

Rooting around in the mouse stores:^{*} Itelmen root-gathering customs

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Traditional Itelmen cuisine includes bulbs and roots, for example the bulb of *eφk*, the Kamchatka lily (*Fritillaria camschatcensis*, Russian: *сарана*), which can be ground with berries, fat, and salmon roe to make *silqsilq*, (Russian: *толкунша*), cited by Krasheninnikov as the primary dish of the Itelmens,¹ and the potato-like root of *ləqləm*, the Tuberous Spring Beauty (*Claytonia tuberosa*, Russian: *кимчица*).² In a September 2016 visit to the Russian Ethnographic Museum in St. Petersburg (Figures 1 and 2), Itelmen elders Lyudmila Egorovna Pravdoshina and Zoya Afanaseva Zaporotskaya demonstrated the use of the *qosqos* (also: *qozqoz*, *qasqas*), a tool for digging roots from the underground stores (caches) of mice, and explained the importance of leaving food for the mice to thank them in return. To fail to do so would constitute theft, and would trigger the mice's revenge, an aspect of everyday life that is reflected and amplified in the traditional stories in which Kutkh, the lazy Raven-figure, steals from the mice and they exact revenge.

The text below reproduces the narratives from St. Petersburg, in Itelmen with interlinear gloss for their linguistic, as well as cultural interest. At the end of this paper, I highlight a parallel to traditional folklore in the tale of the Raven Kutkh and his ill-fated experience at the hands (or paws) of the vengeful mice.

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¹Krasheninnikov (1949, 395), see also the description in Starkova (1976, 133-6)

²Starkova (1976, 127)



Figure 1: Examining Itelmen artifacts at the Russian Museum of Ethnography, September 2016. The *qosqos* digging tool is in the center of the picture. Image: C. Hofer.

1 Inič'itnom - Digging for sarana

Inič'itnom names the traditional activity of going digging for bulbs and tubers. The name is derived from the verb *enič'kas* 'to dig', in the specific sense of 'to dig for edible bulbs and roots'. Two tools were used in the process, a stick to prod the ground, looking for the soft spots on the tundra indicating underground storage chambers in mice burrows, where one might find a cache of edible bulbs and tubers. The other tool was the *qosqos* (plural *qosqozeʔn*) or *qasqas*, a large, hook-shaped instrument carved of wood, with a metal point on the curved end, seen on the table in Figure 1. Details of the tools are shown in Figure 3. This tool was used like a hoe to open up the earth above the mice burrows, from which the contents could be scooped out and collected in a *lepse*, a woven grass basket, or other container.

The elders interviewed in St. Petersburg here recall being brought along as young girls with their mothers, to collect the roots, and it is there that they learned the importance of giving back to the mice whose underground stores they took from. Lyudmila Egorovna Pravdoshina (Figure 4) demonstrates going digging with a walking stick in one hand to



Figure 2: Examining Itelmen artifacts at the Russian Museum of Ethnography, September 2016. Image: C. Hofer.

poke the ground to find the soft spots, indicating mouse stores underneath, and a *qosqos* in the other.

səmtenk ʃeʃqu?nč eʃkeʃn kteʃiʃn.
 in.the.ground mice lilies put.them
 ‘Mice placed lily (bulbs) in the ground (i.e., in stores).’

Poking the ground with a stick:

tixtinu qat tmetičen
 here already I.felt.it
 ‘I already felt it (the soft space) here.’

Bending and making a clean incision with the s:

ʃot tixtaank ʃonk nəŋtaətəznen
 so here like.so they.separate.it
 ‘So here they open it like this.’



