

4 READING THE ETHNOGRAPHIC PAST IN THE PRESENT: WALDEMAR JOCHELSON AND THE YUKAGHIR¹

Thomas Ross Miller

The Yukaghir and Yukaghirized Tungus by Waldemar Jochelson (Vladimir Il'ich Iokhel'son) (1855–1937) is one of those rare books in the history of anthropology: a study of a people so little known or understood, achieved on such a grand scale and in such a comprehensive manner, that it comes to be regarded as the definitive work on the subject. Based on years of fieldwork and collecting, it was written and published in three parts over a period of two and a half decades, years that included the Soviet Revolution and the author's self-imposed exile in America. It was part of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, to this day perhaps the most ambitious ethnographic collecting enterprise ever undertaken. The journey was made at the border between two centuries, in a historical moment of catastrophic population decline for the Yukaghir people. Salvage anthropology's intervention came at a point of crisis for the survival of the Yukaghir clans, shortly before life in the north was changed irrevocably by revolution, civil war, and collectivization.

Previous expeditionary collecting in Russia had not reached the Yukaghir as much as some neighboring peoples in Siberia. The massive holistic collections Jochelson gathered under Franz Boas's direction for the American Museum of Natural History were driven by an impulse to collect the culture of the past for the science of the future. Anthropologists wanted to document what they considered pre-contact survivals, but they rarely envisioned the long-term survival of peoples and their traditions. With the avowed goal of proving the Bering Strait migration hypothesis regarding the origins of the first Americans, railroad magnate and museum president Morris K. Jesup commissioned the expedition. For five years at the turn of the 20th century, teams of fieldworkers led by Boas scoured the countryside from the interior plateau of British Columbia across the North Pacific as far as central Yakutia, collecting recordings, texts, photographs, human remains, and all manner of material items for the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. The cargo included two previously unclassified small mammal species, including the Kolyma red-backed mouse which was named for Jochelson (*Evotomys Jochelsoni*) (14)². In addition to found objects, a category including most art and artifacts as well as human bones, Jochelson and his team made documentary collections consisting of dictated texts, phonograph records, photographs, and head casts—objects created, at least in part, by and for science.

1 This chapter was also published as the foreword to the new edition of Jochelson's *The Yukaghir and Yukaghirized Tungus* [2018]).

2 These numbers refer to the pagination of the main text corpus in Jochelson 2018.

Yukaghir Fire: Land and Language

The Yukaghir are one people in two divisions. The two interrelated but distinct branches are the reindeer herders on the tundra (Wadul) and the hunter-gatherers in the taiga (Odul). The Wadul intermingled more with Even (Tungus) people on the tundra, while the Odul in the taiga were more Russianized. Jochelson, his wife and field partner Dina Brodskaja, and their colleague Waldemar Bogoras coined the hybrid ethnonym “Yukaghirized Tungus” to describe some of the tundra groups. The neologism, suggested by Bogoras, was meant to describe the intermixture of Even (Tungus) and Yukaghir identities and society. Jochelson (16) states that Odul was also a name for Yukaghir people in general, and the people Jochelson and Bogoras named “Yukaghirized Tungus” told Jochelson they too called themselves Odul; but when he told this to the “real” Odul in Kolyma, they were outraged. The Kolyma Odul called the “Yukaghirized Tungus” Alayi-people, which was understood to mean Even (Tungus). The Chuvantsy are a related group whose affiliation was classified in several different ways over the years (see Krupnik 1990).

Jochelson introduced the Yukaghir on the second page of his Memoir as “a tribe insignificant and having no future.” The drastic decline in the Yukaghir population during the period of his field collecting left them on the brink of survival. Odul means strong and powerful, and many northern peoples still refer to the stars or the northern lights as “Yukaghir fire.” According to oral tradition, the metaphor originated at a time when the Yukaghir were so numerous that their campfires and hearths dotted the night landscape as far as the eye could see. At the beginning of the 17th century there were between 10 000 and 20 000 Yukaghir. By the end of the 19th century, their numbers had declined to some 200. By the turn of the 20th century, they were one of the smallest and poorest of the small-numbered peoples of the north. Soviet census figures reported that the Yukaghir population more than doubled from about 400 in 1959 to 835 in 1979 (Forsyth 1992: 405). By the 1990s, the population of the vast Verkhnekolymask district was more than 90% ethnically Russian or other non-indigenous people. At the turn of the 21st century, their population was officially reported at between 900 and 1 200. In the complex ethnolinguistic mixture of North Asia, Wadul have more in common with Even (Tungus) culture; the Odul have sometimes been referred to as Russianized Yukaghir, but they have also long been under a strong influence from both Sakha (Yakut) and Even (Tungus).

As the first outsider to cross the Stanovoi mountain range, Jochelson described the Yukaghir terrain as the severest in all Siberia, a region which experiences the coldest winter temperatures of any inhabited part of the earth. “In the Yukaghir country,” he writes, “the rivers, as a rule, are long, deep, and carry a large volume of water” (13). Rivers are central places in the topology that includes the Kolyma, Yasachnaia, Rassochoa, Indigirka, Omolon, Korkodon, and Shamanikha. The Kolyma region was founded by Russians in 1673 and became a place of banishment, hardship, and death

for exiles and prisoners. The many intermixed marriages in this part of Siberia are among the most ethnically complex in northern Asia, but at the end of the 20th century almost all the Yukaghir in the Kolyma settlement of Nelemnoe belonged to one of six intermarried clans. Early and endogamous marriages have resulted in cousin relationships reproduced from generation to generation. They were long under the double domination of Sakha (Yakut) and Russians. Later, under the totalizing force of Soviet living, collectivization and the *kolkhoz* became a way of life, disrupting and reorganizing the patterns of traditional cultures. Despite this, however, remoteness from the administrative center enabled a degree of cultural persistence.

