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Dmitriy Oparin

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# Liudmila Ainana (1934–2021)

**O**n July 2nd 2021, Liudmila Ivanovna Ainana (1934–2021), the oldest custodian of Asian Yupik knowledge, language, and culture, passed away. Ainana (pronounced Aynganga in Yupik), her Yupik name, under which she was universally known, was an Honored Citizen of the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug, the founder and first president of the Yupik Society of the Chukotka Yupik, an ethnographer, and the author of a host of publications on the language and culture of the Yupik people.

Ainana lived a long and eventful life, her rich biography spanning not only different cultures, but different worlds: the world of a traditional-contact society (Krupnik and Chlenov, 2013) and that of Soviet Chukotka, the world of the intelligentsia circles of Moscow, Leningrad, and Anadyr and the national villages of the North, the worlds of America and Russia, of academia and hunting. The life of Ainana, along with that of her family, reflected the general fate of the Asian Yupik in the 20th century. Born in a tiny coastal settlement in the family of a ship's captain and harpooner who worked with the Americans, she would walk the long path to becoming one of the most respected Elders of Chukotka, an outstanding connoisseur of the heritage, traditions, and language of her people, a national intellectual, and the author of textbooks and manuals on the Yupik language, as well as world-class ethnographic works. Shamanism and animistic concepts, the close interaction between Alaskan Yupik and the Chukchi, Soviet secondary and higher education at the Leningrad Herzen Institute (so renowned throughout the North), the preservation and development of local lore and national culture, human rights campaigning in the 1990s—miraculously, all these facets to the history of the Yupik of Chukotka find their place in Ainana's rich biography.

## Biography

Ainana was born in the small settlement of Uqighyaghaq near Cape Chaplino (location of a large Yupik settlement, Ungaziq) in a thriving Yupik family of the Laakaghmiit clan. Thanks to Ainana's memoirs, we know the stories of her grandparents, people born as far back as the 1860s and '70s. It is only fitting that we begin Ainana's biography with an account of her closest relatives, as their stories have come down to us specifically thanks to Ainana's openness, memory, and deep respect for the history of her family.

Her father Atata (1892-1942) worked as a boat captain in the 1930s and '40s and often sailed over to Plover (a predominantly Yupik coastal

settlement established in 1931 and closed in 1957), and her paternal grandfather Kaqa (? -1946) had worked with American whalers at the beginning of the 20th century: “...we called him [her grandfather] *Foma neveruiushchii*’ [literally ‘Doubting Thomas’]. *He knew nothing about religion or about customs. But how many interesting stories he had, for all that! Because he’d lived so many years.*” Ainana recalled that her father paid little attention to traditional beliefs; he “*didn’t put any faith in the shamans*”, spoke good Russian, and was one of the first Yupik mechanics. Working in Plover did not prevent Atata from going hunting. In 2012, Ainana told me a story about how her father and several other hunters from the Laakaghmiit clan had drifted out on an ice floe for a long time, had tried to get back to shore over the ice, and finally managed to do so in the vicinity of the settlement of Qiwaaq; one of the hunters, a man named Tul’khi, had even died during this excursion.

Ainana’s mother was called Yanga (1885-1956). Yanga’s father Ayakhtha was a shaman. At the end of his life, he became very ill, and as Ainana recalled, he was hanged by his relatives, most likely by his son Mumikhyl’khi. Ainana claimed that Ayakh’ta died some time before the Revolution at a period when voluntary death was still a widespread phenomenon—a distinct form of normative behavior involving the obligation of relatives to put their loved ones out of their misery in cases of prolonged suffering. Yanga and Atata had four daughters and one son: Agnagysyak (1913-1977), Ukhsima (1915-1989), Itkhutkaq (1924-1958), Kurasa (1930-2000), and Ainana, the youngest of the family. Ukhsima, who went to work for the local administration in the neighboring region of Chukotka, later became a teacher at a boarding school and was well known as a skilled craftswoman. Kurasa was secretary of the village rural council (*selsovet*) in Ungaziq (Staroe [Old] Chaplino) and then in Novoe [New] Chaplino, after which she worked as a day-care attendant in a public nursery. Ainana fell in with her grandfather Kaqa (who had considerable American experience and had often visited San Francisco), his second wife Paina, who had escaped from Chukchi captivity in the early 20th century, and famous Yupik shamans of the first half of the 20th century—including Galmug’ye (1919-1976), whose leaping on a walrus skin stretched out like a trampoline was captured by the camera of Aleksandr Forshtein in the 1920s. Ainana was introduced to traditions and rituals through her mother Yanga, and to clan history and pride through her father Atata. She was the direct successor of a bygone era, and through her memory of those close to her, connected the dawn of the 20th century with the first quarter of the 21st.