Figure 3: (l) tip of prodding stick for finding mouse caches [7114-6]; (r) *qosqos* [7114-5_sib]. © From the collection of the Russian Museum of Ethnography, St. Petersburg, Russia.

səmk i ʎaʎin βot tixtaank βot
 earth and you.will.separate.it so here like.so
 ‘You opened up the earth, here like this.’

i li niɣniʃ tənʎaaʃən
 and very much I.separate.it
 ‘And I opened it up very much.’

xokaŋ česk eʃkeʔn, ləqləmeʔn
 there inside lilies, spring.beauties
 ‘There inside are lily bulbs and spring beauty roots.’

i kma enuʔn tčilqzaaʃkičeʔn kəmmən maskolank
 and I those I.will.collect.them my in.grass.bag
 ‘And I will collect those in my grass basket.’

a tʃeankəŋ ʃeʃquʔnkəŋ əŋqačʃ klepačʃ, noziʔn ntəzuʎeʔn
 and to.them to.mice something bread, dried.fish we.will.put
 ‘We will put something (in the hole), bread or dried fish, for them, the mice.’



Figure 4: (l) Prodding the ground to find mouse stores; (r) Making an incision in the ground.
Images: J.D. Bobaljik

Bending to the start of the incision again:

tanaq tk'oskičen βotq, tiʔn qat t'ejpisčeʔn.

again I.come here, this already I.close.it

'And I come back to here (the start of the incision), and I close it up.'

Standing up and walking further, prodding with the walking stick:

tanaq tpiekusk kłametas

again I.go to.search

'And I go again to search.'

tixtiʔn βon əltelaχ semt

so here soft ground

'Here is soft earth.'

tanaq βonk tənnaatəsčen

again like.so I.lower.it

‘I lower it (the *qosqos*) again.’

xok tskəŋ enu č’eqzuzin

there into.ground this enters

‘This (the tip) goes into the ground there.’

i t’ənʃaatisčən

and I.separate.it

‘and I open it up.’

xok mank pikizin tχiʔin kladovka

there somewhere it.goes their cache

‘It goes there, somewhere, their cache (store),’

βonk t’ənʃaqzusčən i tanaq tčilqzuskičeʔn

like.so I.separate.it and again I.collect.them

‘I separate (the earth) like this, and I collect them (the roots) again.’

a tχeankəŋ t’əzuatespineʔn nozeʔn, xamʃcaχ

and to.them I.put.for.them dried.fish, fat

‘And I put dried fish or fat in for them.’

t’ejpatəsčən

I.close.it

‘I close it.’

βot βonk ntčilqzukičeʔn.

so like.so we.collected.them

‘And that’s how we collected them (the roots and bulbs).’

2 Commentaries

In addition to the demonstration, the elders provided two commentaries on the practice. First, Galina Afanasevna Zaporotskaya asked rhetorically about the closing of the earth:

əna xejnəzin nčiləzneʔn i qnaŋ nejpezčən

she says they.collected.them and right.away they.closed.it

əŋqanesx?

how.come?

She explained the importance of immediately reclosing the incision in the earth, so that it would heal. Evidently, there were different strategies for cutting the soil - one long incision, opened up like the leaves of a book, or with a sharp *qosqos*, cuts along three sides

of a square, to open and close the patch of sod like a flap. Either way, it was recognized that a sharp tool, and reclosing the ground immediately, promoted healing.

The importance of both the closing up and the leaving food for the mice was traditionally explained to children accompanying their mothers:

Someone would open up a mouse's cache:

xenezin: “oj oj ptoz eϕkeʔn”

she.says: “oh oh much lily.bulbs”

‘She would say “Oh! Oh! lots of lily bulbs!”’

nʔenʔekeʔnʔč knaŋ nčilqzuneʔn

children right.away they.collect.them

‘The children would (start to) collect them right away.’

i ənna tʔaʔke xeneqzuzen:

and she further.says:

‘and she would say further.’

“itʔe čilaassxən eϕkeʔn,

when you.collect.them lily.bulbs

“‘When you collect the lily bulbs,’

objazateʔno nada nozčaχ ulʔuq əzzos,

necessarily must.dried.fish a.little to.put

‘you absolutely must leave a little bit of dried fish,’

xʔepačχ, potom išo əŋqa χokan knink čʔizin.

bread, then still what there to.you is

‘or bread, or whatever you have.’

qəzzux χokan. xi braβ βonk nuxke.

put.it there very.well like.so like.so

‘Put it there and (close it up) very well, like this.’”

