The Kayak Voyages of Father Ivan Veniaminov

On July 29, 1824, Ivan Veniaminov, a Russian Orthodox priest from the Siberian city of Irkutsk, stepped ashore in the harbor of Unalaska. His ministry to the people of the eastern Aleutian Islands had begun. Over the next 10 years, Father Veniaminov would make yearly visits to various villages in his district, frequently traveling by kayak, or baidarka, as the Russians called it.

While Father Veniaminov was first and foremost a priest in the Russian Orthodox Church, he was also a man of many other talents. He designed and partially built the church in Unalaska, he built his own furniture and a clock, compiled a dictionary of the Aleut language, translated scriptures into Aleut and kept detailed records of the weather in Unalaska. He was also the primary ethnographer of the early Aleuts. As contemporary Russian anthropologist S.V. Ivanov put it, "During the time the Aleut still preserved their typical culture, only one ethnographer, Veniaminov, visited them. When more than half a century later, such specialized researchers as Waldemar Jochelson appeared on the Aleutian Islands, hardly any of the original Aleut culture was extant. Even today, to study Aleut ethnography, we must use the work of Veniaminov."

The ethnographic work that Ivanov refers to is Veniaminov's *Notes on the Islands of the Unalaska District*, or *Notes* for short—a document that covers every aspect of Aleut culture from their clothing to their traditional religious beliefs. But Veniaminov left us with another set of documents, the journals of his day-to-day activities as a priest. The journals cover the entire period of his 10-year stay in Unalaska. While the purpose of the journals was to document Veniaminov's religious activities, such as the building of a church, baptisms and ceremonies performed, they also give us an occasional glimpse of his inter-island travels by baidarka.

Portrait of Ivan Veniaminov some years after he left the Aleutians and had become Metropolitan of Moscow, the highest ranking cleric in the Russian Orthodox Church. (Courtesy of Wolfgang Dirscherl)

A Russian priest sent to bring the church to the Aleutian Islands was a keen and respectful observer of the people who lived there.

Veniaminov Territory

Veniaminov's ministry to the Aleutians was financed by the Russian-American Company, or "the Company" for short. The Company had a charter from the Russian crown, which gave them a monopoly on the fur trade in Alaska. One of their obligations under the charter was to fund the activities of the clergy in Alaska. It was this support that had brought Father Veniaminov to Unalaska.

Veniaminov's parish went west as far as Umnak Island. It went east as far as the Shumagin Islands to the south of the Alaskan Peninsula and included all the islands in between. It also included the Pribilof Islands, which are located roughly a hundred miles to the north of Unalaska. Though Veniaminov traveled mostly by baidarka, the Pribilofs were out of baidarka

range and he visited them only when a Company ship traveled in that direction. There were 27 villages on his parish with a total of 1,464 inhabitants. Over the 10-year period he was their priest, he probably visited them all more or less more than once.

To get an idea of the extent of Veniaminov's journeys, it helps to look at a map of the eastern Aleutians. The Aleutian Islands are stretched out like a string of pearls in an arc that reaches from the Alaskan Peninsula in the east to Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula to the west. The Aleutians also form the boundary between the Bering Sea and the North Pacific. When tides run, they tend to run north-south, turning the straits between islands into fast-flowing streams with currents often exceeding six miles per hour.

Islands in the eastern Aleutians are spaced fairly close together so that the biggest expanse of water Veniaminov had to cross was only about five miles or so. But the shores of the islands themselves were often steep and unapproachable. Landing places on the islands were confined to coves and beaches where valleys met the sea. And beaches were approachable only in good weather when no surf was running. Thus, while a map makes travel in the Aleutians look fairly easy, weather and the topography of the islands often made it a challenge.

Traveling by Baidarka

Veniaminov's first baidarka journey took place in 1828, three and a half years after he first arrived in Unalaska. He had taken three previous journeys to outlying islands, one by sailing ship and two by bidarkas, the large, open skin-boat of the Aleuts.

