

## *Kilvêi*: The Chukchi Spring Festival in Urban and Rural Contexts

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The Chukchis – a people living in the Arctic region of northeastern Siberia – have traditionally been divided into two socio-economic groups: reindeer herders and sea-mammal hunters.<sup>1</sup> With the emergence of an indigenous intelligentsia and the building of cities during the Soviet period, some Chukchis now live in urban areas and engage in other activities. As part of a process of rebuilding identity, members of the indigenous intelligentsia are involved in a revival movement. Some of them have turned to herding rituals to try to restore a link with a way of life that they have long since abandoned.

In that context, this article compares two variants of the same ritual, the *Kilvêi* Spring festival.<sup>2</sup> One version is performed in the tundra by reindeer herders. The second is an interpretation of the first version but is performed in town by city dwellers and villagers. This paper is based on observations of this festival in 1998 in the Amguema tundra (Iultin district), and in 1998 and 1999 in the village of Tavaivaam, a 15-minute walk from Anadyr, the capital of Chukotka.<sup>3</sup>

The objective of this article is not to argue about the authenticity of either of the two rituals: both are legitimate and both are contemporary variants of one (or several) rituals that existed in the past. However, whereas one is performed in continuity with the content and the locality, the other displays and represents a greater degree of discontinuity. As emphasized by Geertz (1957) and more recently in Kreinath *et al.* (2004, 1), rituals are “subject to dynamic changes.” What is interesting here is that we can witness at the same time several changing practices emerging from a common basis. Contrary to other examples of the reinvention of discontinued rituals performed (Lavrillier 2003), here we can observe the re-enactment of an extant ritual, but in a context where it is not expected to be performed, since its symbolic content is clearly related to reindeer herding activities and life in the tundra.

Rituals “are a means of acting on the world” (Horton 1982, quoted by Gerholm 1988, 197), “they are *ways of doing things with symbols*” (Gerholm 1988, 197–8, italics by the author). This comparison considers how different versions of the “same” ritual – they bear the same name, are acknowledged locally as comparable, and are performed at the same time, albeit in different social contexts – can have different content and are intended to act in different ways. I wish to reveal which elements of the herding ritual

are selected in the urban context and how they are used in a formal way to imbue the ritual with new meaning.

In order to approach the two *Kilvêi*,<sup>4</sup> we need first to see how the ritual is inscribed in a regular cycle of herding rituals in the tundra, and what these rituals mean. I will then describe in greater detail the content of the “country” *Kilvêi* and the “town” *Kilvêi*. The descriptions of the two *Kilvêi* will be compared in order to show not only how they differ, but also how the common elements are interpreted differently according to the context.

### Chukchi herding ritual cycle

*Kilvêi* is part of the regular herding ritual cycle, which includes several festivals. These festivals are called *taaronggyrgyt* or *lygêtaaronggyrgyt* (Bogoraz 1975 [1904-1909], 368; Kuznetsova 1957, 264), often incorrectly translated as “sacrifice” or “sacrifice *par excellence*.”<sup>5</sup> *Taarong* means “praise,” “obsequiousness,” “flirtatiousness,” and “respectful greeting,” and *taaronyk*, as a verb, means “to seek somebody’s favor,” “to beg for mercy,” “to greet respectfully,” “to serve” (Inênlikêj and Moll 1957, 127). Therefore, *taaronggyrgyt* and *lygêtaaronggyrgyt* express a wish to establish and maintain good relations with spirits.

Most of these rituals are tied to the main events of life and the reproductive cycle of reindeer, as follows:<sup>6</sup>

- *Pêgytti*, also called *l’êlêjulvêv* (*l’êlêj*, winter), is usually carried out at the end of December or at the beginning of January, both by herders and hunters, when the star called *Pêgyttin* (Altair) appears in the polar night. The appearance of this star is a harbinger of the return of sunlight and warmth (Vdovin 1977, 125). At *Pêgytti*, a reindeer is usually slaughtered (Kuznetsova 1957, 287–9).
- *Pêêsvak* (*pêtysvak -f*) or *pêêsvakênratgyrgyn* (*-ênratgyrgyn*, separation) (Kuznetsova 1957, 294). *Pêêsvak* is carried out in April when the reindeer are divided into two herds, with female reindeer in one herd (*rêkvyt*) and males and the one-year-old reindeer (*pêêsvak*) in the other. This separation is intended to prevent the bucks from trampling the new born calves, and to prevent the one-year-old reindeer from taking the mothers’ milk from the calves. Spirits are fed during this small festival in order to propitiate the coming births. This ritual is sometimes accompanied by the slaughtering of a pregnant female deer.
- *Kilvêi*, which will be described in detail later.
- *Ulvêv*. This festival takes place in mid-July, when the men are back from the spring pastures (*kytkytqaalatyk*). Indeed, during the warmest period,

from June to September, the men go off three times (*kytkytqaalatyk* in spring, *qoral"atyl'yt* in summer and *gargarqaalatyk* in autumn) with the herd in search of good pastures, leaving the women, the children and the elder men on the encampment. *Ulvêv* comes from *nulvuqin*, an adjective that means "motionless." The ritual prepares the summer pastures (*qoral"atyl'yt*) from a material as well as from a symbolic point of view. As men will be out with the herd, the community will need meat, so a significant reindeer slaughter is undertaken. This slaughter is also conducted in order to get light reindeer skins for clothes.<sup>7</sup> Summer pastures are also the best time for the reindeer to fatten up so that they can live in good health through the long winter. So spirits are fed in order to propitiate this crucial event.

- *Ŋênrir"un* is the main festival of the cycle and is carried out before the rutting period, at the end of August. It is the occasion for the slaughter of several reindeer. Since male reproductive potency is the central focus of this ritual, at least one male deer is usually slaughtered.<sup>8</sup> *Ŋênri-* means "over there," "in that direction," and the morpheme *r"u / r"o* implies a large-scale action that indicates an approaching change of season, organization or place. In this case, this could be related to a movement back from the coast to the inland tundra, as was formerly practised. Today, the ritual usually lasts three days, but it could last up to six days (Kuznetsova 1957, 280). Spirits and ritual objects are fed in order to facilitate the reproductive period.