They explained further that they would obligatorily say *qečʔel* ‘thank you’ to the mice. Lyudmila Egorovna further recounted how, as a child, she asked her mother for an explanation:

enqanes enu muzaʔn ntəzzozneʔn tχeankʔ

how.come this we we.put.them to.them

‘Why do we leave these things for them (the mice)?’

As she explained further:³

jesli naprimer mil-da-čisto tinu?nk čila?in,
if for.example everything there you.collected.it
'If, for example, you took everything that was there.'

xen'č niqa βotkuŋ məzin βonk xansopa?i'n
will.not quickly to.there we like.so will.close.it
'and we will not close it.'

i əŋqa ?kaa?in potom?
and what will.be then
'What will happen then?'

kza e?aq č'irič
you as.if thief
'You're like a thief.'

a ?e?qu?n nk'o?i?n nən?ini?n xoqank, njetu əŋqa
and mice they.come they.opened.them there, not what
'The mice come and open (the stores), and there is nothing.'

eti ?e?qu?n, kak v starinu govorili,
those mice, as in old.times they.said
'those mice, as they said in the old days,'

insxe ?aka?naatəzi?n, n?aatəzne?n mi? əŋqa
? they.get.angry, they.took.them all what
'They (the mice) get angry, (because) they (the people) took everything.'

itχ pikaatəzi?n enun xoz?a?nk atnoŋ
they go that to.master to.home
'They will go to that person's home.'

mi? əŋqa nč'alə?ne?n
all what they.will.foul
'They will foul everything.'

The commentaries thus stress the importance of maintaining good relations with nature, both in promptly closing up the cut in the ground, so that it will regrow, and in symbolically leaving something for the mice in return for the stores that were taken. This sense of an 'exchange', as opposed to simply gathering, played an important role in the perception of

³The above narratives were transcribed mostly verbatim, with some light editing by the narrators during the transcription. The following is more heavily edited, primarily to remove some repetition in both Itelmen and Russian.

root-gathering, such that a place in the area of Old Sedanka known for having a rich supply of accessible mouse stores was known in Russian as *заемка*—the exchange.

Orlova (1990, 139) also describes the custom of leaving something for the mice: “When the Itelmen women took *sarana* and *kemchiga* from the mouse stores, they always left a portion of the reserves, as they were convinced that the mice, deprived of the food that they had reserved for the winter, could kill themselves, strangling themselves with grass or shoving their head into the fork of a twig.” Orlova’s description thus differs slightly in lacking the exchange component (rather than giving something else back, the stress was on not taking everything) and in the motivation, favouring a kind of concern for the mice’s well being over the avoidance of revenge, but both descriptions can be seen as illustrating a normative emphasis on the proper interaction with nature.⁴

The tradition of an exchange, and the various customs and beliefs surrounding it, are evidently old, and are described already by Steller in the early 18th century:

All these bulbs are held by the Kamchatkan nation in great value ... In part they take these stocks from the mice with many fantastical ceremonies and superstitions ... When they dig out the mouseholes, this needs to be done with a tool, made of reindeerhorns, which they call a *Koscikoas*. In the process, they call all things by different and strange names, so that a totally different language comes out, the reason being that the mice, who understand the local language, should not understand it. When they have taken out all the stores, during which they never kill a mouse, they put down old rags, broken needles, *kypra* [fireweed, *Epilobium angustifolium*], *slatka trawa* [sweet grass], pine cones, and some *sarana*, so that it should have the look of a trade, since they gave them clothes, beds, tools and other things. If they do not do this, as they have it, the mice will drown themselves or hang themselves, and they would thus lose their workers. They also talk to the mice – they shouldn’t take this badly, they haven’t done this with bad intentions, but rather out of friendship. (Steller, 1774, 91, my translation)

