

ALCOHOL AND HALLUCINOGENS IN THE LIFE OF SIBERIAN ABORIGINES

Based on the papers of the Second Kamchatka Expedition

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The Second Kamchatka, or Great Northern, Expedition (1733—1743), whose plan was developed by the Senate and Admiralteistv-Collegia of St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences, was a large-scale exploratory journey designed to investigate Russian nature and population. Many of the valuable documents and manuscripts of this expedition — letters, travel journals, geographic descriptions, etc. — kept in archives have been published only recently or are yet being prepared for publication. “SCIENCE First Hand” has published a few articles dedicated to this academic project, including papers on the life and scholarly activities of G. F. Müller, J. G. Gmelin and G. W. Steller, who were members of this expedition. The December issue of SCIENCE First Hand (# 6 (12), 2006) featured documents of the Second Kamchatka Expedition dealing with the role of alcohol in the life of 18th century Russian Siberians. The present article dwells on the alcoholic habits of Siberian aborigines as well as on their consumption of hallucinogenic mushrooms and other narcotics producing euphoria and stupor.*

* The top level governmental body organized by Peter I in 1718, which was in charge of the Navy



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| 1. Yekaterinburg | 8. Surgut | 15. Irkutsk | 22. Okhotsk |
| 2. Tyumen | 9. Naryn | 16. Kiakhtinskaya sloboda | 23. Petropavlovsk |
| 3. Tobolsk | 10. Tomsk | 17. Chitinski ostrog | |
| 4. Tara | 11. Abakanski ostrog | 18. Nerchinsk | |
| 5. Omsk | 12. Krasnoyarsk | 19. Argunski ostrog | |
| 6. Semipalatinsk | 13. Yeniseisk | 20. Ilimsk | |
| 7. Berezov | 14. Mangasea | 21. Yakutsk | |



The Yakut sorceress
Drawing from the book:
The Peoples of Russia:
Album of Paintings,

What kind of relationship was established between the Russians and aborigines in the process of making Siberia part of the Russian Empire? Opinions differ: some investigators believe that Russian influence was peaceful and civilized; others argue that the Russians acted as colonizers: they murdered aborigines, ruined the indigenous culture and introduced the local population to nothing better than alcohol.

In the last decades, most scholars have agreed that it is inappropriate to assess in “black or white” terms either Siberia’s joining Russia or relations between the Russians and

Lower reaches of the Palan River, not far from the place where it flows into the Okhotsk Sea



Yakut chorons — wooden three-legged vessels with carved ornament — were used to drink kumis. St Petersburg, 1880

Kumis and araka

It is a well-known fact that cattle-breeders, especially the numerous Turkic and Mongolian peoples and Trans-Baikal Evenks, had known alcohol long before Siberia was joined to Russia. The light alcoholic drink used universally was kumis that contained 1–3% of alcohol and was made from fermented milk. The explorers noticed that when it was used in large amounts, it resulted in intoxication. Lindenau was the only one of them to hold the view that kumis produced a relaxing but not an intoxicating effect. “If you have too much of it, it makes you sick and sleepy but not drunk, as some people believe.”

In his *Description of the Siberian Peoples*, Müller described in detail the process of kumis preparation from mare’s milk. He remarked that “they sometimes made kumis from cow’s milk but it was less strong and tasted worse than that made from mare’s milk”. Frequently, the poor used cow’s milk because they did not have mare’s milk. Having analyzed data on kumis production by the Mongols contained in the notes left by the 13th c. traveler W. Rubrouck and having compared them with his own observations of South Siberian peoples, the scholar came to the conclusion that the technology had not virtually changed in the five centuries.

As a rule, those who made kumis also produced from it a strong alcoholic drink called milk vodka. The scholars disagreed only as far as the Yakuts were concerned: Gmelin referred them to the group of peoples who made vodka from kumis while Müller asserted the opposite. The latter described the technology of vodka production as follows: “Pagan Tatars, Kalmyks, Mongols, Nerchinsk and Bratsk Tungus on both sides of Baikal not only drink kumis but also make

vodka from it that they call *Araki*. They do this using a flat cast-iron cauldron that they cover with a wooden top with a tube through which vodka flows down into a wooden vessel put underneath.”