Thus, the performance of ritual is linked to the biological cycle of the reindeer and to the welfare of the herd. It is necessary to feed all the "natural" (e.g. tundra, animals, rivers) and "supernatural" (different kinds of spirits connected with "nature") entities so that the herd will be healthy.

Although these rituals are different, they share many common elements, which testify to the necessity of creating and entering into a ritual context:

#### *Housekeeping (rygtamavyk)*

Everything involved in the feast should be clean or new. The day prior to the ritual, the *iaranga*<sup>9</sup> (a tent made of reindeer skin) is carefully swept with tree branches. All the kitchen utensils that will be used in the ritual are "washed," that is, rinsed with water, or scraped clean in the case of wooden objects. The daily dishes are thereby symbolically washed of their secular usage to mark the passage to the register of ritual. Once gathered, all dust and other detritus is thrown outside.

Housekeeping is not only a preparation for the ritual; it constitutes an integral stage of the festival itself. This systematic practice of housekeeping

can also be found among the Yuit (Eskimos) of Chukotka (Chichlo 2000). According to Chichlo, in this apparently trivial act is present “a ritual that reproduces an ancient myth,”<sup>10</sup> a myth spread throughout the various groups of Inuit, and one in which the idea is developed that “abundance of food immediately follows cleaning the house and the ensuing festival” (2000, 20). As Chichlo puts it, “cleaning presents itself as a preliminary rite, which opens the passage to prosperity” (2000, 21). This idea is also found in Gessain’s work, as mentioned by Chichlo (2000, 21): “all the dirt thrown outside is supposed to become birds, bears, seals, narwhals.”

Following the same principle, V. Gorbacheva<sup>11</sup> states that, among the Koryaks, if the autumn festival *Qoianaitatyk*<sup>12</sup> has run well, the master spirit of the herd, satisfied, shakes his reindeer skin clothing, and each hair that falls from it symbolizes the future birth of a reindeer calf into the world of those humans who have performed the ritual. Thus there appears to be a notion of a system of circulation of waste and dust between the worlds that enables the regeneration of the herds and wild animals.

#### *Fetching wood (uŋêlyk) and water (aimyk)*

Wood must be specially fetched for each festival. Even if there is a sufficient supply of wood in reserve, wood that has been collected for secular purposes cannot be used in the ritual context. Ritual wood serves both as fuel for the fire made during the festival and as a litter for the slaughtered reindeer. In addition, some small twigs are collected and laid on the meat and other ritual food during the entire time of their preparation as well as while they are being cooked. This is done in order to protect the food from spirits (expressed in Russian *zakryt’ dorogu*, “to close the way”) before it is offered. The principal type of wood collected is willow, which, in various forms, is present in all rituals. Following the same principle, water used during the ritual is specially fetched.

#### *The process*

The organization of all rituals is based on a common logic. Rituals are collective, in the sense that they are performed at the same time in each encampment by all the *iaranga*. Nonetheless, each tent performs them individually. The northernmost *iaranga* (in Amguema)<sup>13</sup> begins first, and this is the signal for the others to start. Rituals unfold synchronically, but are slightly staggered. By circulating between tents, children can act as “regulators,” providing a certain unity in the ritual’s unfolding. They move from one *iaranga* to the next, gathering a little of each dish and telling what each of the neighbors is up to. As if following a musical score, the mistress of

the house does her best to “respect the rhythm.” She must finish after the tent situated to the north and before the tent situated to the south. In a certain sense, this is a matter of honor, the visible sign of a well-organized ritual performed within the rules of the art. Most regular rituals end with a special sequence commemorating the dead.

### *Orientation and movements*

During most rituals, movements are regulated. Orientation, direction of the feeding of spirits and layout of ritual objects are all strictly defined. Elaborate design and strict rules of movement and orientation help to turn an everyday life area into a ritual space.

### *The guests (rêmkyl'yt)*

Guests are part of the successful unfolding of the ritual. To enable the inhabitants of neighboring encampments to visit one another, an interval of a few days separates the same festival in different encampments. Nowadays, rituals are announced by means of radio, which links the herding encampments to one another and to the village. The presence of guests is not simply a question of politeness: rituals are often the occasion of large slaughters, and a helping hand is required to butcher the reindeer and to prepare the meat for preservation. In principle, an invited guest will willingly go to a ritual, since rituals provide the occasion to consume rare and savored dishes, and to receive all sorts of presents (reindeer skins, whole reindeer, quarters of meat, etc.) from the organizers. Rituals thus facilitate a redistribution of goods within the community. Moreover, as rituals also constitute unique occasions for different groups of Chukchi society – reindeer herders, sea-mammal hunters and villagers – to gather together, they can equally be understood as opportunities to perpetuate the cohesion of this nomadic and dispersed people.<sup>14</sup>

### *Ritual cuisine*

As in most places in the world, the preparation and consumption of food play an important role in Chukchi rituals. Rituals are conducted to feed humans, as well as spirits, delicious dishes that are exceptionally prepared. In the culinary preparations, products derived from reindeer are combined with plants. Indeed, although plants do not seem to have a central place in daily nutrition, they play a very important role in ritual food. Plants that are highly prized by reindeer, such as willow (*ëmtotoot*, *Salix sp.*), buckwheat (*rymavyt -m / symavyt -f*, *Polygonum Tripterocarpum*) and arctic riverbeauty (*vêvtyt*, *Epilobium* or *Chamaenerion latifolium*), are of par-

ticular importance in these rituals. Their consumption in a festive context establishes a link between humans and reindeer.

In some cases, no animal is slaughtered. Special animal parts set aside from previous ritual slaughters are consumed. According to the season, the animal slaughtered or consumed may be a male or female reindeer, a calf, or a combination of these categories. The selection of the animal is always a function of each particular ritual. At the springtime festival *Kilvêi*, for example, where female reproduction is central, the meat eaten is that of a privately-owned female reindeer that has been slaughtered either during the winter festival *Pêgytti* or at the autumn ceremony *ÿênrir*"un.

Specially prepared dishes inscribe all the rituals in a single cycle. At each festival, a dish or some dried meat is prepared for consumption at the following ritual. Therefore, rituals lie within a double temporality: in the time of the ritual in progress, and that of the next ritual in preparation.

