

Chapter 4

Three Villages Under the Russian-American Company



In the years following Cook's voyage, people living in Makushin, Kashega, and Biorka found their options reduced as trade in Russian America was soon dominated by the activities of Grigorii I. Shelikhov, a man with voracious interest in the wealth of the territory and a vision of permanent settlements.¹ In 1781 he and two other merchants had formed a company that gradually absorbed and drove out smaller competitors while creating powerful allies in Russia. In 1790 he hired the legendary Alexander Baranov, who, forced to the wall by a series of business failures, reluctantly agreed to Shelikhov's persistent overtures. Baranov sailed from Okhotsk on the *Three Saints* for the settlement Shelikhov had founded on Kodiak in 1784. Approaching Unalaska Island, the vessel anchored in Kashega Bay to replenish its water supply. An early October storm blew in, however, and cornered the vessel, placing it in imminent danger. The crew managed to unload a portion of the cargo during low tide before the vessel capsized during the night of October 6, stranding everyone for the winter. Baranov's account of Unalaska in general and Kashega in particular portrayed a demoralized and innervated population. Along with other negative pronouncements, Baranov wrote:

- “in general they are all lazy and untidy”
- “their yurts are poor and cold”
- “they have no fires...except in their oil lamps”
- they seldom cook anything
- they rarely wear shoes
- “they observe no religious laws”
- “they know nothing of their origin”
- they rarely share food with each other
- “where there are no Russians...they make no effort at all”²



Grigorii I. Shelikhov
[wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grigoriy_I._Shelikhov)

1 See discussions of fur hunting periods in Makarova and Liapunova. See also Black's division of periods in "The Nature of Evil," 117-122.
2 Khlebnikov, Notes on Russian America, 121-125.



Alexandr Andreyevich Baranov
by Mikhail T. Tikhonov, 1818. [State History Museum, Moscow.](#)

His account was strikingly different from those made by Cook's expedition. Perhaps the people at Solov'ev's old haunt were indeed so ground down, so thoroughly subjugated. Perhaps Baranov darkened his report hoping to discredit firms that had preceded him into this area. Perhaps, and this may be the actual source of his disaffected attitude, the Aleutian winter got to him. He had, after all, arrived during an October storm and left in April. Kashega must have been deathly cold for the stranded men. Winds channeled through the draw, shuffling sheets of ice on the long lake, white-capping the water when thawed, and bringing an unrelieved dampness. He never witnessed the exuberant flurry of activity that accompanied summer and fall. The river would have welcomed returning red salmon while the flats leading to Kuliliak Bay echoed the same color with wild strawberries. Migrating fur seals would pass north not far from the village. Unangaġ had found this area a wonderful homeland and would continue living here for another century and a half. By spring Baranov had supervised the construction of three large baidaras and using one of these he navigated a course to Kodiak Island and Three Saints Bay to begin a quarter century of struggles, triumphs, and defeats.

Fortunately, we have a more detailed description of Kashega, Makushin, and Biorka written about the same time by Captain Gavriil Sarychev. His summary of Unangaġ portrayed them as having "a good natural understanding, very considerable talents, and a quick comprehension." While emotionally reserved and modest, they were "quiet and peaceable among each other" and exceptionally polite and helpful to visitors.³ Sarychev was part of a government expedition headed by Captain Joseph Billings. A month after leaving Petropavlovsk, Kamchatka, in May 1790, Billings's *Glory of Russia* stood off Biorka Village in Beaver Inlet. Here the expedition's priest, Vasiliy Sivtsov, baptized 63 males and 29 females from various villages. Forty-eight were from Biorka itself. Martin Sauer—the somewhat renegade member of the expedition who published his account without permission—attempted to get "the best information" he could about the people. He..... made the interesting comment that Biorka people called themselves "Cowghalingen," suggesting either that *Qawalangin* was an inclusive term that included *Qigiġun* or else that the *Qigiġun* had not yet appropriated this area.⁴ He observed that men wore birdskin parkas while the sea otter parkas of women had been replaced by ones made from seal fur. In general, he wrote, the people "wear

3 Sarychev, *Account of a Voyage of Discovery*, 78. See a modern translation of these phrases in Khlebnikov, *Notes on Russian America*, 130.

4 Sauer, *An Account of a Geographical and Astronomical Expedition*, 154. Merck noted that the people of Akun and Tigalda called themselves Kignon (perhaps a version of *Qigiġun*). Merck, *Siberia and Northwestern America*, 168. Billings reported that the Unalaska and Umnak people called themselves Kaughalingn. Merck, *Siberia and Northwestern America*, 199.

what they can get.”⁵ He found the men were exceptional kayakers, “sporting about more like amphibious animals than human beings.”⁶ While at Biorka, Carl Merck saw five men arrive from the village on Unalga Island. They came in five baidarkas (with their wives riding inside). After they were welcomed, they used these kayaks to create temporary shelters.