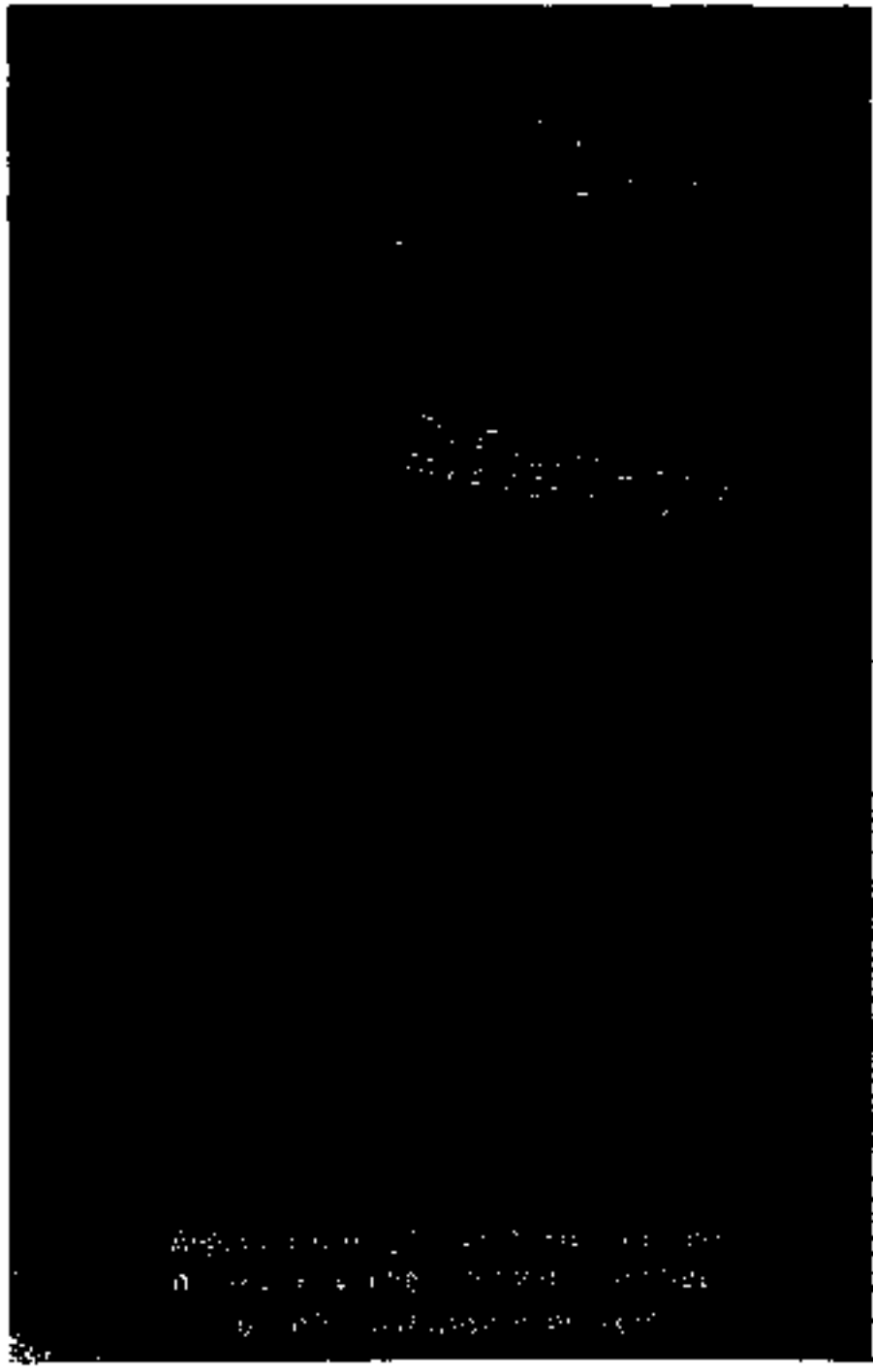
His journal entry on April 12, 1828, reads, "I set out at 9 o'clock in a three-man baidarka in the company of four two-seaters. After sailing through the three straits between islands, we arrived safely at 8 o'clock at the village of Artel'novskoe on the island of Akun. Akun lies off the northeastern coast of Unalaska at a distance of at least 120 versts [80 miles] past the islands of Unalga and Akutan." In a note on this entry he states, "This distance is judged by the progress of the baidarka assuming that a baidarka can cover at least 10 versts [6.6 miles] an hour, or even more with a favorable current."

The distance between Unalaska and Akun is actually 55 miles, which Veniaminov and his group covered in [illegible] hours for an average speed of five miles an hour, just under 4.5 knots. Veniaminov does not say where he got the figure of 10 versts an hour for the speed of a baidarka, but in later journal entries, he revises it down to the 7.5 versts or five miles an hour made evident by the run to Akun. I suspect that at some point he found out the correct distance between Unalaska and Akun and adjusted the average speed of the baidarka accordingly.

