glass jars are a precious commodity. You never throw one away, you hope when the summer comes to fill with mushrooms or preserves every last one of them. My mother would scold me if I

> dropped one accidentally. Now my wife scolds me. (Interview Transcript 51, Lavrentiya 2004).
>
> When vinegar and garlic are available, it sure is nice to marinate. Once I saw a group of old ladies coming back from that dump at the end of the spit carrying all kinds of glass jars. That was during the time when you could not get jars here at all. I thought, "What can I do? My mushrooms are going bad." So I also went to the dump and found jars that seemed very, very old, probably have been around for a hundred years. I scrubbed them hard, and washed them with chlorine, and then boiled each one, and canned the mushrooms that I marinated, and everything was fine after all: nobody got sick. (Interview Transcript 04, Enmelen 2004)

Gruzdi and *volnushki* (*Lactarius* varieties) are usually prepared by either pickling or marinating. There are two methods of pickling mushrooms: the so-called *goriachiy* and *kholodnyi zasol*, or "hot" and "cold" pickling. For hot pickling, the mushrooms are first boiled. A large vessel is prepared with a bed of bay leaves, parsley, garlic, and salt; mushrooms are layered atop and are lightly sprinkled with salt. A second layer of mushrooms immediately follows the first, and another blanket of condiments is added to the strata. This symmetrical sequence—condiments, mushrooms, salt, mushrooms, condiments—is repeated while supplies last. Something heavy, usually a rock, is placed on the top of the lid covering the last layer. After 3 days at room temperature, the whole set-up is transferred to a cool storage. The mushrooms cured through hot pickling can be consumed after 2 weeks, while the cold-pickled ones (prepared the same way, but with prolonged salt-water soaking in place of boiling) must remain under pressure for a total of 40 days. The types and amounts of condiments vary slightly between individual tastes and recipes. In its "classic variant," *zasol* ingredients must also include black currant leaves, which some people obtain through mail-order catalogs or

bring from the *materik* (literally "mainland," the term widely used in Chukotka to mean any part of post-Soviet space that is not Chukotka). The Russian caretakers at Uelen daycare have for years been growing a few black currant shrubs indoors, both for aesthetic and culinary purposes.

In rural Russia mushroom pickling is done in a special vessel called *kadushka*, which is a round wooden tub. Prior to pickling the *kadushka* is filled with hot boiling water and juniper branches, covered with a blanket and left to soak. Fire-heated rocks are tossed under the blanket periodically, keeping the water in a constant boiling state. The procedure sterilizes the vessel while infusing its walls with forest aroma. Pickled mushrooms remain in the *kadushka* over the course of the winter until the whole cache is consumed (cf. Soloukhin 1968). In Chukotka people mostly use enameled pots or tubs for pickling mushrooms. Once the required time lapses, the mushrooms are transferred into glass jars. Paper or cheesecloth held down with a rubber band is used in place of lids, as the cover has to be porous, allowing the contents to "breathe."

In Chukotka the pickling method is used almost exclusively for *Lactarius*. The *Leccinum* mushrooms are preserved by marinating, drying, or soaking in fat. For marinating, whenever possible, only small firm mushrooms are selected. In most marinating recipes, the mushrooms are first boiled in salted water and transferred onto a strainer[42]. To prepare the marinade, a pot of water with variable amounts of cinnamon, cloves, sugar, salt, peppercorn, vinegar, and bay leaves is brought to a boil. The drained mushrooms are poured into the mix and left to boil for twenty to thirty minutes. Then, ladle after ladle, the mushrooms and marinade are distributed into sterilized glass jars and topped with garlic, dill, and a thin layer of cooking oil; some people prefer to add extra vinegar (Figure 28). In contrast to salting, it is important

42 As I explain earlier, for varying reasons certain people skip over the boiling step. Instead, they thoroughly wash the mushrooms prior to transferring them into jars.

Figure 28: Transferring the marinade into a jar. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

that marinated mushrooms are sealed with solid lids. Regardless of who in the household does the cooking, the strongest member of the household is designated with the task of tightening the lids (Figure 29).

As is evident from the interview excerpts presented in the beginning of this section, glass jars are an important resource for the long-term preservation of seasonal foods. In Belarus, the canning of garden vegetables, fruit cocktails, and berry preserves made a regular part of my family's annual cycle. To seal the jars we had to tighten the disposable lids with a specialized tool—a method that until recently was also used in Chukotka. Once the contents had been consumed, every jar was cleaned and stored until the next canning season. Any additional jars obtained over the course of the year, perhaps those saved from store purchases of canned products, served as a stimulus to preserve more food in the current season than one had previously. When pickles and preserves were exchanged between relatives, it was expected that the receiving party return the jars to the giving one; this was less common among friends and acquaintances.

Nowadays people reuse glass jars left over from store-bought foods, which usually have screw-on lids.[43] This type of a jar has only recently become available in Chukotka and people marvel at the convenience of this mechanism, where the original lid can be reused without requiring special

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43 In Chukotka, although mushroom picking has been in practice for several decades now, the popularity of pickling and marinating has increased tremendously in the late 1990s. Looking to maximize and diversify their supplies during the years of the impoverished economic conditions brought on by the post-Soviet crisis, many Native people who had not previously done so became interested in marinating and pickling mushrooms. At the same time, delivery services in all remote regions were falling victim to the fast-crumbling infrastructure. Much like other imported goods, glass jars had become scarce. When talking about getting through this difficult time, people described in detail how they searched out and put to use everything salvageable, taking pride in their own ingenuity and resourcefulness. Compared to the late 1990s and my first visit to Chukotka in 2001, the supply system in 2004 has improved substantially although most delivered canned goods are tremendously overpriced and show a one or two year old expiration date. While most meats and food concentrates are packaged in tin cans, items like fruit and vegetable cocktails are sealed in glass jars with screw-on lids. In the next chapter, I discuss the post-Soviet crisis in Chukotka at greater length.

Figure 29: Making sure the lids are tight. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

tools or supplies. Nearly every household I visited had a store of glass jars awaiting the next harvest of tundra products. The ones already filled with marinated mushrooms or berry preserves still displayed a colorful array of factory labels advertising the products that the jars originally contained (Figure 30). When reused, both jars and lids are boiled for sterilization and the re-applied lids are tightened to the maximum.

Drying and Other Methods of Preserving Mushrooms

Marinated and pickled mushrooms are a delicacy. As a menu item they stand alone, usually served on a separate platter garnished with slices of fresh onion (when available). The mushrooms are an important signifier of a holiday table, but they do not constitute the main part of the meal. Sautéed mushrooms on the other hand do often make the main course, commonly served with a side dish. Mushroom soup, which usually is a hearty recipe cooked with potatoes and barley is a regular dinner item. To make these and other dishes year-round, drying and other methods of preserving mushrooms are used.

Like other tasks associated with harvest and processing, preparing mushrooms for drying is often an activity that a family or a group of people can do together. People typically select the mushrooms that are to be dried while sorting through their freshly collected variety. The specimens intended for drying are usually cut in two or four parts. The least labor-intensive approach is to spread the mushrooms on a house roof or another flat surface elevated from the ground. Sparse sunshine, however, together with high humidity and rains that can fall frequently during the short Chukotka summer do not always permit such a luxury. That is why most people prefer to hang strung mushrooms indoors, near a woodstove or another heat source. While arranging the fleshy garlands, the processing crew sits facing each other on

Figure 30: A cache of winter reserves. The mushroom jar on the left displays the manufactured label naming its original contents, dill pickles. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

the floor or around the table with piles of mushroom pieces, small paper squares, and a roll of thread in the middle. Each time a mushroom piece is placed on the needle, it is covered by a paper square (some people skip over this step); this is done to prevent the mushroom surfaces from turning black, which happens if the pieces are adjoined (Figures 31-32).

Prior to cooking, dried mushrooms need to be soaked in water for several hours or overnight. Instead of taking the time to dry and re-hydrate, some people prefer to freeze the mushrooms just after they have been boiled. Thawed out mushrooms can later be sautéed for an ordinary meal, or ground with onions to make a so-called mushroom caviar—also a popular appetizer on a holiday table. Another way to preserve mushrooms is to soak them in molted butter. With this method, the mushrooms are first fried without salt or any spices. Whether stored in jars or pots, fried mushrooms can sit in melted butter for many months and do not require refrigeration. When cooked for a meal, the mushrooms are usually seasoned to taste and sautéed with potatoes. I have not had a chance to try mushrooms prepared in this a way. People who have used this method say it achieves the taste and texture closely resembling that of fresh, recently picked mushrooms.

Collaboration and Division of Labor

> How can I put this... I am a single guy, I live by myself. To be honest, I prefer to pick mushrooms rather than to mess with them. There is one family here, we have been close for years; all the mushrooms I pick I bring to them. I do the picking, they do the marinating. Whatever turns out, they keep one half and I take the other. (Interview Transcript 61, Nunligran 2004)

Figure 31: Stringing mushrooms in preparation for drying. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

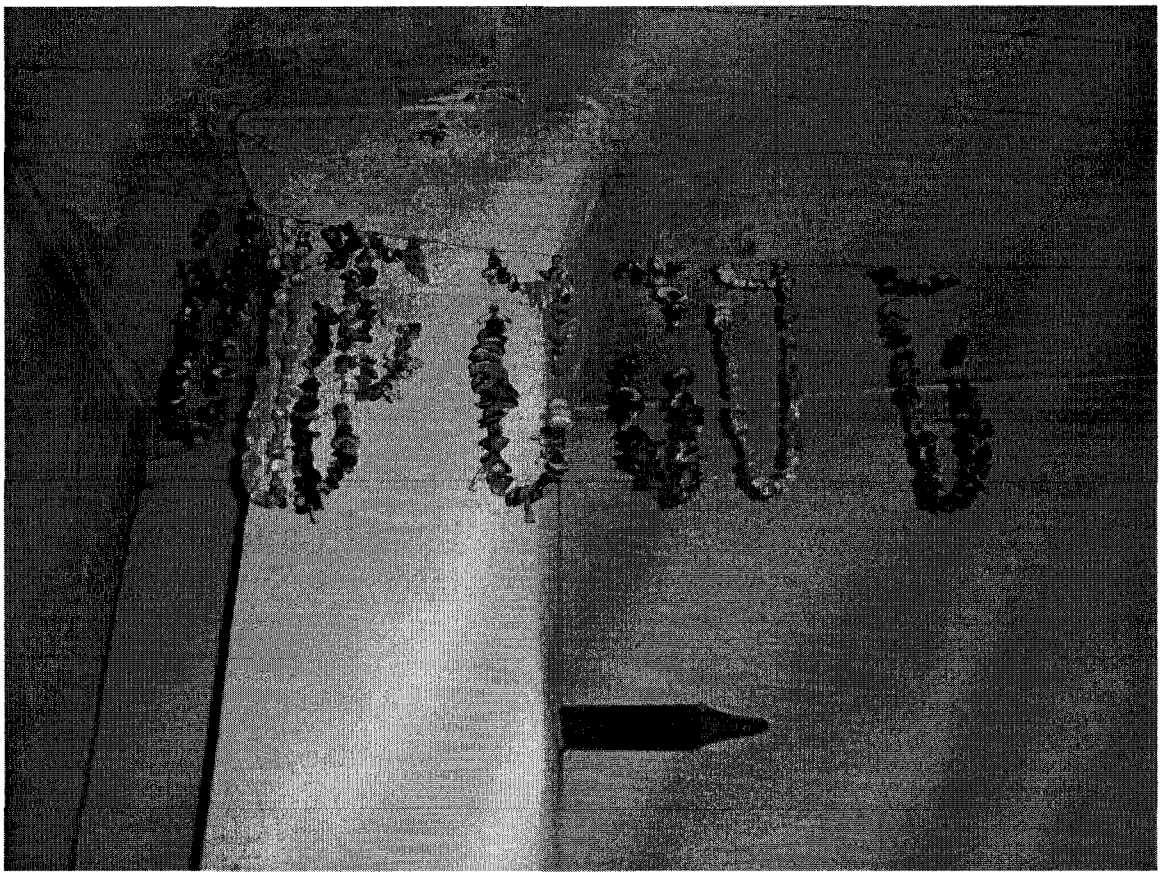

Figure 32: Garlands of drying mushrooms hanging above the wood stove. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

> We have eleven jars of mountain mushrooms marinated. I did not pick them, my friend did. He is not married, so we help him, my wife and daughters do, actually. He brings the mushrooms and whatever jars he can find. My wife, together with our daughters, cleanse the mushrooms, sterilize the jars and the lids, and make the marinade... And I..., I tighten all the lids. They must be airtight. (Interview Transcript 68, Nunligran 2004)
>
> Our friend enjoys picking mushrooms, but cleaning them and such he does not enjoy. So he brings the work to us. My two daughters and I sat around half the night, knives in hands... The next day he brought another bucket-full, I almost protested but took it on anyways; I can't let the mushrooms spoil, once they have been picked. I marinated eleven jars by now; he only took four for himself. My arms and legs have been weakening; I am not much of a picker these days and my husband has to tighten the lids on the jars, [as] I am not able to and they must be airtight to prevent botulism. Lots of work, but the outcome is good: so pleasant to open a jar of mushrooms on a special occasion. (Interview Transcript 71, Nunligran 2004)
>
> When I come back from the tundra with mushrooms, I usually go directly to my sister's or my mother's house. Or I invite a female neighbor over to my place; she cooks them and then we have supper together and sit around talking. (Interview Transcript 55, Uelen 2004)

The preceding overview of recipes shows that mushroom preparation is a labor-intensive process, which involves a number of tedious, time-consuming tasks. The approaches to handling these tasks vary widely among individuals and families. Harvest results, needs and intentions, and other situational circumstances play a role in shaping the course of post-harvest activities. Nevertheless, most people, no matter to what extent they participated in the work, could easily describe the typical scenario of how and

by whom mushroom processing is handled in their households or families. They also often gave examples of how the actual procedure deviated from the protocol, when it was put in practice from one occasion to the next. For instance Galina, whose outdoor workshop I joined one afternoon, said that although she always does the cooking, her husband and children help her with sorting and cleaning. The summer of 2004, however, Galina and her husband—both from coastal Chukchi families—took seasonal jobs at the fishing cooperative on Achchen Lake and were away from the village most of the summer. By late August the fishing season was winding down and Galina elected to return to Nunligran; her husband remained at the fish camp for another two weeks. Although there are numerous mushroom patches around Achchen Lake, the limited kitchen space makes it difficult for individual workers to pickle or marinate their own mushrooms and Galina had not had a chance to procure her winter reserve. Worried about starting late in the season, Galina and her children went out on the tundra and harvested as much as they could carry back to the village. What amounted to multiple bags and buckets of a fungal medley took up a day and a half of continuous processing. Part of that work they did outside where other neighbors and I joined them temporarily.

For Valya and Oleg, a Provideniya couple who in 2004 vacationed and picked mushrooms in Enmelen, the harvest location varies from year to year, depending on transportation opportunities and other circumstance. What stays consistent, they said, is their preference for working together as a family when procuring their winter reserves. One of the evenings I spent with them was after we returned from the tundra with an assortment of boletes and cranberries. While sorting and cleaning the mushrooms, we set aside a portion for supper and decided to marinate the rest. Once Valya got started on the marinating process (giving me an instructional demonstration at the same time), Oleg and the children turned to working with a fresh cranberry

load that needed to be rid of twigs and leaves. When each respective task was completed, Valya sautéed the remaining mushrooms and we all sat down for supper and tea.

On the whole, I observed that even when everyone in the household to some extent participates in the harvest and processing, female members typically do the cooking. Preparing the marinade and pickling set-up is also usually done by women. Exceptions to this are the men who consider themselves *gribniki*, which can be interpreted as "mushroomers" or "mushroom experts" and implies that the person is an aficionado and an expert at the same time. A true *gribnik*—can be a man or a woman—is someone who loves all aspects of the mushrooming process: the hunt, the identification, the processing, as well as serving and consuming. Of the dozen male *gribniki* I met during fieldwork, only one was a Chukchi; the rest were newcomers and settlers from the "mainland" Russia, Belarus and Ukraine with varying years of residency in Chukotka. Although helped by other members of the household, *gribniki* who took part in each preparation phase were the authority on the process. Each *gribnik* took great pride in the subtle but critical nuances that he had developed for his marinade or pickling recipes. All men in this cohort happened to be married and each acknowledged his wife as the main household chef, although most said that they either regularly or occasionally took part in food preparation. For two of the *gribniki*, mushrooms were an exclusive culinary specialty—the only foodstuff for which they took charge of the preparation (although, by far, not the only kind that they regularly procured); all other cooking was done by their wives or other people in the household. The wives of the *gribniki* spoke with appreciation and respect for their husbands' talent. Even though the women shouldered a fair share of the workload, the outcome was always credited to the aptitude of the men.

Aside from *gribniki*, if male members of the household are enthusiastic about the mushroom harvest, their excitement is usually about picking more so than processing. For example, when one afternoon Ida and Sergei, their daughter Lena and son Kostya (both in their twenties), and I returned from mushroom picking to their summer shack near Novoe Chaplino, Ida and her daughter almost immediately began sorting and cleaning the mushrooms. Father and son, on the other hand, brought in the firewood and then climbed on the plank beds, getting up occasionally to tend the woodstove. We all continued to carry on a conversation and at some point I addressed Ida and Lena, asking, "do the two of you usually do the sorting together?" "Mostly so," Ida replied, "but they also know how to do it," she added turning her head slightly in the direction of the men. Sergei and Kostya jumped down from the plank beds and pulled up small stools to join our tight circle. Speaking softly and showing a wily smile, Sergei remarked that he should try not to give the impression of being a slacker in the presence of a "guest from Alaska." We all laughed while scraping the dirt from our specimens.

Periodically we consulted Ida, who was the most knowledgeable person in our group, asking what kind of use would make the most out of a particular mushroom. Much of the other discussion focused on the specimens that were somehow notable, either commenting on the appearance of the mushroom or recalling something about its fruiting locality. When one or a cluster of mushrooms was linked to a particular patch, further conversation might erupt, as different family members recounted previous mushroom harvests or a significant observation he or she had made at this location. The handwork was interrupted only in favor of gesturing; otherwise everyone was talking and scraping or sorting at the same time. Taking note of everybody's skill, I saw that Ida was quite correct: Kostya and Sergei really did "know how to do it." Once the cleaning was done, Ida took charge of the marinating process. Back on the plank bed, Kostya was watching his mother as she filled

the sterilized jars with the soon-to-turn-zesty contents. He said he had never done this before on his own but wanted to learn how, "just in case." With encouragement, Ida recounted how several years ago Sergei prepared a few jars of boletes in her absence. A similar situation occurred with my friend Lara: a revered *gribnik* in the village of Nunligran, she did not become aware of her husband's culinary skill until that August (2004), when he forwarded two liters of marinated mushrooms to her at the Provideniya hospital where she was staying. "How much vodka did he think they give us [in the hospital]?" she cried out contently. (Like pickles, marinated mushrooms are considered to make a perfect chaser for a vodka shot.)

Another kind of scenario I encountered was where households somehow collaborate on procuring mushrooms. An example is the set-up between Tolya, a middle-aged bachelor and a family friend of Natasha and Gleb. In their interview narratives, quoted at the start of this section, each actor clearly articulated his role in the process: Tolya harvested the mushrooms, Natasha and her daughters took care of cleaning and cooking, Gleb tightened the lids. While everybody is happy with the outcome, Natasha was not always thrilled to embrace a fresh bucket of tedious work. A few other single men I interviewed preferred to call a female neighbor or a relative to help them prepare the mushrooms they collected.

Thus, while there seem to be more Russian than Native male *gribniki*, it is more common for women in both groups to be the ones responsible (by preference or default) for the cooking process. I found fewer gender boundaries with respect to picking, which is clearly enjoyed by more people than sorting and processing. Only quick tundra trips, when a meal's worth of mushrooms is collected, are more prevalent among women; the purpose of these short collecting trips is typically to obtain the main course for the upcoming supper or lunch.

Social Networks, Transfer, and Exchange

> One day, my wife and I came home from the tundra, having already collected a bucket, and there was a tub full of mushrooms waiting, with a note from my father saying that he picked these mushrooms and that they were for us. I thanked him, of course, but unprocessed mushrooms are not a present: they are work! He said that messing with mushrooms is a good way for a young couple to spend time together. (Interview Transcript 51, Lavrentiya 2004)
>
> I am lucky that I have people in Provideniya who supply me with condiments for the marinade; we don't always get them in our store. I try to send two 3-liter jars of mushrooms for them, and the same for my sons' families. Everybody knows that I am an inveterate mushroomer! (Interview Transcript 12, Nunligran 2004)
>
> When I hear a helicopter from Provideniya is planned, I get up very, very early and rush to the tundra, not far, just to those ravines beyond *Plokhaya Doroga* ("Faulty Road"). Then I bring a box-full to the helicopter, and my relatives can pick them up in Provideniya, fresh mushrooms, just from the tundra. The mushrooms are plentiful here in Enmelen, but in Provideniya they have to go who knows where, and transportation is always difficult. I try to keep a firm cardboard box handy for this purpose. On the last helicopter they sent us lemons and dairy products from the store. It's always like this among us. We don't take money from one another. (Interview Transcript 9, Enmelen 2004)

Mushrooms were brought to the table in nearly every household I visited. During harvest season they were mostly sautéed, fresh from the tundra (in some cases I collected the mushrooms together with the host(s)). For meals in the winter months, people either made a dish with re-hydrated mushrooms or served some from their pickled or marinated reserves. Even

when my visit was not at a usual mealtime and we were just sitting down for some tea, I was still handed a saucer with a few samples of the zesty delight—"just to have a taste." Mushrooms, though popular, normally do not come into every eating occasion, but in a show of hospitality to me and a desire to appease my specialized interest, people were often compelled to prepare, serve, or at least offer me some.

While the soups and sautéed dishes were usually cooked by the host, the pickled and marinated mushrooms had oftentimes come from outside the household, having been given to the owner by someone else. When bringing out a jar of mushrooms (a self-procured one or a gift), people gave it an introduction of sorts relating information about its sources—where the mushrooms were harvested and who had prepared them.

Mushrooms can be shared, gifted or otherwise distributed in both raw and cooked form. Fresh sautéed mushrooms are shared rather casually, without special planning. As a neighborly gesture, the cook or someone in her household may carry a steaming platter over to someone who she thinks would enjoy the treat. For example, one evening in Nunligran Lara came by my apartment, asked whether I had eaten supper yet, and handed me a bowl of boletes. Glad to see her, I asked if she would please stay and for us to have a meal together. Pointing out the second bowl of mushrooms that she held, Lara explained that she was rushing to deliver it to her aunt before the contents got cold. On her way back she stopped by for a tea and chat. She explained that she *pozhadnichala* ("got greedy") earlier in the tundra that day: the mushrooms kept popping up all around and she could not stop herself from over-collecting. She had enough to make two meals for her family, and instead of preserving the rest of her catch, she decided to cook the remaining mushrooms for someone "who would like them." Health and weather permitting, Lara expected to be making "a tundra run" every day for the remainder of the gathering season.

While the transfer of pickled or marinated mushrooms can be carried out as an unceremonious gesture, its social impact can also go a long way. Because marinating mushrooms requires a lengthy process and a special skill, not everyone who enjoys the treat is willing or able to stack his or her own cache, and those who do are awarded certain kind of reverence and prestige. Furthermore every settlement has a handful of individuals regarded as the masters, whose extraordinary pickling and marinating recipes are downright famous in and beyond the village. For example, when I first began making contacts in Enmelen, people mentioned Tamara Grigorievna almost as soon as I related my research interests to them. Living in Chukotka since 1968 Tamara Grigorievna is revered as the most knowledgeable *gribnik* in Enmelen, an expert at finding prime-quality patches, identifying mushrooms, and utilizing the most delicious recipes. Subsequently, once I had visited Tamara Grigorievna, people began asking if I got to taste her marinated delights and whether I thought they were delicious. I sincerely answered "yes" and "yes." Not only had she opened a jar of mushrooms for supper, but also very generously gave me one "to take home."

Banochka Gribov (A Jar of Mushrooms)

Banochka gribov [44] is a distinctive "commodity." To receive one as "a gift"[45] is to be shown some kind of appreciation on behalf of the giver, who

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44 In this case, the use of the diminutive banochka (instead of banka) serves to express affection, and is not a reference to the size of the jar which could be up to three liters.

45 The term "gift" in this context is used in the broadest possible sense, encompassing any situation where in an act of generosity one party transfers certain goods to another, expecting no payment in return. In Russian, the idea of such a catch-all category of "gifting" is usually expressed with a verb *dat'*, which literary translates as "to give." When the "gift" is a food item that is given in a prepared form and ready for consumption, the term *ugostit'* ("to treat," or "to offer a treat") may also be used. Both *dat'* and *ugostit'* are further distinguished from *darit'*, which is "to give a present." *Podarok* is a noun used to describe that which is being given as a "present." The latter more frequently refers to personalized gifts that are given for

wants to acknowledge a special relationship or occasion, or perhaps to express gratitude for an important favor granted at an earlier time. At the same time, when one brings *banochka gribov* to one's friend's birthday party, the jar does not constitute a present: it is *k stolu* (for the table). In this connection I must point out that "potluck" style parties are generally not practiced in Russia; the hosts expect and are expected to be completely responsible for the full spread. A jar of pickled mushrooms is one of the few items (like a box of chocolate or a bottle of liquor) that a guest can contribute to the table without offending the hosts. When brought to a special-occasion gathering, the jar is usually opened right away and the contents (all or in part) are consumed over the course of the celebration.

While marinated mushrooms is one of the major treats that mark a holiday table, their transfer is not restricted to special occasions. It is also an acceptable "thank you" gesture. Valya and Oleg, for example, gave a jar of mushrooms to each *vezdekhodchik* that took part of their cargo from Enmelen back to Provideniya. Lara sends some to the people in Provideniya who help her procure various items from the stores, including the condiments for marinating.

Close kin may gift multiple jars without waiting for a special occasion. This is especially common between parents and grown children. Every year, Lara and Tamara Grigorievna send variable quantities to their sons' families in Provideniya; their parcels include dried mushrooms too. Olga, a Yupik woman living in Sireniki, marinates for her elderly mother in Sireniki and her sister in Provideniya. The mushrooms that Yurii and Marina served at Yurii's recent birthday party were prepared by his sister-in-law. Although the couple usually tend to their own provisions, during in the summer of 2003 they were vacationing on the Black Sea and therefore missed the gathering season

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special occasions, for instance a "birthday present." In Chukotka, mushrooms are most often given as a "gift," or a "treat," and are not usually intended as a *podarok*.

in Chukotka. Both of coastal Chukchi descent, Marina and Yurii have extensive kin living in the village, who presented them with berries, mushrooms (fresh and dried), *uneo*, and *yukola* upon the couple's return to Enmelen.

Surviving the Surplus

In the cases described thus far, individuals provide for their kin who have limited possibilities to collect their own mushrooms due to constraints in time, health, or access. However, exchanges of this kind are not always need-driven. For example Lavrentiya, the hub for the Chukotsky region, offers a much easier access to mushroom grounds than Provideniya as large patches can be found not far from the village. Nevertheless, twenty-eight year old Boris and his father Valerii Mikhailovich, who are both *gribniki*, annually present one another with three or four liters of marinated mushrooms. Although Boris learned most of his ethnomycological knowledge from his father, over the years he has experimented with recipes and developed techniques of his own. In a friendly competition the men also solicit and compare reviews from their wives and others who get to perform a taste test.

On one occasion, the mushrooms Valerii Mikhailovich brought to his son and daughter-in-law were accepted with much less enthusiasm than normally. That was because this time, the mushrooms were raw, freshly picked by Valeri Mikhailovich and his wife, then left in the apartment of Boris and Tatiana with a note saying "for you from us." It turned out that on that sunny Saturday, as the weather and views were ideal, Valerii Mikhailovich and Elena Borisovna could not resist taking a mushroom collecting walk. Independently, Boris and Tatiana did the same. Feeling tired and with other commitments planned for the next day, Valerii Mikhailovich and Elena Borisovna simply could not endure the thought of a night of sorting and

processing mushrooms, so they forwarded a catch for their children instead. This seemingly generous act had doubled the workload of Boris and Tatiana, who shared the view that, once harvested, mushrooms should not go to waste. Also, despite their frustration, they did not want to appear unappreciative of their parents' contribution. Driven by the sense of obligation, more than the prospect of expanding their winter reserves, the couple finally went to bed, having sorted, cleaned, strung, and marinated mushrooms all night long.