Now the hosts cooked tender seaweed for the guests...with chunks of whale blubber. This was served in wooden bowls, with large shells used instead of spoons. Each of them also got a piece of whale fin, which they eat raw. It is a delicacy to them. Then after sundown the guests were invited to join their customary evening enjoyments.⁷

Merck, along with Sarychev and Billings, visited *Uchuyuuux*, or Bobrovskyoe, on the Unalaska side of Beaver Inlet. During Cook’s visit, the village had possessed seven or eight barabaras; now it had only two dwellings along with a “cabin” for the promyshlenniks—probably a private barabara with a door—along with a small steam bath.⁸



By June 18, the *Glory of Russia* was sailing east toward the Alaska Peninsula and Kodiak, and then it was back to Kamchatka for the winter. By late June 1791 both ships of the expedition, the *Glory of Russia* and the *Black Eagle*, returned to Unalaska where they established headquarters at Iliuliuk. The men spent several months compiling a detailed census of the region, listing males who paid tribute (iasak), those who did not because of age or infirmity, and those who were minors. In February 1792 Sarachev left to explore the west side of Unalaska in a three-hatch baidarka, accompanied by Kaguluḡ, the man who had played a prominent role during Captain Cook’s visit. Now known under his baptismal name, Yelisey Pupyshev, he was the acting chief of Imagna Village in Unalaska

The *Slava Rossjii* [*Glory of Russia*] in Beaver Inlet, by Luka Voronin. From *Early Maritime Artists of the Pacific Northwest* by John Frazier Henry. Repository: Loussac Library, Anchorage. Original image from F.A. Golder’s portfolio “Alaska Scenes,” Hydrographic Section, Ministry of Marine, Petrograd.

5 Sauer, *An Account of a Geographical and Astronomical Expedition*, 155.

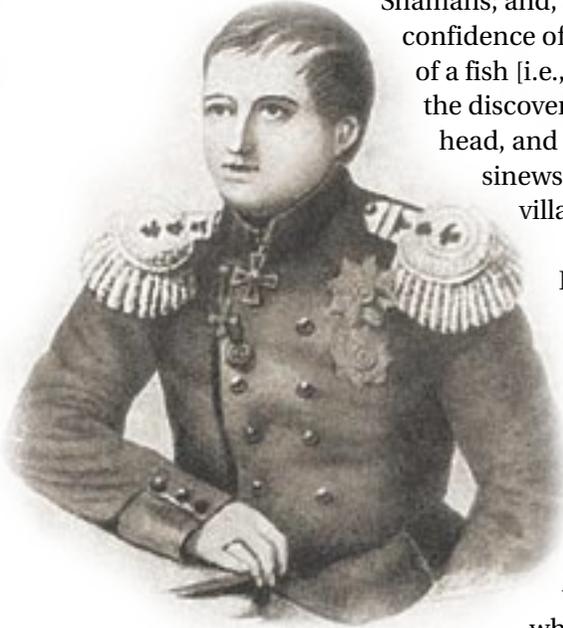
6 Sauer, *An Account of a Geographical and Astronomical Expedition*, 158.

7 Merck, *Siberia and Northwestern America*, 70.

8 Merck, *Siberia and Northwestern America*, 89.

Bay. Their three-day stay at Makushin provided an opportunity to witness one of the seasonal “games...which continue through the winter until the beginning of spring, or until the appearance of the whales.”⁹

Their origin is ascribed to the Shamans, who assure them that the spirits are pleased with such performances, and will, in return, send them plenty of whales on shore. The performers wear masks, resembling the faces of the spirits which have appeared to the Shamans; and, although these men no longer possess the implicit confidence of the people, the Aleutians always celebrate the arrival of a fish [i.e., a whale] with these games. The person first making the discovery announces it by wearing a narrow fillet on his head, and has a right to half the entrails, skin, tongue, and sinews. The rest is divided by the trojars [chiefs] of the village among the other Aleutians.



Gavriil Andreyevich Sarychev
[wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org)

He described an elaborate horizontal arrangement of poles placed at three varying distances below the entrance hole of the large barabara. (There were only two dwellings for the forty-five residents of Makushin at this time.) His measurements suggest a vaulted residence with a high roof. After the guests from different villages had gathered inside, men began to swing themselves up through the three sets of poles like gymnasts—“during which a perpetual clamour is kept up by the shouts of the people at whose jurt it takes place, while those who miss their aim and fall to the ground are saluted by the spectators with loud peals of laughter.”

Once the guests were seated, the dances began with the entrance of two boys who were followed by male drummers dressed with “fanciful” hats, “girdles round their loins, and bands on their arms and feet.” Next came pairs of women “having their heads encircled with binders embroidered with goat’s hair, flourishing bladders of birds’ skins, and dancing to the drums.” A second “string of females carrying arrows” was followed by “a train of men in motley masks, with wide streaked mouths, and on their heads a sea-dog’s face.” The term “sea-dog” referred to any seal. A rousing period of drumming was accompanied by singing, which Sarychev admitted he “by no means understood,” and then three masked men sang additional verses.

These men were followed by female masks, who seated themselves by the man with the sea-dog’s face, before whom a few other women danced with disheveled hair, carrying beards of sea-lions in their hands, occasionally pointing to the mask seated in the middle. They sung the following verse:

9 Sarychev, *Account of a Voyage of Discovery*, 61.

The hellish island Sakehadok
Contains the arrows we must not forget;
Yet why should we remember
That which brings no good?¹⁰



"Masks used by the Oonalashkans in their Dances...." by Martin Sauer, From *Expedition to the Northern Parts of Russia*. Repository: Loussac Library, Anchorage

This was a performance put on by Unalaska Unangaŋ and it "differed much" from the next dance presented by visitors from the Andreanof Islands. A few days later, while at Kashega, Sarychev observed a shaman conduct a healing ritual.¹¹ "The Shamans never demand any compensation from the people," he wrote, "contentedly receiving what is given them, and never requiring offerings for the spirits." After visiting as far south as Chernofski, Sarychev and Pupyshev returned only to be storm-bound in Kashega for another week.