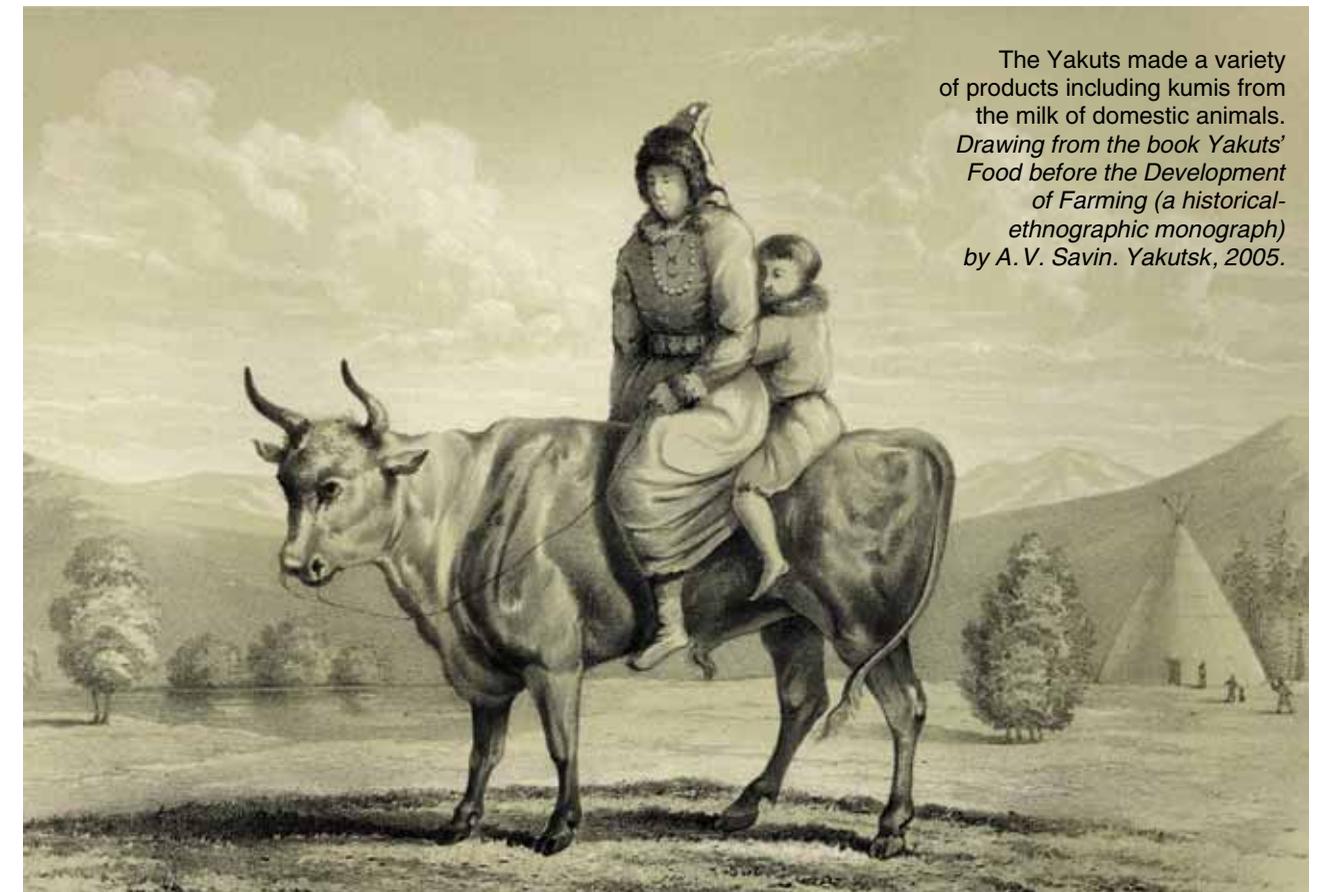
And this is what Müller thought about the quality of milk vodka: “This vodka is very weak, weaker than the ordinary, or bread, vodka; and it has a smell unpleasant to us. <...> The strength of milk vodka depends on the time of the year. Vodka made from the first spring milk is the best and the one made from winter milk is the worst. If kumis were distilled in the European way — using a refrigerating barrel, hermetically closed tubes and a narrow-neck vessel for vodka accumulation with a view to reducing evaporation — the vodka would be much stronger. I tried many times to explain to these peoples our way of making vodka but they would show no interest and would say that their ancestors had done it that way and they wouldn’t introduce anything new.”