Yukaghir poetry, Jochelson wrote, “is distinguished by an abundance of feeling” (310). The landscape is a frequent motif in Yukaghir songs, as a setting and a metaphor for human longing and separation or as a celebration of the blessings of the earth. Distance in the taiga is more often measured in time than space; a destination is said to be a number of days’ journey away rather than a number of kilometers. Hunters and fishermen journeying on the broad rivers of Verkhne Kolyma district leave their fires burning on shore when they break camp so the rising smoke can serve as a beacon of human life, heartening other lonesome travelers passing through the vast uninhabited stretches of wilderness.

The settlement of Nelemnoe sits on a high bank of the Yasachnaia River, deep in the Siberian taiga of the Verkhne Kolyma district in Yakutia (Sakha Republic, Russian Federation). Nelemnoe means “place of many *nelm*” (a white salmon), or according to another theory, of many *nalim* (burbot). Today’s settlement is actually the third Nelemnoe; two previous sites were each abandoned when rising flood waters threatened people’s houses. The first Nelemnoe, near the mouth of the Rassochoa River, was closed in 1931 when the Yukaghir were organized into the “Bright Life” *kolkhoz* (collective farm). The second, on a high bank where there was always a high level of deep water, is now known as Old Nelemnoe. It was evacuated due to rising flood waters between 1956 and 1958 (Vakhtin 1991: 7). Most Odul now live most of the time in Nelemnoe, hunting and fishing along the Yasachnaia and the Kolyma’s many tributaries, and in their traditional territory of the Arga-Tas mountains north of Magadan.

The hunter-gatherer taiga Yukaghir (Odul) and the reindeer herding tundra Yukaghir (Wadul) speak cognate but almost mutually unintelligible tongues. Whether Odul and Wadul are two languages or two different dialects of the same language has been the topic of considerable debate by linguists, as has the question of its origins and affiliations. Yukaghir has been classified as an anomalous Paleosiberian language isolate unrelated to neighboring languages, but some modern scholars disagree. Jochelson saw the language as similar to others, but conceded to the isolate classification pending further studies (44; see also Jochelson 1900; 1905). Before Jochelson’s research, the language was so little known outside of its native speakers that many thought it was extinct.

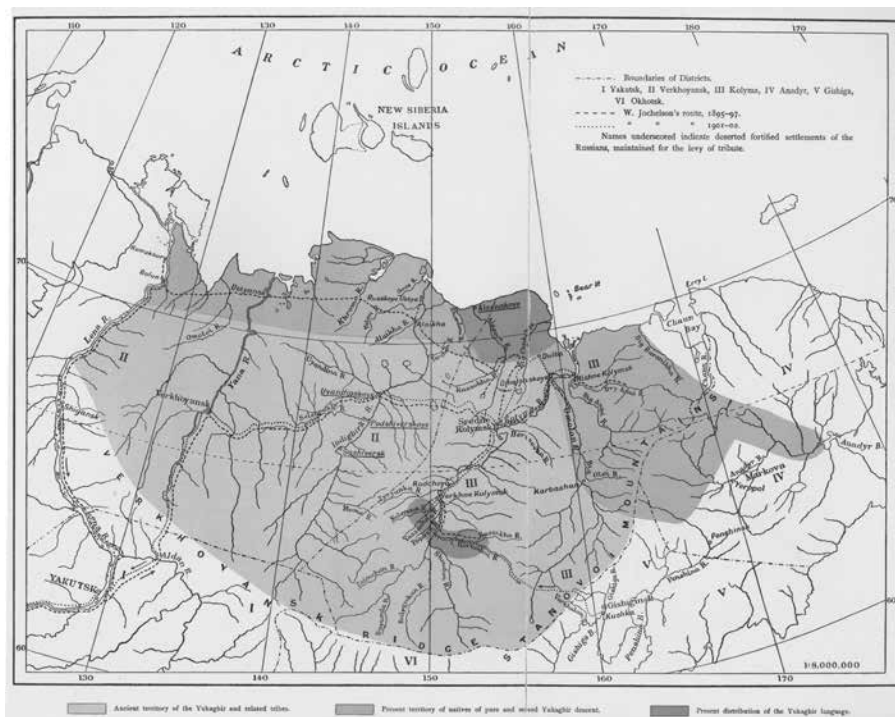


Fig. 1 This map published in Jochelson's memoir shows the loss of Yukaghir territory from the ancient past to the early 20th-century ethnographic present.

Yukaghiric languages were once widely spoken across a vast range between the Lena and Anadyr Rivers across what is today Chukotka, the northeastern Sakha Republic, and northern Magadan Oblast; from the Ural Mountains to the Yenisei River west-east, and from the Arctic circle to southern taiga in Altai. Only two languages or dialects survive, Wadul and Odul. The proper classification of Yukaghir remains contested among linguists. Some still consider the Yukaghiric languages an isolated branch, while others classify them as derived from an ancestral proto-language. Nikolaeva's historical dictionary was an important milestone in Yukaghir linguistics (2006). Based on sound laws, lexical cognates, and glottochronology, Piispanen (2016; 2017) predicts that the Yukaghiric languages will prove to have developed from a Pre-Proto-Uralic language, "perhaps spoken somewhere north of modern Mongolia, close to Manchuria due to typological reasons." The Uralic-Yukaghiric divergence has been dated as far back as 6 600 BC. (see Jochelson 1905; Kreinovich 1958; Nikolaeva 2006).