### *Gender division*

In rituals, like in everyday life, male and female roles are prescribed and different. For instance, the mistress of the house is in charge of the cooking and everything related to the fire. She is also the person who feeds ritual objects (see next paragraph). Men are in charge of slaughtering, as usual, but they also feed the spirits in proximity of the herd.

### *Objects involved in the rituals*

In festivals, many different categories of objects are involved. These objects are handed down from generation to generation and are sometimes extremely old. They bear a strong relation to each *iaranga* and each domestic fire to which they belong, just as the people born in a *iaranga* also have a symbolic attachment to it.

Ritual objects are in principle passed on to the eldest son of the family. A family with several sons will usually share out ritual objects belonging to the "mother" *iaranga* or divide up those that are divisible (such as the ritual string) to create new ritual objects. Objects coming from the same *iaranga* have a similar symbolic identity. Therefore, it is forbidden to mix fires or even objects that come in contact with fires that belong to two different *iaranga*. Mixing is permitted only between two tents that have the same origin, i.e. that derive from the same domestic fire. If two such tents are in close proximity to one another, the families of the tents will perform their rituals side by side.

Not every *iaranga* possesses the same categories of objects, since objects always bear a strong relation to the history of the family, but the principal objects include:

- Offering cups (*koiñyqagtè*): These small wooden receptacles range in size from a soup spoon to a large ladle, and are used to collect finely minced meat or a mash made of boiled plants destined for the spirits before being thrown to them.
- Wooden anthropomorphic fireboards (blocks of wood with a “head” and “body”, used with a leather bow and wooden drill to create fire by means of friction): Fireboards occupy a central function in the ritual, notably by procuring the ritual fire, which must be distinct from normal, everyday fire. To make fire, the board is placed on the ground, under the ball of the firemaker’s foot. A drill (*ñilêq*) is inserted into a round depression created by earlier uses of the fireboard. The person making the fire holds the top of the drill in place by means of a piece of antler (*gyrgysyos’yn*) that allows the drill to rotate freely. The bow consists of a reindeer-antler handle and a strap of reindeer hide that is twisted around the wooden drill. The bow is drawn back and forth, rotating the drill. The friction of the drill on the fireboard creates embers, which are used to ignite a piece of dry moss that burns very quickly and allows the ritual fire to be lit. At Amguema, in Chukchi, both ritual fireboards and matches for everyday use are called *milgyt*. Bogoraz used the term *Qaamêlgymêl* – constructed from the same root *milgy-/mêlgy* (fire), to which is added *qaa-*, meaning reindeer (1975 [1904-1909], 350). This name reveals the link that symbolically unites the fire to the herd. According to Ragtytval, fireboards are called “masters of the reindeer” (*qorên êtyñvyt*) (1986, 171).
- Ritual strings (*taiñykvvt*): *Taiñykvvt* means “that which thwarts misfortune, that which protects from misfortune” (Ragtytval 1986, 172). *Taiñ-* indicating a prohibition – is to be found in *nytaiñyqên*, “it’s forbidden.” More precisely, it signifies “something forbidden in the rules of life whose transgression implies the onset of misfortune” (Vdovin 1977, 141). The suffix *kv(yn)* enables the formation of substantives having the meaning of “protection” (Vdovin 1977, 141). Family strings serve both as protectors and as aids (Vdovin 1977, 142). Some families possess several strings.

The *taiñykvvt* ties together diverse elements representative of important moments in the life of the lineage: anthropomorphic wooden figurines around 10-15 cm tall, parts of killed animals, small stones found in the necks of reindeer, small stones with holes that have been collected from paths and that are reputed to have protective powers, etc. At festival time, each of these parts of the string is separately fed raw marrow.

- Animal skulls (*levyt*) are also among the ritual objects that are fed. Skulls come mostly from predators, such as wolves, bears, loons, and even wolverines. These ritual objects are associated with the activity of hunting. Each family possesses skulls of different animals. The skulls are often those of animals killed on a first hunt. They are handed down from generation to generation, but can also be replaced.
- The drum (*iarar*): Each family possesses its own drum. This is one reason why Chukchis, like Koryaks, are considered to practice a “familial” shamanism (Bogoraz 1975 [1904-1909]; Jochelson 1908). The drum is symbolically attached to the *iaranga*, just as are all the other ritual objects. In addition, the two terms *iarar* (the drum) and *iarany* (the tent) are homophonically close, possibly linking them etymologically.<sup>15</sup> The drum is not fed during festivals, nor is it utilized at every ritual. But it comes into action during ritual sequences that are considered the “most shamanistic,” particularly those called *myjik* or *mjêgyrgyn* and taking place at the end of the spring or autumn ceremonies.

Thus, Chukchi herding rituals are performed in order to reassert social and symbolic links at several levels: at the level of the familial unit, at the level of the encampment, and at the level of the community, which can be understood on various scales. They also confirm links between humans and various spirits and entities, living and dead, including humans, wild game animals, and reindeer. All these elements will be present in the following description and the analysis of *Kilvêi*, as it is performed today in the tundra.

### ***Kilvêi*, the spring festival**

Today, *Kilvêi* takes place after all the new calves have been born, generally at the beginning of May. This is the second most important festival after the autumn one, *jênrir'un*. Although *Kilvêi* has already been discussed in the literature,<sup>16</sup> with the exception of Kuznetsova, the descriptions and analysis of this festival are sometimes quite laconic (half a page in Bogoraz 1975 [1904-1909], 377–8, and a bit shorter in Jochelson 1908, 87). In addition to being the most thorough, Kuznetsova's work has been the most valuable for me, as my fieldwork area is the same as hers, but she was in Amguema from 1948 to 1951. This provides a unique diachronic point of view to the analysis, emphasizing that, despite being performed without interruption, the tundra rituals have also undergone changes. Herding life in the Amguema tundra remains quite dynamic, even if herding itself has



encountered difficulties during the last decade (see notably Chichlo 1996; Gray 2000, 2004; Krupnik 1998, 2000).