10 Sarychev, *Account of a Voyage of Discovery*, 62. See Black's translation of a portion of this account and her discussion of the Makushin celebration in *Aleut Art*, 2003, 76.

11 See Black's translation in *Aleut Art*, 2003, 37.

The Aleutians becoming at length quite tired of bad weather, they one day collected themselves together men, women, and children, and repaired to an open field, where having lighted a fire and turned themselves to the wind, they clapped their hands and screamed with all their might, quietly returning in the full expectation of a favorable change.¹²

Stormbound in Kashega based on Sarychev's stay at Kashega when he witnessed a ritualistic healing and on Innokentii Shaishnikov's stay when he worked on an Aleut translation.



This was not the last time people screamed at the weather. That evening Pupyshchev informed Sarychev that the chiefs and shamans were “conjuring a spirit for favourable weather.” After a quarter of an hour, the shaman cried out and fell into a trance that terrorized the residents. They gathered around him and sang “a

¹² Sarychev, *Account of a Voyage of Discovery*, 66.

solemn lamentation,” supplicating the spirit to spare his life. Once the shaman revived, he explained that he had summoned the spirit into his presence and demanded fine weather. When the spirit had refused, the shaman had reproved him and threatened to expose him as powerless. At this, the furious spirit had attacked him and sent him into a deep trance. While in this state, the shaman learned that the weather would not improve until three days after the death of a certain woman (whom he named, probably much to her discomfort) during the upcoming summer. Then he told Sarychev three interesting things. First, he could travel as far as Makushin but no farther as bad weather would again overtake him. Second, he should not attempt to proceed further, even if the Makushin people encouraged him to do so. Third, that when he reached his ship he would find the condition of his companions had deteriorated.



And so Sarychev and Chief Pupyshev left Kashega. They reached Makushin just as “violent winds” prevented travel around the island. Despite the shaman’s warning, Sarychev was determined to leave. With three guides he went by baidarka to the end of Makushin Bay and began the trek across the mountains to Captains Bay. “The farther I advanced, the steeper it became,” he wrote. Eventually, “I saw to my dismay that I stood on the brink of an immense precipice, whose sides were covered with rocks, at the bottom of which flowed a brook....I was seized with such an irresistible dread, that I could proceed no

Nick Lekanoff (right), Al Dalrymple and Steven Hapoff (left) at the Pass above Makushin Bay, October 1969. Photograph by Ray Hudson.

farther....” After a night of violent tempests and a day when the sea was agitated, he returned to Makushin Village where the chief took pity on him and suggested another route. This time he and his companions portaged into Beaver Inlet from where he eventually made it back to the ships in Captains Bay. On arriving, he found the third prediction all too true: fourteen men had died of scurvy during his absence.

The census compiled by the Billings Expedition, although several Unangaꝯ chiefs assisted, was incomplete for a variety of reasons, including the requirement that people go to the ship to be registered.¹³ Nevertheless, it described our three villages within the context of their respective communities. Makushin and Kashega were part of a complex of six villages strung out along the southwestern coast of Unalaska, their populations totaling 164 males. Makushin was the largest with 45, while Kashega had 32. Two of the six villages were very small (with less than ten males in each) while two were of comparable size with Makushin and Kashega.

Biorka was the largest of the three villages in Beaver Inlet, with 21 of the 49 males registered in the census. If Biorka were in fact a *Qawalangin* village in 1792 as Sauer noted, its relationship with Unalga village and the sixteen other settlements in the Krenitzin Islands—all clearly *Qigiꝯgun* villages—is more difficult to explain. Traditional rivalries may have receded in the face of a common foe. Only one village on Akun and one on Tigalda were larger than Biorka. However, as an illustration of the uncertainty of these numbers, consider that in 1790 there were 29 males from Biorka who were baptized (and 19 females). Bergsland suggests that the disparity (between 29 in 1790 and 21 in 1792) may indicate that a number of able-bodied men were taken away to hunt sea otters and seals by ships belonging to Shelikhov.¹⁴ The census has names of men from the other two Beaver Inlet villages who had been taken to work aboard such a vessel. All in all, Biorka appears to have been a major village in this eastern complex in the 1790s.

What do these numbers mean in terms of the catastrophic population decline that marked the end of the 18th and the start of the 19th centuries? Based on a careful reading of the earliest reports, Roza Liapunova postulated there were “7,500 to 9,500 people, or, in round numbers, 8,000 to 10,000 people, but no more” at the time the Russians arrived in the Aleutians in mid-18th century.¹⁵ By 1792, less than 50 years later, the population had plummeted to about 3,000. The worst, however, was still to come when the population in the eastern Aleutians, for which region we have the most complete records, reached its lowest point in 1822. That year, according to Veniaminov, there were 1,474 residents.¹⁶ By 1834 he recorded a slight increase of twenty, although the number of males had

13 Bergsland, *Ancient Aleut Personal Names*, 22-23.

14 Bergsland, *Ancient Aleut Personal Names*, 23.

15 Liapunova, “The Aleuts before Contact with the Russians,” 8-10.

16 He recorded 695 males and 779 females. Veniaminov, *Notes*, 246.

diminished.¹⁷ In 1829 Iakov Netsvetov, the priest stationed at Atka, estimated the population of the Central and Western Aleutians plus the Commander Islands at 800.¹⁸ Adding this estimate to Veniaminov's 1834 figure [1,494] the total Aleut population around 1830 was approximately 2,300. In summary, the Aleut population from the arrival of the Russians until 1792 declined between 60 and 68 percent. The decrease between 1792 (3,000) and 1830 (2,300) was 23 percent. However, the total population loss up to 1830 was a reduction from somewhere between 7,500 and 9,500 to a low of 2,300, or between 69 and 76 percent. Current archaeological work in the Chain suggests the pre-contact population was even greater than Liapunova's estimate and the consequent loss even more catastrophic.¹⁹