Of special interest to paleolinguists are the birch-bark maps and letters (*shangar shurele* in Yukaghir) written in signs that are thought to be the remnants of an ancient pictographic writing system (Jochelson 2017: 79–89). Linguists believed the code to

have been lost, but at the end of the 20th century some elders were still able to read them from photographs. Some were love letters, while others depicted forests, lakes, and rivers, and crossings. They were used to show good fishing places, to count time, and to predict the return of a hunting party according to the position of the moon. The signs show the story or plot of a song and name the places, but did not indicate the melody. One had to know the signs very well to decode them.

In a section titled “Mental Traits” (42 ff.), Jochelson wrote that although dominated by Russians, the Yukaghir had maintained their dignity. His claim to have never had a single misunderstanding with them (43) probably refers to payments, but it must be taken with a grain of salt as witnessed by numerous incidents including conflict and tension: over love letters addressed to him (65), physical-type photography, the naked anatomical measurements of Yukaghir women, the making of head casts, and his removal of sacred objects including an important *chuchelo* (wooden spirit figure) in the 1890’s from a tree that still stands at the mouth of the Shamanikha River. The abduction of the *chuchelo* triggered an outbreak of the nervous disease sometimes referred to as arctic hysteria, causing widespread suffering (see Miller 2004b).

Although his contributions were long erased from the Soviet historical record, northern people have regarded Jochelson’s legacy (and that of his fellow Decembrists) quite favorably. Yukaghir people say that he had a good heart and tried to help the people when they had few allies. For his part, he characterized the Yukaghir as especially cheerful and playful: “when the young people begin to dance, one after another—old men and children, healthy and ill, and especially old women—begin to join them, until all the inhabitants of the village have turned out to the dance.” Even a sick old woman got up and joined in until she could no longer stand (35). Strong women continue to play a crucial role in maintaining Yukaghir traditions (see Willerslev 2010; Zhukova 1996). Willerslev points out a paradox in the romanticization of the Yukaghir as primitive and remote, a sentiment that made them an icon of small-numbered peoples of the north in the imagination of outsiders: they are sad but cheerful, poor but rich in emotional feeling. Such judgments were based in part on travelers’ impressions, including especially Jochelson’s canonic tome. The Yukaghir “have thus been in the extraordinary position of being one of the Siberian peoples to whom reference is most often made, but on the basis of data that are now more than a century old” (Willerslev 2004). In fact, the reconstructed traditions of Boasian magisterial ethnography were already at odds with modern realities when they were written.

Collecting on the Edge of Change

The book should be considered in the context of the collection as a whole.³ The historical moment in which the expedition and collections were made was a period of disastrous population decline for the Yukaghir, who were enduring some of the worst epidemics in Siberian history. Jochelson reported to Boas in 1902 that the Yukaghir had fared worse than any other northeastern Siberian tribe he knew. At the height of the smallpox outbreak Yukaghir were dying at a catastrophic rate. Between 1850 and 1897 the Alaseia (Wadul) clan declined from 99 to 13, most from illness. Among the survivors was Igor Shamanov, clan shaman and grandfather of activist and poet Uluro Ado (Gavril Kurilov). He recorded spirit voices on the phonograph and sold his shaman's coat and drum to Jochelson for the museum.

Waldemar Jochelson's early years as a Jewish revolutionary, exile, and political prisoner have been described elsewhere (see Winterschladen 2016; Kasten 2017; Krupnik and Fitzhugh 2001). As a member of People's Will (*Narodnaia Volia*), he was linked to terrorists and an assassination plot, and like Bogoras he spent years imprisoned in St. Petersburg's infamous Peter and Paul Fortress. His subsequent exile to Yakutia led him to conduct ethnographic research and travel among the Yukaghir and Sakha (Yakut), including collecting for the imperial Sibriakov Expedition. The Yukaghir treated all Russians as if they were officials; to them, Jochelson and his Cossacks were agents of the state. One Yukaghir elder claimed that "The first researchers who came here, before Jochelson, had rifles; the Yukaghir were afraid of them because the bullets were fast. These researchers thought there were many Yukaghir and that the Yukaghir might kill them, so they put a raft in river and smoke on the raft. They poisoned people to kill them, deliberately."

The imperial bureaucratic state kept Jochelson under suspicion even as it enabled his work (see Jochelson 2017: 153–158). Although his agreement with the museum forbade her getting credit, Dina Brodskia contributed much of the photography and made anatomical measurements of women. Her charm, personality, and human kindness were important in winning the trust and cooperation of the people; nonetheless, there were great difficulties in taking head casts, anthropometric measurements, and photographs of women's sometimes naked bodies (see Jochelson-Brodsky 1906). While the character of fieldwork Jochelson had to employ with the Koryak because of Boas' instructions differed from his fieldwork with the Yukaghirs, some Koryak women were also terrified by the process (see Kasten 2017: 27).

Fig. 2, 3 Boas directed his field workers to photograph subjects in frontal, side, and three-quarter views for physical-type comparison and classification. Some of the items of clothing and ornaments they wore in the photographs are preserved in the American Museum of Natural History's collection. From Jochelson 2018: Plate I, III.

3 https://anthro.amnh.org/jesup_collection; https://anthro.amnh.org/jesup_photos



Yukaghir population decline was caused by environmental conditions, starvation, disease, and the demands of the fur tax and tribute (*iasak*), but the greatest losses came about through absorption into other groups. The rate of depopulation accelerated in the second half of the 19th century. By the time of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, the combined Yukaghir population of Wadul and Odul had probably declined to around 200 individuals. They judged correctly that smallpox was an alien disease imported by Russians, but their shamans were usually helpless against Russian spirits and illness (see Jochelson 2017: 115–137) where he describes in detail especially how the Yukaghirs dealt with these epidemics).