Why, we might ask, were Boris and Tatiana, both being mushroom aficionados, more annoyed than happy to discover the fresh-from-the-tundra surprise? Certainly it meant more processing work on top of the load the couple already had, but hadn't their parents spared them picking time? According to Boris, what his parents imposed upon them is a *medvezh'ia usluga*, literally "a bear's favor"—a Russian idiomatic expression used in reference to an act of kindness that is more trouble than it is worth. As a *gribnik* Boris values the totality of the experience, from harvest to consumption, of which picking mushrooms out on the tundra is a very significant part. As he and Tatiana sort through their tundra treasure, like other *gribniki* they like to remember where and at what moment they found a particularly notable specimen, to hold it up, to study the color of its cap and the texture of the stalk, and to admire their perfection. Eliminating picking reduces the process to mere work without a chance to connect to the land, or the pleasure of performing the harvest, or the integrity of the final achievement. Boris felt that his father, being a *gribnik* himself should have known better. Valerii Mikhailovich did not make a mention of this story when I interviewed him a week later; perhaps for him it was a casual, isolated incident that was not worth sharing. His overall narration, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of all phases of the mushrooming process and was strikingly similar to that of Boris.

Raw mushrooms, when shared, are usually transferred in small quantities, enough to make one meal for everyone in the receiving household. The text typically accompanying this kind of transaction is along the lines of "*pozhadnichala... vozmiote?*" ("I got greedy [while picking], will you take [some mushrooms]?"). Marinating other people's mushrooms is a very rare occurrence. I heard two kinds of explanations for this. One is connected with the passion for picking and the idea that the harvest-to-consumption process is irreducible, where no step can be skipped. This is the view of people who consider themselves *gribniki*. The other type of reasoning is less ideology driven and has more to do with labor and time. Because marinating is a lengthy procedure, people aspiring to do so must plan ahead. There is a shared understanding that to give others a large quantity of raw mushrooms is to impose a series of tasks that people may not have the time or the desire to perform. The gesture shows little in the way of generosity, as it reveals that the giver is not willing to make the effort of preparing mushrooms for the receiving party.

The kinds of circumstances where this etiquette does not apply are in situations of ongoing networks of support, where a particular scheme of labor-distribution or commodity-exchange is embraced by all participants. The arrangement between Tolya who brings his mushroom harvest for processing to Natasha and Gleb exemplifies the case with a set, agreed-upon scenario of designated tasks. Taking the opportunity to supply those residing far from the source is another situation where a transfer of raw mushrooms is not only acceptable, but highly appreciated. An example is Liuda in Enmelen who, whenever she had the chance, sent to Provideniya fresh mushrooms collected shortly before the helicopter's departure; this kind of transfer may also be arranged with a *vezdekhod* although doing so somewhat compromises the quality and freshness of the mushrooms. As she explains in an earlier quote, the gesture was motivated by the ubiquitous philosophy of generosity. It is a

part of the ongoing exchange of goods and favors that Sahlins (1974) calls "generalized reciprocity," where differently situated kin members provide one another with country foods or store-bought items whenever they manage to secure the goods and the means of transporting them to the receiver. Milena Vladimirovna, Liuda's aunt in Provideniya, said that while her family was able to stack some winter reserves by taking long hikes in the direction of Novoe Chaplino, collecting fresh mushrooms for the day's meal is difficult in Provideniya. The latter she can only carry out when Liuda or another relative in Enmelen does the collecting for her. In this context, the act of transferring raw mushrooms acquires a different meaning, whereby the commodity is embraced with sincere gratitude, as a gift truly welcomed and not merely accepted out of social obligation or a sense of ecological responsibility.

The Day that Feeds a Year:

On the Importance of Always Being Ready

The ethnographic material presented in this chapter shows that patterns of mushroom procurement vary widely between villages, among individual households, as well as under particular circumstances. The kinds of collecting trips that I witnessed over the two seasons ranged from the lunch hour "run to the tundra" to a month-long "mushroom vacation" (*gribnoi otpusk*) that required helicopter travel and fairly complicated cargo logistics for transporting the harvested load from Enmelen back to Provideniya. Within this broad variability, I did not observe any relative differences along cultural-ethnic lines in ways that Yupik, Chukchi, and non-Native settlers organize their mushroom procurement.[46] (An exception is a handful of

46 This statement refers to the present-day ethnographic situation described in this chapter. It only refers to contemporary mushroom picking, focusing on the practice, while the

residents, mostly non-Natives, who possess personal "sport utility" type vehicles and can therefore afford greater mobility and independence.) On the contrary, unlike many other procurement activities that are ascribed a more concrete cultural affiliation (such as reindeer herding, sea-mammal hunting, and gathering of certain greens), mushroom picking appears to transcend cultural boundaries, as well as those of gender and age.

The patterns of picking and the logistics involved do vary between locations. Yet, a quality that people with different harvesting possibilities have in common is the acute awareness of the temporal and environmental constraints, and thereby the importance of being opportunistic. In a study of procurement among the Canadian Inuit, Shannon (2003) emphasizes the vitality of opportunistic behavior in Inuit livelihood, where the awareness of the occasion, the ability to take the necessary action, and the skill of performing the task at hand are mobilized at once, when the opportunity presents itself. Opportunism entails always being ready.

In connection with mushroom picking in Chukotka, opportunistic knowledge is manifested in many local ways. Some are connected with mobility and transportation, such as navigating through the informal and unpredictable circumstances surrounding the occasional *vezdekhod* travel between the villages. In addition to making arrangements, one has to be familiar with the surroundings of the *vezdekhodchik*'s route to be able to collect mushrooms during the stops along the way and to return to the vehicle at a moment's notice. Sending cargo, whether intended for others or oneself, requires similar types of a "skilled awareness" (Shannon 2003:170). When, for example, Liuda from Enmelen sends fresh mushrooms via helicopter to her relatives in Provideniya, uncertainty is inherent in every step of the endeavor. First of all, the flights are highly irregular. Weather conditions and backed-

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differences in worldviews and landscape perceptions where cultural affiliation does come into play are discussed in later chapters.

up schedules may delay a flight for days and sometimes weeks. When it is carried out, the departure is often announced at the last minute, leaving the time of arrival uncertain until the flight is air-born. Secondly, harvest conditions do fluctuate throughout the season and may not be favorable on the day of the flight. Thirdly, the responsibility for processing (or transfer) of mushrooms that have been collected but cannot be sent falls on the picker: as the local ethic prescribes, she now has to take time to prepare them or find others who will. Nevertheless, the mornings when good fortune is smiling at her from both the sky and the tundra, Liuda arrives to her job in the village office with a cardboard box in hand, already packed for shipping and filled with the mushrooms collected a few hours earlier. As soon as the sound of the prop reaches the village, she will run over to the landing area and approach the pilot with her humble request (Figure 33).

To conclude this overview, I call attention to a statement that I find to most effectively capture the crucial role of readiness in mushroom harvest and procurement as a whole:

> When the New Year comes or a friend has a birthday, of course you want to be able to bring a jar of mushrooms for the table. So in the summer you must go to the tundra every chance you get. Today the conditions are great, but you never know if it is your last or the only chance to go out: perhaps tomorrow the mushrooms will dry out or rot or freeze, or my motorcycle will need repairs. Then also you have to think of the fact that summer is short, and do you want to have fish jerky in the winter? Sure. How about drink tea with berry preserves? Yes, you do. And, of course, chasing a vodka shot with [pickled] mushrooms at a table gathering is a pleasure. That is why when a day allows you to procure a certain something, you go after it, don't be lazy: one day will feed you for the year! (Interview Transcript 61, Nunligran 2004)

Figure 33: A typical scene at the helicopter landing. Only a few people in the photo are prospective passengers: most have come to help others, or to send and receive care-packages to/from relatives in other villages. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

With this thought in mind, I suggest we explore how the contemporary harvest of wild mushrooms figures into the Chukotkan cuisine and cycle of consumption.

CONTEXTS AND MEANINGS OF MUSHROOM CONSUMPTION

CHAPTER 4

One morning in February, I was looking through the school photo archive when someone entered the museum classroom.[47] From others' description I recognized Valerii Petrovich—a respected science teacher and a long-time Enmelen resident. Having learned about my research from a fellow teacher, Valerii Petrovich came to offer some pertinent information. I thanked him and guided by a set of premeditated topics began asking questions pertaining to Valerii Petrovich's biography, and then shifted toward exploring his mycological knowledge. Originally from Ukraine and married to an Enmelen Native, Valerii Petrovich has lived in the village since 1984. Among the mushroom species that he and his wife harvest in the Enmelen tundra are varieties of *Russula*, *Leccinium*, and *Lacterius*. Like others, they enjoy fresh-fried mushrooms in the summer and put away an elaborate winter reserve. The interview was not presenting anything particularly unusual until, with a rather piqued expression, Valerii Petrovich remarked, "...and you know, my wife did, in fact, tell me that they [Chukchi people] did not pick mushrooms in the past." Although well within my interest, the comment came forward somewhat unexpectedly, before I had a chance to initiate a historical discussion. Anxious to proceed in this direction, I tried to solicit more details and the following conversation took place:

Sveta (S): Your wife told you...

Valerii Petrovich (VP): Yes, at first I thought 'what nonsense,' but it

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47 Similar to other village schools, the Native language classroom in Enmelen also serves as a repository of locally found artifacts and historic photographs. Teachers and students work together on assembling various displays in this room, and the space is commonly referred to as "museum."

turned out it was actually so: they [Chukchi people] did not pick mushrooms before the Russians taught them.

S: ...and when you came here in 1984...

VP: Everybody was picking then like they do now. I distinctly remember that my wife picked and cooked mushrooms when we first met. I thought nothing of it, until discovering, accidentally, that from a historical point of view it is not a traditional activity, so to say.

S: Pardon me, you say 'accidentally'...

VP: Well, 'accidentally' because I would have never thought of asking such a thing, but when I heard something about it, I came home and asked my wife, *vy chto, deistvitel'no ran'she gribi ne sobirali?* ('What, you [Chukchi people] really did not pick mushrooms in the past')? 'No,' she said, 'in the past we did not, mushrooms were considered reindeer food.' Apparently, she learned from the Russians when she was young, and her mother also [learned to pick mushrooms from the Russians]. I would have never suspected that.

S: Interesting... When was it that you and your wife had this conversation?

VP: A few days ago. I came home from work and asked her, and she told me.

S: I am sorry, it is not entirely clear and I am very curious: why did you decide to question her about this?

VP: Because when I first heard the news about your arrival to our village with a purpose to conduct some kind of research, and a few days later a colleague told me about your subject. One thing she mentioned is that the Native population did not pick mushrooms in the past, and I thought it was all gobbledygook of

> some kind, but it turned out to be factual. (Interview Transcript 40, Enmelen 2004)

Listening to Valerii Petrovich, the story of Valentina and Gordon Wasson's honeymoon in the Catskills came to mind. "Here," I thought, "we have another multi-cultural couple whose heritage aspects came to the fore in a mushroom-related interaction." In addition to its amusement value, this anecdote reveals how deeply mushroom picking has become entrenched in the milieu of local activities. Harvesting mushrooms is regarded as a natural procurement task, and in today's Chukotka its perceived ever-presence is taken for granted. While the interaction with Valerii Petrovich turned out to be particularly entertaining, it was not the only time a local resident became aware of the relative recentness of mycophilia in Chukotka as a result of my inquiry. On several occasions children or younger family members learned about it for the first time while I was interviewing elders in the household.

In a slightly different scenario, a comparison with Alaska becomes a revealing source, when a group of relatives learn about the absence of mushroom picking on the other side of the Bering Strait, and while discussing the matter with a degree of wonder and disbelief, they learn from an elder in the family about a similar state of affairs in the recent past of the Chukotka Natives. One such episode unfolded in Sireniki when, during a walk, I met Vera, a young Yupik woman I had interviewed earlier. Vera was accompanied by her neighbor Yulia, whom I had not yet met; both Vera and Yulia are in their twenties. I made a brief introduction, which Vera expanded a bit, stating, "Sveta is from Alaska; she is studying how we cook mushrooms here."[48] Having heard that, Yulia immediately recalled an occasion when

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48 Because this particular interaction occurred spontaneously during an incidental encounter on the street, I did not capture this conversation on my voice recorder. Later I made a written description of this encounter in my notes, reproducing all spoken text as closely as I could remember. The quotes presented here are from my field notes and not from a recorded interview transcript.

several years ago her uncle returned to Sireniki from visiting his relatives in Savoonga, Alaska. Among the impressions he shared was that people do not pick mushrooms in Savoonga. "I remembered we were all puzzled, thinking 'how come?'" It was in this context that Yulia first heard her grandmother explaining that in Sireniki mushroom picking was also absent in the past: "turned out *po-nashemu* (in our language) mushroom is called 'devil cane,' in the past they were not eaten here either."[49] Vera, in turn, said she remembers learning something about "devil cane" from her mother. During an earlier interview Vera shared similar information, commenting "I guess it used to be that way, but not in our time."

Cumulatively, the story related by Valerii Petrovich, the interaction with Vera and Yulia, and other cases where Chukotka's semi-forgotten mycophobic past has resurfaced in connection with my inquiry have come to constitute an instructive dataset, which directed me to explore a number of theoretical and ethnographic issues. First of all, this material illuminates multiple pathways toward examining the fluidity of identity, local knowledge, culinary preferences, and perception of traditions in the context of cross-cultural encounter. Secondly, it speaks to the role of the ethnographer in bringing certain aspects of these processes to the fore, not only for future reading audiences, but also for the informants themselves. Thirdly, and most significantly for this chapter, it indicates the remarkable extent to which mushroom picking has penetrated the contemporary cultural milieu: for most present-day Chukotkans it is an inevitable component of procurement, inherent to their overall connection with the environment that surrounds them, a perspective Tim Ingold calls "dwelling on the land" (2000).

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49 As I explained earlier, "devil cane" (*tugnyram aiavik*) is one of the terms for mushroom that, in addition to "devil ears" (*sygutmykytakh* in Chaplino; *tunigram sigutshak* in Sireniki), Yupik speakers shared with me. In this case, Yulia was speaking Russian and only mentioned a Russian translation of "devil cane."

The striking contrast in the way wild mushrooms are regarded on the Russian and Alaskan sides of the Bering Strait, which was also explicitly discussed by some informants, is the very circumstance that inspired the ethnohistorical dimension of this thesis. The upcoming chapters address the diachronic aspect of this study, exploring the trajectories, contexts, and meanings of transition in the Chukotka Native practices and beliefs connected to wild mushrooms. In the meantime, I continue to portray the contemporary ethnomycological setting to which these changes gave rise. Having provided an overview of the procurement cycle, I now turn to the seasons and circumstances of mushroom consumption, which, like the focus of the prior chapter, are situated in the present. I suggest that in addition to broadening our understanding of foodstuff and culinary practice in Chukotka, the ethnography of nutritional and social roles of mushroom consumption offers a provocative exploratory ground for delving into one of the most eminent, long-standing debates in cultural anthropology: the question of the materialist versus the symbolic importance of eating (e.g. Douglas 1966, Ferguson 1995, Harris 1985, Heston 1971, Levi-Strauss 1969, Sahlins 1976).

Eating and Chasing

My tripod stood in front of the open door on the porch of Ida and Sergei's summer hut—a tiny one-room dwelling with plank beds and a wood stove. The camcorder viewfinder was pointed to capture the small table just on the other side of the cabin's threshold, where the finest selections of our morning harvest were floating in a steaming pot. Surrounded by condiments and armed with a ladle, Ida prepared to fill the jars while giving me a step-by-step demonstration of the mushroom marinating process. Aware that she was making an instructional video, she synchronized every motion with a brief

articulate commentary, counting out loud the seven spoons of vinegar and naming each of the added condiments. "Now we will put them in the cellar and wait for forty-five days," she concluded, having tightened the lid. To ensure proper understanding, I asked whether it is, in fact, possible to consume these mushrooms in forty-five days. *"Tak cherez sorok-piat' dnei ikh mozhno kúshat?"*—my voice is heard from behind the camera. *"Mozhno zakúsyvat'!"* ("You can 'chase' with them!"), she clarified cheerfully, speaking almost in unison with her husband Sergei, who was resting on the plank bed in the back of the cabin.

In their spontaneous response, which in Russian sounds like a word play, Ida and Sergei were drawing a distinction between the verbs ***kú*shat'** and *za**kú**syvat'*[50] The former means "to eat," while the latter refers to taking a cocktail snack or a "chaser" after ingesting a drink of hard liquor (in this context, most likely a vodka shot). It is worth noting that both spouses pronounced *zakusyvat'* with the same intonation, projecting the second syllable *-kus-*, which is also the common stem that this verb shares with *kushat'* (to eat). The intonation worked at once to emphasize the commonality and the distinction between the two verbs, pointing to the fact that *zakusyvat'* is sort of like "eating," but not quite: it is a more specialized form of eating associated with a particular context. The mushrooms that Ida has marinated were intended to be served as hors d'oeuvre— *zakuska*—on a drinking occasion and consumed as a chaser with a strong potion.

All the mushroom recipes that I found in Chukotka are classified into two categories, each associated with one of the two broad contexts of consumption. Other than a form of *zakuska*, mushrooms can also constitute *yedá*—"meal food."[51] *Yedá* can also be interpreted as a catch-all noun term

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50 Bold print is used to help identify the common stem that these verbs share.

51 This noun is related to the verb *est'*—"to eat," which is synonymous of *kushat'*.

for "food" that encompasses *zakuska*. However, when used to mean "meal food," the category is conceptualized as markedly different from that of *zakuska*. Similar to Ida's distinction between *kushat'* and *zakusyvat'*, a verdict *eto—ne yedá* "this is not *yedá*" pronounced in reference to a dish signifies that the item is considered an appetizer—*zakuska*—(or a dessert) rather than part of the main course. Consequently, the mushroom recipes prepared as hors d'oeuvres and those prepared as "meal food" are usually intended for different consumption situations, or at least different parts of a consumption occasion. The dishes within each category are also ascribed particular sensual and nutritional qualities. For example, Ida's marinating hors d'oeuvre recipe can be contrasted with soups, pilafs, and *pirozhki* recipes: the former is a *zakuska* and all of the others are considered *yedá*. Guided by Sidney Mintz's (1996:17) framework of examining the meanings of consumption settings, particularly those arising in the context of dietary change, I explore the social and nutritional qualities attributed to the various mushroom dishes at different times.

Mintz observes that in accepting and adjusting to food changes, people create "new consumption situations endowed with new meanings which they themselves have engineered" (1996:17). To illustrate how the adaptation process unfolds, he proposes a rather simple dichotomy consisting of an *inside* and an *outside* meaning of consumption (e.g. 1996:20-23, his italics). The inside meaning arises within the circumstances of everyday life as people address their consumption needs in accordance with the nutritional, social, and economic values that they have constructed. The outside meaning refers to the broader socio-political processes that "ultimately set the outer boundaries for determining hours of work, places of work, mealtimes, buying power, child care, spacing of leisure, and the arrangement of time in relation to the expenditure of human energy" (1996:20). The two meanings are interconnected, simultaneously enabling and being enabled by one another.

Since this chapter is situated in the ethnographic present, it focuses predominantly on the *inside* meanings of contemporary mushroom consumption in Chukotka, leaving the exploration of the *outside* meanings for the ethnohistorical discussion presented later. Subscribing to the vernacular distinction between the mushroom recipes intended as either *yedá* or as *zakúski*, I outline the conditions of "where, when, how, with whom, with what, and why" (1996:20) for each culinary category.

Mealtimes and Structure of Everyday Eating

Although conceptualized differently from drink 'chasers' or appetizers, *yedá* and *zakuska* are both served at mealtimes: mushrooms are generally not consumed as 'snacks.' That is why I suggest that in contemplating the meanings of culinary mycophagy, it is useful first to sketch out the overall meal pattern in Chukotka. Today it closely resembles the eating schedule my family followed when we lived in Belarus, as well as the one I witnessed in Ukraine, western Russia, and in the homes of the former Soviet Union immigrants living in North America and Europe. It is grounded in what Arutiunov calls "the common social etiquette, formed largely on the basis of de-ethnicized urban culture, which is familiar to people living throughout Russia regardless of nationality and is practiced nearly all the time..." (2001:11).

Clearly, the pan-Soviet consumption ration varies substantially in connection with individual preferences and socio-economic factors.[52]

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52 Presented here is a brief overview generalizing the everyday eating practiced in the former Soviet Union after World War II. This pattern is a syncretic outcome of the cultural continuities extending from Tsarist Russia and numerous transformations that have taken place during the Soviet period in connection with various policies, reforms, and war-time crises. Some understanding of regional food practices in Russia and the former Soviet republics can be gained from Arutiunov and Voronina (2001) *Traditsionnaia Pishcha Kak Vyrazhenie Etnicheskogo Samosoznaniia* [Traditional Food as an Expression of Ethnic Identity].

Nevertheless, it is possible to say that the "idealized cultural model" (Lowe 2002:126) prescribes three daily meals: *zavtrak*, *obed*, and *uzhin*. *Zavtrack* and *uzhin* are somewhat analogous to breakfast and supper, respectively. They are smaller meals that include a main course and a hot beverage, usually a tea. *Obed*—literally translated as "dinner"— is the principal meal. Served slightly later than the traditional North American lunch, the everyday *obed* entails three courses known as *pervoe bliudo*, *vtoroe bliudo*, and *tret'ie* or *sladkoe* ('the first dish,' 'the second dish,' and 'the third' or 'the sweet course'). It may appear as though the three courses are simply enumerated, however, in this context the terms *pervoe*, *vtoroe*, and *tret'ie* are better interpreted as course titles, rather than consecutive numberings. *Pervoe bliudo* definitively constitutes soup. An *obed* where soup is not offered is usually described as the one *bez pervogo* "without the first [dish]." Similarly, if the soup is immediately followed by tea and sweets or a fruit cocktail, the dessert does not become *vtoroe*: the meal is described as one consisting of only "the first" and "the third" dishes. The composition of *vtoroe* can vary greatly; among examples are stews, meat or fish with a serving of potatoes or rice, a buckwheat kasha, stuffed *blini* (crepes), *pelemeni* (meat dumplings), or pasta dishes.

Osokina (2001) draws a historical reconstruction of the endemic food crises characterizing the Soviet period prior to World War II. The collection of articles in *Food in Russian History and Culture* edited by Glants and Toomre (1997) takes on a much broader temporal scale, covering the culinary practices and several socio-political movements connected to food that have taken place in Kievan Rus', Tsarist Russia, and the USSR.

Prazdnichnyi Stol (A Holiday Table)

While a holiday meal can also be called *obed*, the table prepared for a special occasion differs considerably from its everyday counterpart. With an elaborate menu intended to categorically surpass the ordinary, festive eating— *zastol'ie* (literally, "at-the-table-ness")—can extend over many hours. In addition to the overall lavishness, the main structural difference of the holiday spread from a daily *obed*, is the replacement of *pervoe* with a *zakuski* table. Food historians attribute the Russian appropriation of *zakuski* to the Dutch, German, and Swedish influences escalating during the reign of Peter the Great (Chamberlain 1983, Goldstein 2003). In contemplating the place and role of the *zakuski* table in Russian festive eating, I share Lesley Chamberlain's view that "it gave a classic *obed* a new beginning," providing the space for the appetizer dishes that "did not otherwise fit into the Russian dining pattern" (1983:12-13).

Besides pickled mushrooms, a *zakuski* table can include a number of salads, herring and various types of smoked fish, pickled vegetables, salamis and cheeses, smoked meats, stuffed eggs, and liver pâté.[53] Saucers of caviar, often a symbol of culinary extravagance, may adorn a more decadent spread.[54] A common centerpiece of this Russian version of a smorgasbord is

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53 Having attended countless special occasions in dozens of Russian or Russified households in Belarus, Ukraine, Moscow, as well as among the Russian immigrant communities in Germany and the United States, I feel comfortable to speak authoritatively on the subject and describe Russian festive eating using first-hand experiences. At the same time, my experiences closely correspond to the meal descriptions and recipes found in the literature (cf. Chamberlain 1983, Goldstein 2003, Voronina 2001). As always, access to goods (from both geographical and socio-economic standpoints), individual preferences, as well as cultural and family traditions are important factors that bring variation to meal rations and contents.

54 Although compared to most other regions Chukotka villages are economically disadvantaged, the prestige value of red salmon caviar does not apply there, at least not to the degree of engrossment found in Belarus and Ukraine. Illustrative of the latter case is an

kholodets—a broth of either cow or pig trotters seasoned with roots, garlic, and spices, that is cooled until it acquires the texture of jelly. Although the relatively simple salad recipes (such as mixed tomatoes and cucumbers, chopped and dressed with oil) do find their way to the *zakuski* menu, the classic holiday varieties—*Vinegret* and *Oliv'ie*—require a more elaborate preparation. Both salads usually include boiled potatoes, pickles, and onions. *Vinigret* also requires boiled carrots, and most importantly boiled or pickled beets that infuse the concoction with a rich burgundy color; either vegetable or sunflower oil can be used for dressing. *Oliv'ie*[55] salad is mixed with shredded eggs and mayonnaise and features sweet green peas as its defining ingredient; the required meat component is usually fulfilled with cubed bologna. Cold meat plates can offer beef tongue with garlic and horseradish, salami, and various kinds of *vetchiná*—a smoked and spiced ham. Crispy sauerkraut, pickled tomatoes, and dill pickles are the main three zesty vegetable preserves.

A product of foreign influences, *zakuski* table is nevertheless regarded as an essential and defining component of the contemporary Russian-style feast. Regardless of the regional and household particularities, the plethora of dishes and flavors in place of the daily soup is what sets the holiday table apart from the ordinary. Because *zakuski* is the first course of the meal, it is arranged ahead of time, before the guests' anticipated arrival. For a party of ten, each dish is duplicated and the two halves of the table look more or less symmetrical, possibly with a single tray of *kholodets* in the middle and bottled spirits scattered throughout. At longer, more copious tables, spangled with

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Odessan friend of my in-laws whose standard comment of approval in reference to a satisfactory banquet is *"ikra byla"* ("it included caviar").

55 The salad known today in most households as oliv'ie is likely a more economical variety of the game-based recipe called the "Olivier Salad" in Chamberlain's (1983) *Food and Cooking of Russia*. The salad carries the name of a French chef who in the 1880s ran a popular up-scale restaurant called the Hermitage.

With this thought in mind, I suggest we explore how the contemporary harvest of wild mushrooms figures into the Chukotkan cuisine and cycle of consumption.

Figure 34: A *zakuski* table with a symmetrical display of platters and *kholodets* as the centerpiece, composed by my husband's parents, Anatoly and Ol'ga Pasternak, originally from Odessa, Ukraine. They have been living in Chicago since 1992. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

hosts express their gratitude and exchange the farewells, sometimes holding by the elbows a staggering family member who had a little too much to drink.

Russian and Native Cuisines in Chukotka

Both the everyday and holiday meals vary to accommodate the differences in regional cuisines and the socio-economic conditions of individual households. Most Chukotka specialties consist of the foods procured locally, either directly from the land or through personal social networks. As in older times, meat of sea-mammals and reindeer continues to be staple foods of the Native people; they are regarded as principal foods even when animal harvests are scarce and reindeer herding is in decline. Bogoras' observation that sea-mammal meat is "more relished" by both the tundra and the coastal people ("because," he explains, "it is fatter and because it formed the chief food of their forefathers" (1904-09:193)) also applies today. Talking about their food preferences, several individuals remarked that reindeer meat, although delicious, can get wearisome, whereas meat from sea animals, especially the walrus, stays pleasing, even when consumed every day. Bogoras (ibid.) notes that this predilection is reflected in Chukchi folklore, citing a story in which an elderly couple sends their sons to procure some meat of sea animals. The tale's ending depicts the old man eating blubber in the *polog*—the sleeping section of the *yaranga* (dwelling), with oil dripping from both sides of his mouth. Both Yupik and Chukchi, however, are fond of the "sweet food of the reindeer breeders" (ibid.) and used to "undertake long expeditions by sea and land to obtain a supply, and occasionally trade some of it to the Eskimo of St. Lawrence Island and of the Diomede Islands" (ibid.).

In addition to walrus, people prepare various recipes with meat of gray whale, beluga, bearded seal, ringed seal, and spotted seal. When desired for immediate consumption, freshly harvested meat is usually boiled. Organs and flippers are consumed as well; the latter are most commonly used to make soup stock. For long-term storage people employ freezing, air-drying, and fermentation. The most savored meat delicacies are walrus rolls fermented at low temperatures with various herbs and root extracts, and *mantak*[57] (whale blubber and skin) consumed either fresh-frozen or pickled.

Marine birds and waterfowl, though not a major source of meat protein, are caught occasionally and serve to diversify local diets. Among the harvested varieties are ducks, geese, murres, and crested auklets. In several villages, between late May and early August people collect eggs of murre, eider, gull, cormorant, kittiwake, and ptarmigan from nearby sea cliffs. Often procured from treacherous precipices, the eggs of marine birds are considered a treat, as are crabs, mollusks, and clams.