Catherine II had declined Shelikhov's 1788 petition for recognition as the sole legitimate company in the territory. Following Shelikhov's death in 1795 and her own death a year later, her son Paul began to favor a more centralized organization of the fur trade, and in 1799 the company secured its long-sought monopoly. Over the next 68 years, a series of imperial charters to the Russian-American Company extended its governance under a succession of chief managers or governors. The territory was partitioned into manageable districts. Biorka, Makushin, and Kashega fell within the Unalaska District that encompassed the Alaska Peninsula, Unimak, the Krenitzin Islands, Unalaska, Umnak, and the Pribilof Islands. A district manager was stationed at Unalaska (Iliuliuk). In larger villages there were company employees, called *baidarshchiks*, who represented the firm. These men were sometimes Russian, but often Unangaġ. The Makarin, Yatchmenoff, Petikoff, Krukoff, Kudrin, and Golodoff families had such men among their modern founders.

There is little or no information specific to our three villages during the 68 years of the RA Company, but it is logical to conclude that residents in these villages shared experiences common to the bulk of Unangaġ and that their fortunes and misfortunes were frequently precipitated by local management. Men who worked as hunters aboard Russian vessels or under Russian supervision were often kept at a bare subsistence level. In 1818 Vasillii M. Golovnin found that Unangaġ from the Fox Islands had been "taken against their will into service aboard Company vessels." The prices charged for goods were so high that salaries were entirely used up when purchasing meager clothing to supplement the insufficient clothes issued to them.²⁰ Their daily food allowance was "only one dried or pickled fish" and this was augmented on holidays with bread and coarse grain.²¹

17 The number of males was down to 682 while the number of females had risen to 812. Veniaminov, Notes, 245.

18 This was close to Khlebnikov's 1827 figure of 351 males, 363 females, a total of 714 (plus 30 or 40 people absent on hunting trips from Attu and Amchitka). Black, The Journals of Iakov Netsvetov: the Atkha Years, 12. Khlebnikov, Notes on Russian America, 220-221. Both Netsvetov's and Khlebnikov's figures are considerably higher than Litke's 1825 figure of 569.

19 Corbett and Lefevre, "Prehistoric Village Organization in the Western Aleutians," 251-266.

20 Luehrmann, Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule, 67.

21 Golovnin, "Memorandum of Captain 2nd Rank Golovnin," 69.

Starvation threatened communities in the depth of winter—even during periods when there was competent management. During the administration of Fedor Burenin at Unalaska (1806 to 1813) all the people living in a village on the east side of Akutan died of hunger except for one old woman. Ivan Kriukov was the next manager and he was followed in 1821 by Rodion Petrovskii (1821-1829). The following year seven people starved to death at Kashega.²² There was a marked absence of fish that year. At Iliuliuk itself, Petrovskii used company supplies to avoid starvation among the local people.²³ As Luehrmann has pointed out with specific reference to Kodiak, “the material amenities islanders could hope to gain from working for the Russians were small at least through the first third of the nineteenth century.”²⁴

The Second Charter, good for another twenty years, was issued in 1821. By this time all Unangaġ fell within the regulatory umbrella of the company. Although Iakov Netsvetov, the Unangaġ priest stationed at Atka from 1828 to 1843, mentioned independent Aleuts, this was independence within defined limits. The people who today would call themselves Unangaġ were classified both as Aleuts and Creoles. Creoles were members of a special category of Russian citizens. This was a civil status and was “assigned to persons of Alaskan birth who claimed at least one Russian ancestor or who occupied positions of responsibility in management.”²⁵ In 1821 the number of creoles registered in the territory was small (about 300), but they had become significant members of an evolving community the company hoped to foster as a “‘middle class’ stratum in the Russian territory...with roots deep in the native Alaskan tradition, in the Alaskan soil and, at the same time, culturally and socially tied to Russia.”²⁶

Unangaġ who did not achieve the status of creoles remained Aleuts or “islanders” under the Second Charter and as such they were Russian subjects but their status was as yet undefined. Their primary obligation to the RA Company was to hunt sea mammals. Consequently, the company could draft half of all these males between the ages of 18 and 50 for service. The selection of hunters was to be made by the chiefs (toions) who were to try to keep enough males in a family so that village subsistence was not endangered. Those selected were to be relieved after three years unless they wished to continue working for the company. The rights of islanders to hunt and fish on their own were preserved with the provision that they stayed near their home villages. Permission from the company was required to go to neighboring areas. Of course, as the sole legitimate fur dealer in the territory, the RA Company was the only company to whom islanders were allowed to sell their catch. The distinction between creoles and Aleuts was significant. “All Creoles live far better than the Aleuts,”

22 Veniaminov, Notes, 257.

23 Sarafian, Winston Lee, Russian-American Company Records as a Source of Aleut Ethnohistory. Transcript. 18 November 1822, Vol. 3, No. 296, folio 120-121.

24 Luehrmann, Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule, 69.

25 Pierce, Russian America, 10.

26 Black, introduction, The Journals of Iakov Netsvetov: The Atka Years, xxvi.

wrote Veniaminov, “at least they have warm yurtas [semi-underground homes, *barabaras*] and more clothing and linen than the Aleuts, who, with all their efforts are not in a position to have them.”²⁷



Chrismation of Iakov Netsvetov.

