

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Unangam Ungiikangin Kayux Tunusangin, Aleut Tales and Narratives Collected 1909-1910 by Waldemar Jochelson. Edited by Knut Bergsland and Moses L. Dirks.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/34z4v0d8>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 15(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Inouye, Ronald K.

Publication Date

1991-09-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Unangam Ungiikangin Kayux Tunusangin, Aleut Tales and Narratives Collected 1909-1910 by Waldemar Jochelson. Edited by Knut Bergsland and Moses L. Dirks. Alaska Native Language Center, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, 1990. 715 pages. \$25.00 paper.

The Aleutian Islands stretch from the Alaska peninsula to the continent of Asia. *Aleut Tales and Narratives* is a monumental work, providing glimpses, through oral traditions, into the world of the inhabitants of these islands. Our understanding of the Aleuts, or Unangan, as they call themselves, has greatly increased over the past decade. Three current museum exhibitions, with accompanying catalogs, contribute significantly to our knowledge of Aleut life. *Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Siberia and Alaska*, by Fitzhugh and Crowell (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1988), portrays the native cultures on both sides of the Bering Strait; two major exhibitions and catalogs on "Russian America" provide insight into early Aleut life: *The Etholen Collection* by Pirjo Varjola (Helsinki: National Board of Antiquities, 1990) complements the National Museum of Finland's traveling exhibition, "ALASKA Russian America," and *Russian America: The Forgotten Frontier*, by Smith and Barnett (Tacoma: Washington State Historical Society, 1990), accompanies an exhibition of the same title.

The dramatic changes in the Soviet Union and the thaw of the "ice curtain" across the Bering Strait have facilitated scholarly exchanges and publications by Aleut specialists as previously closed archival and museum collections become available. However, *Aleut Tales and Narratives* is unique in that it is a major work in which Aleuts relate their own oral traditions, and it certainly will emerge as the primary reference work on Aleut literature.

Russian ethnographer Waldemar Jochelson (1855-1930) led the 1901-1911 Aleut-Kamchatka expedition of the Russian Geographical Society, and the songs and stories, some on wax cylinders, collected in 1909-1910 are the subject of this volume. The materials languished until 1950, when Knut Bergsland, a Norwegian linguist from the University of Oslo who conducted fieldwork in Atka, began editing the texts. In 1972, Michael Krauss of the Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, learned of the wax cylinders in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) and began reuniting them with the manuscripts, all subsequently deciphered by Atkan scholar Moses Dirks.

The lengthy introductory section (fifty-six pages) is highly

detailed and informative, explaining the Jochelson history and the curious circumstances leading to this publication. Also included in the introduction are four detailed maps of historic Aleut communities and major Aleutian geographic regions, and an extensive discussion of Aleut cultural history, language history, and classification.

Numerous well-described illustrations reveal the complexity of reassembling what is known of early Aleut culture: engravings from Russian expedition documents; a sample of Jochelson's yet-to-be-reassembled Aleutian Islands field photographs; and illustrations of cultural objects and illustrations from museums and archives in Finland, the Soviet Union, and the United States, particularly Alaska.

The multiple-step transfer of Aleut oral literature to print was not simple, but the stories in English are highly readable. Several pages of the original manuscripts and translations in Russian and English are included, with numbered texts, facilitating bilingual comparison across facing pages.

Because of diverse styles and subject matter, the tales are difficult to characterize. Some are succinct and poetic, others are elaborate. They include abstract origin stories, Raven tales, songs, descriptions of facial ornamentation, plant uses—real and mythical. Living in a marine environment, the Unangam frequently told stories of the animals that sustained them physically and spiritually. Interpersonal and group relations, both nurturing and combative, are also described.

In the introduction, Michael Krauss states, "Bergsland and Dirks herein return, for the appreciation of future generations, what is the most important collection of traditional Aleut oral narrative art ever made." *Aleut Tales and Narratives* will enlighten Aleuts and non-Aleuts alike, surely emerging as a classic Unangam literature reference.

Ronald K. Inouye
University of Alaska, Fairbanks