Locally harvested fish includes varieties of salmon, trout, cod, and herring, as well as arctic grayling, whitefish, and northern pike. Among the cooking and preparation methods are air-drying, smoking, frying, freezing, boiling, and mixing with seal oil. During the winter, the day's catch from ice-fishing is often prepared and served at once. In the summer, large specimens of salmon and cod are air-dried for *yukola*—fish jerky (Figure 35), while the

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57 *Mantak* is a Siberian Yupik word for whale blubber and skin that was most commonly used by all three groups: the Yupik, the Chukchi, and the Russian settlers. On one occasion, in a company of a Nunligran couple did I hear *itgylgyn*—the Chukchi word for *mantak*. Having heard that a whale was harvested a day earlier, the husband asked whether anyone will be giving them mantak and the wife corrected (in Russian), "not mantak, but *itgylgyn*: we are Chukchis, not Eskimos." Other than in this exchange, even in villages that are predominantly Chukchi, the Yupik word was used. By contrast, in other cases predominantly Chukchi terms were used. For example, many Providenia- based Russians referred to certain locally harvested plants, such as oysterleaf and roseroot, by their Chukchi names *myt'at* and *mytkh'ag'rak*, respectively, and did not know the Yupik names (*mytkh'ag'rak* and *nunivak*). Berries, cross-culturally, were most often referred by their Russian names. Since I did not investigate language use in a disciplined way, I am not in the position to comment on the significance of such appropriations.

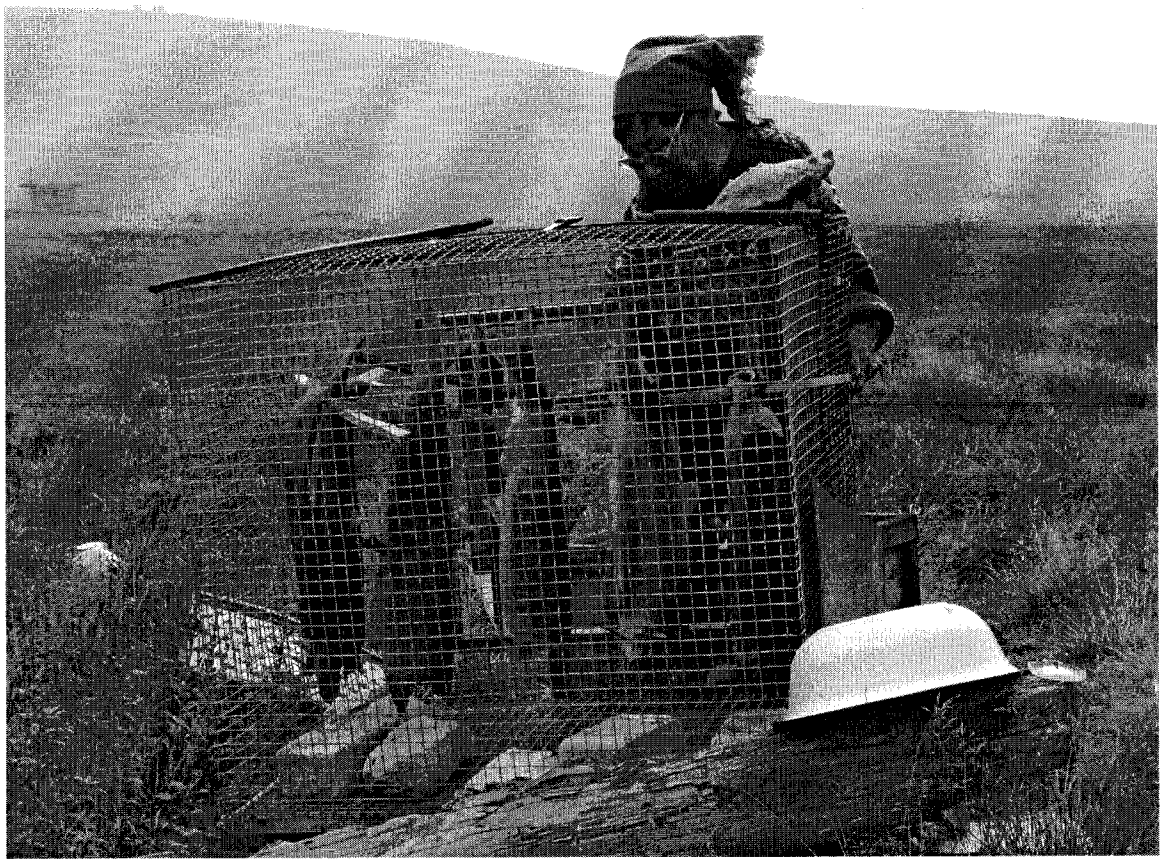

Figure 35: Drying fish. Cages from the shut-down fox farms are now commonly utilized for this purpose. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

heads are eaten boiled or fried. Although like sea-mammal hunting and reindeer herding, some fish is procured as part of a state-farm or cooperative enterprise, both Natives and settlers enjoy fishing for personal subsistence and recreation. I second Kerttula's observation that fishing trips are "savored as much or more than mushroom outings" (2000:111).

Other marine resources are sea peaches and kelp. Both can be eaten by themselves or served with meat; kelp is also chopped into salads. Sea peaches— *upa* (Figure 36)—are raked from the bottom of the sea. Kelp (*morskaia kapusta*) is gathered either along the beach, following a storm, or directly from the sea. The latter, hunters perform while standing on floating ice, with the help of a long wooden tool tipped with a crosspiece.

Wild plant gathering conducted prior to and throughout the Soviet era has become even more extensive in the years following the collapse (cf. Ainana et al 2000, 1999). In many households plant foods continue to be the chief source of vitamins. The most popular species of edible greens are oysterleaf (Mertensia martitima) and roseroot (Rhodiola atropurpurea). Oysterleaf grows in sandy soils along the seashore[58] and has a sweet-and-sour taste. In the summer it can be eaten fresh and makes a welcomed ingredient in various oil and mayonnaise-based salads. For winter use, massive quantities of oysterleaf are pressed down in a large vessel and fermented in their own juice. Like other fermented greens, they are incorporated into several soup recipes and served as a vegetable component in a meal entrée.

Roseroot has a number of medicinal and nutritional applications. I heard several people describe it as "healthful all over: from flowers to the roots." Roseroot flowers are brewed in teas and cooked into sweet preserves. Chopped leaves are preserved through fermentation and are enjoyed frozen or used in recipes similar to other greens. Ground with sugar, bits of roseroot

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58 Several Chukchi women who grew up in the tundra remarked that they learned to use oysterleaf and other coastal plants after relocating from the tundra to the village.

Figure 36: *Upa*—sea peaches. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

leaves are shaped into truffle-size balls, which are regarded as a "candy-substitute." The actual root, known as zolotoi koren "golden root" (and can be compared to wild ginseng), is praised for its healing and flavoring capabilities. Other edible roots, such as wild rhubarb (Polygonum tripterocarpum Gray), bistort (Polygonum viviparum L)., glacier avens (Novosieversia glacialis), wild potato (Hedysarum hedysaroides), and claytonia (Claytonia tuberose) (cf. Ainana et al 2000:45) are prepared into stews, mashed into porridges, and infused with blubber and fermented blood. Also used as flavorings are several varieties of willow (*Salix*) leaves.

Berry picking is very important, both socially and nutritionally. Its cross-cultural popularity among the Chukotka residents is certainly comparable with mushroom procurement. The two activities are frequently conducted at the same time (Figures 37-38). Compared to mushrooms, berry picking does not share the kind of intricate connection with the history and belief systems of the Chukotka people. It may be worth noting that, similar to the majority of gathering activities, the tasks associated with berry picking belong overwhelmingly in the domain of women's work. I did, however, meet several families who perform their collecting chores together (Figure 39). The harvested varieties include *brusnika*— low-bush cranberries (*Vaccinium vitis-idae*), *shiksha*—crowberries (*Empetrum nigrum*), *golubika*—blueberries (*Vaccinium ulignosum*), and *moroshka* cloudberries (*Rubus chamaemorus*) (see footnote 57). Sharing the space with the mushroom jars, *varen'e* (berry preserves) hold a prominent place in many winter caches. Spread over bread, *varen'e* is the most widely consumed dessert, typically served with tea or coffee. These ingredients can also constitute breakfast; sweet condensed milk is another popular topping in a meal of this type.

I met a few Native families who have developed a tradition of distinguishing between "Russian" and "Chukotkan" meals, designating particular days of the week for preparing only one kind of fare or the other.

Figure 37: Resting on one of Nunligran's benches after returning from picking mushrooms and berries, which are often collected at the same time. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

Figure 38: Picking berries in the area outside of Novoe Chaplino on a scenic slope that is also rich in mushrooms. The bucket filled with mushrooms is already waiting at the top of the slope. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

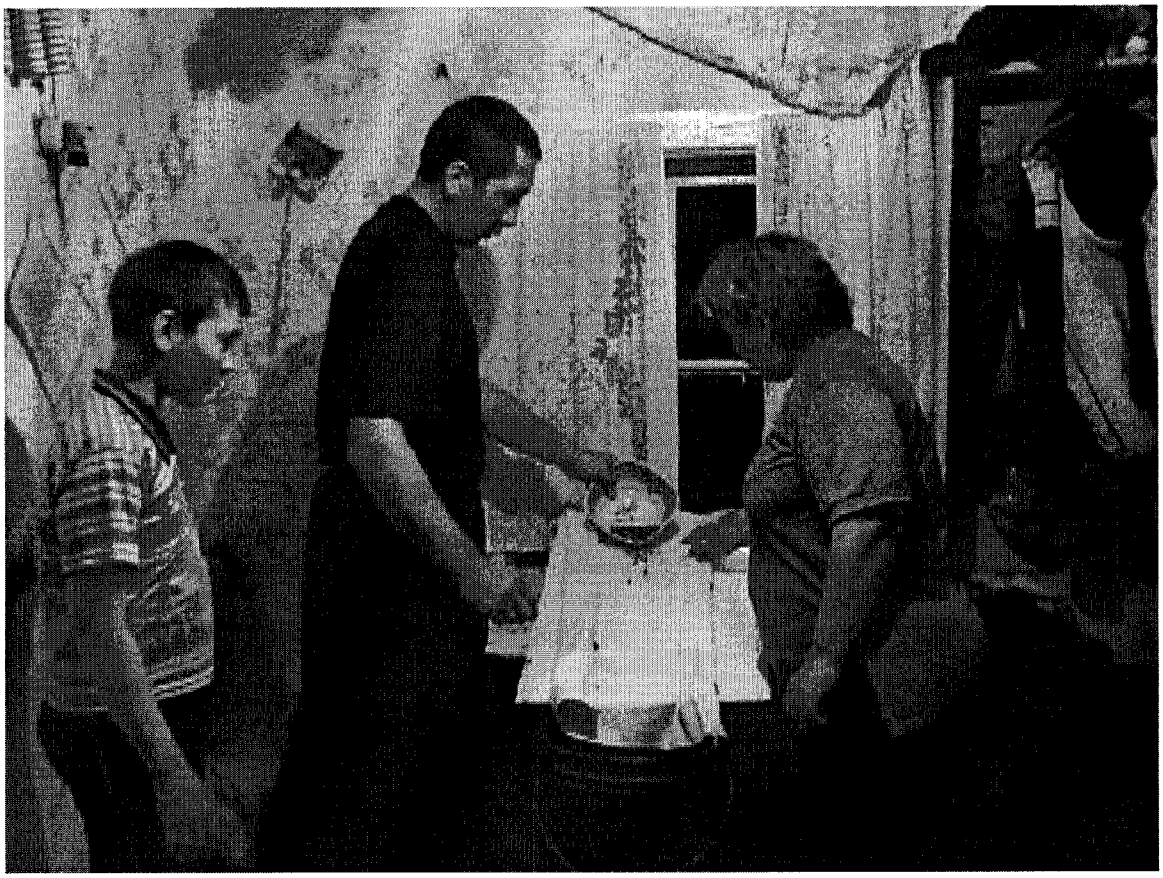

Figure 39: Sorting berries. Pouring the berries over the cloth-covered reclining board helps eliminate leaves and twigs: the berries roll down into the bucket, while the debris are left behind and weeded out along the way. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

To emphasize the distinction, each type of repast is consumed in accordance with the appropriate etiquette. "Russian" meals are served at a table, with individual dishware and utensils. The "Chukotkan" way prescribes a "finger food" approach, with everyone sitting on the floor around one communal platter—a factory-manufactured vessel or a large oval tray carved out of driftwood; individuals may use a knife to cut off bite –size portions from a large piece of meat placed on the centerpiece platter. For the most part, however, country and store-bought foodstuff are mixed on a daily basis with rations and recipes fluctuating according to access and taste. One time, sitting down for supper, my friend Zhenya succinctly summarized the culinary geography of her table, announcing "Nunligran caviar, Enmelen preserves, Provideniya bread" while pointing out each item. Arutiunov suggests that such regional culinary idiosyncrasies can be interpreted "as sort of added to the [pan-Russian] context, when a particular meal is meant to emphasize certain ethnic or local specificities" (2001:11).

Compared to my first visit in 2001, grocery supplies in coastal settlements had appreciably improved by 2004. To this day, semi-fresh produce and dairy products are, for the most part, available only in district centers; shops in Provideniya are generally better stocked than those in Lavrentiya. Village residents can sometimes obtain deficit goods when traveling or in care-packages sent by relatives and friends. Certain staples, like potatoes, are delivered sporadically and are often purchased in bulk with expectations for long-term storage. Flour, macaroni, and locally baked bread can be purchased in every village. Canned goods usually include pink salmon, pork or beef, condensed milk, some sort of fruit cocktail, and occasionally vegetables like corn niblets or sliced beets. Although marked at relatively high prices, canned groceries available in the village stores are, as a rule, way past their expiration date, sometimes by as much as two years. Unlike the inflated prices, which often make the contents of the dusty tins cost-

prohibitive, the expired status of canned goods is largely regarded as a fact of life and does not preclude anyone from purchasing or desiring to purchase the items.

People who lived through the period of severe economic crises brought on by the post-Soviet collapse, construe the contemporary situation as relatively prosperous compared to the late 1990s, remembered by most Chukotkans as "the hunger years."[59] Attitude notwithstanding, the meager variety of locally available foodstuff is undoubtedly a limiting factor for meal preparation in many households. At the same time, the overall eating pattern—*zavtrak*, *obed*, *uzhin*—and composition of each fare is similar to the pan-Russian structure I described earlier, despite the frequent shortage of desired ingredients. In the households that enjoy the advantages of stable employment and that are in one way or another better connected to sources of goods, holiday meals are no less elaborate than the ones I have seen elsewhere, with fresh produce as the only compromise. Those who are less well-off still followed the pan-Russian structure, first serving some form of *zakuski*, followed by a hot course, and topped with dessert. For example, at a birthday party of a Chukchi friend whose family had very little cash income, the *zakuski* table included pickled mushrooms, kelp salad, and diced canned beets dressed with mayonnaise (which the hosts jokingly called "our *Vinigret*") and the hot course consisted of salmon-stuffed *pelemeni*—traditional Russian dumplings that are usually prepared with red meat. While the ordinary and festive menus differed considerably among households, mushroom dishes could be found throughout the socio-economic strata.

Similar to other arctic regions, in addition to everyday and festive eating, in Chukotka it is also appropriate to distinguish between meals

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59 Most people viewed the present circumstances in a positive light, comparing them only to the times of severe food shortages endemic for several years in the late 1990s and not to the relatively abundant supply of consumer goods that was in place during the peak of the Soviet period. The latter is now recalled as a distant, unattainable, and rather mythical paradise.

consumed in the village and out on the tundra. I did not conduct a systematic study of these differences, but in casual observations I noticed many parallels drawn from John Ziker's (2002 a, b) scrupulous analysis of food practices among the Dolgan and Nganasan in Taimyr. A general rule employed when organizing provisions is that the combination of fresh tundra air and the energy one expends doing various activities doubles the ordinary village appetite. Compared to village rations, tundra meals incorporate greater amounts of meat protein and fat. With the exception of visiting a herders' camp and winter travels from village to village, the tundra outings in which I took part were connected with gathering activities. Knowing that on different occasions my companions were packing goods like *mantak*, walrus heart, and salted pork lard, I tried to contribute bread and whatever snacks I could obtain from the rather limited assortment available in village stores. These were always appreciated as were the several loaves of bread I brought for the reindeer herders on a suggestion of Seriozha, the *vezdekhodchik* who transported us to the camp. In a wonderful show of hospitality, the herders prepared reindeer meat for me, Seriozha, and others in our company. Other tundra meals, enjoyed on breaks from collecting activities, were largely smorgasbord-style picnics, followed by tea.

Drinking tea outdoors follows a rather uncompromising, endowed with neo-spiritual significance, procedure that is specific and integral to the tundra experience. Tundra tea requires that fresh stream water is boiled in a cast-iron kettle over a hearth of twigs, kindled with moss. The smoke from the burning twigs, pillowing the kettle sides, is believed to boost the flavor and aroma of the store-bought brew enhanced with wildflower petals, willow and cranberry leaves, and, when available, low-bush cranberries. Everything about the tundra tea—the scent, the taste, the water quality (cf. Shannon 2003:205), the nutritive properties— is regarded as far superior to its home counterpart. For all these reasons, the hefty cast-iron kettles are transported

in backpacks on most walking excursions, no matter the distances (Figures 40-41). The thermos that accompanied me to all the *vezdekhod* winter travels became a subject of many jokes, ridicule, and dirty looks when, unacquainted with the protocol, I brought it to my first summer outing. No one even considered drinking the perfectly hot, ready-to-serve tea that I hauled on my shoulders. The very presence of a thermos at a tundra picnic was considered a blasphemy.

Figure 40: A woman from Enmelen is assembling a small fire of mosses and twigs, getting ready to have a picnic with her grandsons in one of her favorite spots located a walking distance of approximately four hours from the village. Her younger grandchild, standing on the far right, has just filled the cast-iron kettle with river water to prepare the tea. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

Figure 41: Tea on the Tundra. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

Mushroom Dishes in Everyday and Festive Eating

> If I manage to get though everything in one night, I go back out picking the next day. I dry a lot to store for the winter. We eat them often, especially when there is no meat. (Interview Transcript 04, Enmelen 2004).

Laboratory analyses show that mushrooms are low in fat and carbohydrates and have therefore almost no calories (Arora 1986, Chang and Miles 2004). While vitamin and mineral values are comparable to that of vegetables, "mushrooms are *not,*" stresses Arora's guide—"a viable substitute for meat or other high-protein food" (Arora 1986:30, his italics).[60] My Chukotka informants adamantly professed the opposite: mushrooms are high in calories, they are nutritiously interchangeable with meat, and they are "heavy foods" or *tiazholaia pishcha* that take a long time to digest. When I offered a friend in Provideniya a sample of the marinated boletes I brought back from Nunligran, he only ate one mushroom, explaining that he is trying not to eat heavily during evening hours. Early in my fieldwork I found that despite their integral role in the procurement cycle and local diets, mushrooms continue to be prepared almost exclusively in the Russian-style recipes and have not found a special niche among the Yupik or Chukchi

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60 I was not able to find the protein values for the mushroom species that are typically consumed in Chukotka. Chang and Miles (2004) note that, on the whole, little quantitative data is available on the nutritive value of mushrooms. Summarizing published values for *Agaricus bisporus*, *Lentinula edodes*, *Pleurotus* spp., and *Volvariella volvacea*, all of which are species that are being cultivated commercially in several countries, Chang and Miles report the range of protein content of 1.75 to 3.63% of mushrooms' fresh weight, noting that these values are "about twice that of asparagus and cabbage, and 4 to 12 times those of oranges and apples, respectively, ... [and] rank below most animal meats" (2004:28). They also warn that nutritional analysis may show varying results due to differences in cultivation techniques and continuous metabolism changes in post-harvest phases of a specimen. In any case, I argue that while these values give us a general understanding of how mushroom protein content compares to that of other food products, ultimately, they are meaningless when taken outside of their culinary context.

dishes. Only during extreme food shortages would some people fry or preserve mushrooms in seal oil. Rather than attempting some sort of cultural interpretation, most cooks explained the segregation in nutritional and economic terms: since much of the Native foods are already high in animal protein, adding mushrooms would be redundant and seemed counter-intuitive.[61]

In everyday eating, mushrooms are, in fact, conceptualized as "the meat" of the meal.[62] Perhaps this ascribed quality, and the recognizably dominant flavor, are the primary reasons for their defining role in Russian culinary nomenclature: mushrooms are key ingredients that determine the identity of the dish. For example, a soup made of barley, potatoes, and mushrooms is called none other than "mushroom soup" (Figure 42) and stuffed rolls of fry-bread are inevitably "mushroom *pirozhki*" as long as mushrooms are part of the filler. The types of mushroom dishes most commonly prepared throughout the year are soups and stews. In addition to barley or wheat-based varieties, mushroom stock is also employed in *solyanka*—a sour soup cooked with pickled vegetables and infused with tomato purée. The potato and mushroom stew, a rather simple formula seasoned with bay leaf and salt (Figure 43), constitutes a hearty self-sufficient dish. Throughout the year, most recipes are derived from the reserves of dried mushrooms or the ones that have been boiled and then frozen.

During the harvest season fresh mushrooms are consumed on their own, usually fried or sautéed with onions. The summer's first mushrooms, anxiously awaited and welcomed with enthusiasm, are almost always

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61 I met one Russian woman who said she always adds mushrooms to the meat of wild birds and animals to get rid of the "gamy smell," which to her was unpleasant.

62 I realize that this perspective may appear somewhat carnivore-centric to some readers, who do not conceptualize vegetarian ingredients as meat substitutes. In Chukotka, where I have not met a single person who voluntarily eats a meatless diet, the phrase "mushrooms are meat" can be pronounced as a conceptual reality, as well as a metaphor.

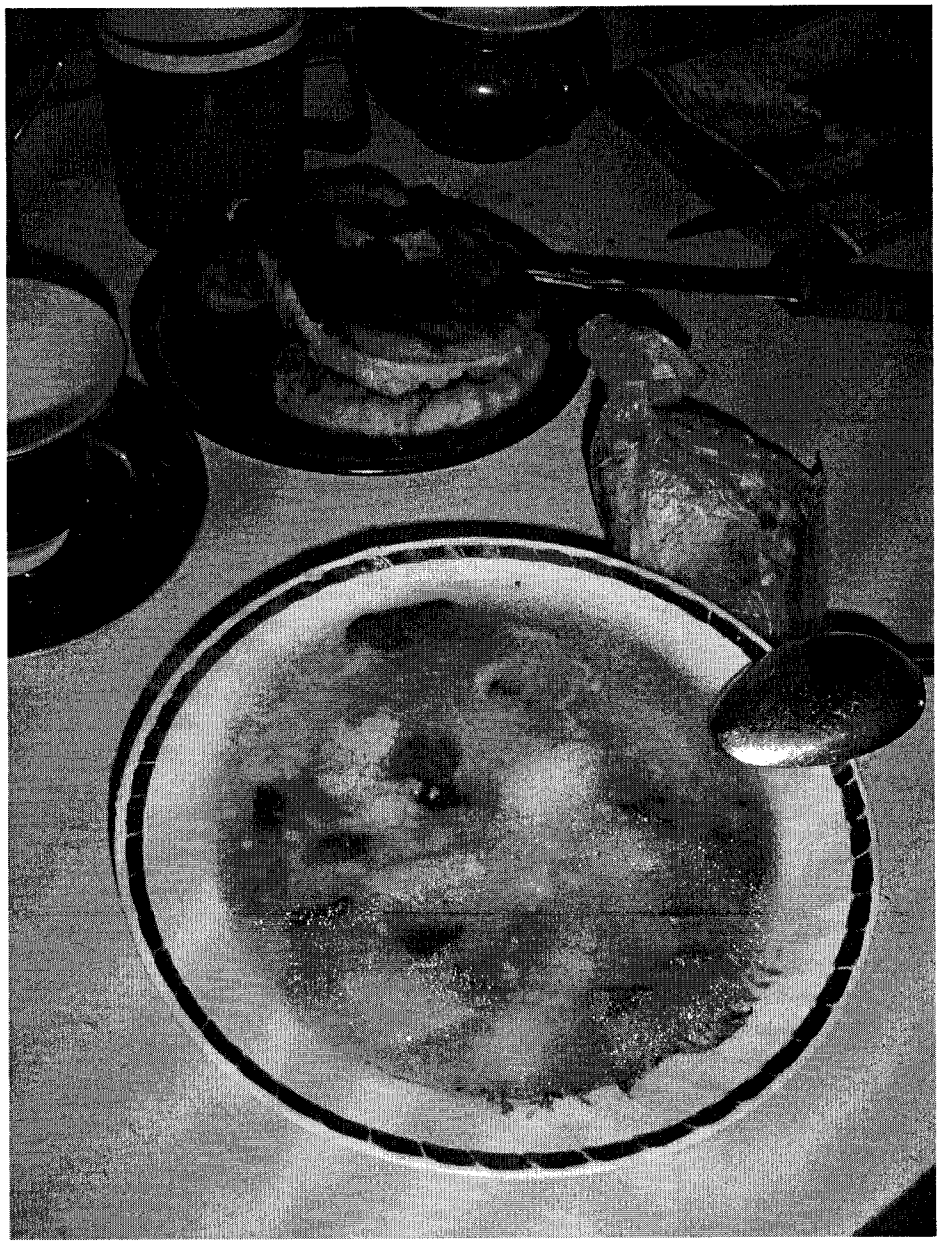

Figure 42: "Mushroom Soup" (boletes, potato, barley, margarine, salt) served with *lepeshki* (fry-bread). (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

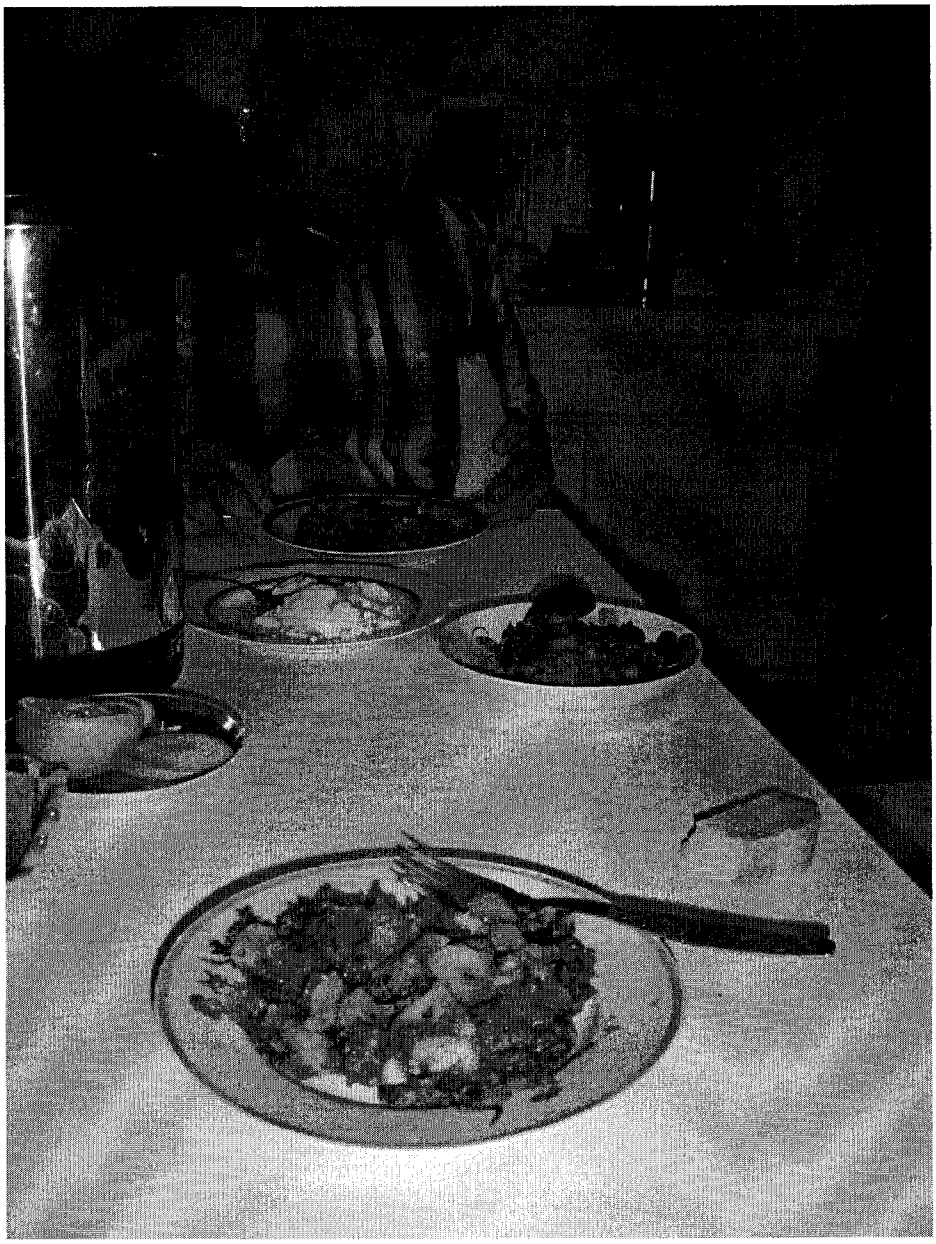

Figure 43: *Kartoshka s gribami* (potatoes with mushrooms), my childhood favorite, is also popular in Chukotka, fourteen time zones away from my hometown in Belarus. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

consumed fresh-fried (Figure 44). As the season progresses, pickling and drying for winter reserves may become a priority. People like Lara, who in the early morning hours collects small quantities to be cooked for dinner later that day, continue to consume freshly picked mushrooms several times a week. Sounding similar to the American Cattlemen's Beef Board slogan "It's what's for dinner," in describing this seasonal practice Lara said that procuring mushrooms in the morning assures that the next meal has been secured. Once again, mushrooms are the meat: the dish is regarded as filling and nourishing. Stews and sautés can also be consumed for supper, though usually served in smaller quantities.