In several ways the Second Charter preserved the rights of the company while attempting to safeguard Unangāx from the exploitation they had experienced in the past. Nevertheless, travel and settlement restrictions continued. Thus, “islanders not in Company service are permitted to fish along shores where they live for their personal and family sustenance, but they are not allowed to go to neighboring areas without special permission from the Company.”²⁸ It also specified the political parameters of Unangāx communities by placing the company clearly in charge. “Islanders are administered by tribal toions under the supervision of *starshinas* [elders],” read the charter, “appointed by the Company from among its best Russian servitors.” (Note that these “Russian servitors” may have been Unangāx.) The responsibilities of both groups, elders and chiefs, included “caring for and supervising the islanders entrusted to them. They are to resolve conflicts, arguments and dissatisfactions, and assist the islanders in their needs.” Whether or not the toions or the elders (or both) were appointed by the

²⁷ Veniaminov, Notes, 248, note*.

²⁸ Dmytryshyn, Crownhart-Vaughan, Vaughan, *The Russian American Colonies*, 362, 363.

Company, in actual fact the role of the company was more one of confirmation than of selection. In most cases, communities elected their leaders and this election was then subject to confirmation by the company.²⁹ In some cases, such as at Tigalda, the toion—in this case, the translator Ivan Pan'kov—was also the company manager.³⁰



Ioann Veniaminov,
Metropolitan of
Moscow. Image
courtesy Francis
Broderick.

Ioann Veniaminov's ten years at Unalaska fell during the period of the second charter. The priest made nineteen visits to villages within a parish that extended from Umnak to the Pribilof Islands and onto the Alaska mainland. While his official journals are brief and focus on ecclesiastical duties, they provide sketches of Makushin, Kashega and Biorka when added to his remarks in the first great Alaskan ethnography, *Notes on the Islands of the Unalashka District*. On April 16, 1825, eight months after arriving at Unalaska (following almost a year at Sitka), Veniaminov set off on his first visit to villages west of Unalaska. He traveled in a new open skin boat—a baidar—rowed by ten men and equipped with a sail. Stepanan Kriukov, manager of the RA Company station on Umnak, went along as a translator. Kriukov was a son of an Aleut woman and Ivan Kriukov, the former Unalaska manager whose praise of Aleuts had brought the priest to the Aleutians. One of Stepan's sons, Gregory Kriukov, would play a prominent role at Biorka in coming decades. What had promised to be a quick voyage ground to a halt as headwinds forced the party ashore at the western tip of the island. From here the priest and twenty companions hiked to Makushin Village, a trek through gusting snow that confirmed the effectiveness of the gut raincoat. "Neither wind nor

rain," he wrote, "can penetrate this very thin garment."³¹ He visited Makushin for nine days, beginning April 19, during which time he held services, gave religious instruction, and blessed marriages. Altogether, he stopped at Makushin eight times during four westward trips.

The priest's description of Makushin Village is not as detailed as one might wish. What is clear is that the village was located on the long beach at Volcano Bay, at the north approach to Makushin Bay. The RA Company stationed a baidarshchik in the village and owned "a yurta, a barabora, a shed, and a steam-bath."³² There were five baidarkas in use in 1834 and the fifteen men and twenty women lived in six yurts and six barabaras. Russians used the terms *yurta* and

29 For the evolving roles of toion and starshina, see Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and U.S. Rule*, 88-91.

30 Veniaminov, *Journals*, 76, 83.

31 Veniaminov, *Journals*, 35, note 9.

32 Veniaminov. *Notes*, 93.

barabara when referring to the *ulaĭ* or *ulaagamax*. Veniaminov distinguished “yurts” from “barabaras,” in which “barabaras” probably referred to more traditionally constructed dwellings. Unalaska, for example, was said to have 27 yurts, while Kashega had eight Unangaĭ yurts, and the village on Unalga had three yurts and three barabaras. Although the indigenous dwelling survived throughout the Russian period, it underwent significant alterations. Floors and interior walls were eventually lined with wood. As indicated by the number of barabaras at Makushin, the large communal dwelling had been replaced by smaller structures, generally used by single families. The introduction of doors and windows were structural modifications that dramatically changed the appearance of villages. Russians are credited with introducing doors, but at least one early visitor noted that dwellings—probably the large multi-roomed structures—had “hidden loopholes... in the sides, by which the residents can escape or get out to defend themselves if the main [overhead] entrance is in hostile hands.”³³

The decline in Makushin’s population, from forty-five males in 1792 to thirty-five males *and* females in 1825, is partially attributable to the decline in salmon. The salmon stream inside Makushin Bay was once considered the finest on the island, but whereas once they were taken by the “hundreds of thousands,” now, Veniaminov wrote, “they scarcely catch twenty thousands.”³⁴

On his first visit, Veniaminov and his companions traveled from Makushin to Kashega, arriving April 28. Over the next few days he chrismated twenty-three people, heard confession, “instructed the local inhabitants on all that which is necessary for our salvation,” and heard confession. “I taught all of the Aleuts using a set sequence, and even identical wording. I have written instructions for this practice [one word illegible]. I omit nothing that is essential for the preservation of faith and the redemption of each man.”³⁵ He held a service for the dead in the cemetery and blessed six marriages before leaving on April 30 to continue westward to Nikolski near the southern tip of Umnak Island.

