Title: The Kayak Voyages of Father Ivan Veniaminov

Author(s): Wolfgang Brinck

Source: Fort Ross Conservancy Library

URL: http://www.fortross.org/lib.html

Unless otherwise noted in the manuscript, each author maintains copyright of his or her written material.

Fort Ross Conservancy (FRC) asks that you acknowledge FRC as the distributor of the content; if you use material from FRC’s online library, we request that you link directly to the URL provided. If you use the content offline, we ask that you credit the source as follows: “Digital content courtesy of Fort Ross Conservancy, www.fortross.org; author maintains copyright of his or her written material.”

Also please consider becoming a member of Fort Ross Conservancy to ensure our work of promoting and protecting Fort Ross continues: http://www.fortross.org/join.htm.

This online repository, funded by Renova Fort Ross Foundation, is brought to you by Fort Ross Conservancy, a 501(c)(3) and California State Park cooperating association. FRC’s mission is to connect people to the history and beauty of Fort Ross and Salt Point State Parks.
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.

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.

A Russian priest sent to bring the church to the Aleutian Islands was a keen and respectful observer of the people who lived there.
range and he visited them only when a
Company ship traveled in their direction. There were 27 villages in his parish
with a total of 1,484 inhabitants. Over
the 10-year period he was their priest,
he probably visited them all—most of
them more than once.

To get an idea of the extent of
Veniarninov's journeys, it helps to look
at a map of the eastern Aleutians. The
Aleutian Islands are stretched out like
eighting of pearls in an arc that reaches
from the Alaskan Peninsula in the east
to Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula
in 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
longest expanse of water Veniaminov
had to cross was only about five miles or
so. But the shores of the islands them­
selves were often steep and unapproach­
able. 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

Veniarninov's first baidarka journey took
place in 1828, three and a half years af­
fter he first arrived in Unalaska. He had
taken three previous journeys to outlying
islands, one by sailing ship and two
by baidara, 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 ar­
ived safely at 8 o'clock at the village of
Atzel Novoiske on the island of Akun.
Akun lies off the northeastern coast of
Unalaska at a distance of at least 120
versus [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 assum­
ing that a baidarka can cover at least 10
versus [6.6 miles] an hour, or even more
with a favorable current." The distance
between Unalaska and Akun is actually
not Veniaminov does not say where he got
the figure of 10 versus an hour for the
speed of a baidarka, but in later journal
entries, he revises it down to the 7.5
versus or five miles an hour made evi­
dent 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 loc­
al accounts, baidarks traveled at greater
speed in times past than they did in the
1820s. The secret, according to his infor­
mants, was in the use of kostochki—bone
or ivory plates inserted into the various
joints of the baidarka. However, when
Veniarninov had a three-hatch baidarka
with kostochki built for him, he found
that it was no faster than a convention­
al baidarka. The secret of speedy baidarks,
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 recre­
tional paddlers, 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 11 hours straight, sometimes even up to 16 hours, 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. During Veniaminov and his companions' 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
or 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 ex­
periences 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 hach
with Aleuts paddling in the bow and
stem. 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
gin strenuous and full of adventure. The
most frequent challenge was probably
the weather. 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 winds and loneliness. In an entry for September 7, 1829, Veniaminov tells us: "While sailing alongside Akutan, 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, 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 straits between islands. "A tide rip," Veniaminov tells us, "is nothing other than an abnormally steep and frequent disturbance, rotary in some places, which curls 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 an 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 do doubt once in when either landing or pulling out from the little island. Fortunately, the distance had not been great, or the 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.
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 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 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.

Wolfgang Brinck is author of The Aleutian Kayak and has been building traditional Greenland and Aleutian kayaks since 1988. In 2004, he taught kayak building at Aka­tan High School in the Aleutians. That trip led to his interest in the kayaking career of Ivan Veniaminov. Wolfgang can be reached at wolfgang@wolfgangbrink.com.