In festive eating, albeit the hot course may feature dishes that include mushroom ingredients (*pirozhki*, stews, pilafs are among examples), it is the *zakuski* spread wherein mushrooms have a special role. Used as a drink chaser, the zesty pickled hors d'oeuvre is a recognized component of a drinking occasion and a marker of the holiday table. In the previous chapter I show that the preparation of marinated mushrooms is very much connected to the revelry cycle in Chukotka: while selecting for marinating the finer specimens of their harvest, people contemplate upcoming birthdays, family celebrations, and various holidays that involve festive eating or call for a gift of *banochka gribov*. As is evident from Ida and Sergei's proclamation "*Mozhno zakusyvat'!*" ("You can 'chase' with them!") in response to my asking about *eating* the mushrooms that Ida has just sealed in jars, pickled and marinated mushrooms constitute a cocktail snack, a *zakuska*, rather than filling food that is part of the principal meal— *yedá*. Like all mushrooms, they are still regarded as heavy foods, but their function as a vodka chaser prescribes a relatively petite consumption. Another dish usually associated with festive eating is mushroom caviar. In Chukotka it is prepared from boletes that are boiled, ground, and fried with onions. Like salads and other hors d'oeuvres,

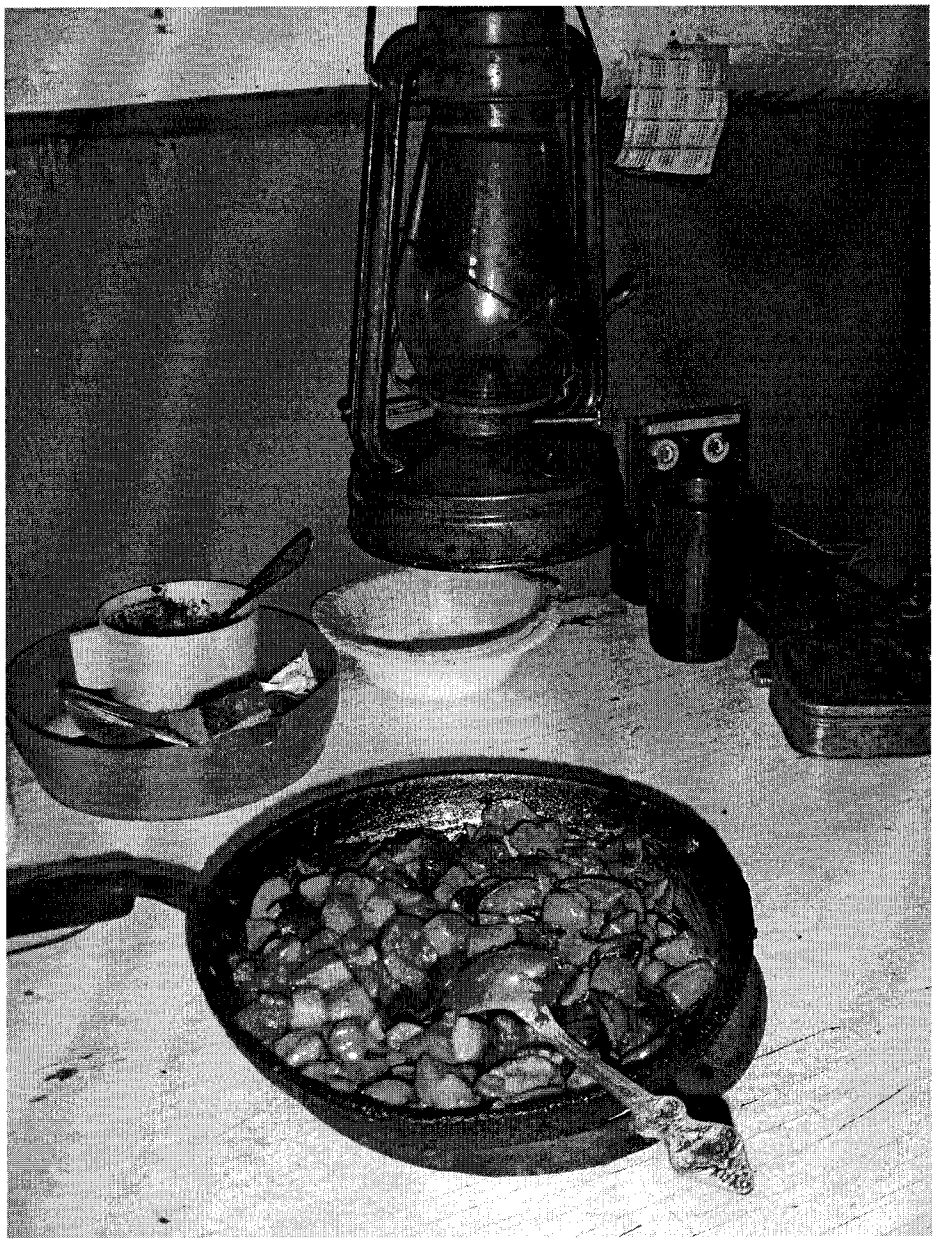

Figure 44: Freshly harvested mushrooms, sautéed—a summer-time meal. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

mushroom caviar is a *zakuska*, and at a holiday table it is served during the first course.

Another context that does not quite fit everyday or festive eating, but often entails the consumption of food and drink, is the bathhouse—*bania*. Writing about the late Soviet period, Kerttula describes the bi-weekly trip to the *bania* as "one of the constants of life in Sireniki" that was "not just a place to clean the body but a social event, and, for some, a spiritual event as well" (2000:70). For the most part, this was true at the time of my fieldwork with the exception of Novoe Chaplino, where the new housing units (built during 2002-2004) featured bathtubs and indoor plumbing and the village *bania* was shut down.[63] A few households in each of the villages had built small private bathhouses, but the majority of the population continued to use public facilities. In Provideniya, even during the weeks when hot running water was available in the apartments, *bania* was still as popular among the men as it was among the women (different bathing days were set aside for each gender). However, the practice of eating and drinking alcohol in the *bania*—in all the settlements—was more prevalent among the men.[64] The way that food and drink figures prominently into the *bania* experience is during the resting part of the bathing cycle, between rounds of steaming and washing off sweat. To cool off and replenish energy and fluids, bathers spend much of their bania time taking refreshments while sitting on the dressing room benches or in the large corridor entrance. As I observed in Chukotka, the women more commonly just drank tea or juices, although they did talk about

63 It was not clear whether the closure was meant to be permanent.

64 Kettula states that she also got a sense that the men's bania was "much more festive than the women's (2000:71). This tendency is common throughout Russia. A Soviet cinema classic *The Irony of Fate or 'Enjoy Your Bath'* directed by El'dar Riazanov (1975) celebrates the tradition of male carousing while socializing while enjoying the steam. In this comedy four friends spend all afternoon before New Year's Eve in the *bania* drinking to the health and happiness of one of the men who is about to get married. However, instead of ringing in the New Year at home in Moscow with his fiancée, the inebriated groom ends up on the plane to Leningrad where he meets another woman.

preparing the food that the men in their households take to the bania on the alternative bathing days. A retired teacher I interviewed in Ukraine recalled how during their fifteen year tenure in Novoe Chaplino, every Saturday morning she filled a large basket with freshly-baked *pirozhki*—most often mushroom *pirozhki*—for her husband and his friends to enjoy in the *bania* with a healthy share of good libations.

As I mention earlier, the subject of my research was the very obstacle that got in the way of my ability to accurately document mushroom consumption in everyday life. On the whole, the people I met in the field were very generous and inviting, eager to show hospitality and to help me with my work. While such efforts made my fieldwork marvelously enjoyable, they eliminated any possibility of carrying out some sort of objective, inconspicuous observation (arguably it is always an illusion, but to a degree). In small communities word travels fast, and many local people learned about this project shortly upon my arrival in each of the villages. Visiting the administrative offices, the school, the store, the banya, the library, and the community center usually helped expand my network of acquaintances. Certainly not everyone was a mushroom aficionado or an active picker,[65] but most people were, or at least had a mycophile relative or acquaintance whom they suggested I meet. To put it simply, if there were mushrooms in the house, I was offered a taste and often in more forms than one. While visiting for dinner during winter months I was usually treated to a hearty meal, featuring mushroom soup or some kind of a mushroom entrée. Frequently, people would also insist that I sample their special marinated reserve. Although a good part of the interviews I conducted were held in the community center rather than during household visits, some informants

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65 I interviewed a number of informants who do not like to eat or pick mushrooms; the majority of them happen to be reindeer herders. Next chapter discusses this tendency in more detail.

brought a jar of mushrooms to give to me at the end of our appointment. Even at the tea party hosted by the Enmelen school in honor of International Women's Day, pickled mushrooms found their way on the table, looking categorically out of place amidst the sugary pastries and steaming beverages. "I brought these especially for you, Svetlana," said the school principal placing the jar next to my saucer.

I am certain that my field notes are far from reflecting a more or less regular pattern of mushroom consumption, precisely because they are full of similar anecdotes. At the same time, I contend that these stories are enlightening in their own right, as they are informative about several matters focal to this inquiry. First of all, they show that that in many Chukotka households mushrooms are available almost year-round. Even in homes where mushroom dishes are prepared on average twice a week, family cooks continued to tap into their winter supplies through the middle of April. While it is true that on numerous occasions a mushroom dish was purposely served in connection with my visit, the specimens in stock were often collected many months before hand and without my influence.[66] Evidently, mushrooms fulfill a significant niche in the gastronomic rations of these households and are stockpiled in sizable quantities. Secondly, the enthusiasm pervading the several dozen interview narratives, the number of heartfelt invitations I received to partake in eating special meals, and the generous amount of dish samples and mushroom jars people gave me as gifts all suggest that many Chukotkans take pleasure in preparing, consuming, and talking about mushrooms. It appears that Valentina Wasson's (1957) assertion that mushrooms make a perfect material for kitchen and conversation is as valid

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66 A few times during the summer fieldwork, I partook in mushroom picking trips that certain friends organized partially for my sake, i.e.: they chose to go out picking specifically on the days that I was available in order for us to productively spend some quality time, during which they "collect mushrooms" and I "collect data." However, most outings that I joined were planned autonomously, and I was simply invited to come along.

now in the farthest northeast of Russia as it was in her native Moscow at the dawn of the Soviet era. Finally, in a way of more broadly reflecting on the fieldwork process, I find that the informants' receptiveness, willingness to respond, and the relative ease characterizing most of my interactions indicate that, at least in this case, people are keen on contributing to an inquiry on a subject that they know well and enjoy discussing.[67]

Good to Think, Good to Harvest, Good to Eat

Mushrooms are low in calories, but processing and preserving them are time-consuming tasks. Mushrooms are admired by some, hardly interest others, literally sicken the third, and are often credited an aura of danger or mystique. Cumulatively, these qualities place mushrooms well within the discussion of materialist versus symbolic approaches to understanding how humans choose, use, and value their food. Cultural materialists (e.g. Harris 1985, Ferguson 1995) may argue that mushroom consumption, which in exchange for hard labor yields a low caloric return, is impractical and, therefore, traditionally not valued in the Arctic. However, as we observe in Chukotka and elsewhere in Siberia (e.g. Ziker 2002 (a,b)), in the second half of the 20th century, harvesting and preserving wild mushrooms has become a common procurement strategy for many indigenous cultures. Proponents of interpretive approaches (Douglas 1966, Heston 1971, Levi-Strauss 1969, Sahlins 1976), on the other hand, who insist that food must be "good to think" before it becomes good to eat, may conclude that nutritional insufficiency

67 This claim runs somewhat contrary to the observation made by Colin Scott stating that "anthropologists may find that we have less knowledge to share with local experts than do our colleagues in biophysical sciences about specific domains of local knowledge, and in this respect we may be at initial disadvantage at striking up mutually interesting conversations with local experts" (1996:71).

serves only to enhance the symbolic significance of mushrooms and their changing status in the worldview of Chukotka Native peoples.

In reflecting on perception and the use of wild mushrooms throughout Eastern Europe and the Russian Far East, I employ both materialist and symbolic analyses, finding that the two approaches are complimentary rather than mutually exclusive. First of all, mushrooms are perceived as nutritiously valuable. They are regarded as heavy foods (*tiazholaia pishcha*) and a caloric equivalent of meat, as conveyed by the following statements:

> Mushrooms are very nutritious: they are rich in calories and vitamins. They are considered heavy foods. They are the total equivalent of meat, don't you know that? (Interview Transcript 03, Enmelen 2004).
>
> Mushrooms are like meat, the same in calories. When we make mushroom soup, or *pirozhki*, or rice pilaf, we don't even put meat in. Why do that? Mushrooms are the meat. (Interview Transcript 07, Enmelen 2004).

Secondly, even from an outsider's point of view, nutritional values of any food item can only be meaningful if measured within its culinary context. Fried mushrooms are prepared in liberal amounts of oil or butter and, regarded as the meat component of the meal, are usually consumed with a serving of carbohydrates. In addition to their perceived caloric contribution, mushrooms are valued for their strong distinctive flavor that tends to saturate the taste of the entire dish. For this reason, I suggest, it is useful to think of mushrooms' nutritive roles as those of condiments, which according to Mintz "make basic starches ingestively more interesting" thereby increasing the consumption of core foods (1986:11). Therefore, within the emic ethno-nutrition schema of Slavic cuisine, which the Russified newcomers have brought from the pan-Soviet mainland to Chukotka, mushrooms are "good to think" not only in social and sensual, but also in economic terms. The caloric significance of mushrooms is physically achieved and socially acquired:

through the specific consumption preferences and preparation methods, mushrooms that in today's Chukotka are "good to think" also become "good to eat."

Eating situations are the fruits of picking and processing labor, as well as the source of motivation for conducting these activities or participating in the transfer networks. The previous chapter illuminates myriad rewards that different Chukotka residents derive from collecting mushrooms. Albeit the reasons for partaking in the gathering and processing activities differ among individuals and specific harvesting situations, I found that most collecting excursions simultaneously address a combination of economic needs, aesthetic pleasures, and leisure values. Whether striving to secure the day's meal, stockpile for the winter, or build up a reserve of glass-jarred delicacies to distribute or serve on special occasions, mushroom procurement is the context of engagement where economic and recreational pursuits intertwine. A logical extension of procurement, consumption of wild mushrooms is a link between people, their knowledge of land and resources, and the scope of accomplished tasks that assures physical sustenance, reinforces social networks, and fosters continuity of the annual revelry cycles. In the next two chapters, I explore how mushrooms came to be regarded as a desired food, valued for their flavor, texture, nutritional composition, and pleasure of picking. Having drawn a contemporary ethnographic overview of procurement and consumption, I will journey from the Chukotka of the present to the past.

UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF TRANSFORMATION IN THE CHUKOTKA NATIVE VIEWS ON MUSHROOMS AND MYCOPHAGY

CHAPTER 5

During the second half of the twentieth century the fleshy tundra fruit, unearthed in the summers by rainfall and sunshine, had undergone a drastic transformation in the eyes and the palates of Native Chukotkans. Once regarded as "devil ears" by the Yupik and "reindeer food" by the Chukchi, mushrooms are now embraced as delicious edibles by both groups. Following the overview of the present-day procurement and consumption, I now move on to the diachronic inquiry. With the ultimate goal of reconstructing the processes by which the use of wild mushrooms in Chukotka has gained the kind of popularity that we find today, the current chapter explores the broader social setting of this transition.

Comparing Mushrooms to Other Food Novelties

The absorption of mushrooms into the culinary milieu is by no means the first significant innovation in the diets of the Chukotka Natives. The cuisine overview in the previous chapter mentions that aside from trading with Russian merchants and American whalers, maritime coastal populations and the tundra Chukchi were also fond of one another's food. Discussing Chukchi keenness for "alien food" (1904-09:201), Bogoras informs us that Chukchi people tended to be rather open to trying new edibles and enjoyed consuming the food attributed to other peoples' traditional diets. This appetite for the exotic was also ascribed to the spirit world. In the early 1900s, when several staples were regularly obtained from Russian traders and

American whalers, the spirits were offered sacrifices of sugar and bread. On the occasion of voluntary death, a departing person would often ask to taste new food as a dying wish. Such requests were grounded in the cosmology that the next world is exclusively for the Chukchi people and would therefore be lacking foreign cuisines.

In addition to flour and sugar, one item highly desired in nineteenth century trade was tea. At fairs Russian merchants treated their Chukchi customers to tea and hard rye bread several times a day. In the 1850s, tea compressed into bricks had become not only a desired commodity, but also served as currency in the sale of firearms, whaleboats, and various smaller articles. The American wares that Russians acquired from Chukchis in exchange for brick tea sold for prices appreciably lower than their monetary value. By the second half of the nineteenth century tea had "become more important than anything else" (Bogoras:1904-09:60) and was used "in the remotest inland camps and all along the Arctic and Pacific coasts" (ibid.).[68] By the early 1900s, tea consumption had come to be regarded as so conventional throughout Chukotka that the few people who did not own a kettle were mocked as "tea-shunners" (ibid.). Bogoras's description of hospitality among the coastal populations is a remarkable testimony to the importance of tea drinking at the time of his research:

> In other Maritime villages we were occasionally detained by a snow-storm for several days. All fuel had been consumed. We fed on raw walrus-meat. Still some fire was necessary to melt snow to prepare tea. In the more southern villages, on the coast of the Pacific Ocean cooking

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68 Wrangel's account indicates that in the time of his expedition 1820-1823, tobacco was the commodity of highest demand among the Natives, also used as trade currency. At the Aniui fair in 1820 Wrangel learned that the Chukchi "buy the furs and other articles with the Russian tobacco, hardware, and beads; they give half a pood of tobacco to the Americans for furs, which they sell to the Russians for two pood of the same tobacco; thus their gain is 300 percent" (1844:111). Ray writes that when the tobacco trade had finally reached Alaska, probably around the 1750s, it "easily made one world of two important continents" (1975:102).

> is done mostly, not with blubber, but with twigs from low bushes, small pieces of driftwood, dried grass, etc. Then the house-master would take an axe and break one of his sledges, or cut down one of the wooden house-supports at the risk of it tumbling down on our heads. When we remember how scarce wood is on the Arctic shore, and especially wood that is suitable for poles and house-supports, we can appreciate the real value of such a sacrifice (1904-09:637).

While the author's main emphasis is on the sheer generosity of his hosts, the text also unfolds the taken-for-granted essentialism, with which Chukotkan Natives regarded tea. By the beginning of the twentieth century, tea was not only a subject of social gesture, but had become so necessary a part of the meal, as to warrant the use of firewood at a time when fuel provisions amounted to less than bare minimum.

After reading Bogoras's account I became curious about the extent and meaning of tea use in contemporary Chukotka. While a number of people stated that in recent years they have come to enjoy drinking coffee, the popularity of tea remains indomitable. Similar to Gail Fondahl's experience in village Siberia, my fieldwork also demanded an ability to ingest "copious amounts of tea" (Fondahl 1998:14). At the same time it is worth mentioning that several individuals around the age of seventy recalled that in their youth tea consumption was restricted among children and young people, and in some cases it was forbidden entirely. For example, a man who was born in 1931 remembered tasting tea for the first time in 1958, and said that it was not until the 1960s that he was allowed to enjoy it regularly. Even a few informants in their forties recalled that, when they were growing up, tea drinking was a privilege of mature adults. A Nunligran woman admitted to conspiring occasionally to have secret tea parties—a pleasure that they, as children, had to hide from their grandfather. Others remembered being merely discouraged by elders from indulging, though no formal prohibition

was enforced. I did not encounter any restrictions on tea drinking during my fieldwork, perhaps only for the very small children who could not safely hold their own cups. Most people were uncertain as to why tea consumption was once curbed, but offered a combination of socio-economic and medical interpretations, i.e.: to prevent addiction, to avoid perspiration, or simply because for certain age groups it was considered inappropriate.

At present, tea drinking is an inevitable component of almost any social interaction, whether it takes place out on the tundra, at a workplace, or in a home.[69] Similar to mushrooms, it is one of the identity markers most commonly called upon in discussions of the Russian versus American heritage of the Native people living on the two sides of the Bering Strait. Over the last five years I have repeatedly heard Yupik and Inupiaq people (both my fellow-students at the University and the people I met while doing fieldwork on the Alaska coast) commenting on the vast quantities of tea consumed by their relatives and acquaintances from Russia. Likewise, the Chukotkans who have spent some time in Alaska confessed to yearning for a cup of tea every time they were offered coffee—overwhelmingly the beverage of choice among their American kin. In addition to contrasting the actual substances, both sides take note of the clearly pronounced differences in the styles that the beverages are served. For example, when I visit with Nadezhda, my Chukotka-Yupik friend who now lives in Nome, we spend hours drinking tea in the best of Russian traditions. From a little tea pot decorated in Slavic folk motifs we pour the dark liquid into the porcelain cups, filling about one-third, and then dilute the brew with boiling water. I take mine straight from the cup, but Nadezhda performs a more elaborate procedure: little by little she pours the tea out of the cup into the matching saucer, which she then picks up with both hands, gently blows to cool the hot liquid, and finally swallows a tiny sip.

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69 See also the discussion on tea in the Chapter 4 section "Russian and Native Cuisines in Chukotka."

Each time the saucer meets her lips, the face of my friend lights up exuding an inimitable expression of ultimate satisfaction and tranquility. Once taken for granted, the much-treasured practice is now an explicit articulation of her identity as a person from Russia. To be polite, at other people's houses she accepts whatever she is offered, but at home, in spite of being teased by her American stepchildren for "drinking from a plate," she will not be caught with a coffee mug in hand and will never give up her precious saucer.

Together, historical accounts, informants' recollections, and the contemporary observations of tea consumption in the Bering Strait amount to a potent illustration of how the meanings and rules that guide this once new practice transform as it becomes a conventional part of the Chukchi and Yupik cultures. At different moments and for various reasons, items like tea, flour, and sugar have come to be regarded, in the words of Mintz as "the new necessities" (1986:143) in local lives. Each fulfilling a range of newly founded social, physiological, and emotional needs, these commodities had made the Native-European trade an essential cross-cultural encounter. Considered broadly, mushroom consumption can be seen as merely one of the numerous innovations that in the last 150 years have been absorbed into the culinary realms of the Yupik and Chukchi people. Focusing on mycophagy in the context of and in comparison to other changes unearths an intricate constellation of circumstances, which, I argue, make this particular transition a unique one.

An Overnight Change?

> Among Native people it happened like an explosion, I really noticed it, like an explosion of interest around 1954-55. Then in 1957 when we moved [from Old Chaplino to New Chaplino] we were finding

lots of mushrooms here too. Now we don't let go of this practice. (Interview Transcript 69, Novoe Chaplino 2004).

In August of 2001 I returned from two weeks of preliminary fieldwork in Chukotka, having had a chance to meet a few local residents and to observe some mushroom picking and processing activity. The handful of elders whom I interviewed in Provideniya and at a hunting camp called Inakhpak all happened to be Yupik from Novoe Chaplino; some still had their permanent residence in the village, while others had relocated to the district center. Their recollections of how mushroom picking had gained popularity among the indigenous residents were similar to that of Maksim Nikolaevich, the Yupik Chaplino elder quoted above. The events they described dated to the mid-1950s, right around the time of increasing military presence in the Bering Strait and the government's relocation of the village from Cape Chaplina to Tkachen Bay in 1957. Like Maksim Nikolaevich, at that time these informants were teenagers. Some concretely remembered being told about the culinary mushroom use by the border guards or their children. Others had a more general memory of learning either from Russian newcomers or from other, already knowledgeable Natives.

Despite variation, all testimonies suggested that the transition from the avoidance and fear associated with "the devil ears" to what Kerttula describes as "obsession with fungi [that] bordered on fetishism" (2000:109) was completed in just a few years. To me, both the degree and the swiftness of change seemed extraordinary: despite its prohibitive status, I thought, mushroom picking has become a wide-spread, and a more or less all-inclusive practice among the Chukotka Yupik. I also spoke with a few Chukchi people from whom I learned that mushrooms, now a regular part of their diet, in the past were regarded by the Chukchi as reindeer food. Beyond the indication that contemporary, human food use of mushrooms is a product of Russian influence, I was not able to obtain any significant historical

information and hypothesized that the course of the Chukchi transition to mycophagy resembles that of the Yupik. Recognizing that the scope of my data was narrow, I nevertheless was influenced by this initial impression when I returned to Chukotka in 2004 to conduct further fieldwork. What emerged from the seventy-eight interviews carried out that year in seven different settlements is a far more involved, amalgamated story where cultural identities, ecological knowledge, and land use values of the Yupik, Chukchi, and newcomer groups are entangled with demographic changes, generational rifts, geographic variations, and myriad vast transformations experienced in Chukotka during the Soviet period.

First of all, although the initial exposure of the Chukotka Natives to the idea of culinary mycophagy does correspond to the period of the 1950s, the integration of mushroom use into the Yupik and Chukchi culinary practices was far more gradual than I initially thought. More precisely, the transition took place in several waves. Secondly, because of the different socio-ecological adaptations and worldviews held by the Yupik, the coastal Chukchi, and the tundra Chukchi, this aspect of Russian influence was received differently by each of the groups, making it possible to distinguish between the various courses and degrees of absorption of mushroom use into Native cultures. Thirdly, the mechanisms by which the Yupik and Chukchi people have come to think of mushrooms as human food, to identify, to harvest, to prepare, and to consume them, to regard the process as indispensable, and to genuinely enjoy all of its components stem from nearly every formal and informal institution. The newly constructed and expanded villages, the schools, the military bases, the fox farms, the collectivized herding brigades, geological expeditions, and mixed marriages have each facilitated a dynamic social context, giving rise to the kind of cross-cultural encounter in which pertinent exchanges took place. I emphasize earlier that the history of mushroom use in Chukotka is also the legacy of Sovietization,

Cold War politics, collectivized economics, demographic shift, and industrial development—what Sidney Mintz would call the *outside* or "grand changes" that "ultimately set the outer boundaries" (1996:20, his italics) for determining everyday consumption practices and desires. Lastly, I have learned that not only was the transition variably experienced by people of different age groups, but also that each generation played its distinctive role in making mushroom use an integral part of Native subsistence. That is why, in addition to cultural and family backgrounds, landscape adaptations, places of residence, and other variables, I found that the ages of the informants also were an important factor.

Age Cohort Framework

Examining rapid social transition through an age-cohort paradigm can be an insightful and analytical framework for understanding how different generations experience, react, and adapt to change. This classificatory method rests on two principal questions: 1) how old people were when a particular event (or series of events) took place and 2) what significant transitions occurred when a group of persons were of a certain age. Because of its mutli-generational perspective, the age-cohort framework goes hand in hand with the ethnohistorical reconstructions of human experiences. In a brief overview, I try to capture the formative socio-political circumstances that had uniquely shaped the disposition of each Chukotka Native generation over the course of the century. Stories recounting the course of mushroom use show it arising at the background of vast transformations. They also enrich our insight into the everyday forums and fabrics of social change.