Veniaminov counted forty-one residents at Kashega, eighteen male and twenty-three female. There were eight Aleut “yurts” along with a “yurta” for the resident baidarshchik. This man was in charge of the entire western half of Unalaska indicating that by this time Kashega, Chernofski and a few other smaller villages in the area operated as a single economic unit. At Kashega the company had “a shed, a barabora, a steambath and a cattle yard.”³⁶ Cattle were introduced in 1833 and the Kashega herd consisted of four cows and a bull. The small herd was “incomparably better” than the forty-five cattle at Iliuliuk (Unalaska) and

33 Palas, quoted in Masterson and Brower. *Bering’s Successors*, 44-45. There were also hidden underground locations where families could be concealed during invasions (Veniaminov, Notes, 264).

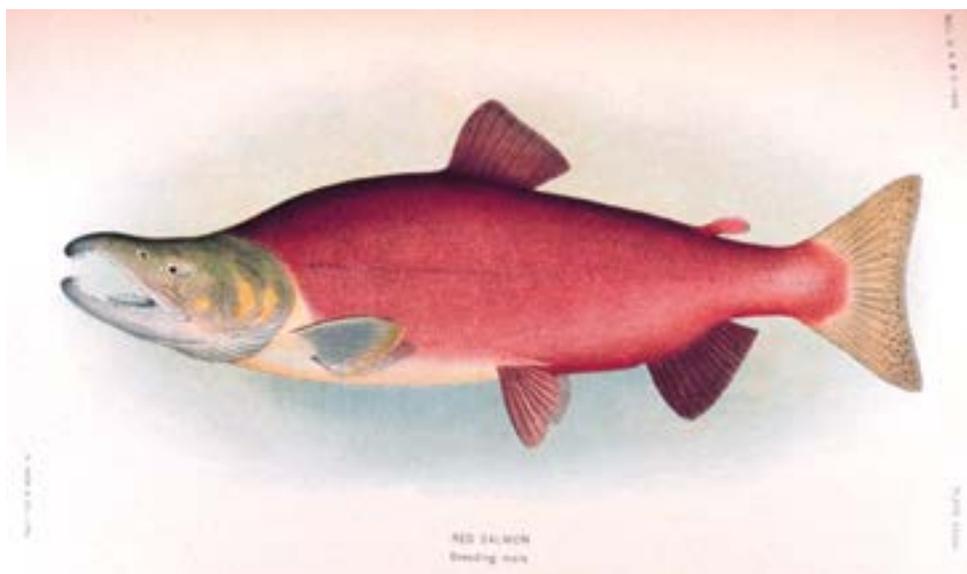
34 Veniaminov, Notes, 84, 94, 39.

35 Veniaminov, Journals, 35, note 11.

36 Veniaminov, Notes, 94-95.

Veniaminov credited this to a milder climate and to an abundance of forage.³⁷ Pigs were also raised here (as well as at Unalaska and Makushin). Somehow, unlike residents of other villages, Kashega and Makushin people were able to keep the pigs from rooting up their barabaras.³⁸ Despite these agricultural beginnings, Kashega's resources were "not very enviable,

though red salmon enter the mouth of the stream almost from January to July and Dolly Vardens, humpbacked and silver salmon from June to October, the quantity is very small, so that, even on the best of days, the catch hardly exceeds 300 fish. Sea fish are taken outside the bay at a considerable distance. Occasionally it is possible to take sea lions on the south side. A small number of seals are taken on the [offshore] rocks. Roots—*sarana* and *chagitka*—which grow in large quantities, constitute one of the main items of subsistence.³⁹



Red salmon, breeding male, "The Fishes of Alaska." Bulletin of the Bureau of Fisheries, Vol. XXVI, 1906. P. 360, Plate XXXIV. NOAA.

Veniaminov returned to Makushin and Kashega in August 1828 and again in April 1830 and April/May 1832. He continued to use Stepan Kriukov as his translator although by 1830 his command of the language had made this almost unnecessary. During the 1832 trip, while at Kashega, he and Semen Pan'kov finished correcting their translation of one of the Gospels.⁴⁰ On this occasion, after visiting Makushin, he returned to Unalaska by hiking overland from Portage Bay. His last visit to these two villages was in April 1834, just a few months before he left the Aleutians for good. The populations had increased slightly. There were now thirty-eight people at Makushin and forty-three at Kashega.⁴¹

37 Veniaminov, Notes, 40-42, 95.

38 Veniaminov, Notes, 42.

39 Veniaminov, Notes, 95.

40 Veniaminov, Journals, 159.

41 Veniaminov, Journals, 191.

The priest made fewer trips to Biorka, then neither the largest nor the most important village in the area. Between Beaver Inlet and Unimak Island to the east, there were ten villages with a total population of 352. In Beaver Inlet itself were Bobrovskoe (in Deep Bay) with forty-one residents, Biorka (Sedankosvkoe) with forty-four, and Sechkinskoe (in the bay between Ugadaga and Agamgik bays) with a very small but unrecorded number of residents. Unalga Island, near the mouth of Beaver Inlet, had twenty-three inhabitants. In the Krenitzin Islands there were villages on Avatanak with forty-nine residents, on Akutan with thirteen, and on Tigalda with ninety-seven. On Akun Island there were three villages: Artelnovskoe with thirty-two residents, Rechesnoe with thirty-seven, and Seredninskoe with sixteen. (In addition, on the north end of Unalaska Island, in Kalekhta Bay, was a village with fourteen residents.)⁴²