Müller left a lot of notes about the quality of milk vodka and always came to the same conclusion that vodka from mare’s milk was worse than bread vodka but better than vodka made from cow’s milk. He noted that Siberian Tatars

“also make vodka from skipped cow’s milk but it is worse and it gives you a headache”. Gmelin dwelt on the same subject, but his view on the strength of vodka made from cow’s milk was different from Müller’s. The Nerchinsk Tungus interviewed by Gmelin stated that it was as strong as the one made from mare’s milk: “We satisfied ourselves that vodka distilled in our presence from cow’s milk was so strong that it could burn.” In other notes, though, the explorer maintained that “kumis made from mare’s milk contains more alcohol than that made from cow’s milk.”

According to the scholars, braga (home-brewed beer made from grain), was produced only by a few peoples of West Siberia, predominantly by those who were in close contact with the Russians. They made it from fermented millet and from barley or rye flour with hop. The volume of this production was never high.

Traditional alcoholic drinks, especially kumis, played an important role in pagan ritual practices of virtually all Siberian peoples. Not only kumis itself, but also the pot in which it was prepared and the cups from which it was drunk had a sacral significance. The most important holidays were usually held at the time when mass production



The Yakuts made a variety of products including kumis from the milk of domestic animals. Drawing from the book *Yakuts’ Food before the Development of Farming (a historical-ethnographic monograph)* by A. V. Savin. Yakutsk, 2005.

aborigines — these had many aspects and were sometimes of a conflicting nature. This is also true of spreading alcoholic drinks among the indigenous population. To unearth the truth, we can resort to documented sources. In addition, we should not forget that scholarly papers, expedition materials, personal testimony and opinions left by the explorers who traveled

through Siberia in the past centuries can prove valuable. In this article, we will turn to the documents created by the members of the academic detachment of the Second Kamchatka (Great Northern) Expedition of 1733–1743: academicians G. F. Müller and J. G. Gmelin, adjunct G. W. Steller, student S. P. Krashennikov and interpreter Ya. I. Lindenau.



Tundra near the village of Lesnaya, Tigil region, Koryak Autonomous Okrug

In Siberia, they have long produced kumis both from mare's and cow's milk. The photo shows a Buriat cow and a Siberian horse of the Kuznetsky breed



In July-August 2006, the Institute of Philology, Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, organized another expedition to Kamchatka. Two years earlier, the Olyutor region of Koryakia had been investigated. This time the expedition focused on the western coast: the Tigil region of the Koryak Autonomous Okrug and Bystrinsky region of the Kamchatka oblast. Members of the expedition managed to gather varied evidence of the Koryak folklore and traditional culture — fairy tales, personal songs, myths — and made a lot of precious photos and videos that give a good idea about traditional methods of economy, dwellings, and clothes of this people.

of kumis started: in spring and in early summer. Describing the most important Yakut festival called Isiakh, during which kumis was sacrificed to the most respected gods and spirits, Müller wrote: "The Yakuts collect the first milk until all the mares foal, ferment it and make kumis for the Isiakh. <...> All kumis prepared is drunk during



Ritual kumis cups made of wood (chorons) are an indispensable attribute of the Isiakh festival. During the Isiakh festival, the chorons filled with the first kumis symbolized the center of the Universe — the source of heavenly creative energy.



The tambourine is more than just a musical instrument — it is an indispensable attribute of a shaman. Many Koryak families have a tambourine: its tapping accompanies personal songs and dances. Nobody but the shaman and his assistants are allowed to touch the shaman's tambourine because this instrument is believed to be fatal.

the Isiakh.” And only some time later, according to the scholar, kumis could be used just as an ordinary drink.