Legendary Speed

In *Notes*, Veniaminov reports that, by local accounts, baidarkas traveled at greater speed in times past than they did in the 1820s. The secret, according to his informants, was in the use of *kostyaks*—bone or ivory plates inserted into the various joints of the baidarka. However, when Veniaminov had a three-hatch baidarka with *kostyaks* built for him, he found that it was no faster than a conventional baidarka. The secret of speedy baidarkas, if there was one, had already been lost by the time Veniaminov arrived in the Aleutians.

While the five-miles-per-hour cruising speed of a baidarka in Veniaminov's time can easily be achieved by today's recreational paddler, maintaining it for 11



hours is still a feat beyond the capabilities of all but the most athletic paddlers. And as Veniaminov points out in *Notes*, when Aleuts paddled in good weather, they didn't stop for breaks. So although they passed islands en route from Unalaska to Akun, for instance, they wouldn't stop at these islands for a break but would paddle without interruption except perhaps for a short on-the-water rest.

While five miles per hour was a common cruising speed for the baidarka, higher speeds were also observed. In *Notes*, Veniaminov records, "The best present-day baidarka can go against the fastest current in the straits, as for example, in Unalginskoi Strait, where off the capes, the current runs up to 6.5 knots [7.5 mph]."

According to Veniaminov, on the morning of a long paddle, Aleuts did not eat because they claimed that eating would make them thirsty. Thirst in turn would lead to drinking, and drinking would lead to a full bladder. This might explain how the Aleuts could often paddle for 24 hours straight (sometimes even up to 36) without stopping to urinate. Modesty, no doubt, prevented Veniaminov from addressing this topic. Not all journeys were done without interruption. Sometimes the wind came up and progress became impossible, forcing Veniaminov and his companions to duck into the nearest island for shelter.

A non-native in the middle seat of a three-hatch baidarka, circa 1880. (Courtesy of George Dyson)

A Priest Without a Paddle?

Did Veniaminov paddle his own baidarka or did he simply ride along as a passenger in the middle hatch of a three-hatch baidarka? He is not explicit on this topic. Certainly, nowhere in his journals does he mention learning how to handle a

baidarka which he would have had to do had he done his own paddling. In Notes he gives glowing accounts of the abilities of the Aleuts in managing their baidarkas but he doesn't refer to any experiences of trying to paddle his own.

A further clue to support the idea that Veniaminov didn't do his own paddling is the mere mention in several journal entries of traveling in a three-hatch baidarka. The three-hatch baidarka, according to most accounts, was not developed until after the arrival of the Russians and was designed to carry Russian notables in the middle hatch with Aleuts paddling in the bow and stern. In Veniaminov's time, Russian society, including that part of it in its North American territory was organized along strict class lines. Most Russians in America were one or two class levels above the Aleuts, with Aleuts forming the lowest class. It meant that Aleuts were responsible for all the unskilled labor, which we can presume included paddling a baidarka. Higher-class Russians such as Veniaminov would not have been obligated to carry loads or paddle a boat.

In an entry in Notes, Veniaminov tells us that on one occasion, when bad weather forced his party to stop short of their destination, they decided to walk overland instead of going on by boat. The Aleuts, who had run out of food, carried all the gear without complaint, and the Russians in the party, though they had full stomachs and were not carrying any gear, could hardly keep up with them. This little story tells us that the Russians, when underway, regarded the Aleuts not as travel companions or equals but rather as laborers brought to do the heavy work.

But even if Veniaminov didn't do his own paddling, travel by baidarka was still strenuous and full of adventure. The most frequent challenge was probably the weather. The season for baidarka travel was roughly April to September. Veniaminov described winter as lasting from October to March. Travel beyond these dates was too unpredictable because of frequent storms and high winds.

In winter, the days were too short for trips to neighboring islands. Even during the travel season, high winds could come up and stop a group of baidarkas, forcing them to seek refuge wherever they could. And in some cases, the storm could make life unpleasant even if travelers were already on land. Of September 27, 1829, Veniaminov wrote: "That night the wind grew extremely strong, and there was a heavy rain, so that, despite all our efforts, we could not keep the tent standing. At midnight, in terrible darkness, we were forced to move into a deserted yurt."

Veniaminov had taken his family with him to Unalaska. Although in his journals he does not complain of missing them, his journeys often lasted several weeks, and the separation from his family no doubt was an additional hardship for him.