In the past, this festival was organized four times a year (Kuznetsova 1957, 300). Today, according to the herders, it is ideally conducted in two stages, one for the male deer (*symjy*, *symjat*, old male deer), the other for female deer (*rêkvyt*). The ritual for male deer uses the fallen antlers of male and castrated reindeer, the ritual for female deer uses the antlers of female reindeer. According to Kuznetsova, the male *Kilvêi* was organized around the 20<sup>th</sup> of April and the female *Kilvêi* around the 20<sup>th</sup> of May (1957, 300). If only a single ritual is to be performed, then it should definitely be the one devoted to female deer (Kuznetsova 1957, 301), because at *Kilvêi*, female reindeer fertility is the central focus of the ritual. In practice, the ritual for male deer seems to be gradually disappearing nowadays in Amguema, and I only had the opportunity to see the ritual devoted to female reindeer.

Sometimes *Kilvêi* is referred to as the “ceremony of antlers” (Bogoraz 1975 [1904-1909], 377; *prazdnik rogov*, Kuznetsova 1957, 300). This is because much of the event takes place around antlers that the female deer lose when they give birth. When they guard the deer, herders collect these antlers and bring them to the encampment. But this designation, “ceremony of antlers,” can cause confusion; it is not a translation of the Chukchi *Kilvêi*, and it implies that the antlers are the central element, which is not the case. What is central is what the antlers symbolize, which is the birth of calves, since the antlers are shed when the females give birth. As suggested to me in the field, the name *Kilvêi* may derive from the term *killil* (umbilical cord), which would point also to the festival’s focus on birth, and not on the antlers themselves (*rynnylgyn*, plural *rynnyt*, antlers or teeth).

Although linked to reindeer herding, *Kilvêi* was also conducted in the past by Chukchi hunters and Siberian Eskimos who owned reindeer (Kuznetsova 1957, 300, 325; Bogoraz 1975 [1904-1909], 406; Vdovin 1977, 161–2). This aspect probably plays a role in the fact that, in the urban context, people from different backgrounds can identify with this particular ritual.

*Kilvêi* lasts one day, mostly devoted to the cooking of ritual dishes. I attended it in the brigade where I spent most of my tundra fieldwork and where I could see almost the entire ritual cycle. That year, there were only two *iaranga* on the encampment. (The other three were being rested, following the principle of rotation that is applied in this region during cold seasons.)

DESCRIPTION OF THE *KILVÊI* RITUAL, AMGUEMA TUNDRA, 5 MAY, 1998

On the day of the ritual, everyone gets up a little earlier than usual, around 7am (it can vary from one house to another). Upon awakening, the mistress of the house of each *iaranga* lights the tent's fire using anthropomorphic fireboards. The fire is kept burning, so that the dishes to be consumed later can be prepared on it throughout the morning, a task that falls essentially to the women. After lighting the fire, much of the morning is devoted to melting enough snow or ice for cooking and for the tea that will be drunk throughout the day.

As already mentioned, at *Kilvêi* the female reindeer and their fertility are at the center of the ritual. This is why meat from a female reindeer plays a central role. The mistress of the house boils the soft parts of the thighs, breast (*maso*), and udder (with the teats intact) of a female reindeer that had been slaughtered earlier at either the winter or autumn festival *ņênrir'un* (it varies with each family). The meat from this female reindeer is consumed over the course of the winter and its bones are gathered up by the mistress and put into a sack after being completely gnawed and scraped clean. At *Kilvêi*, these bones are brought out and crushed up with the bones of stillborn calves and those that died within days of their birth (which have also already been eaten). This is done in a big bowl made of walrus skin (*taqananj*), with the aid of a heavy hammer (*rypênyj*) on a stone (*êlgykvyn*). The crushed bones are then boiled in a big pot with water from melted snow or ice. They end up constituting a sort of white butter-like fat, which at Amguema is called *ypalgyn* or *taliapalgyn*.

On a tray (*qêmênyj*), the mistress puts a green mash (*vytrylqyril -m / vytsilqytsil -f*), preserved in a plastic bag so it remains very moist, that is prepared from the contents of the stomach of the young reindeer slaughtered at the autumn festival (*rilqyril -m, tsilqytsil -f*) along with plants (buckwheat and arctic riverbeauty) gathered and cooked in July. To this she adds blood that has been collected earlier and preserved in one section of an intestine, and then mixes everything together.

Ritual objects – anthropomorphic fireboards and string (*taijkyvyt*) – are set down around the fire to lie in wait. The ritual, properly speaking, cannot begin until the herders guarding the herd have returned to the encampment. The men of each *iaranga* go looking for wood especially for the festival. Before carrying away the branches, they leave a small piece of fat at the place where they collect the wood.

As is the case for all the festivals of the season, orientation is strictly codified. At *Kilvêi*, the ritual takes place behind the *iaranga*. All movements during this ritual are regulated in the direction of the sun. To prepare the

ritual site, the mistress sweeps some snow, using the *vêgryl*, a sort of shovel made from the central, flat antler of an adult male reindeer, which is tied to a stick of wood. The men, for their part, interlock reindeer antlers and willow branches and build them into a pile or mound (called *tynytvan*, *tyn / ryn*, antlers, *-vak / -tvak*, to be, *-n(v)* indicating the place). Then the mistress places on top of it the ritual objects (fireboards, strings *taijykyvt*), personal objects belonging to members of the house (such as fur hats), as well as the skins and bodies of young dead reindeer only recently brought back from the herd.



*Kilvêi*. Building the mound of branches and reindeer antlers. Amguema 1998.  
photo: V. Vaté

Inside the inner tent (*ëroyy*),<sup>17</sup> the mistress finely minces the meat that will be given as an offering and shares out the dishes of food in small ritual cups. Dressed in her ritual clothes (*kêmliliun*), the mistress then removes some embers from the interior of her *iaranga* and puts them on a tray with some small ritual “cups” (*kojnyqagtê*), in which she puts a little of each dish: green mash (*vytrêlqyrêl -m / vytsêlqytsêl -f*), fat (*ypalgyn*), and finely minced meat. Always respecting the rules of movement, she then carries the tray out behind the *iaranga* to the ritual site, where the rest of the people of the encampment are waiting. There she lights a small fire close to the mound (*tynytvan*), using the embers collected from inside. The mistress gives the prepared cups of food to the herders and the young boys of her home, so that they can make of it a gift to the spirits. They walk around to the front of the *iaranga* and offer some food in the direction the *iaranga* faces (in

Amguema, the *iaranga* faces east, see footnote 13). Then, they walk around the *iaranga* again, scrupulously respecting the rules of movement, until they arrive back at the northern side of the *iaranga* (in the Amguema case). There they make another ritual offering of food. As with each ritual situation, they perform this offering while squatting, with their heads covered by their fur hats, and accompanied by the item most revealing of their status and identity as herders, namely, the lasso.