Müller gives similar evidence on Turks living in the Krasnoyarsk uyezd (district, a unit that makes part of a province): “*Tun*, or *Ürüß*, is the Tatar name of the sacrifice prepared from the first kumis and bestowed upon their gods and spirits in spring. When in

spring they separate foals from mares and begin to milk the mares, for the first three days the milk is collected into *Kögör* and fermented to produce kumis. Early in the morning on the fourth day, before the sunrise, the men of the family <...> take a small vessel filled with kumis, a cup and a spoon and go some distance away from the yurt, into the open field. There they wait for the sun to show above the horizon. As soon as they can see it, they pour kumis into the cup; head of the family takes the spoon and sprinkles the milk from the cup first in the direction of the rising sun and then walks in a circle imitating the sun's movement, sprinkling the milk in all directions. If it is an old and experienced person, he calls by name all the gods and spirits of the Earth — those of various rivers and streams, lakes, mountains and cliffs. <...> If there is a shaman nearby, he can be invited to do the sacrifice. After this ritual, they go back to their yurts and help themselves to the first kumis. Women, however, must not have it on that day; they are only allowed to drink kumis the day after. <...> And on the third day, they begin to distill wine from kumis.”

Müller observed similar practices with the Buryats, who sacrificed milk vodka, apart from kumis. “The Bratsk Buryats sacrifice cattle to devils and the dead and call this ritual *Kirik*. In spring, similarly to the Yakuts, they sacrifice wine and kumis to gods and devils. This ceremony is referred to as *Sazogö*. <...> Prior to having a drink, they always sprinkle a little of wine and kumis into the fire. <...> During the *Kirik* ritual, they also sacrifice wine, kumis and *Tarak* (fermented milk prepared from boiled cow's milk), sprinkling it upwards.” The Turkic peoples of Siberia are known to have had the cult of the horse. When horses (stallions, as a rule) were sacrificed to gods, they were sprinkled with kumis.

On rare occasions (mostly in West Siberia), they used braga, or bread vodka, as sacrifice. In September 1734,



Teleuts: a shaman's ritual. Drawing from the book *The Peoples of Russia: Album of Paintings St Petersburg, 1880*

Krasheninnikov witnessed a sacrificing ceremony observed by the Tuliber Tatars of the Kuznetsk uyezd: “Every year, under those birch trees the Tatars sacrifice to their god: having brewed a huge pot of braga, they take it to the birch trees, pour them with it, and drink it, and worship their god this way.”

«...men and women and young children are always drunk»

Among 18th century aborigines routine alcoholism occurred rarely — it only concerned those individuals who had broken off from their relatives and moved to towns and ostrogs (fortresses), where they worked for the Russians. The scholars believed that the exception was rich cattle-breeders inhabiting the southern part of East Siberia, predominantly the Buryats. Their alcoholic addiction, however, was seasonal and took place only in summer, when a lot of kumis and milk vodka was made. According to Müller, the Buryat name of the second summer month (*Chani-chara*) is directly linked to this fact: “The word *Chani* means “wild” because at this time of the year the

Buryats are constantly drunk.” Krasheninnikov agrees with his colleague and writes that “in summer time, the Bratsk Tatars (Buryats) — men and women and young children — are always drunk, like other Tatars, because they distill wine from mare's milk.”

Aborigines could buy Russian bread vodka, or “wine”, only during their rare visits to towns and ostrogs, and at the time when the yasak (tribute) was collected. Representatives of the Russian authorities treated them with vodka as a sort of reward for loyalty and timely payment of the yasak. For the most part, only family heads were considered worthy of such a reward, but in some uyezds all yasak payers were treated with Russian vodka. Krasheninnikov observed this practice with the Turks of the Krasnoyarsk uyezd, called Kachintsi: “Some pay one sable as the yasak, and others pay two, three, or even six sables, which is the largest number. <...> In return, they are treated with as many cups of wine as they have given sables: if you have given one sable, you will get one cup; and so on, up to six cups for six sables.”

Vodka in large volumes was a kind of salary paid to representatives of the noblest aboriginal clans. Accord-



When the shaman communicates with the spiritual world, a spirit “stays within him” and the shaman should treat him to make the spirit happy. The spirit may ask for a meal, a drink, or a smoke, or it may want to hear a song: who knows what may “come to its head” — and you dare not fulfil any of its wishes! The photo shows the shaman woman who has never smoked in her natural life, but the person whose spirit is now inside her felt like having a smoke because he was a heavy smoker when alive. So she has to do as he pleases....