Ever-Present Risks

But there were other dangers besides high wind and loneliness. In an entry for September 7, 1829, Veniaminov tells us, "While sailing alongside Akutaan, we met a number of whales and faced danger in passing among them: one whale caught sight of our baidarka when he was about to surface, grew frightened, as usual, and turned suddenly. This created a terrible wake." Luckily, it failed to capsize the baidarka.

On April 19, 1828, Veniaminov encountered his first tide rip, a hazard found in the chain between islands. "A tide rip," Veniaminov tells us, "is nothing other than an abnormally steep and frequent disturbance, rotary in some places, which rushes up like a tube at the top. This phenomenon occurs when the wind and roughness of the sea go against the direction of the current. There is no way to save oneself when in the middle of a strong tide rip in a baidara, and even more so in a baidarka!" When Veniaminov and his companions encountered tide rips, they had no choice but to wait for either the tidal current or the opposing wind to stop.

And then there was always the possibility of tearing a hole in the skin of the baidarka. In his entry for September 27, 1829, Veniaminov reports, "After arriving at the village, we discovered that our baidarka had been torn along the keel; as a result, it was almost half-filled with water. We no doubt use it when either landing or pulling out from the little island. Fortunately, the distance had not been great, or else everything would have gotten wet, not to mention that something worse could have happened during such a high wind and unfavorable current."

While baidarka trips were often challenging, the fact that Veniaminov survived 10 years of inter-island travel indicates that it was not necessarily fatal. Prudence and experience helped the Aleuts survive their journeys. Although Veniaminov reports no critical accidents in his journals, in *Notes* he mentions some of the safety equipment and safety procedures available to the Aleuts to deal with accidents. Each boat had a bailing tube that could be used to suck water out of the bottom of the boat. A boat might also carry a sponge to soak up smaller quantities of water.

Early Paddle Floats

Veniaminov also reports that in former times, when Aleut paddlers frequently ventured out alone, each baidarka would carry a bladder made from the stomach of a seal or sea lion. In case of a capsize,

One-, two- and three-hatch baidarkas, Kodiak Island, 1805. (Courtesy of George Dyson.)

the paddler could exit the baidarka and, with the help of the inflated bladder, climb back into the cockpit. The method he described was essentially the same as we use nowadays to get back into our kayaks with the help of a paddle float. Veniaminov makes no mention of rolling maneuvers as a form of self-rescue.

The float also had other uses. "It has happened that, when occasionally the baidarka sheathing split somehow, the paddler, with the help of the bladder, bailed out of the baidarka, turned it over, repaired the leak, and then climbed in, provided that the weather was calm." Given the temperature of Aleutian waters, this form of rescue must have been only for the most hardy of paddlers.

The bladder could also be used as a float bag, allowing a paddler to paddle a partially swamped baidarka to shore. However, by Veniaminov's time, few Aleut paddlers used such bladders any more, since they always set out two or three at a time and could help each other when in trouble.

Veniaminov himself never traveled alone. His notes usually mention several baidarkas setting out on a trip. It seems that longer trips were often done in relays. One set of baidarkas would take him from one island to the next. Then they would return home while Veniaminov performed his clerical duties. Then for the next leg of his journey he would travel in a different baidarka or sometimes a bidara. His journals give the impression that there was a fair amount of inter-island travel going on, and he could often send word ahead to the next village to have a group of Cadacs come to fetch him.

The End of a Decade

In all, Veniaminov averaged two baidarka trips a year. His last baidarka trip ended on May 19, 1834. His last day on Unalaska ended with a sermon. His journal entry for that day reads in part, "Immediately after the sermon, I set out for the ship, accompanied by each and every Aleut. The sincere gratitude and sympathy of every Aleut were attested to by his tears. At one o'clock on the same day, we weighed anchor and went to Sitka. Thus concluded my stay on Unalaska, a stay that had lasted 10 years and 17 days: from July 29, 1824, to August 15, 1834."

And so, Veniaminov performed his ministry in the Aleutians and left us with the primary account not only of Aleut culture but also of what it was like to travel around the Aleutians in a small skin boat. Those who might be interested in retracing Veniaminov's journeys in the future will find that the geography and the weather of the Aleutians has changed very little from what he described in his journals. The number of villages in the Unalaska district has shrunk from 27 in Veniaminov's time to seven today. But most other things are the same. The wind still blows and the tide rips still form in the straits between islands. **SK**

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