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Beringia Through the Myco-Scope: History, Mushrooms, and Cross-Cultural Encounters

Abstract:

Separated by the two national borders and the international dateline, the Native communities living in the Bering Strait area of Alaska and Chukotka in the Russian Far East share common histories, physical environments, and subsistence diet, that includes land and sea mammal meat, fish, birds, berries, and greens. An exception to the common array of subsistence foods are the wild mushrooms: in Chukotka mushrooms are admired as delicious edibles, while in Alaska they are regarded as disgusting and poisonous by some, and simply avoided by others.

In an attempt to gain a better understanding of the reasons and meanings surrounding such opposing attitudes to a resource present on the both parts of the Bering Strait, I have conducted ethnographic field research in Nome and Kotzebue areas of Alaska (summer 2001) and the Chukotsky and Providensky regions of Chukotka (summer 2001; February-May 2004, August-September 2004). In the course of this investigation, I have discovered that until recently, wild mushrooms were equally shunned by the Native peoples living on both Russian and Alaskan sides of the Bering Strait. In Chukotka, mushrooms have become a significant part of subsistence diet during the last forty years due to the influence of Russians and other Russified newcomers, many of whom were admirers and connoisseurs of wild mushrooms. While working in the Chukotkan communities of Enmelen, Nunligran, Sireniki, Provideniya, Novoe Chaplino, Lavrentiya, and Uelen, I have collected extensive interview data on the subject of ethnomycology offered by people of different ages, backgrounds, and occupations.

The goal of my dissertation research is to document the transformation in knowledge, tastes, and attitudes of the Yupik and Chukchi people within the scope of a broader ethnohistoric reconstruction of social change in Chukotka during the Soviet era. This study focuses on ethnomycology—a subject that is under-investigated in general and has been largely, if not entirely, overlooked in Arctic social sciences. By analyzing ethnomycology issues as processes and consequences of social change, this research will not only produce a new and unique set of data on mushroom uses in Native communities of the Arctic, but will also expand the scope of knowledge on Bering Strait ethnography and history, as well explore a number of theoretical questions stemming from the discipline of cultural anthropology. Among such wider disciplinary issues are the interconnections between cosmology and food prohibitions, social disruption and dietary change, cultural identity and perception of landscape, and the fluidity of local knowledge and understanding of tradition.