ing to Müller, titled grandsons and great-grandsons of the famous prince Gantimur, who went over to the Russian territory from China, together with the Tungus under his command, were granted 5 to 20 buckets of vodka a year as part of their salary. From 1734, on the complaint submitted by the Nerchinsk voevoda (governor of a province in ancient Russia) to the effect that the Gantimurov princes “do not serve but spend all their time carousing”, these vodka payments were suspended. Müller, who knew the princes well, noted that one of them was indeed addicted to drinking. “But can you find many people in Nerchinsk and all over East Siberia to whom this characteristic does not apply?” added the scholar with a note of sarcasm. “If every person guilty of

this sin is deprived of the salary, there will be few people left on the payroll.” The true reason for voevoda’s dissatisfaction, according to Müller, was that the Gantimurovy stopped bribing him under the pretext of having to obey the anti-bribing decrees.

It was banned to sell vodka in locations where indigenous population lived, and no mass violations of this law in the 17th-18th centuries were recorded. The practice of trading vodka for furs between the state and individuals was not widespread either. On the other hand, the Senate’s order handed over to W. Bering sent to the Second Kamchatka expedition reads: “In Kamchatka, wine shall be made from the sweet grass growing there and sold at moderate prices. The population should be supervised not to drink themselves to death for the lack of habit.” In all likelihood, not only the Russians but the Itelmen too were to be put under “supervision”, because of the same decree orders to trade vodka for furs supplied by Kamchatka inhabitants.

By the time Steller was staying in Kamchatka (1740–1744), the Itelmen had already got used to these peculiar “fruits of civilization” introduced to them only quarter of a century before. “Many Itelmen are very fond of vodka and, when they come to Russian ostrogs, they drink it till they feel no pain and ruin themselves in this way. Others do not enjoy drinking, and do it only to look like Cossacks, as they

believe that this intoxication is a sign of culture of the latter. When inebriated, they do their best to imitate everything they have seen drunken Cossacks do, for example, pay visits to everybody, even to the people they are bound to respect, and boast to them in a funny manner, ‘I’m drunk, don’t be cross with me...I have a Russian nature now...I’m Russian, you see...’ and other silly things like these. We can thus see what these poor and kind people need: enlightenment, good examples and sensibility.” Krasheninnikov’s notes contain similar evidence.

It would be false to maintain, though, that the drunkenness described by the explorers was spread wherever the indigenous population was in close contact with the Russians. For instance, the Tatars of the Turinsk uyezd, who were baptized massively in the first quarter of the 18th century and were surrounded by numerous

Russian towns, lived next to one of the busiest routes from the European part of Russia to Siberia but remained virtually untouched by the evil of drunkenness.

What do you eat fly-agaric with?

For most peoples inhabiting the taiga area and forest tundra and not involved in dairy cattle breeding, fly-agarics — hallucinogenic mushrooms — were a peculiar replacement of alcohol. Back in the ancient times, fly-agarics must have been very popular throughout the northern part of the Eurasian continent. Testimony to this fact is petroglyphic depictions of this mushroom discovered in the Far North, dated 1st millennium BC to mid-1st millennium AD.

The traditional Ob Ugry, Samodian and Paleoasian cultures have a variety of uses of fly-agarics. In sacral songs

the fly-agaric is a treat for the spirits; shamans eating fly-agarics performed magic and ritual songs, communicated with the spirits and transported themselves to other worlds; under the effect of these hallucinogens, fortune-tellers and foretellers fell into a trance in which they met spirits-advisors. As for the ordinary people who were in the state of peculiar ritual “mushroom intoxication”, they performed psychedelic songs referred to as “fly-agaric”, “mushroom”, or “drunken” songs.

Fly-agarics are referred to in the historical legends of the Khanty and Selkups, which mention enemies who carried out raids “intoxicated by the fly-agaric”; the internecine was ended with a peace treaty — the former enemies marked its signing with “eating fly-agarics” because “there was no wine at the time”, etc. Interestingly, the tradition of eating fly-agarics and psychedelic singing was adopted by some groups of Russian inhabitants

of Indigirka and Kamchatka. Participants of the Second Kamchatka Expedition left evidence to the effect that fly-agarics were important goods sold to the northern peoples who lived in the regions where fly-agarics were rare or did not grow at all.