The stage was thus set for the Boasian salvage ethnology model of collecting at the edge of change, when the old ceremonial artifacts were still in people's houses but their use had declined due to death, assimilation, and what appeared to be a fading out of traditional ceremonial life. Boas instructed his field workers on the Jesup North Pacific Expedition that the cusp of modernity was the best time to collect ritual artifacts, when people still owned them, but would sell them cheaply due to lack of interest.

Shamans and Singing Diseases

The texts by Jochelson and Bogoras on the subject of shamanism, classics in the field, have profoundly influenced western anthropologists' thinking about the subject. Shamans met by Jochelson in Yukaghir country included an old man called Tuliach (Spiridonov) (201); Nelbosh (Samsonov), a Yukaghir shaman from the Korkodon River, was only revealed as a shaman to Jochelson after his death (196). Mashka, an Even Tungus from the Sea of Okhotsk, was Nelbosh's son-in-law. Mashka's movements were wild and loud; but "Nelbosh would sing with deep feeling, but in a low, drawn out voice, as if lulling somebody to sleep, and producing an atmosphere of quiet sadness" (201). The Yukaghir shamans Jochelson recorded in the taiga were actually from the tundra, Wadul whose speech and songs were unknown to the Odul in the area.

Jochelson has been criticized for stating that he encountered few shamans in Siberia, yet constructing an entire ethnographic representation of Siberian shamanism. Field work in the 1990s confirmed that some of his informants were secretly shamans; others went by nicknames or pseudonyms. Was the truth concealed from Jochelson, or did he know this and conceal their true identity rather than reveal it in print? His Yukaghir consultants took part in a tradition of secrecy and covert shamanizing. This tradition has long included the practice of withholding some information from ethnographers in the field, whether at the behest of the spirits or the discretion of the shaman. The negotiation of the informant with the spirits over what esoteric knowledge to reveal and what to conceal from outsiders is a familiar and continuing part

of the ethnographic enterprise, a shadow dance of revelation and concealment. Some things are simply not spoken of.

Shamans and shamanizing were fluid, translinguistic, mobile in space as well as between the worlds. Observing that Yukaghir life has always been small scale and lacking in grand public rituals, Willerslev (2007) and some others posit that the Yukaghir were favored by the Soviets as something like primitive communists, and that none of their shamans were persecuted. They were, however, repressed. The source of a Yukaghir shaman's power is ecological, residing in sacred elements of the environment beyond the reach of bureaucrats and *apparatchiki*. One time the authorities came to Nelemnoe and pointed a gun at a great shaman, demanding to be shown the source of his shamanic power. He led them to the river and pointed at a fish. Shamans acted as historical conduits for resistance and provided a secret counter-narrative to Soviet domination.

The outbreaks of "Arctic hysteria" (*emerek* and *emirchanye*) Jochelson witnessed among the Yukaghir during the period of his field work were the most severe and widespread of all documented cases to have occurred in the north. Those stricken, mostly women, exhibited strange behavioral disorders including violent fits, crying out, perseveration, echolalia, compulsive imitation, and speaking in tongues. Some studies have attributed the epidemics to extreme cold, malnutrition, or colonial domination, but few have examined the point of view of the Yukaghir themselves. Outbreaks occurred especially when the clans were without shamans. The worst documented pandemic occurred in the decade around 1900. All accounts agree that Kolyma Yukaghir territory was the epicenter of the epidemics.

S.I. Mitskevich, a Bolshevik physician who later served with Bogoras on the Committee of the North, observed and treated many patients with *emerek*, *menerik*, and related nervous conditions. Victims were frightened of abuse at the hands of Russian exiles. *Tarymta*, also associated with spirits, was a less severe disease that affected women from the onset of puberty by attacking the heart, mouth, and nerves. In several locales he found nearly all persons experienced some type of "domestic hysteria" or cabin fever (1929: 10–23). In the small settlement of Rodchevo, Mitskevich determined that fully 100% of the women had suffered from some type of "psycho-neuropathology," including one *shamanka* (which he considered a type of psychic disturbance).

The *khozain*, masters of taiga and lake, are animal spirits who serve as intermediaries between nature and supernature, acting as shamans' helpers and protectors. But when spirits possess unwitting individuals, the afflicted are powerless against them. Mitskevich documented a widespread epidemic of singing diseases among the Yukaghir in 1929. A patient, he wrote, would "cry, sing rhythmically, beat her head against the wall or shake it from side to side, tear at her hair." Her body cramped and became rigid, and she began to make terrifying noises which built to a crescendo. Others hearing the cries sometimes took up the song in chorus as the nervous illness spread.

Patients “sang in unknown languages and predicted the future; like shamans, they were possessed by spirits and extraordinary powers could appear.” The rhythms of their songs were the same as those of shamans’ songs, but unlike shamans they could not control their spirits. They usually sang or spoke in Yakut or Russian, and Yukaghir often claimed the affliction was of foreign origin.

Although the pathology of certain nervous and psychic syndromes common to the circumpolar north has been linked to extremes of cold and dark, outbreaks also occurred in summer. They often spread contagiously. Some were attributed to biological epidemics, as among the Verkhne Kolyma Yukaghir and Even in 1899. In Nel-emnoe, every night sufferers could be heard crying, singing, and speaking in tongues including Chukchi, which according to Mitskevich was unknown there. Among the Chukchi themselves, the disease was rare. Another outbreak occurred in 1900, when some blamed a shaman from the tundra for bringing the illness (Mitskevich 1929:27–28). The tundra Yukaghir rarely suffered from the affliction. Yukaghir *emiriachki* most often spoke in Sakha or Russian, which might suggest a foreign origin.