The Cohorts of Late 1800s through 1920s

To maintain ethnographic consistency, as well as for the sake of convenience, my analytical framework employs a modified version of the age-cohort paradigm that Krupnik and Vakhtin (1997) developed for their study of ecological knowledge among the Chukotka Yupik. Stressing that knowledge is always fluid, the authors decided to start their countdown at the beginning of the twentieth century, calling the adults of that time "Generation A." What we know about the ways of life and worldviews of this generation comes from secondary ethnographic and ethnohistoric sources (e.g. Bogoras 1900, 1904-09, 1975 [1910], 1913, Nelson 1983[1899], Ray 1975, Ushakov 1972). Although this period predates by several decades the advent of Soviet power or a permanent Russian presence in Chukotka, members of the A-Generation were brought up and socialized during a time when active trade involving Russian merchants, American whalers, and Native people living on both sides of the Bering Strait was well underway. Certain exogenous foods and material objects had by then become part of the conventional living setting, while the desire to secure these items had its effects on the quantities and types of locally harvested commodities—ivory, furs, baleen—viable in commerce. Other implications of trade, such as extensive travel and cross-cultural contact, had also brought about some knowledge exchange and diffusion of ideas. For example, the venue known as the Aniui fair (*Anyuiskaya yarmarka*), which took place in the Yukaghir territory of Chukotka on the Aniui tributary of the Kolyma River, was attended by representatives of at least five different Native groups and Russian entrepreneurs from as far away as Yakutsk (Ray 1975). Particularly meaningful for this study are the connections between the coastal settlements on the Chukchi Peninsula and populations of interior Chukotka, which definitely facilitated diffusion of folklore and other ideas (see, for example, the discussion of Kele stories in Chapter 2).

Despite ongoing external influences, the epoch of the A-Generation is still the time when interactions between the Native groups, incoming traders, and the relatively few long-term settlers was inspired by the groups' shared interests in one another. Occasional Christian baptisms took place, as well as some forms of official and unofficial coercion, but by and large, in appropriating certain elements of Russian and Euro-American cultures, the Native people were acting of their own accord, incorporating the innovations they enjoyed into the content and cadence of familiar everyday life. The same is true for the formative years of the B-Generation, born approximately between 1900 and 1925. Early agents of Soviet power began to emerge in Chukotka only after this period, in the form of *kul'tbazy* "culture bases," which, in the words of Gray were "the front-line Soviet strategy for establishing civilization in the North" (2005:194).

Culture bases appeared both in stationary and mobile versions (the latter, called *krasnaia yaranga* "the red tent," was intended for the nomadic reindeer herders) and were meant to provide formal education, medical and veterinary services, entertainment, some dining and shopping opportunities, and equipment repair. *Krasnaia yaranga* is where reindeer herders first "saw cinema, heard radio, received the first qualified medical assistance, saw doctors and teachers, and experienced the diversity of the concern of the Soviet power for them" (Vdovin cited in Gray 2005:195). The pioneering Chukotka culture base, established in Lavrentiya in 1928, was preceded by the small one-teacher schools that began operating in coastal villages in the late 1920s (Dikov 1974:185).[70]

In the 1970s, when Krupnik and Vakhtin began conducting extensive fieldwork in the region, the B-Cohort was, by that time, a generation of elders.

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70 This information is somewhat inconsistent with Gray's account, which states: "The first Soviet school for indigenous children was opened at the "culture base" (*kul'tbaza*) in Uelen in 1923, and thereafter the number of schools grew steadily" (2005:104).

The authors regard this group as representative of the "old society," whose citizens "received a traditional upbringing, no systematic schooling, and often had limited fluency in Russian." Members of the B-generation "recognized and described the world primarily in the terms they had acquired in early childhood" (ibid.: 238). In my case, the primary sources of information about members of this cohort come from their living relatives and acquaintances, as the most senior person I interviewed in Chukotka was a Sireniki woman born in 1929. Sireniki happens to be the settlement where, during the 1930s, ethnographer Georgii Menovshchikov worked as a school teacher. Since the Sireniki members of the B-Generation are the parents and older relatives of the first students taught by Menovshchikov, we can gain some perspective on the worldviews and practices of this cohort from the ethnographic materials he collected (e.g. 2003, 1984, 1977, and 1959).

The Cohort of the 1930s

As follows, the C-Generation, born between the late 1920s and the 1930s, is the eldest cohort with whom I could interact directly. Brought up in the predominantly Native environments, this group had been a part of the Soviet society throughout their adult lives. Most in the C-Cohort are bilingual, speaking either Yupik or Chukchi (some people know both) and Russian. The latter they learned during their variable years of formal schooling; many had to use Russian extensively throughout their lives. I interviewed a total of seven members of this age group, four of them were Yupik, one is a coastal Chukchi, and one is a *tundrovik* and a retired reindeer herder. As children, they were the first cohort of Chukotka Natives subjected to the Soviet institutionalized attempts to transform indigenous cultures.

From the Writings of Georgii Menovshchikov

In addition to teaching the traditional academic disciplines, the Soviet education system was also geared toward instilling in the peoples of the North new types of aesthetic and hygienic norms. In the early 1930s incoming teachers began forming sanitary committees in Chukotkan coastal settlements. Initially, the sanitary committees consisted of leading pupils and acted only inside the schools. Menovshchikov describes the first sanitary committee in Sireniki as "the most necessary and important unit of the school's self government" (1977:69). Committee members' responsibilities included daily check-ups of their fellow students in order to make sure that everybody had a clean face, neck, hands, and ears. Those whose cleanliness was deemed unsatisfactory had to wash in the school tub prior to the start of classes. The school also supplied each student with a towel designated exclusively for his or her use. The students were encouraged to introduce washing habits to others in their households, although the older generations were opposed to washing for religious reasons. Washing at home was also difficult for most of the year because fresh water was rather scarce: melting snow required heating fuel, and the water obtained through this method was used for food preparation. The teachers and other Soviet activists understood that under such circumstances the hygiene practices introduced in schools were not likely to transfer over to the domestic realm.

In an effort to improve the efficiency of hygiene education, the sanitary committees soon expanded to include young adults—regarded as Native activists—who were to conduct community-wide cultural training programs. Committee members were to visit each dwelling in the village in order to instruct its inhabitants to keep the floors of the entryway and the inner room clean, to designate separate dishware for humans and dogs, to wash dishes with water and towel-dry them (rather than lick them clean), not to wash

hands and face with urine, and to air out the bedding hides every six days. The regional council instituted a contest for the neatest *yaranga* in each village. Once a week, the sanitary committee inspected all *yarangas* and, taking note of the appearance of its inhabitants, recorded a grade for everyone's sanitary condition. The winner received a prize. During the 1933 celebration of the anniversary of the October revolution, several families in Sireniki were awarded prizes, such as wash tubs, tea kettles, dress fabric, and finished clothing items (ibid.).

"Pioneers," the young Leninists, were the first in Sireniki to start washing personal garments. Menovshchikov recalls how on one occasion he was particularly touched when he witnessed a scene of three young children rinsing some clothes in the icy river water. When he approached, they complained about the frigid water temperature, but said that they are following his instructions on laundering regularly to prevent getting itchy skin (1977:74). A less successful outcome of Menovshchikov's efforts, took place while he was away from the village for a teachers' conference. In his absence, a group of young activists ordered all of the villagers to bathe in the river. Despite opposition, they managed to "wash" numerous village residents. Many were complaining of not feeling well afterwards and one young boy came down with a fever. On this occasion Menovshchikov actually sided with the elders, joining them in scolding the activists at a town meeting. From Menovshchikov's descriptions of the daily cleanliness check-ups in schools, household visits, the contest for the neatest *yaranga*, and various other activities of the sanitary committees, it appears that the teaching of hygiene practices was one of the major priorities of the Soviet social engineering in Chukotkan communities.

Local Perspectives

Born in the 1930s, the representatives of the C-Cohort have not retained personal memories of the early stages of the events that Menovshchikov describes. However, life in Native villages continued at a similar pace well into the 1950s, when the Soviet government launched a large-scale housing construction followed by the creation of boarding schools, closure of the "economically unviable" villages, and creation of non-indigenous enterprises. Therefore, childhood recollections of the C-Generation members whom I interviewed in 2004 closely resembled Menovshchokov's testimonies, relating the stories of cleanliness competitions and "the neatest *yaranga* awards." (An exception to this is one man, who, being a tundra Chukchi, had little village experience as a child). I consider myself very fortunate having had the chance to meet and interview these elders as they, drawing on their own and their parents' memories, rendered a portrait of life in Chukotka at the dawn of the Soviet century. While no applause was offered for the ideology of that time, I heard much praise for the courageous efforts of the first teachers and the hardships they had to endure. Recounting myriad chores attended to by her elementary school teacher, Vera Alekseevna, an Enmelen elder, marveled at her extraordinary abilities:

> I don't know how they managed, those teachers... they must have gone through rigorous preparations before they were sent up here: we did not speak a word of Russian! We had to memorize words like *stol* [table], and we did not have tables because there were only *yarangas* at that time, *skameika* [bench], *okno*, *o-k-n-o* [window], we had to sound it out letter by letter, because we did not have a window... oh, how they suffered! Now I am trying to imagine and I can't: what kind of hardships they had to endure... Oh, what teachers! They looked after sanitation, since there were only *yarangas* here. They even traveled twelve

> kilometers [to the Enmelenka River]: some *yarangas* were standing there too. They checked on the sanitary conditions, to make sure that people maintained a tidy dwelling, do laundry, so that the *polog* is clean... And they organized all the cultural events, since there was no *klub* [cultural center] then... they made sure people had clean towels, tea kettles—those were stained black, because people cooked over fire, and [the teachers] made sure that people washed the kettles, the dishes; they checked on everything. They did so much. They probably stayed home only while sleeping. (Interview Transcript 71, Enmelen 2004).

With the exception of the four years she spent attending middle school in Anadyr, Vera Alekseevna has lived all of her life in Enmelen. Like others of her generation, she has vast knowledge of the traditional coastal Chukchi culture, which she acquired through first-hand experiences. Yet it appears that from very early age her consciousness was being infused with the spirit of patriotism and appreciation for changes inflicted by the Soviet system. This feeling was fostered by the school and also cultivated at home. Vera Alekseevna's father, in her own words, "deeply respected the newcomers" and wanted his children to get a formal education. Using the fabric left over from the flour bags "imported from America," he would sew the white shirts that they wore to classes. Vera Alekseevna's mother, on the other hand, although supportive of the children's schooling, was less enthusiastic about some other, more invasive changes that came later on. She did not, for example, want to leave the *yaranga* when the rest of the family was moving into a newly constructed wooden house.

Vera Alekseevna's testimony echoes the cautions put forward by Bloch (2004) and Gray (2005), who point out that Soviet policies, although criticized for their forceful changes, are often regarded quite positively by the indigenous people. It also supports Kerttula's assertion that rather than just

being "passive recipients of Soviet colonialism" Chukotka Natives (and other northern peoples) "actively participated in their own transformation" (2000:15). At the same time, I consulted a number of people from younger cohorts who said that the perspectives of their parents and grandparents were quite opposite to that of Vera Alekseevna. Growing up they were consistently hearing the elders' predictions that the incoming population will one day evacuate Chukotka, taking with them all the infrastructure, and warned to trust neither the newcomers nor the Soviet system in general. Thus, from the early days of its presence in Chukotka, the Soviet state and its many programs inspired mixed reactions from the indigenous residents. This diversity of views held by the members of Generation C is also found among other age groups.

The Cohort of the Period 1940-1955

Although the D-Generation—born between 1940 and 1955—regards the previous cohort as "the elders, the experts, and the connoisseurs of tradition" (Krupnik and Vakhtin 1997:238), its more mature representatives are, nowadays, also regarded as elders. This status is ascribed to them by self-designation and by others in their communities, and is especially true for those who have adult grandchildren, which is often the case for people around the age of sixty.[71] Most people in this cohort grew up in either Yupik

71 When sharing this paradigm with the people of the same age group who live in the United States, whether in written or verbal forms, I often get sensitive and rather critical reactions from those who consider terms like "elder" offensive (at least for the individuals under eighty) and do not wish to think of themselves or their contemporaries as such. My Naukan Yupik friend periodically reflects on this subject, explaining that while in Alaska she "would not even dare to think of [herself] as someone who is anywhere close to being an elder," in her native Chukotka she represents the older, more knowledgeable generation. In her case, being one of the last speakers of Naukan Yupik who was actually born in Naukan—a village closed by the Soviet government in 1958—is what primarily defines her elder status. She often calls herself and her few childhood friends "the last of the Mohicans" (an expression derived from the title of the novel by James Fenimore Cooper widely read in the former Soviet Union). She thinks that being called an elder is an honor.

or Chukchi speaking households, except for those who come from "mixed" marriage families where one parent is Russian. Many have completed secondary school in Russian, some have attended vocational schools in Anadyr, and some have earned higher education degrees from institutions in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Khabarovsk, and Magadan, among other cities. Krupnik and Vakhtin state that the Yupik speakers of this cohort "use their mother tongue on rare occasions... and by their own accounts, think primarily in Russian" (ibid.). From my observations, this characterization applies to a lesser extent among the Chukchi people. While it is true that Russian is the predominant lingua-franca in all Chukotka villages, I witnessed a number of occasions where people of this age-group used Chukchi or a mixed flow of Chukchi and Russian in communicating with their contemporaries or with younger people.

Perhaps one of the factors denoting the elder status of this cohort is the fact that many of its members spent part of their childhood living in *yarangas*, thereby maintaining a vast knowledge of the Yupik and Chukchi material cultures. It was while they were children and teenagers that the Soviet government had initiated rapid and vast transformations. Small village schools and certain economic reforms were instituted throughout the Soviet North in the 1930s, but the "rhythm of life among the northern peoples did not," as Igor Krupnik notes, "appreciably change until the 1950s" (1993:64). On the Chukotka Peninsula the major transitions extend into an even later period, and it is usually the decade of the 1960s that is regarded by local people as *perelomniyie gody* "the rupture years." Kerttula describes the Soviet social science literature of the time as "laundry lists of 'achievements'" (2000:13) parading "well-built comfortable housing, heated with anthracite... furnished with beds, chairs, tables... cloth trousers, jackets, coats, leather and rubber boots... airmail regularly delivers newspapers, magazines, and letters

to remote tundra villages" (Antropova and Kuznetsova 1964:832 cited in Kerttula: ibid.).

The course of ideologically driven changes specifically aimed to transform the indigenous ways of life coincided with the emergence of Cold War politics, intensive exploration of mining resources, and the fast growth of extractive industries. The increasing militarization and industrialization associated with these activities brought on a tremendous rise in the influx of newcomers and the expansion of civilian infrastructure. Between 1960 and 1990, the number of nonindigenous residents expanded to become ten times larger than the Native population, peaking at 160,000 (Kaiser cited in Thompson 2005:59). The relative autonomy, which, largely due to its remoteness, the region retained throughout the era of Russian exploration and the early periods of the Soviet Union, was followed by the swift changes of the 1960s that caused numerous social disruptions. Niobe Thompson rightfully observes that "in contrast to other northern regions, Chukotka lacked a history of gradual colonization and incremental settlement" (2005:59).

How each of the innovations was received, how the State-imposed ideology affected Native consciousness and identity, how the social and economic transitions played out in the everyday lives of the local people varies greatly among families and individuals. During their youth, people born in the 1940s and 1950s were still surrounded by the carriers of views and traditions existing in pre-Soviet times, when the Great Transformation era was swiftly ascending from dawn into zenith. At the same time, they were being socialized in state schools, speaking in Russian and learning about the ways of thinking and living prescribed by the Soviet ideology. Those coming from coastal families now lived in centralized mixed-population villages, consolidated from smaller household clusters, or clans, that used to stand at a greater distance from one another. Day in and day out, the fruits of their formal education were filtered in domestic contexts, and vice versa. The

children of the reindeer herders resided in the schools' boarding facilities—*internaty*—September to May and spent most of their summer and winter holidays with their parents in the remote tundra camps. Whatever the individual situation, the vast majority of young people of the time had to live in two worlds, alternating between the explicitly atheistic doctrine taught in schools and the indigenous spirituality upheld by their elders. Some had committed to one kind of view, whereas others have maintained a pluralistic, uniquely syncretized perspective throughout their lives.

The study for which Krupnik and Vakhtin had originally designed the current age-cohort paradigm is concerned with the transmission and transformation of indigenous ecological knowledge. However, I am also interested in the oral history of the early Soviet period in Chukotka, and therefore draw substantially on the nineteen extensive interviews that I conducted with the members of the D-Generation. Born in traditional dwellings, having witnessed multiple reincarnations of village housing and raised simultaneously by the Soviet state and the old indigenous society, people of this age group bear witness to the entire lifetime of Soviet Chukotka: from its vivacious birth to its gloomy ending. Nowadays, they are rapidly becoming the last living veterans of the times that preceded the Great Transformation.

The Cohort of the 1960s and 1970s

For the members of the E-Generation, born in the1960s and 1970s,[72] Russian is the first and in some cases only language. The older members of their households may have used Yupik or Chukchi on a regular basis, but Russian dominated virtually all spheres of their public and private lives. Their formative years were spent chiefly in mixed-population towns and villages,

72 Krupnik and Vakhtin (1997) construct the E-Generation as the cohort born in the 1960s. In the next section I provide the reasons for choosing to modify this portion of the paradigm.

with the Great Transformation hastily underway. Together with language shift, the state-run boarding schools, attended the by the vast majority of the E-Generation, have created a further social gap between this cohort and their elders. Increasingly, the indigenous youth embraced behavior norms and aesthetics stemming from the western Russian society. While the persistent promotion of atheistic ideals has not reached so far as to completely vanquish the indigenous spirituality, they did play a part in generating a new, more secularized view of their surrounding world. All that does not mean that, in becoming more Russified, the Yupik and Chukchi people have merged into a homogenous pan-Soviet population. On the contrary, the regular contact between the Yupik and Chukchi now living in the same settlements has magnified the cultural differences, enhancing the feeling of an explicitly distinct identity of each group (cf. Gray 2005, Kerttula 2000).

Another important transition in the lives of Chukotka Natives taking place during the "rupture years" was the shift from an indigenous to a chiefly Russian pattern of eating. A whole range of factors prompted this changeover. With the appearance of schools and daycares, collectivized production, nonindigenous enterprises, and various administrative apparatuses, came the everyday structure and pace of life that dictated a new eating schedule. State control over fishing and hunting resulted in limited access to local foods, while the expansion of an infrastructure associated with the influx of the non-Native population entailed a growing assortment of grocery items available for purchase.[73] Local food production has also transformed (Figures 45-47) from relying solely on wild animals to now

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73 Compared to the rest of the Soviet Union, even to other northern regions, Chukotka was particularly well supplied with groceries and various consumer goods, many of which were in acute deficit elsewhere (cf. Kettula 2000, Thompson 2005). This has to do with the Soviet system of distribution that privileged the regions considered remote, climatically unfavorable, and difficult for living.

Figure 45: Poultry farms were among the many Soviet-brought innovations in Chukotka. (Courtesy of the Lavrentiya Regional Museum)

Figure 46: Harvesting cucumbers at a greenhouse of the Lenin's Way State Farm in Loreno. (Courtesy of the Lavrentiya Regional Museum)

Figure 47: In the jubilee photo album of the Lenin's Way State Farm this photo has a caption "Reindeer herder Ivan Vasilievich changes professions." Quite likely, the title is also an allusion to a 1974 comedy film by Leonid Gaidai "Ivan Vasilievich Changes Professions," in which a twentieth century citizen travels back in time to assume to the post of Czar Ivan the Terrible. (Photo courtesy of the Lavrentiya Regional Museum)

including poultry, swine, and cattle[74] farming and greenhouse vegetable cultivation. This complex of changes is a direct outcome of concurrent socio-political processes—Sovietization, militarization, industrialization, etc.—that constitute the outside meaning of consumption (cf. Mintz 1996).

The Cohort of the 1980s

The paradigm developed by Krupnik and Vakhtin (1997) includes a total of five age groups, A through E, where the E-Generation constitutes the youngest cohort of adults. In order to fit the circumstances of my 2004 fieldwork, I modified the paradigm, adding another cohort. In the given framework, the E-group is constructed as the individuals born in the 1960s and 1970s, while those born after 1980—the F-Generation—are regarded as the youngest cohort. Entering the field a decade after the last phase of Krupnik and Vakhtim's (1997) study, I was able to consult a whole new group of young adults in their late teens and early twenties. The formative years of this cohort were spent in a unique socio-political context: their teenage years correspond to the time of break-up of the Soviet Union and they were entering adulthood during the crises caused by the post-Soviet collapse. Because of that, the economic prosperity (or at least security), capacious infrastructure, and ample assortments of goods in the village shops that existed during the Soviet era only lasted through their childhood and are hardly a part of this generation's conscious experience.[75] Finally, as I explain in Chapter 4, for

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74 The acceptance of beef is another example of a sensual perception categorically transformed in the Chukchi context. According to Bogoras, Chukchi people used to have an aversion to beef: his numerous informants regarded the cow as a "filthy animal" (1904-09:40), whose meat and dung have the same unpleasant odor. Some individuals, apparently, found the smell so intolerable that they refused to enter the room when beef was being cooked.

75 It is worth noting that with many social and economic conditions long-gone, Chukotka (possibly with the exception of Anadyr', the capital) had retained more of the overall "Soviet feel" than other parts of the Soviet Union. In his discussion of the Soviet-era settler identity versus that of the post-Soviet modernizers Thompson (2005) examines this point in detail.

many in this younger cohort mushroom picking is an inherently local practice, part of the overall subsistence cycle and a source of locally procured foods, which since the post-Soviet crises have reacquired their livelihood importance. At the beginning of an interview with a group of twenty-year old men, when I asked whether they pick mushrooms, in unison, all four responded: "*estestvenno*!" ("naturally!").

Conversing with the seasonal construction workers and young teachers from central Russia, I also repeatedly heard a reflection that coming to Chukotka, for them, was like traveling back in time to the days of the Soviet Union. For the seasonal laborers, the atmosphere in shops and offices, the excruciatingly dawdling service and the vast bureaucracies, were the most reminiscent of the good old days. The teachers were amused to find out that certain patriotic ceremonies, such as military-style marching in honor of the Day of the Defender of the Motherland (February 23, formerly the Day of the Soviet Army and Navy), were still practiced in Chukotka. "Someone ought to tell them that on the mainland this is no longer done," one of them remarked sarcastically.

ETHNOMYCOLOGY AS ETHNOHISTORY:

MUSHROOMS AND CROSS-CULTURAL ENTANGLEMENTS

CHAPTER 6

How would the Russian and Euro-American colonial influences play out on their respective sides of the Bering Strait if the border regime and Cold War politics had not been put in place? To what extent would indigenous residents of the two coasts succumb to national differences had they been able to continue traveling freely between the continents, influencing one another's practices and beliefs? For the enthusiasts of Beringian heritage, these questions are as provocative as they are unanswerable. Naturally, I like to ponder the subject in general, as well as specifically with regard to mushrooms. While widespread diffusion is unlikely, perhaps with perpetual influence drifting from the Russian side, some level of interest in mushroom picking could arise in Alaska. Coincidently, the Cold War atmosphere that sealed both sides from contact and exchanges with each other—thereby preserving mycophagy as a strictly Russian-side practice— was, in fact, the very politics that initially brought the knowledge of mushroom picking to Chukotka, as the first collecting activities are believed to be linked to the appearance of Russian soldiers in the Chukotka villages.

Mushrooms in the Border Zone

According to local accounts, some time around1950, certain indigenous residents had begun collecting mushrooms at the instruction, or upon request, that they received from the border guards. The elders who provided this information recalled that at that time Native people did not yet pick mushrooms for personal use, but only in order to barter for flour, tobacco, and

other commodities that could be obtained from soldiers. It is no accident then that, chronologically, the first memories of mushroom picking come from Sireniki and Novoe Chaplino—the villages standing in close proximity to the patrolling stations established in the early years of the border regime. The following testimonies depict the circumstances of those exchanges:

> When border guards came here in 1949, I used to pick [mushrooms] and sell them or exchange for flour or sugar... Well, they picked for themselves too, and often they ended up not wanting our harvest, because at first we did not know what makes a good quality mushroom. Somehow we would negotiate. We mainly needed flour, sugar, matches, tobacco—whatever they give you, I guess. For a bucket [of mushrooms] you could get a kilo of sugar or flour, ten boxes of matches: it's pretty good... It is only recently that people started picking mushrooms around here: first in the 1950s, but very cautiously, nobody ate them then. I remember some time in the 1970s this elderly couple collected a huge pile and then were afraid to deal with them, so I took their mushrooms and cleaned and cooked them for this couple... At first older people were really wary of young people picking mushrooms. You see: for no other living organism, not for plants, not for roots, is there any kind of association with the demons. This word is only connected to mushrooms. One could suppose it is because some mushrooms are hallucinogenic, like the fly-agaric, but those are not found around here: they grow in the tundra much further south. (Interview Transcript 66, Sireniki 2004).
>
> Growing up we were always taught that mushrooms are devil ears or canes... *Tughnyzak sigutshak* or *tughnyzak ayavik* [in Sireniki Yupik]. We did not pick them, did not eat them. If you touch one, this is what you had to do [blow at fingers], probably to avoid contamination. Turned out that mushrooms are food, tasty food! They tricked us, our

> grandparents. My mother picked mushrooms, but she did not eat them... The border guard, an officer, came to us once and brought some mushrooms to show my mother, to tell her which kinds he wanted her to pick. After that she would go collecting and then brought [the mushrooms] to the border station to trade for flour, sugar, and whatever else. But she did not eat them and we did not eat them. It is only when we became adults, already when I had children, I started picking them. Now we eat them a lot, cooking them in all kinds of ways: frying, marinating... My daughters pick and so do my grandchildren. And they are so tasty! They really tricked us, our grandparents. I don't know why, but they did [chuckles]. (Interview Transcript 14, Sireniki 2004).

Having learned from the border guards, some people also started selling their harvests, fresh or dried, to the ships that delivered construction materials and other supplies to the village. It is difficult to estimate what percentage of the local population was involved in these ventures. The Chaplino elder whom I quote in the previous chapter (see the beginning of the "Understanding the Circumstances..." section) states that the Native interest in mushrooms had escalated "like an explosion," in the mid-1950s. Yet, the majority of the D and E cohorts said their parents did not collect either commercially or for personal use. Perhaps against the background of total avoidance, the very appearance of picking looked significant to him. The accounts above also suggest that, having started as a trading endeavor, mushroom gathering did not enter the subsistence realm until much later. A Nunligran woman from the D-Cohort said that she too had first learned about mushroom consumption in the 1950s, but the context, in her case, was the boarding school:

> In the 1950s I was going to school here in the village and my parents came with the reindeer sledge to take me back to the tundra for

> holidays or when the camp was near the village... Our *internat* teacher picked mushrooms almost every day in the summer. She taught us and we picked with her, but I never ate the fried ones or the soup they made for us in school. I just did not like them, I did not think they were palatable. It was as an adult when I started liking them and picking them for myself and taking my children. My parents, they were *tundroviki*, they never understood what it is to pick mushrooms. Local people did not eat mushrooms. Reindeer, they like to eat them! They simply go crazy. My mother would always say about the newcomers, 'Why do they pick those mushrooms? What are they, reindeer?' (Interview Transcript 54, Nunligran 2004).

Although aking place in different circumstances, the given encounter develops into a similar course of events, where local people learn about mushroom picking from the newcomers and engage in picking for trade or—as in the latter case—out of politeness or obligation. Vera Alekseevna, an Enmelen elder, said that she clearly remembers that the first *gribnik* in her village was the head of the collective farm in the 1950s. Apparently he tried to encourage the local people to pick for the Collective, but Vera Alekseevna could not recall whether anyone, in fact, got involved in mushroom harvest as a result. Overall, it seems that at that time, neither the exposure nor the experience gave rise to an immediate interest in harvesting mushrooms for personal use.

A Primary Subject in the Secondary School

From 1960 onward, it appears that mushroom gathering increasingly becomes an activity prescribed in the summer camps hosted by village schools. In the beginning, the situation triggered mixed reactions among the

students' family members. Perhaps in rare cases the parents or others in the household had decided to try out picking for themselves, but the stories that I have been told describe the sentiments of either perplexed indifference or caution mixed with panic and admonition. The first kind of attitude, generally characteristic of the Chukchi, resembles the one expressed by the mother of the Nunligran woman quoted earlier. The news of humans engaging in such a peculiar practice did not arouse in her outrage or trepidation, but a mere puzzlement. "Why do they pick those mushrooms? What are they, reindeer?" was what she made of this behavior so unusual for people,. In Yupik families, new experiments were received with far more apprehension. Here, for example, is an anecdote shared by Rima, a former Sireniki resident I interviewed in Enmelen (where she has been living since she got married). The situation she describes had unfolded when she came home from a day camp excursion, bringing her share of the fresh mushroom harvest, part of which was already prepared and served at the boarding school dinner:

> Rima: My mother was very worried and my grandmother scolded, 'why did you eat those *tunigram sigutshak* [devil ears]?' They did not sleep that night and after I went to bed they woke me up several times through the night to make sure that I was acting normal.
>
> Sveta: Why were they so worried?
>
> Rima: Because these were *tunigram sigutshak*, you should not eat them, just do this [blow at your finger] if you touch them by accident.
>
> Sveta: Did you then tell your teachers what happened?
>
> Rima: Yes, and other kids too, the same thing in their houses. So they told us from now on to just turn all of the mushrooms we collect over to the *internat*. And that is what we did, we just brought them to the *internat* and the cooks used them for our meals. They dried them and everything there too. (Interview Transcript 52, Enmelen 2004).