Veniaminov's first visit to Biorka was in September 1828. He gathered the residents into the tent he had brought, provided religious instruction, chrismated individuals and blessed marriages. He heard confession and gave four ill or aged individuals Holy Communion. On his trip back, he crossed Beaver Inlet to Ugadaga Bay and hiked overland to Iliuliuk along a much-used trail.⁴³ Although he stopped at Akun, Tigalda, and other nearby villages several times, he did not return to Biorka until 1831 when he visited for two days in September. His brief description said the village included "6 yurtas" for the forty-four residents, seventeen males and twenty-seven females. They were cultivating gardens, but their staple food was "deep sea fish and shell-fish."⁴⁴

We owe a description of Unalaska villages a few years later to a smallpox epidemic that first appeared in New Archangel (Sitka) in 1836 and then spread to Kodiak and the Alaska Peninsula. By 1839 it was threatening the Unalaska district. The company physician at Sitka, Dr. Eduard Blashke, traveled to the Fox Islands and vaccinated people at Iliuliuk and in outlying villages. His description is particularly valuable since it clearly distinguished smaller communities, like Biorka, Kashega, and Makushin, from Iliuliuk that continued in the throes of cultural change.

"The Aleuts go about in jackets and frock coats," Lavrentii Zagoskin would write following a visit to the principal settlement three years later in 1842, "their wives and daughters in calico dresses and kamleya [parka covers], which are long shirts made of ticking or nankeen [unbleached cotton] with red cloth trimming around the collar and hem. The married women, guarding against sin, keep their heads always covered while the girls wear their hair long, tied at the back of the neck with a ribbon."⁴⁵ A drawing he made shows a dozen men outside a building on a Sunday. Eleven of them are dressed in gut kamleikas. Based on the elaborate collars, these were probably ceremonial kamleikas similar to those collected in the 1840s by Governor Etholén and others. The hats were adaptations of

42 Veniaminov, Notes, 259-260, corrected from the text.

43 Veniaminov, Journals, 90-91.

44 Veniaminov, Notes, 96.

45 Michael, ed., Lieutenant Zagoskin's Travels, 87.

a European seaman's cap, topped with a circle of fine embroidery and fancy stitching.

In contrast, Blashke found that in smaller villages “the usual Aleut dress is a birdskin parka which the poor wear over their bare body. Most Aleuts, however, wear a canvas shirt underneath.”⁴⁶ The parkas were washed frequently and Aleuts used steam baths on a regular basis. Blashke found that steps had been taken to insure that starvation did not occur. “Special so-called ‘company’ baraboras have been built in every village,” he explained—these would have been the company yurts mentioned by Veniaminov—“in order to avoid a shortage of winter supplies of dried fish and fat, the chief and essential objects of the Aleut diet.” Half of each season’s supply of dried fish was placed in this storehouse, under the control of the baidarshchik who distributed it as needed. Food supplies were exchanged among villages if that became necessary. “In this way,” he concluded, “the almost annual spring famine of previous years is averted.”



He found subtle differences among residences. Chiefs and “well-to-do Aleuts” had baraboras divided into two or three rooms, while the baidarshchiks even had glass windows. Ordinary homes were “of timber or plank construction, rarely more than twenty-one feet in length or fourteen feet in width. The height rarely exceeds that of a man.” There was an entrance hall, where any wet or damp clothing was left, and where the cooking fire was kept along with “supplies of dried fish, fat, etc.” The inner compartment was the living space and this was “always kept neat, the floor...strewn with straw and covered with straw mats, as are sometimes the plank beds and the walls.” He acknowledged that villages differed in cleanliness, methods of subsistence, the success of their hunters, and overall prosperity. “Nevertheless,” he concluded, “the number of well-run villages considerably exceeds the number of poorly run ones, of which there are only two.” It is significant that he never mentioned village chapels.

“A Man and a Woman of Oonalashka” by Martin Sauer. From *Expedition to the Northern Parts of Russia, 1802*. Repository: Loussac Library, Anchorage.

Although over a thousand individuals were vaccinated, 134 people died of smallpox, including seventeen at Iliuliuk and a significant number in the Krenitzin Islands.⁴⁷ The death toll for our three villages is unknown, but if the

⁴⁶ Tikhmenev, *A History of the Russian-American Company*, 471, note 22.

⁴⁷ Black, et al. *The History and Ethnohistory of the Aleutians East Borough*, 42. *Records of the Russian-American Company, correspondence of the Governor's General, Communications Sent*, vol. 16, no. 481, folios 191v-195, November 4, 1838. Sarafian, *Russian-American Company Records as a Source of Aleut Ethnohistory*.

Krenitzin Islands were struck it is likely that the number of dead at Biorka was also great.

With stabilization of community life under the RA Company, the population began a gradual recovery. An 1852 publication listed 2,300 Aleuts from Unimak to Attu, but omitted the Pribilof Islands and settlements on and near the Alaska Peninsula.⁴⁸ A decade later, the Unalaska district was credited with having 1,862 residents while the western islands' population was 530, making a total for the Aleutian region of 2,392.⁴⁹ An 1867 census from Innokentii Shaiashnikov, the priest at Unalaska, gave a total of 2,493 (adding RA Company figures for Attu and Atka).⁵⁰ In other words, the region experienced a slight population growth in final decades of the Russian period.