Fits of singing disease were associated with the stresses and strains of colonialism, and of the subaltern condition of native women especially. Some of the Cossacks assigned to accompany (and perhaps to spy on) Jochelson were cruel to native women, demanding food, shelter, and sexual favors; some had violent sadistic impulses. One old woman, a *menerik* sufferer, was startled by the crack of Jochelson’s camera shutter and rushed at his Cossack Kotelnikoff, cursing and trying to grab his sexual organs. (37) (see Kendall, Mathé and Miller 1997).

Here the erasure of group boundaries was expressed through a vocal repertoire, in this case of a terrifying and uncontrollable variety. Mitskevich proposed attacking the disease by using culture as a weapon. With collectivization and communism, he concluded, the people would come into a natural state of harmony. The doctor’s prescription reflected the aims of the Party in the late 1920s to gain control over northern minorities, in line with Bogoras’ plan to save native cultures by helping them adapt to the inexorable tide of Communism.

Slow Science

The complete writing up and publication of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition materials took decades of slow science, painstakingly reconstructed by sifting through source materials collected many years earlier. Bogoras’ monumental study of the Chukchi, the most widely known in the series, took five years post-fieldwork to be published in full. *The Yukaghir and Yukaghirized Tungus* took far longer; by the time Part III appeared in 1926, some two dozen years had passed since the completion of principal fieldwork. (Jochelson’s *The Yakut* took even longer, until 1933.) Jochelson and Boas were using prerevolutionary data to create a canonic description, in the

present tense, of a people whose way of life had radically changed by the time the full publication appeared. When is the ethnographic present of the Memoir?

The overarching mission of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition—to accomplish the hypothetical reconstruction of the peopling of the Americas from Siberia, or else obtain definitive evidence to the contrary—through the massive accumulation of holistic fragments always remained in the minds of Jesup, Boas, Jochelson, Bogoras and the others. But the collections and monographs became far more descriptive and focused. They stand as testaments to a legacy of expeditionary fortitude. Boas downplayed the obvious lacuna in his theory of a grand North Pacific culture region: since he collected no evidence from Alaska, the central piece of the geographic puzzle, any hypothetical proof of common origins would remain unresolved. The American Museum of Natural History was already rich in artifacts from Alaska, in particular those purchased from the voluminous collector George Emmons. Instead, Boas concentrated more of the museum's field resources in peripheral areas far from the North Pacific coast, where he already had trained men on the inside: Jochelson (1933) for the Sakha (Yakut) and James Teit on the interior plateau of British Columbia.

In his culture area theory, Boas postulated these regions as transition zones between coastal and interior peoples both in North Asia and North America. This stretched the definition of North Pacific peoples, which was the point of the entire exhaustive endeavor in the first place. In the end it hardly mattered, as the voluminous and richly detailed scope and range of the Jesup collection and monographs continue to inspire artists, scholars, and activists to discover and explore the historic links among indigenous people on both continents (see Fitzhugh and Crowell 1988). While solo fieldwork became standard practice for British and American anthropologists, collecting expeditions remained important in Siberia, where seasonal access to the field remained limited for scholars. For seven decades in the Soviet era, the existence of Siberian collections in New York was hardly known outside of rumors. The reopening of exchanges between Russia and the west in the 1990s allowed indigenous cultural revitalization actors to access and study the Siberian ethnographic collections made by Jochelson and Bogoras, the largest and most significant outside of Russia.

Franz Boas formally separated from the American Museum of Natural History in 1905, but continued to oversee and edit the publication of the complete Jesup North Pacific Expedition Memoirs, including the present work. Unable to come to an agreement with museum administrators over what he saw as a devaluation of scientific research in favor of simplified popular exhibitions, in 1905 he resigned his position as Curator to establish the first department of anthropology in American higher education at Columbia University. Waldemar Jochelson eventually finished the writing during long years of self-imposed exile in New York and the erasure of his legacy in Siberia, while Bogoras became a pre-eminent ethnographer and shaper of official Soviet minorities policy.

Jochelson's writing was interrupted for the Riabushinskii (Riabouschinsky) expedition to Kamchatka and the Aleutian Islands of Alaska, which fulfilled a key part of Boas' unrealized plan for the original Jesup Expedition project. While negotiating the terms of his formal separation from the museum, Boas was asked to outline a program of recommended future research to carry the work of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition further. In a draft memo and budget, he initially assigned top priority to filling in the Alaskan gap in the center of the North Pacific region by mounting a major collecting expedition in the Aleutian Islands, but the cost was prohibitive. His final draft plan instead prioritized Salish collections from the Interior Plateau of British Columbia, where James Teit was already trained and on the scene. Meanwhile, Jochelson sought patrons to fund an Aleutian expedition of his own. In 1907 Boas assisted him by pursuing wealthy collector George Heye, even as he wrote to Jochelson that he "should much prefer to have you finish the Yukaghir manuscript before you take up new researches," but an economic downturn doomed the fundraising effort (APS). When Jochelson then secured sponsorship under the auspices of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society for his Riabushinskii Expedition to Alaska and Kamchatka, Boas remained anxious for him to complete the first part of the Yukaghir manuscript before leaving for the field. While this was not possible, Boas asked him to at least first incorporate into the manuscript Bogoras' material on Yukaghir mythology, and to finish all he had written to that point, so that at least a part of the Memoir could be printed. Torn between the goals of completing the missing Alaskan fieldwork piece of the Jesup Expedition puzzle and completing the publication of the Jesup Expedition Memoirs, Boas had to agree to the interruption. He accepted Jochelson's proposal to print the first six chapters as a stand-alone Part I.