The circumstances surrounding Rima's story stem from the social context common to the majority of Chukotka Natives born in the 1950s. Though she spoke Yupik as her first language, her values and ecological knowledge have clearly been influenced by the formal schooling and summer camp interactions and were undoubtedly more Russified than those of her parents and grandparents. Still, the ability to communicate in Yupik and in Russian has granted her versatility in both worlds: at home and at school, she had understood what was and what was not appropriate and did her best to please the authorities in each context. In contrast, Sasha's narrative divulges a firm language barrier and a much more abrupt generational divide:

> Sasha: I grew up picking mushrooms. I picked them throughout my youth. But my grandmother's reaction was always negative.
>
> Sveta: What would your grandmother say?
>
> Sasha: I don't exactly know. She did not speak Russian. I did not speak Yupik. (Interview Transcript 18, Novoe Chaplino 2004).

Two kinds of scenarios are emerging thus far that describe mushroom-related experiences of the Yupik and Chukchi through the 1950s and 1960s. In the earliest instances, some local residents took up mushroom picking as a commercial venture that did not transfer to the domestic realm. Obviously, the individuals who collect mushrooms in order to barter have come to neglect or abandon the danger that *sygutmykytakh* or *tunigram sigutshak* are ascribed by other Yupik people. Still, at that time, these selected entrepreneurs did not yet turn into mushroom aficionados. In the next phase, mushrooms were harvested, as well as consumed by Native youth. However, the practice was largely restricted to school or summer camp activities and was not accepted in family contexts.

It is important to keep in mind that the general mycophilic disposition characteristic of the Russian culture does not mean that every Russian or Russified person is a mushroom enthusiast. Some individuals who enjoy

eating mushrooms may not necessarily be passionate about harvesting or have the knowledge necessary for identification, processing, and cooking. Thus it was merely a matter of chance that in certain villages the early newcomers—teachers, administrators, border guards—turned out to be mushroom aficionados, while in other places mushroom picking remained unknown until the later phases of population influx. We can speculate that a similar turn of events is the reason Georgii Menovshchikov's writings, or the school-years recollections of the C-Cohort elders, make no mention of mushrooms. I broached this subject with several people from the C and D groups, asking why they thought that mushroom picking in Chukotka did not seem to date back to the time of the first *yaranga*-schools and the pioneering teachers. In their view, the enormous workloads of the Menovshchikov-era teachers, who, in addition to the formal curriculum took pains to organizw community events and administer the hygiene education, simply did not have room for recreational outings. *Im bylo ne do gribov* "they could not bother with mushrooms" is what I was told, which certainly is a plausible interpretation. Of course it is also possible that some mushroom harvesting and knowledge exchanges had occurred during that era, but they did not cause any significant changes and have neither been captured by historical documents nor become part of local memory.

Native people I interviewed in Uelen said they did not start picking mushrooms until the mid-1970s or early 1980s, having learned about identifying and preparing them only as adults. During a group interview with the day care staff, I recorded a tale of the first connoisseur in that village:

> There was a woman here, before my time—I have been here for twenty-two years and I think she worked here in the 1960s—she was the one who got everyone excited about mushroom picking. During the season by five o'clock in the morning you could already see her on the horizon. By the time the daycare opened she already had two

> buckets of mushrooms stowed away in the kitchen. I heard she gave lessons in marinating. She was so thorough about the procedure that she even potted a shrub of black currant, so that its leaves could be used for the marinade. We are still cultivating black currant here, right here at the daycare. (Interview Transcript 20, Uelen 2004).

Among the Enmelen residents, several in the D-Cohort recalled seeing mushrooms being dried at the house shared by their school teachers. "My brother pointed [at the mushrooms] and said 'look, they pick them for something.' Only later, much later, I learned that they are tasty food" (Interview Transcript 45, Enmelen 2004), said Tatiana Federovna, a coastal Chukchi born in 1949.

Tundra Encounters of the "Third Kingdom" Kind

A woman who was born in the tundra and attended the Enmelen boarding school related the following episode:

> I remember very well that when I was eleven... that means... just a minute... that means it was the year 1976. We were out on a hike with our summer camp caretakers and we came across another group of school children. They were from Provideniya, mostly newcomer children. They were on a long many-day hiking trip. I remember they spent some days with the reindeer-herding brigade. They invited our group to eat with them. They wanted to treat us. That's when I tried mushrooms first. I remember it vividly: a large, large pan over the fire. Then later I collected some here on the slope, mountain mushrooms, I guess, brought them home and my grandfather said 'why did you pick them, when nobody eats them?' (Interview Transcript 24, Enmelen 2004).

In the course of my fieldwork the anecdote above was the first of its kind, where a tundra Chukchi, who has been placed in the village to attend school, learns about mushrooms, not in the village, but back in the tundra, when she comes across a group of Russians during an organized summer camp excursion. Astounded, during the evening that followed the interview I could not stop from reiterating the scenario, thinking, "what are the chances?" But no further than the next day a similar development was narrated by another childhood *tundrovichka* [female tundra-dweller]. Although this cross-cultural encounter unfolded in a slightly different setting (at a geologist camp), Elizaveta Vasilievna's learning about mushrooms from the Russians also involved a return from the village to her native tundra:

> I spent all the winters here in the village, but for the summers I joined my parents in the tundra in the reindeer herding brigade. One summer our *yarangas* were situated close to a geologist field camp, maybe within ten-thirteen kilometers. There is a large river, Erguem, and Vatamngaivaam is a tributary. They had a large camp there, between Vatamngaivaam and Lake Pechgynmygytgyn called Pepe or Pepen in Russian. They invited us to visit and we used to walk over there. They cooked mushrooms there in large quantities—that I remember very clearly. My father and uncles would sit down to eat with them. To us, the kids, they gave candy. Now I know that mushrooms are a lot of work—it's not just picking, but also cleaning—so I suppose they did not want to feed all of us regularly, only the elders, out of respect I guess. That was when I first saw mushrooms being eaten. Then, when I was around sixteen or seventeen, I also tried them here in the village, someone treated me. But for myself I did not start picking until my twenties. That was in late 1970s and by that time everyone else was already picking. Now I have a six bucket [annual] quota—that's my goal—half for drying, half for marinating; marinating I only learned

> recently, when we had hunger here in the late 1990s. And of course we eat plenty of fresh mushrooms all through the summer. (Interview Transcript 64, Enmelen 2004).

Unique in its own right, the story nevertheless portrays a recurring theme, where in some sort of social exchange between the Chukotka Natives and the Russians one learns from the other about this previously unpracticed activity and perhaps experiences a new culinary sensation. At a young age during this initial encounter, these Yupik and Chukchi individuals did not take up mushroom picking until adulthood, when they suddenly found themselves surrounded by other enthusiasts.

At a certain point, as the number of newcomers and Natives familiar with mushroom consumption continued to rise, the villages, herder camps, and tundra migration routes become more and more populated with *gribniki*. Under these circumstances, even an inexperienced individual put "face to face" with harvested mushrooms was likely to find competent help nearby, as was the case in this situation:

> I entered the *yaranga* and saw a pile of mushrooms on the floor. I asked my mother: 'where are these from?' I knew she did not pick them. She said '*vezdekhodchik* gave them to me. He picked too many. Now I don't know what to do with them.' I sorted through them, and cleaned and fried them. She tried them and later took to liking them gradually. (Interview Transcript 23, Enmelen 2004).

I must stress that not every encounter between a potential novice and a *gribnik* has led to the former becoming enthused about mushrooms. In some cases he or she continued to frown upon both the taste of mushrooms and the set of activities required for their harvest and preparation. This is especially true for the reindeer herders, many of whom to this day remain apathetic at best with respect to consumption and utterly hate the mushroom season from

a practical standpoint, as it can be hard to control the animals near the fruiting patches.

Sometimes, differences in the Russian and Chukchi perceived value of mushrooms have led to true conflicts of interest. For example, a retired herder whom I interviewed in Nunligran told a story about a Russian *traktorist* (tractor driver) who, having collected several bucket-loads, had spread his harvest on a large piece of tarp in order to sun-dry and then lay down for a nap. The combination of fresh tundra air and hours of collecting and waking can literally make one feel relaxed to the point of pleasant exhaustion. This must have been the case with the *traktorist* who slept so soundly that he remained oblivious to the herd approaching his camp and only awoke after the gluttonous reindeer swallowed every last one of his mushrooms. "What did he do when he saw what had happened?" I asked Yurii, the herder. "He was quiet at first, but then started cursing, and cursing, and cursing. He cursed for a long time, boy, did he curse! But what could I do? Reindeer, they love mushrooms: how could I stop that from happening?" (Interview Transcript 44, Nunligran 2004). Yurii chuckled the entire time he narrated this incident; his eyes sparkled with amusement. I could not help but think that recounting how the naïve *gribnik*'s scrupulous efforts had gone in vain due to the animals' impish behavior gave Yurii a special pleasure, the kind that only a reindeer herder could understand.

Another *tundrovichka*, who comes from a herder family and later worked in a herding brigade herself, is nowadays one of Enmelen's most respected *gribniki*. Her mycological knowledge is not associated with a special event. "I don't remember exactly how, but when I moved from the tundra to the village somehow I started picking them. Other people were picking and I guess I started picking too," she said rather blandly, and then suddenly offered this striking comparison:

> Reindeer herders don't like mushrooms because the reindeer start going crazy when approaching a mushroom patch. They run after them like we run to the store when there is vodka. It is so infuriating that one just wants to take a big stick and hit them. On the other hand, that [kind of behavior] is understandable: sometimes I think to myself 'oh, it is late, I should not walk too far,' but then I start finding mushrooms and I walk, and walk, and walk, like a reindeer [chuckles]! (Interview Transcript 4, Enmelen 2004).

Considered in the context of other interview materials, this lucid portrayal offers an inexorable link to the allegory drawn earlier by a B-Generation Chukchi, who said "what are they, reindeer?" In a conversation with her little daughter, the woman posed this rhetorical question in reference to the newcomers. Mushroom picking, at that time, was a culture-specific practice that signified their otherness. Nowadays it is the daughter's contemporary, also a Chukchi from a herder family, who puts forward the image of a mushroom-loving reindeer as a colorful metaphor for self. Born and raised in the tundra and having grown fond of mushroom collecting, she now understands how mushrooms can be utterly irritating for some and highly desired by others. Remarkably, the frustration in her tone turns into affection as she switches from ratifying the perspective of a herder and takes on the one of a *gribnik*, easily intoxicated by the process and pleasure of picking.

Not surprisingly, as mushroom harvesting was becoming more popular, the Native people were no longer finding out about it solely from the Russians, but were also, like as in the previous case, learning from each other. I have already shown that certain individuals associate their first exposure to mushroom consumption with a specific encounter that has made an impression and left a lasting memory. In every settlement though, I also interviewed a number of first-generation pickers who did not recall a

particular instance, but simply said that at some point "everybody was doing it" and they too, have simply "picked it up":

> Mushroom picking was not something that the Native people did. It came from Russians, the newcomers. My mother did not eat mushrooms, but while I was growing up I was aware that mushrooms are edible and that people pick them and cook them. When I was school-age [in the mid-1970s], it was already pretty widespread. I guess I just somehow picked it up. There are so many families here with mixed marriages: Russians and Natives. Maybe it is through them [that mushroom picking] became widespread. Our teachers in the summer camp, they took us on long hikes. We stayed out on the tundra for days at a time with them, picked mushrooms and cooked them right out there, on the tundra. I didn't bring them home then, but when I got older I started cooking them for my mother and then she herself started picking. Now she likes them a lot, we haul bucketfuls for her: *podberezoviki*, *gruzdi*, *gornyie*—that is what we like, but all mushrooms are good around here. Even the newcomers, those construction workers from Cheliabinsk,[76] they marvel how delicious the mushrooms are around here. I guess they are not used to seeing such quality: so beautiful, practically without worms. And I see on television and read about mushroom poisoning sometimes on the mainland, but here in Chukotka I have never heard of someone getting sick from eating mushrooms. I am a nurse; I work in the clinic and we have never had a single case: alcohol poisoning—now that happens [chuckles], but nothing happens from mushrooms. (Interview Transcript 15, Sireniki 2004).

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76 This refers to the seasonal laborers doing construction work in the village for one or several summers since 2002, in connection one of Governor Abramovich's initiatives on improving the living conditions in Chukotka.

This Sireniki resident is quite correct in suggesting that the Russian-Native marriages provided another significant disseminating context, where the Native spouse and his or her extended kin were influenced by the Russian family member and have in one way or another become involved with mushroom use. This was the case for several people I interviewed in Chukotka, as well as for my friend in Nome, whose Russian stepfather, she says, was "fanatical about mushroom picking." Coincidently, even his surname was the same as the common name for one of the bolete varieties, which is not an uncommon occurrence among Slavic peoples (cf. Wasson and Wasson 1957). "During the season," my friend recalls, "he brought loads of mushrooms," and she and her mother had to clean them. "I remember mother always complained how much work it is: takes hours, and she did not even like to eat them. But for me now there is no better treat than fried boletes, fresh from the tundra." (Interview Transcript 1, Nome 2001).

Chukotka in the 1970s:

Time of the Mushrooming Mushrooming

During fieldwork, as the volume of the materials I recorded was expanding, so did the variety of social contexts captured by these oral histories. I have found that the diversity of circumstances that facilitated the kinds of exchanges described in this chapter does not really fade away in the later phases of the Soviet period. What does change is the time frame in which the newly acquired knowledge is being put to practical use. The narratives of the early cross-cultural encounters draw up a vast assortment of situations yet exhibit a common trait, namely the temporal gap between the time when a novice is first exposed to either picking or consumption and the time when he or she becomes a mushroom aficionado and an active harvester.

The initial commercial ventures with the military do not extend into personal use, the skills acquired in school and summer camp do not resurface until adulthood, and the first chance to sample the flavor, the aroma, and the texture of cooked mushrooms does not arouse an urge for more. However, with some exceptions (predominantly among the reindeer herders), the individuals who first learn about mycophagy in their youth do take up mushroom picking later in life, come to regard it as an essential part of the procurement cycle, and, in several instances, even become known and respected as *gribniki*. By contrast, the pickers, whose first harvesting or consumption experience occurs in the 1970s—rather than the 1950s and 1960s, turn into regular users relatively quickly, as in the case of Nina:

> In 9th grade I was traveling by *vezdekhod* to the reindeer herding brigade and there were some Russians sharing the ride with us. They picked some mushrooms and they were frying them, and for me, I remember, this sight provoked some kind of aversion, it was so unpleasant. People from here, I mean Natives, did not like mushrooms. Reindeer, they like mushrooms, oh, yes, they do! But that time [the Russians] said, 'Nina, please have some, at least have a taste.' And to my surprise they turned out quite palatable, even tasty. After that I pretty much started picking. By that time it was actually becoming widespread, but somehow I did not get into it until later. Now I use them a lot in cooking, mainly dried ones... During the hunger years, especially in 1998, you could say that they saved us from starvation. (Interview Transcript 57, Nunligran 2004).

Why is there such a striking difference in the time lapse between Nina's course of transition and that of the individuals quoted earlier, those who did not start picking mushrooms until years after they had had their first taste or a harvesting experience? Why were their sensory impressions often negative, while Nina, albeit surprised, found her sample to be "quite palatable"? At the

time of Nina's introduction, mushroom picking had been practiced in the area for some time and, as she herself points out was "becoming widespread." Certainly, these are important factors. However, the key issue, I argue, is not in mycophagy *per se*, but in the fact that it accompanied a wider transition in food preferences, tastes, culinary practices, and the overall pattern of eating.

In a classic work on the anthropology of food, Farb and Armelagos state that "cuisine is basically as conservative as religion, language or any other aspect of culture" (1980:190). Analogously, Mintz (1996, 1986) observes that while periodic additions to the diet can be rather inconsequential for the overall pattern, notable changes in eating practices usually result from a major shift in the entire scope of everyday routines. Following this premise, Ellen Messer proposes that "to change food preferences and dietary structures there probably need to be not only the right ecological and political conditions but also some major social rupture that creates an opening for a new food or nutrition pattern and a reason for abandoning the old" (1997:102).

I think that in Chukotka, myriad Soviet-era changes described by the local testimonies, as well as the secondary sources (e.g. Gray 2005, Dikov 1974, Kerttula 2000, Krupnik and Vakhtin 1997, Thompson 2005), have undoubtedly amounted to the kind of "major social rupture" (Messer 1997:102) that could and did cause a significant dietary transition. The daily routines dictated by the schedules of work and schooling, the altered production and distribution of local food, and the expanding range of imported commodities sold in villages stores, have each played a role in transforming the meal times, structure, and composition. Also, the integration of the etiquette and aesthetics propagated among the Native people since the times of the pioneering "culture bases" has intensified during the rapid alteration of living conditions. The transfer from *yarangas* into houses had furnished the material pedestal for acting out the Russian-centric embodied

norms instilled, with variable success, by the different agents of Soviet power. Then came the new eating postures, dishware, and utensils—the whole complex of "table manners" that, with the elevation of mealtimes from the floor to the table, has acquired a more fitting context and created a hospitable atmosphere for the invasion and absorption of the new cuisine. The transformed spaces and pace of everyday life called for modifications in culinary practices that both accommodated and took advantage of the new living arrangements.

Undoubtedly, the Russification of taste did not play out evenly in different social environments and age cohorts, as well as among individual persons. Nevertheless, for many Chukotka Natives the social and ideological changes of the rupture years have also transformed the sensual realm, thereby placing mushrooms amid the many items that, unappealing in the past, suddenly seemed "quite palatable, even tasty," as Nina discovered upon her first appraisal.[77] Simultaneously, the growing popularity and the vast availability of mushrooms have facilitated the context and the means by which mycophagy has gained a regular spot on the Chukotka Native menu. As people continue to exchange samples and recipes, its culinary application acquires a wider scope. Tamara Grigorievna, a long-time settler and a respected mushroom connoisseur remembered instructing her co-workers at the Enmelen fox farm:

> Fur harvesting is very labor-intensive. It means to slaughter, to collect the pelts, to scrape off the fat. The twelve of us [farm employees] could not handle such a workload. And the rest of the village would come to

77 This raises the question of whether any elements of cuisine brought to Chukotka during the Great Transformation were resisted by Native youth. On the whole, I did not find a specific food item, or a recipe, that was notably rejected by the E-cohort, whose members were relatively quick to embrace mycophagy. Individual tastes, of course, did vary as they do to this day. A number of Native people, for example, said they continue to dislike vegetables, while others proudly showed me their indoor cultivations of potted cucumbers and tomato plants. I did note though that the individuals who did not care for vegetables still enjoyed eating mushrooms.

help us. Seventy-five people gathered during fur harvest seasons. We ate our meals together and when all the work was finished we had a celebration to congratulate one another. Everyone contributed, brought food to share. Some brought *uneo*, others brought meat, boiled flippers, potatoes. I brought mushrooms—marinated—three jars. And then we ate together. It was during November, December. By December 21, we turned the furs over to the post office and by January 5th a helicopter collected first from every village, then took them to Anadyr, and then to Irkutsk... In the summertime my co-workers said 'Tamara Grigorievna, this time we want to help you stockpile mushrooms. It would be nice if the fox farm had its own cache, and then we can treat everybody during the fur harvesting season.' And they came up with a plan: 'during our dinner break, we will go collecting and turn the mushrooms over to you, and you will prepare them.' I said, 'you ladies are smart. You know that two bucketfuls, if I start them at nine at night, it will only be three in the morning when I will be putting the lids on the jars. It's not a matter of ten minutes.' That is why I organized them collectively. 'Whoever wants to,' I said, 'let's get together and request transportation. Make it a fasting day [for the animals],' meaning you give a double dose to the animals in the morning—some eat right away, some later—and leave for the tundra. And we pick mushrooms. Or they pick and I have to stay on quality-control (it was hard for me not to pick when they are picking). So, when someone gets a bucketful, they come to me and flip it over, pouring out the mushrooms. I sort through their harvest and say: these we will marinate and the rest you can take home to dry. Then we all sit down, the school children also came with us, the older kids, the ones who worked at the farm to help us. We all sit down and clean the ones we will marinate. The second day, Sunday, we came

> back to the farm in the evening and left everything in cold storage. Next day when we came to work, we started the heating stove, and we have a forty-liter tub, the kind they would use to make soup in the cafeterias. And our furnace man would keep the stove going and heat the water. When the water comes to a boil, everyone would gather around me and I would show them how to do it... In short, everyone I taught that year stockpiled not only for themselves, but also for their relatives. (Interview Transcript 8, Enmelen 2004).

It appears that at the time of this event (summer of 1987, according to Tamara Grigorievna), marinated mushrooms had come to be regarded as delicacies by at least some indigenous residents. However, the narrative also points out that the dissemination of this cooking method in Chukotka extends into late the 1990s, "the hunger years," when a number of local people learned how to marinate for the first time. Thus even through the present time the culinary significance of mushrooms continues to expand.

Mycophagy during Food Crises in the Late 1990s

My fieldwork in Chukotka began several years after the period of disastrous food shortages that peaked in the late1990s. Nevertheless, the hunger years were still vividly remembered, and in a number of interview narratives people shared their recollections of hardships, losses, and survival strategies implemented during those arduous times. The words "hunger years" usually refer to the severe socio-economic crises that followed the post-Soviet collapse, when the crumbling infrastructure coupled with the regional government's astonishing mismanagement of resources had pushed most Chukotka settlements to the edge of survival. Salaries and pensions were not paid out for months, giving private entrepreneurs little incentive to

make deliveries, especially to villages, at a time when the state failed to supply even basic foodstuff and household items. In the meantime, state subsidies and field operations during the Soviet era that supported the collectivized forms of traditional enterprises like hunting and reindeer herding had all but disappeared, eliminating the means of obtaining fuel, transportation, ammunition, or the equipment necessary to conduct these activities. Explaining how they managed to get by, people emphasized creative use of local resources and reliance on subsistence and social networks.

Jack Goody rightfully notes that "famine often brings its own cuisine" (1982:59). In Chukotka, coping with the extreme shortages of the post-Soviet crises entailed, more than anything, determination and ingenuity in procuring and preparing food. Drawing descriptions of their survival strategies, a number of informants repeatedly stated, "not a single berry on the tundra was wasted," enunciating every word with a slogan-like perspicuity. Even those who previously went out on the tundra largely for recreation during the hunger years had to turn to gathering activities for sustenance (cf. Gray 2003). Not surprisingly, most households collected a wider variety and far greater quantities of berries, mushrooms, roots, and greens over the course of this trying period. Chukotka culinary innovations resulting from creative experiments of that time included a number of recipes that subjected locally procured foods to new methods of preparation, such as grinding into cutlets, spicing, and smoking the meat of whale, walrus or seal. This was primarily done by the settler residents who after a number of years of living in Chukotka still did not take a liking to the taste of marine mammal meat, unless its flavor and texture had been significantly altered. Some of these recipes have gained popularity and remained in use even after the range of cooking options has expanded.

Under the dire circumstances of the hunger years, mushrooms became an especially critical food source and were reportedly gathered in copious amounts. *My zachastuiu tol'ko etimi gribami i zhili* "we often subsisted on mushrooms alone," said one Provideniya resident, describing how almost every day she was trying to figure out a different way of preparing them. At the same time, a number of people emphasized that regional preferences for mushroom picking continued to hold up even during the hunger years. The Provideniya scene was again contrasted to villages:

> During the hunger years in Provideniya they even picked and fried *poganki*. When I heard about it, I thought, 'What is happing there?' In our village, no matter how bad it got, nobody picked or ate *poganki*[78] (Interview Transcript 34, Nunligran 2004).

While the district center stores were a little better supplied than were village stores, it was the selectivity in mushroom picking that this Nunligran woman used in order to indicate a difference in the conditions and standards of living.

A peculiar transition in the overall consumption pattern was that in the late 1990s, marinating mushrooms became more widespread and popular. Those who made canned reserves all along began to stockpile in greater quantities while others learned to marinate for the first time. We already know that under normal circumstances, pickled and marinated mushrooms are singled out as a delicacy—the meaning that defines how these mushrooms are selected, distributed, served, and consumed. At the time of my fieldwork, people were largely preparing their caches of glass jars with festive eating in mind. What happened during the hunger years is that tundra mushrooms became one of the remaining and most abundant local food source that was fairly easy and inexpensive to harvest: compared to animals and even fish, mushroom procurement requires very little in terms of equipment and

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78 A generic term that people use to refer to many varieties of little brown mushrooms or mushrooms they consider not edible.

supplies. Stripped of most desired foods and ending up with an unusually high volume of mushrooms, people were looking to diversify the ways of preparing the fungi, as well as to expand the overall scope of flavors available to them during shortages. Those who were previously relying solely on the gifts of others for occasional feasting now wanted a supply of their own. Aside from holiday gatherings, people tapped into their pantries more regularly, opening a jar of mushrooms just to eat a few with pasta or bread for an ordinary meal, thereby turning a delicacy into emergency food.

It is possible that the case of escalated mycophagy that took place in Chukotka over the years of the post-Soviet crises (which was likely the case in other parts of the Russian North as well) was the first large-scale occurrence of mushroom use for basic sustenance during famine in the circumpolar area. While increased consumption of berries, perennial greens, roots, and lichens is well-documented (e.g. Jones 1983, Kuhnlein and Turner 1991), we do not know of mushrooms being used during food shortages to any great extent. Eidlitz (1969), whose circumpolar food survey revealed that in the past mushrooms were hardly eaten throughout the North, lists some evidence of mycophagy taking place during severe famines in northern Sweden in the 1860s. She speculates that ethnohistorical accounts may understate the importance of mushrooms during shortages because of a general "negative attitude towards mushrooms as food" (1969:66).[79]

The fact that during the recent hardships Chukotka residents used mushrooms as emergency food extends the ethnographic perimeter of mycophagy, surfacing additional ground where the materialist and the symbolic attributes of eating, discussed in Chapter 4, can be further explored. On the one hand, the striking upsurge in the harvest of wild plants that

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79 As a provocative comparison, it is worth noting that Valentina Wasson (1957) explicitly connects Russian nation-wide mycophilia with the long legacy of recurring famines, explaining that mushrooms are best-known to poor people, who frequently experience hunger.

occurred in the late 1990s, which many local people perceived as the maximum utilization of tundra resources, is clearly a practical coping strategy—a tactic of mere survival. At the same time, we should not forget that, even during the hunger years, mushrooms were "good to eat" only after they have come to be regarded as so. For example, in the early 1900s it was flour—at the time an increasingly weighty commodity in the trade between the Native people and whalers—that served as a chief means of keeping off famine. According to Bogoras (1904-09), the annual quantity of wheat flour that whalers sold along the Chukotkan coast in the early 1900s averaged twenty-five hundred sacks (forty-four pounds per sack). "In truth," he writes, "during the spring of 1901, people in the village of Ekven, on Plover Bay, and also at Indian Point, lived chiefly on flour cakes baked with little oil" (1904-09:62).[80]

On the Alaskan side of the Bering Strait, Natives too regularly searched for ways to obtain flour when hunting resources were scarce (cf. Eide 1952, Lopp 2001). While mushrooms probably fruited just as abundantly at the dawn of the 20th century as they did in the late 1990s, during the earlier period they did not come in to use as emergency food, even though their procurement did not require entrepreneurial efforts or trading opportunities. The reason is that, at that time, they were simply not regarded as food. While on the Alaskan side this view is still intact, in contemporary Chukotka the idea is all but unthinkable. Mushrooms are now endowed with positive qualities both in nutritive and in symbolic senses, but the case at hand reaffirms that it is ultimately what is "good to think" that determines what should and should not be eaten.

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80 The three place names mentioned here refer to coastal localities on the Chukchi Peninsula. Ekven is close to the contemporary settlement of Uelen, while Plover Bay and Indian Point are on the southern tip of the Peninsula.