The tradition is also documented among the Yup’ik and Iñupiat in Alaska, where the term “mouse food” is used to refer to edible tubers, bulbs, and roots collected from mouse

⁴Orlova (1999, 91) mentions another tradition regarding the collection of edible roots from the mouse stores. Among a list of beliefs about possible negative effects of women on hunting and fishing, and of various prohibitions concerning things that may cross a river when the fish are running, she includes: “if old women transport *kemchiga* and *sarana*, taken from the nests of mice, across a river, then even the fish that have already entered the river might go back to the sea.” See also Koester (2012) for further discussion in the context of beliefs about salmon and salmon fishing. As Orlova herself notes, it is somewhat harder to see in this particular custom a grounding in what we might now see characterize as resource stewardship.

(or other burrowing animal) caches. The following sources note the idea of barter or exchange and giving back:

“People gather *qetget* [horsetail, *Equisetum* spp.] along with other stored roots and stems from vole nests in the fall. Elders said that people should not take all of the food in a vole cache and should leave some other food, such as dried salmon in exchange.” (Jernigan, no date, 55)

“‘Mouse akutak’ [a mixture of berries, sugar, seal oil, shortening, flaked fish flesh, snow, etc.] is made from roots found in mouse holes. Only a portion of the mouse’s stored roots is taken, and some people replace the roots with something else the mouse can eat.”⁵

“*Picniuk* [Cottongrass, *Eriophorum angustifolium*] was not dug up by the Iñupiat, they let mice dig the plant and store it in a cache for the winter. In the fall, they used to find the mouse caches by poking sticks in the ground on the tundra until they felt a soft spot. Then they would dig up the root stored in the cache and take half of the roots and replace the root with dry fish or dry fish skins. This was a little barter system the Iñupia[t] had with the local mice populations.”⁶

“‘Our people have deep roots in taking care of the land,’ she said. She remembered her grandmother collecting ‘mouse food,’ the seeds stored by lemmings in their burrows, to feed her own family; she would always put something back for the lemmings, so they wouldn’t go hungry.” (Lord, 2011, 129)

3 The mice’s revenge in the Raven cycle

The threat of the mice’s revenge, that they will come and foul a person’s home if the customs aren’t followed, provides an interesting point of contact between custom and myth. As is well documented, notably in the work of Waldemar Jochelson (see Worth, 1961), the traditional tales of the Itelmens are part of the broader cycle of stories common to Chukotka and Kamchatka (Meletinskij, 1979), revolving around the Raven figure Kutkh (also called Kutq, and in the Sedanka region, under the linguistic influence of neighbouring Koryak, Kusłnequ). Early writers including Steller and Krasheninnikov explicitly saw Kutkh, the

⁵https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yup'ik_cuisine accessed 13 January 2018.

⁶<http://ankn.uaf.edu/ANCR/Inupiaq/plantsofmypeople/plantfiles/Picnik.html> accessed 13 January 2018

creator of the world and progenitor of the Itelmens, as the central Itelmen “god”, and commented in their chapters on Itelmen religion about the irreverent and disparaging attitudes towards this figure displayed in the tales. A running theme in the daily life of Kutkh and his family is bad judgment on his part, often the result of laziness, and the resulting comeuppance. Modern commentators (see Koester et al., 2014) have questioned whether the early authors’ characterization of Kutkh in religious terms reflected the influence of their own (Christian) attitudes towards their creator figure, as well as the changing expediencies during the Christianization of the Itelmens. David Koester suggests seeing Kutkh in the tales, qua buffoon, more as an “illustrator of consequences”, a role that casts the traditional tales as instructive devices in the manner of fables.