Boas assigned the translation work to anthropologist-activist Alexander Goldenweiser but was frustrated when he received just the first chapter, followed by news of Goldenweiser's arrest in Kiev (it turned out to be a relatively trivial misunderstanding). Finally he asked Jochelson to have the rest translated professionally in London. On the day that he finalized his agreement with the American Museum of Natural History to take over the editing of the Jesup Expedition publication series himself, a jubilant Boas wrote to Jochelson:

All further relations between yourself and the Jesup Expedition will therefore be directly with me. I am convinced that with this moment our troubles will cease. [...] whatever we do now is to be done between yourself and myself personally, not between you and the Museum. I think it is a matter for congratulation that we do not need to deal with the office now, but that the matter has to be settled among ourselves, who have respect for each other and for our scientific work. (APS)

Jochelson continued to reply to Boas' detailed query letters about the Yukaghir while he and Dina Brodskiaia made their way to Unalaska, Atka, and Attu, and Kamchatka

over the next few years. In 1913, with Jochelson back in St. Petersburg, Boas finally received the go-ahead from the museum for the completion of the Yukaghir volume. The two anthropologists met in Berlin and agreed that Jochelson would write up the sections on religion, folklore, and material culture in that order. Boas requested a full working out of the material, which he proposed to edit down to the required length and then see to it that the rest got printed elsewhere. Jochelson even bought property in the Ural Mountains, not far from Bogoras, where he worked on the remaining chapters while suffering poor health. When the Russian Revolution and civil war came, Boas lost touch with both Bogoras and Jochelson until 1921. He then secured a small amount of funding from the museum and brought Jochelson to New York to write up the rest of his findings. Part III was finally published by E. J. Brill in Leiden

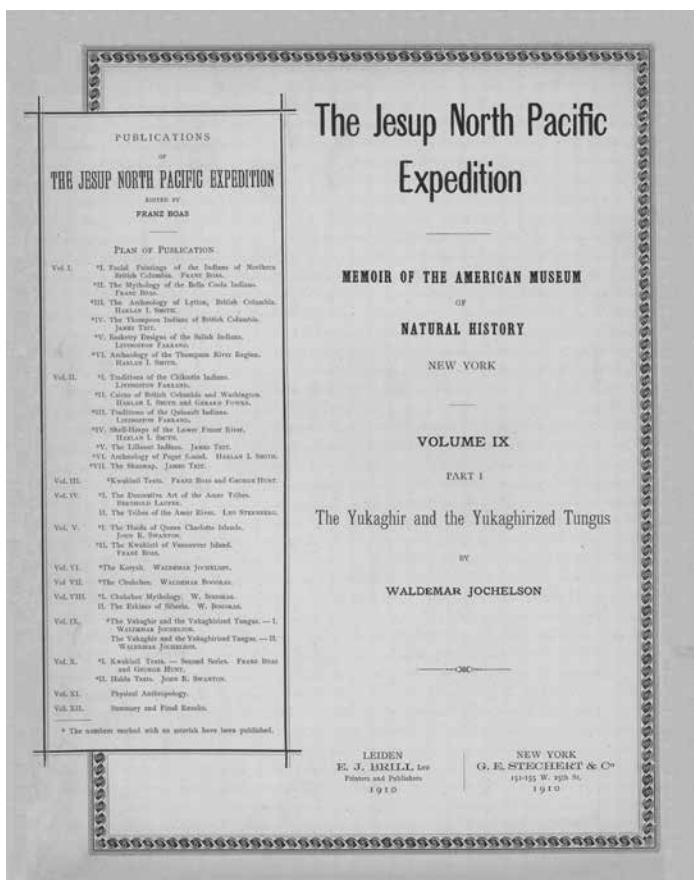


Fig. 4 The Yukaghir and Yukaghirized Tungus was one of the last of the American Museum of Natural History's classic Jesup North Pacific Expedition monographs to be completed. As shown here on the cover of Part 1, series editor Franz Boas eventually published the work in installments.

in 1926, completing the saga. The whereabouts of Jochelson's field notes, if they exist, have remained unknown. The present edition stands as a companion volume to the historic Russian translation of *The Yukaghir and Yukaghirized Tungus* translated and illustrated by native scholars in a years-long collaboration (Jochelson 2005).

While the authorial voice is unmistakably Jochelson's throughout the three parts of the Memoir, the editorial hand of Boas remains firmly in the background. The granular level of ethnographic detail and careful framing of speculative theories adhere to Boas' trademark methodological caution, and yet the ethnographic present of 1901–02 remains in full force despite the total reorganization of Yukaghir life during the Soviet era. The collection itself was curated by Boas to emphasize older material representing pre-contact traditions. Before field work even began, he instructed Jochelson to screen out many modern syncretic realities in order to represent the past (Mathé and Miller 2001).

The Yukaghir in the Long 20th Century

Jochelson called the Yukaghir “a tribe on the eve of extinction” (20), but they have persevered through floods, famine, deadly disease, collectivization, war, dislocation, repression, assimilation, marginalization, and neglect. This volume stands not only as a monumental ethnohistorical record of the Yukaghir, but also a record of a moment in contact history. Collecting was simultaneously part of the removal of tradition and part of its preservation. After the end of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the Yukaghir held a gathering of all the clans for the first time in their history. The two main themes that emerged were the importance of preserving their language and their land. Without these, asked poet and activist leader of the Yukaghir *intelligentsia* Uluro Ado (Gavril Kurilov), what is a people?