Members of the expedition mainly paid attention to how the consumption of fly-agarics, which they called “drinking”, affected everyday life. Müller not only collected data about this phenomenon but included them in programs and instructions intended for other members of the expedition. The instruction compiled for J. E. Fischer contained three items on the subject: “545. On consumption of the fly-agaric by the Ostyaks in the Ob River basin and potential consequences. 546. Whether fly-agarics are consumed by the Yukagirs, Koryaks and Kamchadals. 547. Whether poor Yukagirs collect urine of the rich and consume it and whether it has the same effect as the fly-agarics themselves.”

The expedition notes left by Müller contain few data on this subject. As a rule, the explorer only informs the reader about the name this or that people had for the fly-agaric and whether they ate it. Fly-agaric consumption by the Koryaks, Yukagirs and Itelmen was described in more detail, in accordance with Müller’s instructions, by Lindenau, Steller and Krasheninnikov. This is what Lindenau wrote about the Koryaks: “Some shamans, having helped themselves to the fly-agaric *Wapach*, start foretelling the future. Others eat it to get drunk. Only the rich Koryaks can afford fly-agarics; the poor are



The Koryaks (in contrast to some other peoples like the Evens) continue to practice ritual consumption of fly-agarics. They “cook” fly-agarics as follows: pierce them with a branch and dry them on it; dried mushrooms are cut into small pieces or can be eaten whole; and they usually have them with warm tea. Bon appétit!

content with having the urine of the rich; when a man intoxicated with fly-agaric urinates, lots of other men gather around him and, having drunk his urine, get even more inebriated than the one who has eaten fly-agarics. These mushrooms are picked up in summer and dried up; they are eaten as follows: a mushroom is rolled, dipped into fat, and swallowed in one go. But every mushroom should be eaten with a spoonful of porsa (dried and pounded fish). One can have 5–7 or even 9 mushrooms, but necessarily on an empty stomach. The hands and legs of the person who has eaten fly-agarics are tied so that he does not rage. The next day, after he has had enough sleep, he is untied. Those who have drunk his urine also get tied. When the *Gitoepitschan's* (heads of patriarchal families) come to see each other, they usually help themselves and help their guests to fly-agarics.”

The Itelmen, as evidenced by Steller, had practically stopped eating fly-agarics in the vicinity of Russian ostrog's; in the remote areas, however, this mushroom was treated “with great respect”: “The aborigines dry these mushrooms, eat them without chewing, in big bits, and then drink a fair amount of cold water. Half an hour later, they become very strongly intoxicated and fancy most fantastic things. The Koryaks and Yukagirs are yet greedier for this food and love it so much that they everywhere buy fly-agarics from Russians; those who cannot afford buying them, collect the urine of the intoxicated and, having had it, become as excited and behave even more wildly. This urine produces an intoxicating effect even when it is used for the forth or fifth time.” It is hard to believe it, remarks the explorer, but he swears that his words “are true”. This is what Steller writes about the extraordinarily powerful effect of fly-agarics on a living being: “Northern reindeer, very avid for mushrooms in general, sometimes eat fly-agarics and, as



Singing of songs and telling of fairy tales often comes together with ritual eating of fly-agarics. Some researchers believe that “fly-agaric” songs are a separate folklore genre.

a result, fall down and for some time behave wildly, as if they are drunk, after which they fall into a profound sleep. If the Koryaks find a reindeer in such a state, they tie its legs until it has had enough sleep and the mushroom juice has ceased to have any effect, and stab the reindeer only after that: If they had killed the reindeer while it was asleep and intoxicated, everybody who ate its meat would have become as frantic as if they had eaten fly-agarics.”

Even more exciting are the observations of the Itelmen and Koryaks made by Krasheninnikov. These peoples used the fly-agarics “for fun” in two ways: 1) fly-agarics were steeped in the willow-herb must, which was then drunk; and 2) dry mushrooms were rolled up and swallowed whole. “The first sign of a man

intoxicated with fly-agaric is jerking of his members — this begins an hour after he has eaten the mushrooms or even earlier. The drunken man then becomes delirious and has visions, horrible or funny, depending on his character: he may hop, dance, cry and feel terrified, or he may think that the keyhole is a big door and a spoonful of water is the sea. However, what has been said concerns those who have consumed too much fly-agaric; those who eat it moderately feel extremely light, merry, brave and vigorous like the Turks feel when they have opium, they say. <...> This is noteworthy because everybody who have tasted fly-agarics state that whatever wild things they do, they do them to obey the fly-agaric’s “order” who commands them invisibly. But all their deeds are so harmful that if they were