Although the number of residents was gradually increasing, there was a significant and enduring loss in the number of villages. By 1840 the profusion of small subsistence villages united by kinship ties were consolidating into centers for trade and commerce as the requirements for sustainability changed. As an example, consider the villages on Unalaska Island.⁵¹ There were said to have been twenty-four when the Russians first arrived.⁵² Baranov listed sixteen in 1790; Billings recorded fifteen two years later. Veniaminov listed ten in his table in the *Notes* (plus two additional small villages mentioned in his journals). More serious than the numerical decline was the loss of villages with populations large enough to assure continuation. In all three lists there were two to four villages with male populations of ten or lower. These were villages soon to disappear. Of villages with between eleven and twenty-one males there were nine in 1790, four in 1792, and six in 1840. The greatest change occurred in the number of larger villages, those with over twenty-two male inhabitants. There were five in 1790, ranging from thirty-five to fifty; the largest of these were Makushin and Chernofski. In 1792 there were seven villages where the number of males ranged from twenty-six to forty-five, with Makushin and Chernofski again the largest. However, by 1840 there was only one village with more than twenty-two male residents: Iliuliuk (Unalaska) with ninety. In other words, by 1840 moderately sized villages had disappeared leaving only one steadily expanding settlement. Would Biorka, Makushin, and Kashega soon go the way of so many other villages?

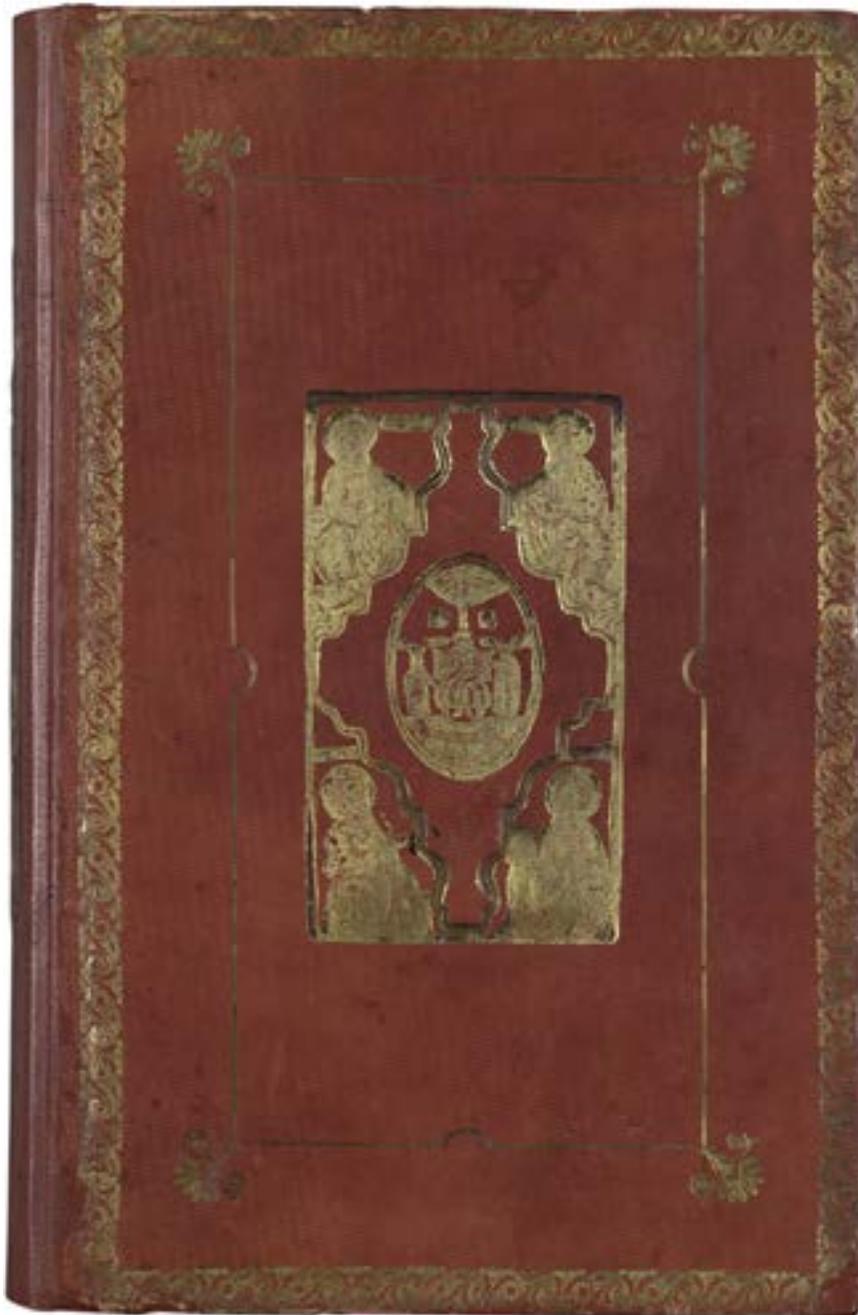
48 Teben'kov, Atlas, 77, 82, 84, 85.

49 Tikhmenev, A History of the Russian-American Company, 402-409. Numerous villages are omitted from this account and his inflated figure for the small village of Imagnia ("about 368") must lump several villages into one.

50 Davidson, Report, 221-222.

51 Sedanka Island is not included because the 1790 population for Biorka is difficult to ascertain. If Baranov called it Usetinskoe, it had 15 adult males; if he called it Boreshke, it had 10. There were 16 adult males in the Billings' census, plus 5 minor males. Veniaminov listed 17 men and 27 women in the table in his Notes.

52 Veniaminov, Notes, 90.



[*The Gospel of St. Matthew*](#) translated from Russian into Unangam tunuu by Ioann Veniaminov, 1840. Repository: National Library of Russia.
Digitized by World Digital Library.