In any event, a number of stories involve interactions among Kutkh and the mice, and the theme of the mice’s revenge looms large. One such story, retold already in Steller’s description from the early 18th century (Steller, 2003, 196-199) illustrates well the dangers of double-crossing the mice.⁷ In the version as told by the late Ekaterina Efimovna Silina (recorded in Sedanka, April 1994), Kutkh’s wife Miti sends him out to hunt for food. He spies a group of mice by the shore struggling to drag out a seal. He offers to help the mice carry the seal, but he cheats them, and runs away from their house. Bringing the seal home, he has Miti lock the door and make *silqsilq* from the seal, so that they and the children will have their fill of the ill-gotten seal in the morning. But the murine matriarch seeks revenge - she sends the mice to Kutkh’s during the night, where they not only steal all the *silqsilq*, but also scatter thorns across the floor, for Kutkh to tread on in the morning. The story continues with a series of escapades as Kutkh tries to exact revenge on the mice, but they manage to outfox him at each turn. In one encounter, the mice sew strands of red fox fur to Kutkh’s eyelids, so that when he looks at his house, he thinks it is burning. Although Kutkh manages to behead some number of the mice (only to lose the tasty rotting mouseheads to a fox), he is eventually tricked into falling asleep in the mouse’s burrow, where they decorate his face with make up from berries, eggs, and charcoal. He is lured under false pretenses to the river, where he mistakes his reflection for a beautiful maiden. In an ending with distant echoes of Narcissus, Kutkh forsakes his wife and family, giving himself over to the maiden in the river, where he drowns.

Seen as a fable, the message of not crossing the mice (or perhaps of fairness in dealings with others more generally) seems clear in this telling. The version recounted by Steller has a slightly more ambiguous ending. There, Kutkh “barely escapes death by drowning” even though the mice had intended this trick to “cost Kut[kh] his life”. Fearing Kutkh’s wrath, the mice resolve no longer to live above ground and instead hide underground. Kutkh in turn resolves to exact his revenge “by digging up their holes and taking their provisions

⁷A version of the same story is among the Koryak texts collected by Waldemar Bogoraz in 1901 (Bogoras, 1917, 23-32)

for himself” (Steller, 2003, 199). Despite the lack of finality in Steller’s version, the key elements of the story have remained strikingly consistent across the intervening 250 years.⁸ The constant core is Kutkh’s brazen theft from the mice, the mice’s recovery of the seal and retaliation, and Kutkh’s many subsequent hapless attempts at revenge, culminating in his being tricked again and again by the clever mice.

4 Closing remarks

The visual demonstration⁹ of the use of the *qosqos* provides a richer sense of the nature and use of the cultural artifacts than could be found in a brief museum or dictionary description. While filming the demonstration and while transcribing it afterwards, we were provided with invaluable commentary about customs integral to the process of *inč’itnom*. One such comment concerned the importance of closing of the wound on the tundra raises interesting questions about the traditional sense of stewardship of natural resources: was this a convenient metaphoric extension from corporal healing, or was the tundra (or the earth) itself seen as a living entity, such that it could be wounded and healed? Orlova (1999, 90) notes that “a river was considered by the Itelmens to be a living entity, capable of reacting to people’s actions and even of retaliating against them.”¹⁰ Another custom raised in the commentaries was the importance of giving back to the mice from whom something was taken, instilled in the root-gatherers from a young age. The rationale given – avoiding angering the mice such that they would seek revenge – strikes a resounding chord with an age-old theme in the cycles of traditional mythology.

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⁸Even matters of detail are retained, for example, in both Steller’s version from the early 1700s and that recounted by E. E. Silina in 1994, a mouse complains that her claws hurt from digging for roots:

oj, djedju, li pəlq kəmaʔn kʔuʔn əŋqʂxiziʔn.
 oh, gramps, very much my claws hurt.
 “Oh, gramps, my claws hurt very much.”
 tʃalequkičən zink ləqləmeʔn tʻenʃčəzoqučeʔn.
 I.went to.woods kimchiga I.dug.up
 “I went to the woods and dug up kemchiga.”

⁹This demonstration was recorded in audio and video and will ultimately be available online as part of the Itelmen online materials collection.

¹⁰My translation.

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