The mistress feeds the outdoor fire with a little bit of each dish. She also feeds the mound (*tynytvan*), the skins and the bodies of the young dead reindeer and the ritual objects. She throws a bit of the mash (*vytrêlqyril*), and some of the pieces of meat and butter-like fat (*ypalgyn*), in their direction.



Ritual dishes at the *Kilvêi* festival. Amguema 1998.

photo: V. Vaté

The herders of the *iaranga* also take some of these offerings and distribute them in all directions, including on the mound (*tynytvan*), and the ritual objects. According to Vdovin (1977, 161), the green mash is offered so that the reindeer always have enough to eat and so that the following year the young reindeer will not die; the butter is offered so that the reindeer will be fat.

Next, the mistress, positioned between the *tynytvan* and the *iaranga*, distributes a piece of boiled meat covered with fat (*ypalgyn*), to each of the invited guests, who are situated just beyond the mound (*tynytvan*). This gift, given to the invited guests, is called *ysvêkêtgyrgyn* (Kuznetsova 1957, 307), which comes from *ysvêk*, designating a young female reindeer. The

portion is to be consumed immediately. It is essential that everyone receive a piece. Then everyone eats a bit of each of the dishes present. When finished, the mistress takes the dishes back inside. After that, the mound is from that moment overturned by the herders toward the *iaranga*. Then in one of the *iaranga* they call out in Chukchi “*plytkug*”; “It’s finished,” and in the other in Russian, “*pognali*,” “We have rounded them up,” which in this context refers to the reindeer but also to the spirits in proximity to them. One herder is explicitly designated to pretend to round up the symbolic herd, which he does, shouting as if he were with the herd. The overturned mound of mixed antlers and branches is left in place. Some of the food is put aside for the herders, who must perform an offering when they arrive at the herd of female reindeer.

The women take off their ritual clothing and prepare the ritual commemorating the deceased (*iinêniiiryk*).<sup>18</sup> This latter ritual reunites all the *iaranga* of the encampment. Each home gathers, in a sack made of seal skin, a collection of dishes (intestines (*nanov’e*), fat (*ypalgyn*), boiled meat, etc.) and objects (tea, matches, cigarettes, etc.) to be given as offerings. Using the snow beater (*tivisgyn*),<sup>19</sup> the snow is cleared from the ground between the two *iaranga* in the area between the two mounds (*tynyvtvan*). Each person takes his or her place, squatting or kneeling. Each one places on the cleared ground a little piece of each thing that has been brought, and everyone eats together again, sharing this symbolic meal with the deceased. The remaining dishes and objects are taken away by someone other than those who made the offerings. In this way, the offering allows for the reaffirmation of relationships on many levels: with the spirits, with the deceased, and among the living. The mistress slips a blade of grass down the collar of the clothing of each member of her home, and of the guests residing at her place, to protect them from the deceased spirits. Then all return to the *iaranga*.

From that point on, movements are no longer regulated. Everyone continues to eat together inside, discussing various things over tea. The herders return to the herd of females to resume their watch over the young reindeer and their mothers. The small cups used for the ritual are rinsed and put back in place. The mistress makes a small lasso of grass, which is attached to the back of the fireboards. She ties a dog to the rear of the *iaranga* on the ritual site so that the dog can eat and clean up what is left from the ritual.<sup>20</sup>

### **An example of Urban Ritual: the *Kilvêi* of the town**

I attended this festival in the village of Tavaivaam. Although it took place in a village, I call this festival “urban” for two main reasons: it brought together a significant proportion of indigenous city dwellers; and Tavaivaam is so

close to Anadyr, the capital of Chukotka, that it is a kind of extension of the town. (It was officially annexed by the city in May 1994, Gray 2005, 135.)

In contrast to the city, the inhabitants of Tavaivaam are mainly indigenous people.<sup>21</sup> Although it remains a separate unit, as also emphasized by Gray (1998, 48), Tavaivaam is different from other villages located farther from a big city. The inhabitants of Tavaivaam have suffered from this proximity to Anadyr. Probably more than in other places, they have faced the consequences of sedentarization and of the prohibition against religious practices. Although reindeer herding was still practiced until fairly recently, it had completely disappeared by the end of the 1990s: there are no reindeer left in Tavaivaam.<sup>22</sup> Those who used to live in the tundra have had to become fishermen, but, culturally, fishing is valued as a supplementary means of subsistence, not as the primary source of food.

Anyone who wanted to could attend the festival, since it was in the open air, but the majority of the participants were of indigenous origin. People both from Tavaivaam and from Anadyr took part in the ritual.

#### DESCRIPTION OF THE *KILVĚT* IN TAVAIVAAM, 24 MAY 1998 AND 22 MAY 1999

The festival takes place in the central plaza of the village. A *iaranga* is erected on the village site. It has been bought from the herders of Kanchalan<sup>23</sup> by the House of Culture in Tavaivaam specifically to be used in festivals. This *iaranga* consists only of the wooden frame covered with a *rêtêm*, a roof of reindeer skin. There is no inner tent. Contrary to the usual practice, the fur of the reindeer-skin roof has not been cut. This fact is pointed out to me by elders and by the Chukchis originating from the tundra, who are displeased with it. Other people don't seem to notice anything and simply the presence of a *iaranga* is reason enough to rejoice.

The positioning of the *iaranga* is largely defined according to pragmatic considerations of staging: the *iaranga* is placed to one side of the plaza, thereby leaving a large open space for the visitors and spectators, and the door of the *iaranga* opens out onto this area in the direction of the visitors. The arrangement is not based on the principles of orientation that are applied in the tundra. No rules of movement are respected.