Ainana’s memories, divulged through our long conversations in Provideniya and Moscow, were not only ethnographically and historically accurate and informative but also had a good dose of irony and the poetic

at the same time. This unique combination is illustrated in her account of a small episode from her childhood in Uqighyaghaq:

We covered the summer *iaranga* [skin-covered mobile dwelling] with a clean yellow walrus skin. I remember one time when I was very young, and I was sitting in the *iaranga*. And there was a hole in the skin—this meant that they'd shot the walrus here. And through the hole shone a bright beam of light. And I mistook this beam for a rope. I got up to have a go on it like on a swing. And I fell to the ground, thinking: "What kind of rope is this?"

In the late 1930s, Ainana's family moved temporarily to the settlement of Plover where Atata had found employment. Workshops had been organized there to service whaling vessels and motors used at local *kolkbozes* (collective farms). The first workers in these workshops were Yupik who came over from Staroe Chaplino (Ungaziq). Ainana recalled how she was afraid to go into the house; after living in a *iaranga*, this rectangular wooden structure was something quite alien to her. In 1942, Ainana went to elementary school in the settlement of Staroe Chaplino, with no knowledge



**Figure 1.** Ainana's sister Ukhsima is standing on the far left, Yanga (mother of Ukhsima and Ainana) is sitting second on the left, Ainana is standing on the far right. Provideniya. 1954. Ainana's personal archive.

of the Russian language. After three attempts, her teacher gave her the name Liudmila. During the war, the villagers listened to the radio, with the broadcasts translated into Yupik by the local teacher, Maina. Ainana recalled how the Americans relayed their aircraft through the Staroe Chaplino airfield: *“That was the first time I ever saw a white American.”* Ainana met up with Alaskan Yupik guests from St. Lawrence Island on an almost annual basis until the borders were closed in 1948. In 1946–47, Ainana studied at the boarding school in the village of Provideniya.



**Figure 2.** In the Provideniya boarding school. Ainana stands on the far right. 1950s. Natalia Lukianova’s personal archive.

In 1954, Ainana entered the Faculty of Philology at the A. I. Herzen Institute in Leningrad. She first had to fly to Anadyr, then change flights in Seimchan, Magadan, Okhotsk, Khabarovsk, and Irkutsk, from where she flew to Moscow. By the time she reached Moscow, Ainana had run out of money and was bought a ticket to Leningrad by some soft-hearted doctors who had once worked on Sakhalin and so mistook Ainana for a member of the Nivkh people. *“It’s extremely difficult for me to put into words the beauty I saw in Leningrad,”* Ainana recalled. She went to the opera (where she especially liked *Aida*), the ballet, and the theatre, visited museums, and listened to

organ music at the conservatory. As a child, Ainana had been taught by the first teachers of the early Soviet Yupik schools. In Leningrad, she visited Katerina Sergeeva, who had worked as a teacher in Ureliki in the 1930s:

She lived on Vasilevsky Island in a small room of a house where a sign on the wall said that Tchaikovsky once lived there. And as soon as we came to her, she said: 'That's it! Forget Russian, we'll speak Eskimo!' She spoke it very well. I first saw her in Ureliki. She was wearing a *kamleika* [a leather hooded over-jacket in Russian] and *torbasa* [deerskin boots in Russian], despite being so white and Russian. She came to the cinema, sat down next to me, and suddenly said in Eskimo: 'Move over!'