During the last summer of the 20th century, I stood on the high bank above the river among the abandoned wooden houses being reclaimed by the taiga where Old Nelemnoe once was. In the summer Yukaghirs still use the land for hunting, fishing camps, and smokehouses. My companions lit a fire and we made offerings to the *khozain*, the master spirits of the place. One elder, who was secretly a shaman, said we should eat as if we're eating with the spirits. When the *kolkhoz* was here, he said, there were many cows; they produced their own milk and *kolbasa*. Swans come here in the fall for a short time. (Another man remarked “The czars ate swans, they were a great delicacy.”) In summer *nelm*, the white salmon that gave all three settlements their name, swim here against the current from the mouth of Arctic Ocean to spawn. Later in the year, when the river freezes in October and the ice begins to accumulate onshore, *chir* (broad whitefish) come to spawn. In the dead of winter, the ice on the river can reach 2 meters thick, but here the river is shallow, less than two meters deep. People used to sink through the thin ice.

One year before, floods had washed away old houses and the grave of Jochelson's Yukaghir guide Alexander Dolganoff, which had sat on the ground in a small grove on the opposite bank. It is customary for graves to be placed above ground because of the thick hard permafrost, but Dolganoff was buried alone, across the river from Old Nelemnoe and the cemetery. They say it was because he showed Jochelson the *chuchelo* figure whose removal from the tree at the mouth of the Shamanikha River had brought misfortune to the people. This, they say, was probably why Jochelson died destitute in self-imposed exile in America (see Miller 2004b). One year before, the flood waters had risen and washed away Dolganoff's grave, sending his bones into the swollen river to be carried away downstream. His son has been identified in Jochelson's photographs by modern Yukaghirs, and his grandson continued to live with them.

The elders Vakhtin dubbed the "rupture generation" underwent violent erasure of tradition and identity, suffering the displacements of collectivization, purges, famine, and war. Their life histories are suffused with personal memories of events which had a far-reaching impact, historical extensions of colonialism reaching back through three centuries of contact and domination. In deeply personal songs resonating with the collective memory of deprivation and persecution, the narratives of their experience survive the Soviet epoch (see Online Kolyma Documentation Project, Odé 2016a,b; on musical styles and song types, see Sheikin 1996). Three aspects in particular of the Soviet experience are reflected in their songs and narratives: the *kolkhoz* or collective farm, the *Komsomol* (Communist Youth Organization), and the dislocations and deaths of the Great Patriotic War (World War II). The influence of party-run social institutions was overlaid onto, and interwoven with, older cultural strains of Russification with deep folkloric roots going back to the mythology of Old Rus.

Vakhtin has identified three crucial periods during the Soviet epoch in north-east Siberia. During the first, 1920–1927, change came gradually. After Magadan was built as a regional administrative capitol, the prison camps of the vast Stalinist Gulag were hidden throughout Kolyma. As a member of the Committee of the North, Bogoras wrote to Boas around 1930 of their goal to transfer all administration to native languages. But in 1931 the Dalstroï trust brought roads and regional development to Kolyma. The Zyrianka region, built by prisoners, was founded in 1937 as a mining and transport center for coal. The Committee of the North, never highly effective, was soon rendered moot by the hard line emanating from Moscow.

Later, from the Great Patriotic War into the 1950s the principal objective of the state was to develop industry. By the late 1960s, very few villages in the north remained on their original sites. In the late 20th century, in one relatively large port town of 10 000 only 63 were natives, compared to perhaps 40% in smaller towns and villages (Vakhtin 1991). In Nelemnoe, after the Sovkhoz (state farm) was disbanded in 1991, it was replaced by a village cooperative that developed into a self-governing body (Willerslev 2007: 41).

In 1992, members of all the Yukaghir clans gathered in Nelemnoe for the first congress in their history, to unite the people and discuss their future. Speakers emphasized the need to reawaken consciousness, combat alcoholism, teach the Yukaghir language, acquire their own territory, and prioritize environmental preservation and repair. Just surviving in the taiga and the tundra remains a challenge. At the turn of the 20th century, the Kolyma Yukaghir owned no cows. At the turn of the 21st century there were three cows in Nelemnoe, all that were left of two dozen who died when floods killed the hay. The rest were kept alive without heated cow sheds through the Kolyma winter by producing three tons of hay per cow.

Russian 2002 Census figures listed 1509 Yukaghir including 50 Odul speakers and 150 Wadul speakers. By 2009, only an estimated 5–10 Odul speakers and 60–70 Wadul speakers remained, and some linguists have since declared the two languages of Kolyma Yukaghir and tundra Yukaghir “moribund.” In 2009 the Tundra Yukaghir project estimated the population of Wadul to be about 700, of whom 50 were mother-tongue speakers. A majority of Wadul Yukaghir now live settled lives in the far northern village Andriushkino in Nizhne Kolymsk. Tundra Yukaghir language is being taught there in school from an early age. In Nelemnoe Jochelson’s Memoir, along with drawings and photographs of artifacts from the Jesup collection, have been used as a primary source by teachers to reconstruct and teach traditional designs and stories to schoolchildren (Miller 2004b).

The 20th-century development of the Kolyma River basin negatively impacted indigenous people whose livelihoods depended on fishing. Industrial gold and coal mining operations established in the 1930s, including Dalstroï, depended heavily on prison labor. During the 1950s native people strongly protested the construction of hydroelectric dams. In the early post-Soviet era of the 1990s, several environmental activist groups were formed in Siberia and Kamchatka. One study found nearly 90 percent of indigenous respondents were anxious about pollution and changes in the Kolyma River (Boyakova 2003: 64–65). More recently, in 2018 the government has begun efforts to require environmental preservationist groups in northern Russia who collaborate with international partners to register as foreign agents.