Neither is there a fire inside. The food is prepared over a fire lit outside of the *iaranga* in the meeting area. After a certain time, some visitors light a fire inside the *iaranga* to warm themselves up. No fireboard is used to light either of these two fires.

Nevertheless, reproductions of ritual objects are used. These are objects that belong to the N. family, the father of which directs an ensemble called *êmnun* (tundra) in the village of Tavaivaam.<sup>24</sup> During these performances,

he customarily stages ritual offerings to the spirits, in which he and members of his group throw imaginary food in all directions to the spirits. However, at *Kilvêi*, the ritual objects are fed with some meat by the N. family. The objects are laid down beside the *iaranga*. (Recall that during the *Kilvêi* in the tundra they are deposited near the mound of wood and antlers.)



*iaranga* at the *Kilvêi* festival in Tavaivaam, 1999.

photo: V. Vaté

Those who actively participate in the ritual are dressed in Chukchi clothing, whether or not it is a ritual costume. At festivals, they usually wear a cloth cover-all (*vytysgyn*, in Chukchi; *kamleika* in Russian) to protect their fur garments from snow and humidity. These *kamleiki* are made of very colorful cloth, often decorated with floral patterns. This has come to be the typical outfit used to express ethnic identity in an “urban” context, where everyone tries to dress up, even if only slightly, in the “Chukchi way.”

One of the most representative element of *Kilvêi*, as we have seen, is the construction of a mound (*tynytvan*), in which are intertwined reindeer antlers and shrub wood. The mound remains a central feature in this urban version, differing only in a few details. For example, most likely the reindeer antlers do not come from female reindeer that have just given birth, because there may well be no suitable reindeer nearby. The same goes for the skin and bodies of young dead reindeer, which are put on the *tynytvan*: In the tundra, they have only recently been brought back from the herd; here the skin is clean and already tanned. The mound itself is also of much more modest size. Moreover, rather than placing it behind the *iaranga*, as in the tundra, it is located out in full view in the center of the

meeting area. Two elders from the retirement house, a man and a woman, feed the *tynytvan*.

Whereas the tundra *Kilvêi* requires the preparation of various dishes, in the village it involves the sharing out of meat only. Yet, as the opportunity to eat reindeer meat in urban life is rare (and entirely dependent on infrequent deliveries), the very presence of reindeer meat is enough to confer a festive character on the ritual, particularly for the elders. But there is no selection of particular pieces of the animal, as there is at the *Kilvêi* in the tundra, when the breast of the female reindeer is eaten.

Entirely new elements have been introduced to this ritual. One of them is the omnipresence of a video camera from the local television station. Although the camera does not really take part in the ritual as such, it has nevertheless become an indispensable appurtenance for all the festivities.<sup>25</sup> The camera is always kept in close to the action, regardless of the spectators and even of the unfolding of the ritual itself. In this way, it ends up occupying a central position in the festival. Whereas movements and occupation of space in the tundra ritual are regulated, the unrestricted movement of the cameraman clearly reveals a whole new attitude toward ritual.



The mount (*tynytvan*) at the *Kilvêi* festival in Tavaivaam, 1999. photo: V. Vaté

Finally, the festival concludes with folk dances interpreted by the “national college” (*natsional’nyi kolledzh*), which educates young aboriginals in the activities of “culture” (*kul’tura*, e.g. singing, dance, sculpting ivory) and / or by the professional Eskimo ensemble, *Atasikun*.



**Comparison of the two rituals: keeping reindeer and rebuilding identity**

Having presented the process of the two rituals, I now want to examine how they use the same symbols to construct different meanings, and how they are performed in part with different objectives.

*Two different spaces*

The “country” *Kilvêi* is closely tied to the life of the tundra. If herders are absent from the tundra at the time of the performance of a ritual, they either don’t do it at all, or they try to “catch up” at the next ritual. I saw the elder of one brigade adding some elements to *Pêšvak*, and I was told this was because she hadn’t been able to carry out *Pêgytti*, as she had spent the winter in the village. Herders do not conduct rituals in the village. So introducing a herding festival into this context constitutes a different approach to ritual. The city *Kilvêi* brings symbolic elements from the tundra festival into the urban context, which testifies to a wish to reestablish a link with the tundra and reindeer. As emphasized by Gray (2005, 134), “[...] central to the identity of Tavaivaam villagers [...] was the tundra itself, where the reindeer had grazed.”

*Different conceptions of ritual time*

In the urban ritual, the idea of a cycle has disappeared, and with it also the idea of passing from an everyday life context to a ritual one. The objects utilized are not ritually cleansed, the ritual site is not expressly tidied up, the wood and the water are not specially fetched, etc. In addition, the rules of ritual movement and orientation have been completely abandoned in the urban *Kilvêi*.

*Different connections to discourse and practice*

Following Turner (1995 [1969]), one would be encouraged to look in the tundra for people able to explain the rich symbolism elaborated during herding rituals; then one could draw comparisons with the discourse developed in the urban context. However, in the tundra, rituals are performed in silence, and people in the tundra generally do not speak about the meaning of the ritual and its symbols. In the urban context, on the other hand, members of the indigenous intelligentsia have developed an elaborate discourse about the meaning of, and the proper way to conduct, the rituals. They explain the rituals in detail, perhaps even over-elaborating the symbolism in some cases. Where there are gaps in their knowledge, they fill them with information taken from classic ethnographic sources such as Bogoraz, or from more esoteric neo-shamanic approaches like Michael

Harner's, whose books have been translated into Russian. Somewhat paradoxically, their discourse tends to focus on how rituals in the tundra *should* be, and not on how the urban rituals they are now organizing in fact *are*.

*Different meanings for the same symbols*

Some of the same elements are used in both the "country" *Kilvêi* and in the "city" *Kilvêi*, but in different ways. We might first consider the *iaranga*, which in the tundra ritual represents the relationships among the family, the ritual objects and the reindeer. In the city, the *iaranga* seems to be just part of the setting, giving the impression to the audience that we are in an encampment. It is present at most festivals in the city and, as such, has become a generic symbol of the tundra and of the herding way of life.