A Subject of Conversation in All Walks of Life

The narratives presented in this chapter, recounted by people of different ages and cultural backgrounds, capture a vast diversity of social environments. Reflecting on the episodes situated in schools, the herding brigade, the fox farm, the geologist camp, the border station as well as dozens of individual encounters unfolding in private and public domains, in the villages and out on the tundra, it seems that during the late Soviet period in Chukotka, there was hardly a context that, at one time or another, did not play host to a mushroom-related exchange. This diversity of encounters prompted by the vast socio-political changes—the *outside* meaning (Mintz 1996:20-23, his italics), examined through the prism of an age-cohort paradigm, reveals a sequence of phases, or waves, in which Yupik and Chukchi have made wild mushrooms a regular part of procurement and consumption activities. Each wave—the "discovery" of mushrooms as human food, the taste tests, the exchange of samples and recipes, the budding enthusiasm about picking—has served to further incorporate mushrooms into the local "dwelling" (Ingold 2000), enriching the social milieu associated with their harvest, processing, distribution, and eating, and thereby expanding the *inside* meaning (ibid.) of their use.

The history of mycophagy in Chukotka, as I have tried to show, is deeply entangled with the broader transitional processes taking place in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Thus far I have explored how the outside meaning, "the grand changes" (ibid.: 21), have prompted the culinary use of locally harvested mushrooms and shaped its contemporary character, as described in chapters 3 and 4. However, the relationship between the outside and inside meanings is not a one-way street: it is a dialectic process. The tunings of everyday life, though they may seem minute and inconsequential, do not just arise from the grand changes, but also contribute to their course. I

conclude this study by considering the implications of mycophagy, exploring the impact of this once new, and now well-integrated, practice on the constructions of social identity, natural environment, and land use values. Maintaining that mushrooms are uniquely positioned on both physical and historical landscapes, I argue that their use provided the Yupik, Chukchi, and Russian people in Chukotka a means of integrating with each other and coping with major transitions in their lives.

HOW THE DEVILS LOST HEARING, PEOPLE RIVALED REINDEER, AND MUSHROOMS GREW TALLER THAN TREES: ADOPTING MYCOPHAGY WHILE ADAPTING TO CHANGE

CHAPTER 7

At last, it may be that a sketch of culinary ethnomycology in the Bering Strait region is beginning to emerge. Its time span stretches over three major phases: we can talk about (1) the Native perspectives on mushrooms and mushroom picking prior to the Russian and Euro-American colonial influences, (2) the changes that occurred during the period of Sovietization and Cold War politics, and (3) the beliefs and practices we find today. To some extent, the part of the post-Soviet period known as "the hunger years" can also be considered a transitional phase. By that time mushroom procurement was already a widespread and customary practice, but due to the harsh economic conditions its parameters have expanded in a number of ways.

At every historical moment we are faced with a particular set of applications and dispositions toward the mushroom world. We also find that ethnographic diversity itself varies greatly at different points along the temporal axis. Presently, the most profound contrast is between the attitudes found in Chukotka and Alaska. However, turning to the contemporary ethnographic situation within Chukotka, we see that the divergent attitudes of the Yupik, Chukchi, and Russian people, which during the transitional period had prompted such dynamic cross-cultural encounters, appear to have merged into a region-wide phenomenon, more or less uniform in meaning and practice. Revisiting Chapters 3 and 4 one may note that, with the exception of minor details, hardly a distinction is made along the ethnic lines on the subject of present-day mushroom harvest and consumption. That is

because traveling between settlements, doing interviews, going out on the tundra, and taking part in the processing work and eating occasions, I found that in contemporary times both the discourse and the practice associated with mushroom procurement are endowed with overwhelmingly common overtones.

The Yupik, Chukchi, and Russian people, on the whole, welcome the fruiting season with similar enthusiasm and hold the same reverence for the expertise of the erudite *gribniki* in their communities. Cross-culturally, mushroom procurement demands particular knowledge, skill, and opportunistic awareness. Whether used by the picker or distributed along his or her social network, mushrooms work their ways into similar recipes, which in turn become part of comparable eating occasions. Consequently, while acknowledging the diversity in individual preferences, we can say that, to a great extent, the implications of the ethnomycological transition are shared by all groups.

Does the past then matter in this context? Why go through the trouble of documenting the change, reconstructing its course and its multi-cultural fabric, while being fully aware that the divergent paths of the transition at-hand culminated in nothing but a sweeping homogeneity? Given how important mushroom picking is in today's Chukotka, would it not have been sufficient to present the ethnographic evidence that demonstrates this fact, without delving into how it came to be?

True, as this study was first conceived in a comparative setting, the historical axis came forth as an integral part of its design. Juxtaposing the geographical and the temporal dimensions, I have realized that by contrasting the two sides of the Bering Strait, I can also travel between the past and the present of Chukotkan ethnomycology, where people's attitudes toward mushrooms in former times resemble, on a general level, those found in contemporary Northwest Alaska. Considering my own cultural background, it

was not difficult to connect the transition from region-wide mushroom abstinence to the prevalent use that we now find in Chukotka with the national differences shaped by distinct colonial legacies: whereas due to the influx of Eastern European influences, the Yupik and Chukchi of the Russian Far East made a collective transition to mycophilia, among the Inupiat no such conversion has taken place. This simple conclusion was also a valid one. Yet, driven by a wide-ranging interest in cultural processes, I decided not to "just leave it at that," but to attempt an understanding of the actual mechanisms and contexts arising in Chukotka, that both promoted and resulted in this dietary change.

Inspired by other food and commodity studies (e.g. Atwood 1992, Mintz 1986, Scheper-Hughes 1992, Mazumdar 1998, Ortiz 1947), I had hoped that a diachronic query on culinary mushroom use, aside from being informative on the subject itself, would also enrich our take on the regional history and broader issues in the anthropology of food. Indeed, the narratives offered by local people paint an intimate portrait of the everyday social contexts in Chukotka during various stages of Sovietization and after the fall of the Soviet Union. Demonstrating the fusion of mycophagy with the emergence of the more Russified practices of consuming, the ethnohistorical synthesis serves to transmit the circumstances during which Chukotka Native people accepted the innovations in structure, taste, and etiquette associated with the new cuisine. Shedding light on the local specificities, the study supports the more far-reaching theoretical stance on dietary practice, claiming that chiefly conservative food habits (cf. Farb and Armelagos 1980) do develop a propensity to change when routines of everyday life become engulfed by a "major social rupture" (Messer 197:102), emanating at the crossroads of distinctive ecological and political realms (Mintz 1996, 1986). In this capacity, the given thesis is a step toward an integrative platform for northern

ethnography and anthropology of food. Auspiciously, its input as such turned out to be only part of the story.

As I have argued throughout, the mushroom's position in the Chukotkan context is unique, both in the physical sense and in the multiple domains of history and culture. With a number of cross-cultural idiosyncrasies (some are outlined in Chapter 2), mushrooms have a peculiar standing among the peoples of Chukotka. First of all, mushrooms are a resource that is harvested locally. Their contemporary use by the Yupik and Chukchi is an outcome of a change in perspectives rather than an institutionalized importation or an exogenous trade. Secondly, the Yupik and Chukchi avoidances in former times were substantiated not by unawareness of mushrooms as a potential food source, but by culturally specific definitions, which, in turn, were grounded in the wider socio-ecological orientations and worldviews. To illustrate this point we can think of certain coastal plants—oysterleaf, for example—about which *tundroviki* learned from the maritime people, after the former settled in villages. Similar to mushroom gathering, the use of coastal plants by the tundra Chukchi also constitutes an expansion of local knowledge, procurement, and culinary practice. In the same vein, the context in which tundra people developed a taste for these resources stems from the grander changes. Inherently, these experiences are linked with the history of Sovietization and Soviet policies in the North, particularly with village consolidations and efforts to settle the nomadic people into permanent residences. However, because (as far as I know) the reindeer Chukchi at the time of their relocation were hardly aware of the coastal plants and had little in the way of preconceived notions about them, there were no deep-seated values to reconsider.

In contrast, the mushrooms did occupy a specialized niche in the worldviews of Yupik and Chukchi. Guided by either cosmological or ecological concepts, both perspectives were entangled with a much broader

understanding of certain interrelationships. By definition, mushrooms presumed certain relationships between the land, the people, and other beings: a human typically does not ingest the reindeer's meal and ought to keep away from contacting malevolent elements. That is why I argue that, although inevitably a part of the culinary field, mycophagy and the set of activities it entails are more than a dietary innovation. Irreducibly, they are a cause, a result, and an expression of a much more profound transformation in how the Yupik and Chukchi people have come to relate to the surrounding world, as well as to see their own positions in the environment.

In many respects, mushroom gathering in today's Chukotka provides a means of relating to the land that is common to all Chukotka residents. In addition to the practical knowledge pertaining to locating specific varieties, mushroom picking is also a way of channeling a more wholesome vision of the landscape. Here I follow the distinctions drawn by Robert Riley (1997), who says that in relating to landscapes we operate in the visible, visual, and vicarious realms. Thus we take in sensory information of what we see, derive pleasure from what we like, and obtain "the raw material from which internal landscape fantasies or narratives are composed" (ibid.:201). Certainly, harvesting scenarios, whether described by a Yupik, a Chukchi, or a Russian, show that mushroom hunting fulfills each of these functions. However, as we move from the questions of aesthetics, utility, and geographical fluency onto the notion of landscape as a cultural space—a set of ideas "by which social agencies constitute the physical world" (Humphrey 1995:136), the sentiments evocative of the historically distinct pasts begin to resurface and social identity comes back into play. That is why, despite the overreaching similarities, to understand the implications of the Chukotka ethnomycological transition fully we should attempt to consider how it affected each of the groups involved.

The Devils Went Deaf...

"Nowadays when someone returns from the tundra and our people see their buckets are full, they say 'look at that: now all the devils must have gone deaf in the tundra..." (Interview transcript 1, Nome 2001). In her stylish wise-woman mystique, Nadezhda paused and gave me a cheerful glance, with a subtle but evocative smile unveiling in her expression. Since I had recorded these words after her during our very first meeting in 2001, the notion of devil-deafness, an outcome of ear amputations now fervently performed year after year on the Chukotka tundra, has been reiterated to me in numerous variations. When, for example, Ida was trying to adjourn the mushroom-picking frenzy that seemed to have taken hold of her family, she theatrically towered over their crouching figures and in a playful tone read out her disapproval, stating "what, you want them all to lose their hearing, every last one?" That was her way of saying that they have gathered enough and should stop, so as not to end up with a harvest too big for the family to sort and prepare in a timely manner. The idea of devils as hearing-impaired was always conveyed with humorous colors. On several occasions I discerned that the joke was intended for my benefit, such as Tolya's sarcastic "don't worry about the noise, now the devils can't hear us," which he screamed over the roar of his motorcycle bringing us back to the village from a mushroom-collecting outing.

Ambivalent as to their significance, for a long time I refrained from reading these good-natured allegories as ethnographic texts. Insinuating that the malevolent spirits inhabiting the tundra, having lost their auditory capacities to voracious mushroom pickers, pose little or no danger, such sentiments could very well be a reflection of how the Yupik conception of the tundra as a dangerous place (cf. Kerttula 2000:121, 141) is changing to some extent. However, because people did not refer to the "deafened devils" with

the kind of seriousness that they, for example, talked about feeding the spirits of their ancestors, I was somewhat hesitant in attempting an interpretation. Essentially, the concern giving rise to this caution can be boiled down to a simple "are they just joking?" question. Upon thoughtful consideration, I still see the discourse at hand as humorous, but at the same time think it should not be dismissed on that account. On the contrary, the fact that the subject of "devil ears" can now be encountered in the joking realm makes these sentiments not only a legitimate but also a revealing text of cultural transition.

From early kinship studies we learn of social contexts where joke-full communication is used both to mark and to cultivate special relationships between family members. Offensive under different circumstances, various forms of joking and teasing were considered appropriate when exchanged between certain kin (Radcliffe-Brown ([1924] 1952:90-116). Although the comments of "devil deafness" do not directly speak to the dealings between people, they certainly say something about the relationships between the people and the land. Instead of wondering whether the individuals who make these remarks are "just joking," I ask why are they joking about this, why can this subject be approached on humorous terms with the kind of ease and light-heartedness that, as we defer from the accounts in prior chapters, several decades ago was unthinkable?

Clearly, I argue, these expressions indicate that the transition in the perceptions and use of mushrooms is part of a larger transformation in the Yupik worldview, particularly with regard to the metaphysical landscape, which over the course of the Soviet era was being perpetually, and often quite forcefully, secularized. As Krupnik and Vakhtin (1997) show in their trans-generational study, a number of elements stemming from the older set of Yupik spiritual values continue to be relevant, yet the period of exposure to ideology grounded in atheism has also had its effects. In this context, the idea of the tundra devils going deaf presents a perfect metaphorical amalgam, as it

brings to light the human-caused handicaps of the devils while inherently recognizing that these malicious beings do exist. The notion also very conveniently captures the Soviet-driven secularization process and translates it into emic terms: by picking mushrooms people make *cherti* (devils) powerless, unable to eavesdrop on human affairs and, by extension, to conspire on harmful actions. Mushroom gathering, therefore, works to dissolve the aura of magical danger and inhospitableness that the Yupiit ascribe to the tundra.

Although plausible, this explanation largely stems from my own analytical vision, for not a single Yupik person, even after I asked, cared to delve into the matter beyond sharing their version of the "deaf devils" joke and the refreshing chuckles that followed. To interpret this kind of attitude, I think it is necessary to reflect not only on the former and current beliefs about mushrooms, but also on what the transition from one to the other entails in terms of the meaning it renders to the everyday lives and worldview of the contemporary Yupik people. Simultaneously with the collective changeover from fearing even a momentary skin contact with "devil ears" to avidly harvesting and consuming vast quantities of wild mushrooms, the Yupik people experienced myriad transformations in their dietary, socio-economic, and spiritual realms. Of the cultural whole that existed prior to the advance of Sovietization, only certain beliefs and practices were considered acceptable during the decades of Soviet reign. To make sense of pasts and presents occurring in the course of a single lifetime, individuals had to find ways of reconciling values that were strikingly contrastive and contradictory at times. How, for example, does one respect elders and ancestors while recognizing that many of their views are no longer relevant and much of their knowledge does not adequately address current concerns? How does one merge pursuing formal education, speaking Russian as a first language, and working at a government enterprise with maintaining a Yupik sense of identity,

grounded in the belief systems and ways of life considered indigenous? How does one inhabit the social universe with two, seemingly incompatible, worldviews: one that sees the surrounding landscapes as spiritually rich and filled with metaphysical presences and the other that regards all space as strictly material, explicitly incapable of any extraordinary potential?

Posing similar questions about the nonempirical environment of the Inupiat, Ernest Burch (1971) observes that entities such as ghosts, dragons, and giant birds, which in pre-Christian times widely inhabited the Arctic Alaska landscape have largely been "relegated to the status of 'fairy tales'" by contemporary youth. The current study certainly illuminates similar features of a generational shift. Zooming in on our subject, however, we also find that the acts of seeking out, harvesting, and consuming wild mushrooms form the very ground where the conflicting views are contested. It is the situation where the ideas about the spirit world, which continue to have everyday relevance in the lives of many Yupik people, must be markedly reconfigured, in order to turn the once forbidden activity into one that is acceptable and respected. As the previous chapter shows, the transformation was fueled by explicit instruction, increasing cross-cultural encounters, language shift, and transition to a dietary pattern heavily influenced by Slavic cuisine, each of which played a part in making wild mushrooms a pleasure to gather and delicious to eat. Making room for a new tradition, richly multi-faceted and spiritually and nutritionally fulfilling, required adopting a cultural outlook where the untouchable devil ears could be embraced as both desired foods and admirable features on the landscape. Called to duty, some imaginative syncretism went out to work, creating a unified cognitive framework in the state of fast-rising cultural pluralism.

Trying to capture the spirit of intense social change, Comaroff and Comaroff write:

> Between the conscious and unconscious lies the most critical domain of all for historical anthropology and especially for the analysis of colonialism and resistance. It is the realm of partial recognition, of inchoate awareness, of ambiguous perception, and, sometimes, of creative tension: that liminal space of human experience in which people discern acts and facts but cannot or do not order them into narrative descriptions or even into articulate conceptions of the world; in which signs and events are observed, but in a hazy, translucent light; in which individuals and groups know that something is happening to them but they find it difficult to put their fingers on quite what it is (1991:29).

In the course of this research, I have encountered forms of liminality that continue to find their way into everyday life, even when the overall social order appears to be relatively stable. Highly appreciated today, but with their former meaning still remembered (though admittedly not by everybody), mushrooms for many Chukotka Yupiit continue to show their partially liminal status. In practice, as I have tried to convey, this liminality is hardly perceptible: the Yupik mushroom pickers, on the whole, engage in the same kind of procurement, distribution, and consumption activities performed by most Chukchi and non-Natives. However, practice, understood here as a lived materialization of dispositions encompassed by habitus (Bourdieu 1977), does not always oblige a conscious reflection. As the excerpt above so poetically advocates, living in a culturally plural setting that has been pervaded and invaded by competing ideologies, people do not necessarily know exactly what to believe or what they themselves believe in. Yet, in most instances they continue to carry out the activities necessitated by their everyday lives.

Analogously, when it comes to mushroom gathering among the Chukotka Yupiit, we see the actors perform on a day-to-day basis within the

task-scape defined by their dietary preferences, land-use options, and various social and ecological conditions. Occasionally though, ideas of the former times resurface. These sentiments are very different from the kind that the younger-generation Yupik were facing several decades ago, when in their domestic situations the subject of mushroom picking was first brought up. Accounts of those experiences do not convey the kind of jocular tone, characteristic of the remarks people make today about "deaf devils." For example, the story told by Rima, quoted in the previous chapter, portrays a scenario far from being lighthearted. As a child, Rima was admonished for picking mushrooms with her *internat* classmates. Having heard that she not only gathered, but also ate a serving of the mushrooms prepared at the *internat*, Rima's mother and grandmother became so apprehensive that they kept waking her throughout the night to check on her condition. Unfortunately, the voices of those women cannot be heard today, and Rima, who by now is a seasoned *gribnik* herself, is no longer sure as to what kind of consequences her kin were afraid of: did they worry primarily for her physical health or for her mental condition, did they look for specific symptoms or were they just making sure she was generally unharmed? Rima's only explanation simply centers on the fact that mushrooms "*were tunigram sigutshak* [devil ears], you could not eat them, just do this [blow at your fingers] if you touch them by accident" (Interview Transcript 52, Enmelen 2004).

By now, the fear of touching mushrooms appears to have been all but dispelled. I have not met or heard of anyone who abstains from mushroom picking out of concern for their contaminative force, once thought to take effect instantly upon skin contact. Even when members of the more advanced age-cohorts speak of this aspect of the tradition, they largely invalidate it: "They really tricked us, our grandparents. I don't know why, but they did" (Interview Transcript 14, Sireniki 2004) says a Sireniki Yupik elder. Similar to

the "deaf devils" theme, her narration is also followed by a facetious chuckle. Like others whose lifetime follows the stream of perpetual liminality, she continues to shape her worldview to accommodate what she considers an inevitable and a useful transition. Agitated for decades to become an adversary of her own past, instead of hostility, she speaks of it with a pardoning laughter, at once acknowledging the bond and the detachment that exists between then and now.

A verbatim explanation of precisely how mushroom picking has affected the Yupik perception of the tundra as a magically perilous place (cf. Kerttula 2000:121, 141) is not found in the narratives people shared with me. Nevertheless, the joy and enthusiasm inspired by the harvesting seasons, the sheer scale of procurement, and the vivaciousness that accompanies the exchanges pertaining to hearing-loss among the tundra devils all point to the fact that some of those anxieties have been lifted. Albeit a sea-oriented people, mindful of the spirit world, the contemporary Yupik, like most others inhabiting the pan-Soviet space, did not escape the part of the ideological indoctrination that treats the secular universe as the only reality. Undoubtedly, some of the Yupik metaphysical landscape has, in one way or another, been secularized. I suggest that the transformed status of mushrooms from devil ears to human food serves simultaneously as a product and an instrument of this kind of sporadic secularization.

...People Rival Reindeer...

As I discuss in Chapter 2, the Chukchi people never had an explicit prohibition against mushrooms, but, seeing them largely as reindeer food, placed mushrooms outside the dietary sphere. It is important to note that reindeer hold an important position in Chukchi cosmology. Yet, compared to

the Yupik reclassification of mushroom, the transition of seeing mushrooms as human food, rather than that of reindeer, is more a matter of socio-ecological categorization rather than of reconfiguring an unequivocally cosmological stance. Nevertheless, reading into the individual narratives we find that Chukchi people's land-use values and perspectives on their own identity did not remain unaffected by the mushroom's new status.

The course of modification in the overall Chukchi perspective is actually two–fold, changing from early categorization of mushrooms as reindeer food to that of the food that only reindeer and Russian newcomers can like, and then to a hearty and delicious edible admired by Chukchi people as much as it is by many others. There are two narratives that, taken together, are especially effective in illuminating this succession. The first one is where a contemporary Chukchi elder conveys her mother's expression, in which she rhetorically wonders whether the mushroom-picking newcomers are actually reindeer. The second narrative is where another Chukchi woman says that, because of her own infatuation with mushrooms, she in some ways identifies with reindeer. She explains, "...sometimes I think to myself 'oh, it is late, I should not walk too far,' but then I start finding mushrooms and I walk, and walk, and walk, like a reindeer! (Interview Transcript 4, Enmelen 2004). Although initially both maritime and tundra Chukchi thought that mushrooms are only for the reindeer, nowadays virtually all village-based[81] Chukchi consider them a regular part of the human diet as well.

When it comes to the perspectives of reindeer herders, compared to the views of Chukchi people in settlements, we do find some observable differences. Of all my informants, the herders appear to be the least enthusiastic about mushrooms, particularly during the fruiting season. This is

81 "Village-based," in this case, is taken to mean the Chukchi people who are ancestrally coastal and those who originally come from nomadic tundra families, but have been living in permanent villages since the time of intensive Sovietization.

mainly due to the nuisance that mushrooms create out on the tundra, hyper-stimulating the animals and wreaking havoc within the herds. In contrast, a number of village-based Chukchi people now see themselves as competing with reindeer for the mutually cherished resources. For example, one of the questions I posed to the village residents whose family members work at the herder camps was whether they pick mushrooms while visiting their relatives in the tundra. Virtually all the responses proclaimed it a futile effort, charging that reindeer, with their gluttonous binging, show no mercy toward other stakeholders. In a similar vein, one Enmelen resident shared a story of a reindeer herd getting away from the tundra brigade one summer. The animals showed up near the village, bringing about some unfortunate consequences:

> They just shaved off the tundra, all there was: there was nothing left after them, not a single mushroom. And here, in the village, people got upset. And that is understandable: in the tundra they [reindeer] can eat all they want—tundra is vast, but here, on these slopes around the village, and those ravines, and all the way to the river is where *we* pick! Those are *our* mushrooms [chuckles]! (Interview Transcript 7, Enmelen 2004).

Similar to the Yupik remarks about the deaf devils, this woman's rendition of human-reindeer territoriality appears to be intentionally ambivalent. Having related the frustration caused by the animals, she then cracks a smile and momentarily turns to laughter.

Nevertheless, the women working in herder camps do engage in some harvesting, picking mushrooms within the camp's vicinity. They either prepare and serve them in-season or preserve them, usually by drying, for future use; in the summer months it is not uncommon to find strands of drying mushrooms stretching across the *yaranga* perimeter. Reputation notwithstanding, the animals do not scoop up "all there is," and despite

competition, the camp women manage to procure some quantities for their own consumption. Whether or not the herders, when at camp, partake in enjoying the spoils of these efforts depends on individual preference. However, the condition I have come to regard as "professional mushroom detestation," i.e.: disliking mushrooms not for the way they taste, but for the problems they cause, applies to nearly every herder I met or was told about by others. Yurii, who is now retired after a life-long career in the tundra, offered a synopsis that, I think, best captures this relationship: "...some herders eat them, some don't—that is a matter of taste, but when it comes to mushrooms out on the tundra, when we are there with the reindeer, all the herders, every one of them, is equally full of hate [chuckles]! (Interview Transcript 44, Nunligran 2004).

It is very likely that the claims put forth in Yurii's vivid statement do apply to the majority in his trade. I did, however, manage to find one exception: a Russian man who was an aficionado of both the mushrooms and the reindeer. Prior to his current job in the village, Ivan spent a number of years working in a reindeer brigade, and not as a tractor-driver or *vezdekhodchik*, as is the case for most newcomers, but actually migrating with the reindeer. By the time we met I felt that I had heard scores of testimonies similar to Yurii's and, therefore, was anxious to find out what Ivan, in his unique perspective as a Russian herder, had to say. Partially, Ivan agreed with his Chukchi colleagues, reporting the same kind of frenzied behavior that he observed in the animals when passing through mushroom patches. Where his view differed is on the alleged scythe-like tendencies of the reindeer who at every opportunity mow the tundra into a smooth, mushroom-free surface. On the contrary, he showed no esteem for his competitors' harvesting skills: "They run after the smell, but they don't see well," he assessed, "so it may look like they are swallowing everything, when in fact so

many good mushrooms they leave behind, silly animals" (Interview Transcript 13, Nunligran 2004).

As far as he knew, Ivan was the only Russian herder on the Peninsula and the only one who picked mushrooms together with his deer, or as he says "picked up after them [what the animals missed]." He viewed the elation possessing the animals as an analogue of the excitement that humans get upon discovering a mushroom-rich area. The mushrooms he collected Ivan cooked over the fire while resting, usually finding no other takers for the grub among his fellow herders. An exceptional personality, Ivan asked to join the reindeer brigade to experience an occupation, a lifestyle, and a landscape that for him were "totally extraordinary." But once he entered this novel setting, mushrooms, he says, were the feature that emerged as familiar.

Although Ivan's comparison was of the reindeer and humans, his remarks echo several other people's reflections on seeing, or being able to see, mushrooms on the tundra versus not seeing them at all. Both Yupik and Chukchi informants have commented that they could not see mushrooms when they went out to look for them in the forest, during the time when they either traveled or attended school on "the mainland." Concealed by the shadows of trees, mushrooms did not reveal themselves as readily as they do on the tundra, where they supposedly protrude above all else. Living in the Alaskan taiga I could very well picture a rusty mosaic of the forest floor, covered with fallen leaves and shrub vegetation, and darkened by branches of spruce and birch. Not surprisingly, to me the predicament made perfect sense. However, alongside this view came forth another vantage point—the one held by the Chukotka settlers, who claimed that the tundra is where the mushrooms are in fact difficult to spot, as they camouflage easily in the array of rocks and fall colors. With actual spans of time varying from person to person, each settler admitted to taking a while to acquire the seeing skills needed for certain species. This claim, suggesting that a supposedly ordinary

landscape feature can, for a novice observer, be hiding in plain view, has profoundly captured my interest. As I listened closely to the settlers' recollections of finding mushrooms on the tundra, of knowing what to look for, of learning how to see, I began to recognize these stories as those of settlers coming into a place, reorienting their vantage point from the outsider gaze to looking *around* "in the landscape of [their] dwelling" (Ingold 2000:202).

... and Mushrooms Grow Taller than Trees

My 2004 fieldwork corresponded with the time of an ongoing housing expansion program, and walking about in Chukotka villages I frequently stopped to chat with construction workers, many of whom were seasonal migrants from central Russia. As expected, they often were curious as to what brought me to Chukotka, hence conversation frequently turned to mushrooms. Their reactions quickly revealed how impressed they were with the volume and quality of mushrooms in the tundra regions. They were not used to seeing such a fruiting plethora back home. The long-time settlers also recalled how surprised they were, first coming to Chukotka, to find themselves amidst its mushroom splendor. Little did they know, much of the first-rate supply that starting mid-August saturates the mosaic of the surrounding slopes, often remained undetected: spotting *gornyie griby* (mountain mushrooms), which are among the most highly prized, can be tricky. The challenge is trying to discern the orange-brown caps among the patches of *Arctous erythricarpa*, whose leaves turn merlot-red right around the mushroom's fruiting season, and even then the deceptive target may turn out to be a rock.

Disappointment, of course, is an experience not unusual for a novice. In his ethnography of mycological hobby groups, Gary Allan Fine comments on the subject:

> Finding mushrooms (or snakes, minerals, or birds) is not a matter of 'simply' looking. I recall my frustration when I first went birdwatching. My friend kept pointing to 'invisible' birds. I trusted that they were in the trees somewhere, but couldn't see them. I lacked a template for looking... Mushrooms are close at hand and don't move, so a mushroomer can force another to see them (Fine 1998:102).

In a striking similarity to Fine's observation, Chukotkans, too, described their first discoveries as forced: "The mountain mushrooms I could not see myself, even when they were in front of me, not until somebody forced me to squat and literally stuck my nose into one" (Interview Transcript 72, Sireniki 2004). "Nose in the mushroom" appears to be a time-honored education technique, for it came up just as frequently in the settlers' recollections as it did in the stories told by the construction workers for whom 2004 was the first summer in Chukotka.