The transition to post-Soviet life in the small hunting, fishing, and gathering society has often been a struggle to persist in the face of shortages of trade goods, food, transportation, and fuel. Yet the Yukaghir activist Gavril Kurilov (Uluro Ado) has maintained that even though they lost their cultural identity during the Soviet period, the October Revolution effectively saved his people from total extinction since they were subsequently supported by the socialist system. He believes the promotion of “culture bases,” recognizing the distinctiveness of the *ethnos* and realized partly through the institutions of *kolkhoz* and *Komsomol*, actually kept the thread of continuity alive, making a future Yukaghir renaissance possible. The cultural history of rupture and survival lives on as memory in songs of love, death, and the land transmitted by elders to post-Soviet generations who will come to know their people’s past through the melodic poetry of those who lived it.

Through the upheavals of the cataclysmic 20th century, there has remained a continuity of memory and identity. The Yasachnaia River people have been called hare people (*Cholgorodzy*) to distinguish them from other clans. Some consider it a derogatory term used by Russians, while others take pride in the identity. One of the most frequent genres in Yasachnaia Yukaghir folklore involves an old couple and a hare, with countless variants belonging to individual storytellers. An example recorded on wax cylinder in October 1901 by Jochelson was told by Nikolai Sontsev (see English translation on pp. 252–254). In this version, an old woman sends her husband out to hunt for food. He cuts down a willow tree to attract game; eventually a hare comes to eat the willow, but runs away when it sees the old man. Then so many hares come they are “like grains of sand.” To punish the old man for felling their tree, they decide to invade his house. The old man beats on his drum as they swarm, then clubs them to death. The old woman scolds him for not leaving her any hares to beat, but there is one last hare hiding under the woodpile. She strikes at it with her kettle hook but misses, just grazing the tip of its ear. This last survivor escapes to become the original progenitor of all living hares, who are its descendants; their black-tipped ears are considered the mark of their ancestor where it was struck by the old woman’s kettle hook.

Sontsev’s tale can be interpreted as both a comical episode and a metaphorical origin myth for the Yasachnaia Yukaghir people, the *Cholgorodzy* themselves. Once part of a large tribe, then nearly killed off, they are small and few in number; but through cunning and quickness, they have persevered in the face of threatened extinction. At the end of the 20th century, I played a tape copy of the scratchy wax-cylinder recording for elder Akulina Vassilievna Sleptsova. She knew Sontsev’s family; the storyteller’s grandson, who also had a fine voice, sang for her when she studied Yukaghir children’s songs in the local school. Laughing at the words spoken rapidly on the crackling recording, she remarked that while there were many such tales, each is unique:

This story is primeval, from the longest time ago. Nobody knows these tales; nobody has even heard this one [...]. So this is an old story, almost like it’s the first [...]. A Kolymski tale, it truly belongs to Nikolai Sontsev [...]. The family probably sat in the boat and sang [...]. This is pure Yukaghir, without high language. How the words ring out! Only here he speaks quickly: this is a Yukaghir quality. In old times, and even now, Yukaghir people were very joyous. Even when they had no food, they always danced and sang songs. When someone came to the house, even the old women would go down to the club and spend the night. There were young people and old people all together. Actually, I’m astonished it could be like that. Hungry! Yes, without clothes! Hungry children, barefoot children—[I was] barefoot myself, no? People would say, ‘What is she dancing and singing for?’ It’s simply a habit of mine, and has remained so. I myself am amazed at the strength and resilience of the Yukaghir people (personal communication, 1999).

An old metaphorical saying about the Yukaghir holds that “A piece of gold is very small but very precious.” Another, more cynical aphorism states that “The Yukaghir are a people sold by weight.” As one of the last small hunter-gatherer tribes in the far north, they attract interest from seekers of the exotic and archaic. Akulina Vassilievna worried that she was giving away too much by singing songs and telling the old stories for visiting anthropologists and other latter-day culture hunters. “I’m worse than a fool. Why should I speak? Whenever someone asks me to, I just start telling it to them [...]. Are they telling stories or singing? Then I’ll be there. Everyone who passes through asks you to sing, so you sing. They say ‘Will you tell a tale?’ and I can’t refuse. It’s too bad for me!” (Miller 2004a: 291–296)

The story of the political purges, repressions, and transformations in the North is still being told. Writer Tekki Odulok (Nikolai Ivanovich Spiridonov, 1906–1938) emerged as a leading intellectual and artist, the first Yukaghir to gain national attention. Although forced to join the Communist Party for show, he was in actuality a powerful advocate for his people and planted the seeds of a nationalist consciousness. As such, he posed a threat to the regime and was executed on false charges of being a Japanese spy. In later years the Kurilov family, especially Gavril (Uluro Ado) and his artist brother Nikolai, has played a key role in the survival and revitalization of Yukaghir culture (see also Odé 2016a,b). A ceremonial arch constructed in Nelemnoe during the 1990s stands as a focal point of ceremonial life and a symbol of perseverance. Jochelson’s work, suppressed in the Soviet Union for most of the 20th century, has re-emerged.



Fig. 5 This ceremonial arch, built in the Upper Kolyma settlement of Nelemnoe during the early post-Soviet era of the 1990s, symbolizes the revitalization of Yukaghir tradition for the 21st century. (photo T. Miller)

Reading the ethnographic past in the present raises the question: what kind of story is this Memoir? How should we in the 21st century interpret the ethnographic past of the 19th-century Yukaghir, written over the first third of the 20th century while radical changes took place in Siberia? The Yukaghir's future prospects remain nearly as uncertain as they did more than a century ago. Uluro Ado proposed that if a people loses their land and their language, they are in danger of ceasing to exist as a people. At the turn of the millennium, laws were promoted to protect their land rights, yet it's unclear whether the people are any better off. Meanwhile, through this book Jochelson's work is being used to reconstruct tradition and transmit it to the next generation. Before the elders of the rupture generation died out their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren listened carefully to their songs and tales from the past. As folklorist Lyudmila Zhukova (1996b) has remarked, "The old people are dying, but new old people are growing."

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