A central element of the *Kilvêi* is the *tynytvan*, the mound of wood and antlers. In the city, the reindeer antler is less a reference to the female reindeer's fertility than it is to the reindeer-herding way of life. The ritual itself, therefore, is aimed less at ensuring the health and reproduction of an actual herd and more at generating an idealized image of a way of life. This is partial confirmation that what is important in this festival is not so much what the objects actually are but what they invoke. As Kreinath *et al.* mention, "With the innovation of rituals, the group performing the ritual relates itself to its tradition by explicitly responding to the emergence of current demands" (2004, 2).

The ritual objects that represent the symbolic relationships among the family, the *iaranga*, the fire, the reindeer and the ancestors constitute another central element of tundra rituals. In the city, even though one has recourse to certain kinds of ritual objects, what counts is more their presence than the symbolic linkages (which in this case are nonexistent) between the ritual objects and the *iaranga*. Where in the tundra rituals certain objects clearly belong to the family performing the ritual, here in the urban context they acquire a sort of collective identity. One family feeds ritual objects on behalf of the entire audience. They have become objects belonging to all urban Chukchis, or to the indigenous people in general who may be present at the festival (including Eskimos, Chuvantsy, Even, etc.) and who may in a certain way identify with the festival.

Most urban festivities include dances, songs and games. This is a carry-over from Soviet times, when official state policy promoted Sovietized ritualization using cultural elements that had been emptied of their symbolic content, in accordance with Stalin's famous motto, "National in form, socialist in content" (Hamayon 1990, 59). Native songs, dances and games were easily manipulated to fill that role. As a result, Chukchi

life was seen by some as “nothing but songs and dances,” as a woman of Russian origin working at the Anadyr House of Culture once said to me. Whereas the reality of the tundra has nothing of a musical comedy to it, it is undeniable that dances, songs, and “ritual games” such as wrestling and races (see Hamayon, 1999-2000) used to play an important role in the tundra rituals (Vaté 2003, 298–305). Today, however, it is interesting to observe that, in contrast to the omnipresence of dances in the urban festivities, there is hardly any dancing at ritual times in the tundra. I have been told that, nowadays, dances are performed only during the ritual sequence called *myjik*, which is carried out once every two or three years either after *ÿênrir*’un or *Kilvêi*. (Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to attend it.) It would appear that, having been imported into the urban sphere, dances and games have lost some of their significance in the tundra and in the rituals from which they originated.

#### *Expression of social cohesion at different scales*

Both versions of the *Kilvêi* are intended to reaffirm the links existing within the community, but they tend to do so in a different manner and at different scales. In the tundra, herding rituals in a single encampment are performed simultaneously but individually in each tent, thereby reaffirming social cohesion at the level of both the family and the encampment, which are the principal units of social organization. Additionally, by welcoming people from neighboring settlements, be they herders, sea-mammal hunters or villagers, these rituals play a role in maintaining social cohesion within the society in a broader sense.

In the city, the family no longer plays a central role in the ritual, as it does in the tundra. However, elders from the retirement home (*dom invalidov*) assume a leading role associated with the ritual, much as they do in Chukchi herding society. In this way, the elders act as symbolic parents for the entire urban community, performing the offering with children at their sides and showing them how to proceed. Thus relationships between the older and younger members of the community, disrupted by urban life, can be restored through the ritual – even if only temporarily.

In the city, social relationships are reasserted mostly at the level of the indigenous community that gathers for the event. The indigenous community represents itself as united, at least for a short time. We can thus say that the affirmation of familial unity, or of the unity of the encampment, is no longer central to this revivalism. Rather, the key element is the expression of a collective Chukchi – or even more generally, a collective indigenous – identity, through the restoration of an emblematic

link to the tundra and the herding life. Whether it is Chukchi dances or Eskimo dances that are performed, all gather together and are able to identify with the ritual. The symbols of herding thus become in this context a vehicle affirming indigenous identity. Even for those who live in town and are engaged in presumably “modern” activities, what remains in the final instance is the symbolic idea of a relationship to the tundra which, even though far removed from its context and reified, is to be found at the heart of the contemporary construction of Chukchi identity.

## Notes

- 1 According to the 2002 Census ([www.perepis2002.ru](http://www.perepis2002.ru)), Chukchis number approximately 15,800, living mostly in Chukotka (12,600), Kamchatka (1500) and Yakutia (600).
- 2 This article has been developed on the basis of two previous presentations. The first was a lecture that I gave jointly with Alexandra Lavrillier at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in 2001-2002. That presentation aimed to compare the revival of two different rituals, the *Kilvêi* and the Evenki *Ikênipkê* (Lavrillier 2003; see also Lavrillier and Vaté, 2003). The second was a paper given at the Réseau Asie conference held in Paris in September 2003 “*Kilvej* des villes, *Kilvej* de la toundra: comparaison de la fête du printemps en milieu rural et urbain chez les Tchouktches (Arctique sibérien),” Actes du premier congrès du Réseau Asie (24 et 25 septembre 2003), CD-ROM.
- 3 This fieldwork was made possible through a scholarship from the Ministry of Research and Higher Education in France and a grant from the French Institute for Polar Research and Technologies (IFRTP, also called IPEV). Here I also want to thank the Fyssen Foundation (France) and the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (Halle, Germany) for their support. I am indebted as well to Irina Grigorievna Gyrgolnaut for much of my information on the construction of Chukchi terms, and I must also thank Charles Weinstein and Tokusu Kurebito for some stimulating discussions and information on that issue. I am especially grateful to those who helped me in Chukotka, and particularly to the people of Amguema. Finally, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Brian Donahoe for the time he spent editing a first draft of this article.
- 4 I have used the transliteration system of the Library of Congress both for Russian and Chukchi languages, with some adaptations. For Chukchi words I use *ê* to represent *ə*, and *s* to represent *ʃ* (which is closer to the actual pronunciation, although some variations exist according to the speakers), *q* for *k'* (back velar) and *ŋ* for *h'* (velar nasal, as in “singing”). Furthermore, the Chukchi language contains specificities of pronunciations that distinguish female speech from male speech. The most common is the existence of a gradation between *r* (in men’s speech) and *s* or *ts* (in female speech), for instance: *rygryg -m*, *sygsyg -f*, hair. In the text, I distinguish these variants by placing an *-m* (male) speech or *-f* (female) after the words (for information about female speech, see Dunn 2000).
- 5 *Lyg-* is a prefix that gives the term to which it refers a special meaning, sometimes translated as “*par excellence*,” but also regarded by some people as meaning “something that is really Chukchi”. This prefix is found in the self-designation