**Figure 3.** Ainana in Leningrad. 1950s. Ainana's personal archive.



**Figure 4.** Ainana (left) with classmate Liudmila Gramovich. Leningrad. 1950s Ainana’s personal archive.

In 1957, Ainana attended the World Festival of Youth and Students in the Soviet capital. She would make many more trips to Moscow in subsequent years and knew the city well.

Upon her return from Leningrad in 1959, Ainana secured a position teaching Russian at a school in the Anadyr district. She worked there for a year before getting a job at the Novoe Chaplino school (1960-1963), after which she worked as a Yupik language teacher at the secondary school in Provideniya (1963-1978). In 1974, Ainana published a Yupik primer that she co-authored with Vera Agnal’kvasyak. From 1978 to 1999, Ainana worked for the Northern section of the Institute of National Problems of Education, located in Moscow. Here she developed a methodology for teaching the Yupik language and wrote syllabuses, teaching guides, and textbooks.

Ainana was a founder and the first chairperson of the “Yupik” Society (1990). In the 1990s, she took part in and coordinated a series of Russian-American projects on the study of traditional wildlife management and the folk knowledge of the inhabitants of Chukotka, and also helped set up the Union of Sea Hunters of Chukotka (1997, now the Chukotka Association of Traditional Hunting). From the 1990s, she travelled to Alaska many times, attending meetings of the Alaskan Eskimo Whaling Commission, conferences of Yupik Elders, ICC sessions (Inuit Circumpolar Council), and “Beringia Days” conferences. Ainana also gave lectures on mainland USA: *“My first salary in America was \$1,000. I gave a lecture in Chicago. And then I bought*



**Figure 5.** Ainana with her husband Nikolai Panaugye in the tundra near Provideniya. 1960s. Ainana’s personal archive

*my first TV and something for the children. I spoke in Russian about the culture of the Eskimos in Russia.”*

## **My Personal Experience**

I met Ainana in the summer of 2011, on my first visit to Chukotka. She was living in the district centre of Provideniya at the time, and it was impossible not to meet her if you had come to Provideniya to do scientific work—whether it be biological, geographical, or something connected with the social sciences. As I listen once more to the taped recordings I made over a decade ago, I am amazed all over again at the thoroughness and gentleness of her narration, her openness—and her condescension toward a young graduate student, still somewhat wet behind the ears.

The conversations I had with her were more than just interviews; they turned into discussions that went way beyond the bounds of “traditional culture”. We talked at length about the post-Soviet period, about her turbulent social activism on an international level in the 1990s, and about the Yupik



Society that she had founded. Ainana was a prominent member of the intelligentsia (with all the sense of social responsibility that this implied), with a heightened sense of truth and justice, and a special understanding of the public good. Ainana loved her region, Chukotka, and her people, and this love often led her into disputes and even conflicts with local authorities. Indeed, while she attached great importance to social work, she frowned upon the Party career in the Soviet era and the state initiatives of contemporary Russia with irony and even distrust.

The second time we met was in 2012 during my second stay in Chukotka, and then a few months later in Moscow. Ainana had come to the capital on personal business, and her stay in Moscow, away from the usual routine of her Chukotkan life, gave us the opportunity to talk about many things. The next few years saw me working away from Chukotka on other matters, but it was Ainana's phone calls and reproaches that I had "abandoned" the Yupik that finally prompted me to return to the North after defending my thesis.



**Figure 6.** Ainana in Moscow. 2012.  
Photo: Aleksei Lukin.

Ainana was always open to conversation, was totally transparent, and tried to pass on as much as possible what she knew—and she knew a great deal. Once I asked her why it was that she freely shared certain aspects and details of ritual practices and animistic notions that most other informants usually refrain from discussing. Ainana answered:

I am a modern person. I want the traditional way of life to be covered somewhere. So that the new generation will know about what our

ancestors used to do. Things I did myself, in person. That's why Kurasa [Ainana's sister] never took me anywhere [to conduct family rituals], so I wouldn't tell anyone about it (she laughs). I studied at the institute and at school, I was a researcher, and my goal is to talk as much as possible about traditional life.