Native people are also aware of the *gornyi grib's* clandestine nature. Once at a dinner conversation, a young Chukchi woman, who was taught to pick mushrooms when she was a small child, made an effective comparison, saying, "The mountain mushrooms like to camouflage as rocks on slopes, and that's why they can be invisible for the mainland people... it would be the same if I tried to pick mushrooms in the forest, where the trees are blocking my view." (Interview Transcript 03, Enmelen 2004) On another occasion a Yupik man challenged me to count how many rocks and how many mushrooms there were on the slope we were about climb. The idea was to guess which of the two characterizations (that of a mushroom or a rock) will apply to each of the dark protrusions visible in a distance. Admittedly, on the way I got distracted and did not properly follow through with the exercise,

but, aware by that time of what lies at the core of the riddle, I appreciated his point (Figures 48-49).

Several Russian settlers described how in their early attempts to find *gornyi grib* they relied more on touch than on eyesight, having to get down on all four and by hand feel around the surface of the tundra. Some said that with experience they switched between senses, and now their vision works ahead of the fingertips. Others remarked that they can spot birch boletes from afar, but hunting for mountain mushrooms they must wear glasses and attentively scan the near perimeter. Tamara Grigorievna, greatly respected in Enmelen for her mastery of the mushroom world, thinks that the best time to collect mountain mushrooms is "in early fall, when we get light snow in the morning and then bright sun in the afternoons." Specifying the advantages offered by this condition, she made a statement that I found both graceful and pragmatic: "the sun melts the snow from the top of the caps [making them visible on the white background]" she explained, "and I can fill two American buckets[82] in an hour" (Interview Transcript 8, Enmelen 2004).

Tamara Grigorievna also coached me on how to seek out the *Lacterius* varieties (known in Russian as *gruzdi*):

> There are yellow *gruzdi*, they like moisture, they are fewer in number. There are white *gruzdi*, they grow under turf and it is very important to pick them properly so that you don't damage the spot. You pick the turf layer and set it aside and there will be *gruzdi* underneath ranging in size from that of a kopek to medium and large. You take the larger ones and leave little ones alone and replace the turf. Leave everything as is and next year you will get three times as much there.

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82 Tall plastic buckets, which often served as containers for U.S. humanitarian aid commodities sent to Chukotka over the last decade, are often referred to as "American buckets."

Figure 48: *Gornyi grib* (the mountain mushroom) playing "hide and seek." (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

Figure 49: Carrying a tall bucket inside his backpack Andrei is optimistic to uncover the boletes that are camouflaged along this rocky slope. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

Sveta: How do find them?

TG: You have to pay attention, be observant. Usually it is not in a rocky place, not in pebble, but in a spot that is sandy-like, closer to the mountains; they don't need much moisture. The yellow kind, they like moisture, and, like all tundra mushrooms, they grow out of soil. For the white ones, you have to look near the mountains. Walk slowly and look, don't rush. You will notice the spots where the earth is uneven, where the cover, though not really torn, but you see little bumps appearing. Take your knife carefully, and cut the top layer, set aside carefully, so that not to let it tear, turf on turf, and underneath you will find a sand cover. Brush it off, and that's where your white *gruzdi* are.

S: Is it a large area?

TG: It can be large, it can be small. But of course if it is, let's say, three by three meters, you will not be able to lift the entire turf. So you clear a patch from it, cutting carefully on both sides, but do not disturb the cover. So that when you lift it and see the mushrooms, you take the large ones and then replace the turf. This way, you can come and check on it in a week and take the large ones again. But don't pull them out: cut them. The most important thing is to be very gentle, to use a knife, and not to disturb the *gribnitsa* [mycelium]. If you disturb it, you will not see mushrooms for a long time. And even though we have a lot here in the North, if each person disturbs ten mycelia patches, in three years you will only see as much as there was three years ago. You have to conserve everything; remember that you don't only live today: you will need it tomorrow and the day after. And that day after tomorrow can come in ten years. If you replace the turf carefully, you can come back to the same spot five times and

> collect your dozen. And if you do everything right, next year, you can collect five dozens or maybe even ten. (Interview Transcript 8, Enmelen 2004).

As I discuss in Chapter 3, the conservation ethic, despite the abundant supply, comes out strongly both in discourse and practice: people encourage one another not to *zhadnichat'* [act greedy] while out on the tundra and, in case of overcollecting, they usually transfer their extras to another household. Tamara Grigorievna, and others who, perhaps with less colorful epithets, talk about various ways of preserving the mycelium or "feeding it" by smashing old mushrooms they find and then spreading the puree with their feet, advocate to harvest in ways that ensure an even greater yield in the future. Also noteworthy is the temporal span in which Tamara Grigorievna frames her concerns: "that day after tomorrow," she says, "can come in ten years." Having come to Chukotka as newlyweds, Tamara Grigorievna and her husband tied their lives to the North. Now surrounded by children and grandchildren, they think of Chukotka as their home turf. Grateful for the tundra's bounteous kindness, they hope that its beauty and nourishment will be just as generous toward their descendants for generations.

In his recent dissertation Niobe Thompson draws a compelling portrait of the settling process, showing how the people who once arrived in the North as "newcomers" made the switch from transience to rootedness by establishing "practical intimacy with local landscapes" (2005:6). Sharing the premise of Thompson's argument, I find that the mushroom-picking stories told by Chukotka settlers illustrate both a means and a path of such a transition. As they immersed into a new seasonal pattern, learned to decipher the telltale signs, and established their favorite harvesting spots, which they yearned to revisit and preserve for the future, the place that once seemed unfamiliar and strange began to reveal its munificent, one-of-a-kind hospitality. Both the long-term settlers and the recent arrivals say that, being

new to the tundra, they took note of the abundant mushroom supply, quickly placing it among the landscape's primary features. Of the locally available products, mushrooms are among the first (along with blueberries and low-bush cranberries) that newcomers begin to harvest themselves. Surely, the fact that mushrooms capture the interest of most Russian or Russified people long before (if ever) the items like sea peaches or kelp acquire any gastronomical appeal is not an accident. And, of course, it is hardly a surprise. Yet, it is crucial that this seemingly uncomplicated tendency does not go overlooked, for it provides a grounded example of how human agency, senses, and practical experience interact to initiate a shift in one's landscape perspective.

Coming from either forested or agricultural zones, most newcomers do not think of tundra as a land from which any kind of nourishment can be derived. The inability to grow crops is what prevents some from accepting the place as livable, while the absence of trees, I have found, is often equated with absence of nature. When, for example, talking with seasonal construction workers our conversation turned to the subject of the tundra scenery or *priroda* (environment, nature) of Chukotka, they remarked that *priroda* is something they have at home. Chukotka, on the other hand, without a single tree and only scraps of meager grasses patching the cold rocky slopes, is deprived of nature, or only has "scanty nature" at best. Discovering that this ostensibly desolate land is a fertile ground for prime-quality mushrooms induces many to reconsider their preconceived notions about the Arctic environment. A retired teacher I interviewed in Ukraine had explicitly attested to this experience:

> I had thought that this land would be completely barren, what else can one expect from permafrost? Imagine my joy when I saw that in Chukotka people harvest mushrooms and berries in quantities we could only dream about on the mainland. I remember I wrote to my

Sveta: How do find them?

TG: You have to pay attention, be observant. Usually it is not in a rocky place, not in pebble, but in a spot that is sandy-like, closer to the mountains; they don't need much moisture. The yellow kind, they like moisture, and, like all tundra mushrooms, they grow out of soil. For the white ones, you have to look near the mountains. Walk slowly and look, don't rush. You will notice the spots where the earth is uneven, where the cover, though not really torn, but you see little bumps appearing. Take your knife carefully, and cut the top layer, set aside carefully, so that not to let it tear, turf on turf, and underneath you will find a sand cover. Brush it off, and that's where your white *gruzdi* are.

S: Is it a large area?

TG: It can be large, it can be small. But of course if it is, let's say, three by three meters, you will not be able to lift the entire turf. So you clear a patch from it, cutting carefully on both sides, but do not disturb the cover. So that when you lift it and see the mushrooms, you take the large ones and then replace the turf. This way, you can come and check on it in a week and take the large ones again. But don't pull them out: cut them. The most important thing is to be very gentle, to use a knife, and not to disturb the *gribnitsa* [mycelium]. If you disturb it, you will not see mushrooms for a long time. And even though we have a lot here in the North, if each person disturbs ten mycelia patches, in three years you will only see as much as there was three years ago. You have to conserve everything; remember that you don't only live today: you will need it tomorrow and the day after. And that day after tomorrow can come in ten years. If you replace the turf carefully, you can come back to the same spot five times and

Figure 50: Changing the vantage point to see how mushrooms grow taller than trees. (Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak)

needs and driven by personal culinary cravings, the desire to embellish the holiday table, and to please others with special treats and gifts, these scrupulous hunters develop the means of seeing the caps of mountain mushrooms amidst the gaudy autumn kaleidoscope, and spot the patches of elevated turf protecting the colonies of white *Lacterius*. The rising fluency in finding, processing, and preparing mushrooms enriches the portfolio of succulent recipes and favorite harvesting spots. Just as when I had once come to Alaska and responded to signs that looked dear and familiar, the Chukotka settlers too have embarked on the path from transience to rootedness (cf. Thompson 2005) by, so to speak, finding "mushrooms abroad."

Mushroom hunting is of course not the only means of engaging with the land: other forms of procurement and recreation have undoubtedly played their part in helping the once-transient dwellers to enjoy and connect with their new surroundings. Still, the elevated status of mushrooms in both the Russian outdoor experience and Russian culinary practice should not be forgotten. Mushroom picking also is an activity that, in Russian culture, is traditionally more inclusive with respect to gender and age, and in the Chukotka setting it is relatively easily accessible across economic strata. Mobility does expand the options, and certain preparation methods are logistically complicated (pickling, for instance); fair amounts of harvesting are accomplished close to villages and with equipment that is rather low-tech.

When these more general nuances are taken into account together with the ethnographic content this section relates, we find that for many newcomers and settlers in Chukotka, mushroom procurement is more than a multi-faceted source of nourishment: it is also an acclimatizing venue that over the course of their adaptation in the North plays a significant and an instrumental role. While the Native people were taking on a new activity within the physical environment that for them was, by and large, well-known, coming into a strange country the Russian people are embracing that which

looks and tastes familiar. Some of them are longing for specific flavors and scents, some are nostalgic for a certain culinary venture, and others are driven primarily by the pleasure of picking. Whatever the motivation (and often people crave all at once), I argue that the desire to indulge in the harvesting, the cooking, and the taste is in itself a kind of embodied practical knowledge that allows Russian newcomers to form connections with this mysterious and "magical" landscape, where mushrooms do, oftentimes, grow taller than trees.

MARX WENT AWAY, BUT THE MUSHROOM STAYED BEHIND

CONCLUSION

In February, 2004, a Russian Orthodox priest named Father Leonid was traveling through the settlements on the south of the Chukchi Peninsula. Father Leonid has a permanent church building in Lavrentiya but periodically travels throughout the region to hold services in other settlements. I first met Father Leonid when he stopped to visit my host family in Enmelen. He said he learned about my project from an article in *Poliarnik* (Medvedev 2004 (9):8-10), a regional newspaper based in Provideniya (I met with one of its staff journalists a few days after arriving in Chukotka and gave an interview, as one of the ways to inform the local people about my purpose). On that occasion Father Leonid did not have much time to socialize, but he did briefly share some of the experiences that he specifically thought would be of interest to my study. His foresight was quite correct. Two months later, when I came to Lavrentiya, Father Leonid was able to meet for a longer visit and treated me to tea and pastries at his church. Since he had agreed to a recorded interview, for the sake of accuracy, I asked him to reiterate the information he had related at our first encounter. Here is an excerpt from the transcript of that recording:

> On the 19th of August (the 6th of August on the old calendar) we have a holiday Transfiguration of Our Lord. This holiday is celebrated with the blessing of the fruit harvested off the land. In folk terminology this holiday is called *Yablochnyi Spas* (literally "Apple Saviour") because a pious custom prescribes that apples are to be blessed and eaten on that day. In the East, they bless the grapes. That is done in places like Greece and Jerusalem where Christianity has a much longer history. In central Russia grapes generally do not grow—well, now I think they

> have some special varieties that do grow, but nevertheless—so on *materik* [the mainland] they bless the apples. And since here there are neither apples nor grapes, we bless the berries—in August these are mostly cloudberries and blueberries—and of course the mushrooms, because they are even more abundant than the berries. People bring them fresh and sometimes even already sealed in jars, which may not be as good, because the idea is to bless the fruit that are fresh, but here we bless whatever is available. The special prayer that is pronounced blesses the people who harvested the fruit, the harvest itself, and the fields from which it has sprouted. And I suppose what we do here is, after all, appropriate, perhaps even better than blessing some kind of exotic fruit, because with locally harvested products we have the assurance that they are fresh, whereas if someone brings in an orange from Morocco, it is hard to say anything as to its freshness. (Interview Transcript 78, Lavrenitya 2004).

Father Leonid offered this information mainly for the overall enrichment of my study, figuring it would contribute a perspective that was fairly unique, being the one that he, as an Orthodox priest, has gained by virtue of his distinct occupation. He was not mistaken: within the overall diversity of experiences I was able to capture, Father Leonid's does, in fact, represent an exceptional insight. For me, however, it also underscores a more particular significance, indicating that, with the emergence of new forms of spirituality, the meanings and social functions of mushrooms on the Chukotka landscape are continuing to transform. Whereas during the latter half of the 1900s mushroom picking made its way into the Yupik culture as an element of secularization, at the dawn of the twenty-first century it is acquiring a particular spiritual importance, mediating, for all the congregants of the Orthodox Church, between the physical space, subsistence gathering, and the realm of the sacred. I heard a similar sentiment from the people who had

chosen an Evangelist rather than a Russian Orthodox confession. Although the mushrooms do not play the part of a ritual centerpiece in any of the Evangelical traditions in Chukotka, they are endowed with a special meaning. When praising the abundance and the quality of mushrooms found on the tundra, both Natives and settlers have said that because "this land is blessed," it is able to yield such prosperity.

Readers of the post-Soviet studies literature are likely to recognize the similarity in the titles of this chapter and a book by Caroline Humphrey (1998) *Marx Went Away—but Karl Stayed Behind*, which explores the post-Soviet incarnation of Russia's collective farming. In this compelling account of social adaptation in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Humphrey shows that forms of collectivized agricultural production are driven predominantly by economic and political necessities rather than nostalgia or ideological convictions. Collectivization is not a preferred way of organizing, but for many people it remains the best or the only option.

In Chukotka, and likely in many indigenous communities of the Russian North, mushrooms have found their way into the spheres of procurement practices, everyday consumption, and festive eating as part of the many changes that came along with collectivization and Soviet transformation at large. However, compared to many policy-driven changes, mushroom picking and all of its associated activities appear to be long-lived. Having outlasted the institutionalized atheism, the tastes and nutritional preferences it was able to bring about, as well as the knowledge, skills, and myriad social and spiritual attachments are likely to be in place for the long haul. Many Native people today regard all these matters as neo-traditional and inherently local. And the vast majority of those who are aware of its peculiar history in Chukotka, mycophilia, for better or for worse, is regarded as one of the good changes they took from the Russians.

Throughout the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, the cultural diversity of Chukotka has remained perpetually rich, with the Yupik, Chukchi, and non-Native dwellers continuing to manifest their distinct social identities explicitly and implicitly. Yet, amidst wide-ranging perceptions of differences there are bound to be some venues where mutual understanding is achieved. The pleasures of harvesting and eating wild mushrooms, as I have tried to show, manage to transcend social divides, creating, literally and figuratively, a lived and hospitable common ground. Ultimately, mushroom procurement played an adaptive role for all Chukotkans. As members of each group were modifying their views to allow mushroom picking become part of their "dwelling" (Ingold 2000) environment, the activity was proffering its special facets to enable the makeover. Reflecting on the changes in landscape values, we find that transformations in the Chukotka ethnomycological milieu extend beyond mycophagy, permeating broader aspects of social transition.

Are Mushrooms "Special" After All?

What then can we gain from this study to shed light on "the mushroom question"? Revisiting the ideas presented in Chapter 2, I am not certain whether the Chukotka case unveils a previously undiscovered characteristic unique to these Third Kingdom citizens. However, it certainly highlights one that has been mentioned, although not analyzed to any great extent.

In relating his own picking experiences the Russian nature writer, Vladimir Soloukhin (1968), asserts that harvesting mushrooms is fundamentally different from that of berries. Compared to other wild crops, he says, mushrooms are more spatially scattered and must be sought out individually—the features that are more characteristic of a hunt, than a

gathering activity.[83] Because each specimen (even within a species) is recognizably different from the rest, it is possible to connect it to its fruiting locality. While sorting and cleaning a fresh harvest, the author retraces his scouting route, recalling the spot and the surroundings where each mushroom was collected (or "hunted down").

In contrast to the forested environment depicted in Soloukhin's writing, on the treeless landscape of the Chukchi Peninsula mushrooms often rise above other vegetation and appear in clusters. A tundra picker, especially an experienced *gribnik*, can scan the perimeter taking note of a whole patch of mushrooms at once. As I stress in the previous chapter, such vision is an acquired skill that takes practice. Still, the tundra setting is markedly different from scouting for mushrooms in the forest, searching out individual specimens that hide under trees and shrubs. The unique association of each mushroom with its harvest locality does not, therefore, occur in Chukotka to the same extent as it does in Soloukhin's reflections. I did witness several occasions when an exceptionally recognizable specimen (perhaps because of size, color, shape, etc.) encountered while sorting mushrooms inspired a vivid description of the habitat. The speaker then would visualize exactly where and how the mushroom appeared to him or her on the landscape. In most situations, however, people connected clusters of mushrooms, rather than individual specimens, to a harvest locality, listing a local place name or a topographical feature of the landscape. For example, recognizing an assortment of *Lactarius* specimens collected in a particular spot, one might say "I found these at the edge of the 'third ravine,'" or "climbing down from 'Mountain 501' walking toward the 'first lake,'" or "around the Sunny

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83 The argument is also captured in the title of Soloukhin's (1968) essay—*Tretia Okhotka* ("The Third Hunt"). As a prey on the hunting continuum, mushrooms seemingly come in the third place for Soloukhin, preceded by mammals and birds, and fish in the second place.

Meadow."[84] This often provokes further discussion about previous harvest experiences at a given location, how it compares to other mushroom picking areas, or how it changes throughout the season.

Over time, observations made during picking and processing give rise to specific preferences for certain spots, where a seasoned *gribnik* will seek out mushrooms possessing particular qualities. Tamara Grigorievna described as one of her "special spots" a gulch out on the tundra, where the birch shrubs are of "the brightest green [that she has] ever seen." Each time she gently pulls apart the branches, Tamara Grigorievna uncovers a cluster of birch boletes that she says are firm, never wormy, and come in the "identical size of a five-kopek coin." Compared to all other places where she harvests mushrooms, this patch is fairly small and stands the furthest from the village. Taking the journey is a luxury for Tamara Grigorievna, one which she interprets as a way of rewarding herself for a timely fulfillment of other procurement obligations, including drying and marinating large quantities of mushrooms—collected elsewhere—that she distributes among her kin. Part of the harvest of the "five-kopek boletes" makes the evening meal, and the rest are marinated. On New Years Eve, one of the most important holidays in Russia, Tamara Grigorievna brings to the holiday table that special *banochka gribov* that she regards as "the grand reserve."

It is evident that the process of reconnecting and re-orienting oneself on the mushroom harvest landscape, which according Soloukhin (1968) emerges during the sorting and cleaning phases, does take place in the Chukotka setting. Working their way through a "special place" harvest or while uncovering some distinguished specimens in a stratum of a multi-location assortment, people recall their prior experiences and discuss where and when it may be better to pick next time. For the large-scale *gribniki*, who

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84 The three places exemplified here are located near Enmelen, Nunligran, and Provideniya, respectively.

distribute much of their harvest as "treats" and "gifts," the mushroom processing and preparation phases are also times of contemplating one's social networks and calendars, recalling the dates of individual birthdays and family holidays when the special delicacies will be served. Consequently, what unfolds over the course of a mushroom processing session is not only a progression and exchange of local ecological knowledge, but also a series of verbal visualizations that reinforce temporal and spatial dimensions of the "dwelling perspective" (Ingold 2000).

I found that the cultivation of the socio-ecological dwelling that is nurtured during the harvest and processing of mushrooms continues throughout the phases of distribution and consumption. Clearly, the transfer of harvested mushrooms, in whichever form (dried, fresh-fried, raw, marinated), serves to fulfill some utilitarian goals. For the receiver, the gain is the mushrooms acquired and possibly the reassurance of having social support. The giver, depending on the specifics of the relationship (Sahlins 1974), may be rewarded with another gift, a favor, the pleasure of sharing, or a sense of self-gratification gained from the appreciation and high regard on the receiving end (cf. Sahlins 1974). We definitely see traces of the type of exchange that Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) saw as individualistic and self-serving. At the same time, I encountered numerous examples where in talking about the mushrooms that they give to or receive from others, people explain the significance of the social and geographical origin of the transferred goods. The individual utilitarian benefits of these transfers are therefore entangled with the relational and symbolic significance of giving illuminated by Marcel Mauss (1990 [1924]).

The identity of the giver, according to Mauss and others (e.g. Gregory 1982; Parry 1986; Strathern 1988), is inseparable from the gift and emerges particularly strongly when a specialty dish is the subject of transfer (cf. Counihan 1999). Examples from my data in which the gift is a personalized

recipe of a revered *gribnik* clearly supports this view. Mushroom assortments—particularly the *banochka gribov* [jar of mushrooms] given or served on a special occasion—are frequently associated with a certain location ascribed with qualities that are aesthetically or spiritually meaningful. Such a gift, then, in addition to that of the harvester and the cook, also bears the identity of the land where the mushrooms were collected; the latter can be a specific spot (like a particular slope or a ravine), a rather broadly defined locality such as Lake Achchen, or a general region as in "the Enmelen tundra." To illustrate this, we can think of Lara, who by sending her treats to people in Provideniya perpetuates the mushroom-rich reputation of her native Nunligran as well her status as an "inveterate mushroomer."

Similar to other Chukotka ethnographies (e.g. Kerttula 2000; Thompson 2005) and works on subsistence livelihoods in the Arctic (e.g. Anderson 2000; Brody 1987; Caulfield 1997; Hansel 1996; Ingold 2000; Shannon 2003, Ziker 2002 (a,b)), this study illuminates a particular "context of engagement" (Ingold 2000) with the natural surroundings, where the outcome may at once be practical, recreational, and spiritual. The practices of collecting, processing, and distributing wild mushrooms make up a cycle where personal passion and knowledge of the land merge with economic needs and social connectedness. Each of the components is reinforced by the cycle while fueling it at the same time, both spatially and temporally. What I have come to see in the course of this inquiry is that the individuality which, as Soloukhin (1968) insisted, is perceptible in the physical form of a mushroom specimen plays a distinctive function in this cycle. Within the "context of engagement" as a whole it offers a point of creative entrance.

When Time is of the Essence:

The Feasibility and Value of Studying "Small Changes"

In the beginning of the chapter on mushroom consumption I related an anecdote of the exchange I had with Valerii Petrovich, a long-time Russian settler whose wife is an Enmelen Native. In their twentieth year of marriage, Valerii Petrovich discovered a peculiar detail about his wife and her cultural past, the fact that she, like many other Chukchi people of her generation did not learn mushroom picking from her parents but from the Russians living in her village at the time. Although the revelation itself may, in the grand scheme of things, be rather inconsequential, Valerii Petrovich was nevertheless surprised and a little puzzled, first by the insight itself and, secondly, by his own prior unawareness of this amusing trivia. Evidently, the information on what the Chukchi people thought of mushrooms in the past, for him, would probably not have surfaced had it not been for me and my peculiar inquiry. That is because, by and large, in the contexts of everyday life for the last twenty-some years, mushroom procurement and consumption have been activities that are as commonplace as going fishing, buying flour, or drinking tea. As one person summarized, "it is something that always was, is, and will be" (Interview Transcipt 22, Nunligran 2004). In the same chapter I also mention several other instances when Native people became aware of the Yupik and Chukchi ethnomycological legacies only after contrasting the differences found in Chukotka and Alaska, of which they learned either from other relatives or, as in Valerii Petrovich's case, from me.

We know that, in part, this ethnography has been spawned from the personal experiences and cultural background of the author. I tried to be clear on this point from the start. Looking over some of the literature that discusses ethnomycology as a field of study, it appears that I am by far not the

only researcher whose interest in the mushroom world emerged as a result of a cross-cultural encounter juxtaposed with one's own perspectives. This, however, is not only an example of the author's "baggage" influencing the production of ethnography as a whole (cf. Crapanzano 1980, Dwywer 1982, Rabinow 1977), but also is a case where the study participants, triggered by the very subject of the research, themselves engaged in some reflexive thinking and interactions, recovering, as a result, a semi-forgotten part of their past. Exploring these two directions of reflexivity, delineating how each has affected particular nuances and the overall dynamic of the study, can generate a lengthy and complex discussion. However, aside from the situational specifics, I doubt it can produce a novel insight on reflexivity that would significantly enhance what already has been written on the subject (e.g. Briggs 1970, Marcus 1998 [1994], Rosaldo 2000 [1989], Salzman 2002), both in the given work and relevant literature. On the other hand, what can be gained from taking a reflexive stance is the acknowledgement of time as a crucial factor that determines not only the scope of the ethnographic and ethnohistoric content, but also the range of vantage points from which our interpretive lenses can be positioned.

Nowadays, of all the Native people in Chukotka, it is the cohort of the1980s whose vast majority looks upon mushrooming as a set of practices that are customary and genuinely local. To them, the chores and pleasures involved in collecting, processing, sharing, and eating do not resonate an ethnic affiliation: they are simply part of the experience of living in Chukotka. Their attitude bears out Julie Cruikshank's understanding of local knowledge as that which is "learned, shared, and passed on locally" (1998:49), rather than an insight possessed exclusively by the indigenous groups. A number of them first became aware of the fact that mycophagy is a fairly recent phenomena in Chukotka when they heard me explain my research questions. Others have learned about it prior, from older relatives or friends. For some

Chukotka Natives the idea has come up in a comparative context, upon discovering that mushroom picking is all but absent on the other side of the Bering Strait.

Considering the inherentness that pervades these perspectives, in a way of a closing reflection, I propose we contemplate a scenario of first approaching this study in a more distant future, perhaps sixty-some years from now, when the children of today's young adults will begin to mature into elders. Moved by a similar interest, having deduced—either from the discrepancies in literature or from the cross-Beringian contrasts (provided they are still in place)—that mushroom picking had come to Chukotka with Sovietization, what kind of questions would a researcher in my position be able to unearth?

Certainly, she or he could have been doing just as much, or more, in capturing the ethnographic richness of mushroom picking, exploring the domains of culinary practices, social interactions, practical knowledge, and connections with the land. Quite likely, in addition to or instead of the matters covered here, she would pursue some novel and insightful facets, to which, alas, I remain oblivious at this point. But what about the ethnohistorical dimension? Those who have experienced the transition from mycophobia to mycophilia first-hand will probably no longer be around, and the cohort of the current young adults, even if piqued by the revelation, will hardly have anyone to turn to with follow-up questions. From what kind of resources would our researcher then draw? And what if the subject were to come up not in sixty years, but two centuries from now?

Looking into the past, oftentimes we tend to take our own temporality for granted, neglecting the fact that a study *of* a time is performed *in* a time, forgoing an opportunity to reflect how the latter works to enrich or constrain our perspective. An interpretive archaeology approach suggests that striving to understand the innovations embraced by cultures of the deeper past may

call for an analytical stance that privileges transformation in taste over that of meaning as reason for change (Stahl 2002). Whatever else the future researcher would stand to gain or lose due to the moment of her introspection, the many nuances of the transition that I manage to describe, to her would have been inaccessible. At the very minimum, her insight into the course of change and the transforming meanings of mushrooms and mushroom picking would have been restricted, allowing little in a way of reconstructing the contexts of change. Aside from ethnographic richness, as in the "thick description" (Geertz 1973) I try to draw of the "deaf devils" and "human reindeer" metaphors, the timing disadvantage would detract from delving into grander concerns. It would be difficult, for example, to show how mycophagy provided a means for social adaptation, serving as one of "culture's way[s] of making new and unusual things part of itself" (Mintz 1986:120-121). It would not be effective in delineating how traditions come into being or demonstrating that skills do not, in fact, get "transmitted from generation to generation, but are regrown in each" (Ingold 2000:5)

Thus, more than anything, I view the current endeavor as a seized opportunity to document a food and land-use transition that is already approaching the end of its transitional phase. From the distance of time, it may look like a "small change," but, as this work has set out to show, small changes matter.

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