- of the Chukchis, *Lyg'oravêtl'at*. It is also present in several categories of things, such as in foods. For example: *ynnên*, a fish, *lygnên*, a salmon, or *oonylgyn*, a berry, or *lygoonylgyn*, mountain crowberry (*Empetrum nigrum*), thus describing foods that play an important role in everyday life.
- 6 Following the argument of some people that *Pêgytti* is the "Chukchi New year's festival," I decided to present the ritual cycle as beginning with the winter festival. However, the presentation could also follow the reindeer biological cycle and begin with birth at the spring festival. According to Bogoraz (1975 [1904-1909], 372) and Kuznetsova (1957, 264), the cycle starts with *hênrir'un*, the main festival of the cycle. The presentation and the analysis of these rituals have constituted the heart of my thesis (Vaté 2003).
  - 7 Bogoraz (1975 [1904-1909], 372) referred to this festival as *vylygyaanmatgyrgyn*, from *vylyg* – thin hair and *qaat* – reindeer.
  - 8 In Kanchalan, this ritual is called *tyrkyl'yqaanmatgyrgyn*, the festival of the three-year old male reindeer (*tyrkyl'yn*).
  - 9 I have chosen to use the Russian term in transliteration since it is easier to read. The Chukchi term is *iaragy*.
  - 10 The translations are mine.
  - 11 Valentina Gorbacheva, a paper presented on 22 May 2002 at a seminar entitled "Pratiques rituelles contemporaines en Sibérie," EPHE, 5<sup>th</sup> Section, organized by A. Lavrillier and myself (Lavrillier and Vaté 2003).
  - 12 This festival seems to be the Koryak equivalent of *hênrir'un*.
  - 13 In an article to be published in the *Etudes Mongoles, Sibériennes, Centrasiatiques et Tibétaines (EMSCAT)*, I show that the use of Western terminology of orientation raises difficulties. As I present in detail, although the space terminology in the Amguema and Kanchalan tundra is similar, the tents are not positioned the same in terms of Western orientation. To make the reading easier, I use the Western terminology here, with a reminder to the reader that it applies specifically to the Amguema context.
  - 14 This theme is the subject of an article to be published in *Senri Ethnological Studies* 69, edited by K. Ikeya and E. Fratkin.
  - 15 Although it is not possible to definitively assert a link between these two terms, among the three linguists whom I asked the question, two – namely T. Kurebito, from Japan and I. Gyrgolnaut, from Chukotka – did not reject this possibility. This homophony also exists in Koryak : *iaiana* (house, tent) / *iaiai* (the drum) (Zhukova 1967, 640).
  - 16 For the Chukchi festival, mainly: Bogoraz (1975 [1904-1909], 377–8), Kuznetsova (1957, 300–8), Takakava (1990, 10–2), Gurvich (1990). For the Koryak version, mainly: Jochelson (1908, 87), Gurvich (1962), Irimoto (2004, 190–213) and Gorbacheva. V. Gorbacheva wrote her dissertation on the issue of rituals among the Koryaks. To the best of my knowledge, it is still unavailable (Gorbacheva, 1985), but she has published several articles on this issue (1984, 1993). A dissertation just defended by P. Plattet at the University of Neuchâtel in April 2005 also deals with the issue of rituals in North-Kamchatka.
  - 17 The *iaranga* is a dome-shaped tent, approximately seven meters in diameter, made by stretching a cover of reindeer hide over a wooden frame. It consists of two parts. The *êrogy* is a small inner tent (approximately two by two meters) built against the back wall of the *iaranga*. It is just large enough for approximately five people to sleep in, and is well sealed to retain body heat and the heat

of candles (in the past oil lamps were used). The outer part of the iaranga, the *sottagyn* (literally “what is beyond the pillow,” the *sotsot*), is the larger, unheated part of the *iaranga*, where many everyday activities occur (e.g., cooking, softening hides, etc.).

- 18 The verb *iinēniiryk* means “remember the ancestors and send thoughts in their direction,” and “walk against the wind” (Vdovin 1977, 136).
- 19 The *tivisgyn* functions to close the way to spirits and to the deceased (Vaté 1995, 107–8), but it seems that in some rituals it can also have the function of opening the way to them. This is an element that I encountered also among the sea-mammal hunters (Vaté 2003, 310).
- 20 Interestingly, before the offerings, dogs are forbidden even to sniff from afar any ritual food.
- 21 According to Gray (2005, 131), in the 1990s about 8.5 percent of the inhabitants of Anadyr were indigenous, while the figure was 78 percent in Tavaivaam.
- 22 On the history of Tavaivaam’s *sovkhos*, see Gray (2005, 133–4).
- 23 The second closest village to Anadyr, located around 80 kilometers away.
- 24 N. is one of those trying to revive indigenous culture in Anadyr. Around 50 years of age, only late in life did he become interested in his culture. This was when he was about 40, around the time his father died. He learned a lot from his mother, knowledge that he complemented by conducting more in-depth investigations among elders of the village of Tavaivaam, where he originates. He spends his time with children in school teaching them Chukchi dances and songs. But, like most of those active in the domain of indigenous culture, he has not succeeded in passing on his knowledge of the Chukchi language and culture to his own children, who grew up with him in Anadyr. This situation illustrates well the paradox in which the city dwellers of his generation find themselves.
- 25 Making the same observation, Patty Gray recounts how the crew from the local television station left rudely before the end of a festival at the Tavaivaam House of Culture, having apparently captured enough footage for their needs. Because the television crew’s equipment had provided much of the lighting for the spectacle, their departure plunged the audience into a dim half-light (Gray 1998, 136).

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