Ainana was exceptionally well informed about far more than just the “traditional way of life.” She had been an attentive and thoughtful witness to how Soviet school education took shape in coastal Chukotka, had observed shamanic rituals, and was present at the visits of Alaskan Yupik to the region. Ainana belonged to several different social environments: rural Yupik society, the Indigenous intelligentsia, and the academic world of ethnographers, biologists, geographers, and linguists. She could give equally fascinating accounts of the legends of the Laakaghmiit clan and the everyday life and cultural sphere of 1950s Moscow and Leningrad. Ainana adapted to the needs of the time. As one of the first Yupik women to receive a higher education degree in Leningrad, she participated in the creation of the Soviet cultural system and its relations with national minorities, a key component of which was the universal Soviet school education. In the 1990s, Ainana was active in fostering relations between Chukotka and America, and rode the wave of a short-lived Russia-wide ethnic revival to become the head of a Yupik organization that defended the rights of Indigenous people. Unsurprisingly, she was accused by the corrupt former governor of Chukotka, Nazarov, of “unpatriotism.” In her last two decades, she occupied herself with ethnographic work, initiated various collective publications, and wrote about the Chukchi-Yupik *baidara* (canoe), traditional nature management, and ethnobotany.

The uniqueness of Ainana as an academic partner and connoisseur of Yupik culture lay in the fact that she connected different eras and layers of the Yupik world with herself, as a researcher and an educated person with an appreciation of what science really is. On one hand, she was a source of unique information, and on the other, its active interpreter. For instance, she was well aware of the peculiarities of Yupik everyday life rituals and animistic beliefs, and at the same time—making no effort to conceal anything—would describe the mechanics of the ritual. She wrote down for me, in her own hand, the Yupik words that she used and gave a demonstration of the ritual; on several occasions, she conducted the funerary *pominki* rite in my presence for the spirits of her ancestors in her native place, the abandoned village of Ungaziq. She announced in advance that she would be conducting the ritual, urged me to watch carefully, and directed my attention to various aspects of the ritual, as if she was teaching it. Her openness was not only due to her conviction as to the value of her tradition, but also to her understanding of the nature of ethnographic research, why it is necessary, why it is interesting, and what I would go on to do with the information imparted.

Ainana was not just a repository of memories from her own life and her own family's history; she could tell you about virtually every Chaplino Yupik who had lived in the 20th century. Ainana created vivid portraits of her long-departed fellow villagers with ease. She carried a unique baggage that included memories of a bygone way of life and milestones in the Yupik experience of the 20th century, not to mention the personal stories and cultural values of an entire people.

The last time we saw each other was in the autumn of 2020. I was then collecting stories about deceased Yupik for a multimedia project on the historical memory of the village of Novoe Chaplino. Though no longer full of energy as in previous years, and suffering increasingly impaired vision, Ainana was happy to help me. She often remembered the life stories of the people I was interested in far better than their own living descendants did.

A few months ago, a linguist graduate student was preparing for a journey to Chukotka to study the suffixes of the Chaplino Yupik language. By that time, Ainana was already gone. The student asked me to share my "contacts". It was then that it fully hit me that, with Ainana gone, any such study on the Asian Yupik would be—through no fault of the young scholar herself—incomplete and impoverished. Whenever I was confused or did not understand something, whenever details escaped me or questions arose, I could always call upon Ainana in Provideniya or telephone if I was in Moscow. I always knew that I would either get an exact answer from her, or we would have a productive discussion through which the answer would be found.

## Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Igor Krupnik. It was his initiative to write a paper dedicated to Ainana, firstly in Russian, and to focus her academic partnership with scholars. For me personally and for Ainana's daughter Alla, it was important to publish a paper dedicated to Ainana in English, so English-speaking Inuit in Alaska and Canada could read about such an incredible Yupik woman.

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**Dmitriy Oparin**  
Passages (UMR 5319, Bordeaux Montaigne University –  
University of Bordeaux – CNRS)  
dimaoparin@hotmail.com