Fish processed in various ways has always been the main course of Kamchatka aborigines. In winter dried sole is very good both for people and dogs. Porsa — dried and pounded fish — is often eaten with something else: the Koryaks, for example, have fly-agarics with a spoonful of porsa.

not looked after, not many would survive.” Only men ate fly-agarics. According to Krasheninnikov, both the Itelmen and Koryaks had fly-agarics not just “for fun” but also on these rare occasions when they “were going to kill somebody”. And this is what the scholar wrote about the Koryaks’ way of using the urine of their kinship who have eaten fly-agarics: “The Koryaks honor the fly-agaric so much that a drunken man is not allowed to urinate to the floor — his urine is collected and drunk with the effect of making those who have drunk it as crazy as the man who has eaten fly-agarics. The Koryaks get fly-agarics from the Kamchadals because these mushrooms do not grow in their lands.” Consumption was considered moderate if no more



than four mushrooms were eaten; “to get drunk” they would eat about ten fly-agarics.

The Itelmen’s experience was borrowed by the Russian sluzhiliye (people bound by the obligations of

service, especially military service to the state). Before the sea route to Kamchatka was discovered, they had to break through the lands of the warlike Koryaks, and thus could not import either vodka or products to distill it from to the peninsula. For this reason, alcohol was replaced with fly-agarics. Incidentally, in the 1730s–1740s, when the population of Kamchatka no longer had problems with alcohol, many Russians continued eating fly-agarics.

Krasheninnikov gives a lot of comical and sometimes tragic examples of “wild behavior” exhibited by the former sluzhiliye: fly-agarics made



The so-called tall “legs” protect barns with provisions from large and small animals (bears, dogs, and rodents), and from floods that happen when rivers overflow their banks.



Stabbing reindeer was an occupation widespread with the peoples inhabiting the Chukotka peninsula. Drawing of the second half of the 19th c. from the book *The Peoples of Russia: Album of Paintings*. St Petersburg, 1880

them do unbelievable things, and even kill themselves. This is one of examples: “The servant of Lieutenant-colonel Merlin, who worked with the investigation department in Kamchatka, was ordered by the fly-agaric to hang himself in a way that would astonish everybody. <...> Another local resident fancied that he was in hell, at the edge of a horrible abyss where he was to be thrown, and on the fly-agaric’s order he knelt and confessed his sins, as many as he could remember. The izba in which this was taking place was full of the drunkard’s friends, who took great pleasure in

listening to the confession, while the man thought he was all alone, confessing his sins to God. <...> They say, there was a sluzhilyi who would eat fly-agarics moderately before setting off for a long journey, and could thus cover a long distance without feeling tired; but one time he ate too much of them, crushed his balls and died. A Cossack’s son, who was my interpreter, under the effect of fly-agarics wanted to slash his stomach on the fly-agaric’s order, but they managed to prevent him from doing it at the last minute by holding his arm with the knife, ready to strike.”

Interestingly, the Itelmen “drunk on fly-agarics” did not usually exhibit such wild behavior, dangerous for the life. Krashennikov attributed this either to more moderate consumption or some protection mechanisms their organisms had developed over the years. The aboriginal population of Siberia gradually replaced fly-agarics with liquor. This is what Krashennikov writes about the Itelmen: “They used to drink fly-agaric water infusion <...> and now they also drink wine and ruin themselves completely.” Nevertheless, some localities featuring a traditional

way of life have preserved till nowadays the habit of eating fly-agarics and a special sacral attitude to them, as evidenced by the ethnographic expeditions organized recently to Koryak communities.

They’d rather starve than quit smoking

Among the doubtful pleasures that became very popular with the Siberian peoples after they joined Russia, i.e., from the beginning of the 18th century, the scholars note addiction to smoking, which literally ruined many smokers because tobacco in those remote regions was very expensive. In his work *Geography and the Current Situation of the Land of Kamchatka* Müller testified that the Kamchadals (Itelmen), who had only recently dis-

covered tobacco, “got so much used to it that they would rather starve than quit smoking”. “Husbands, wives, children and servants — everybody smokes tobacco and needs 2, 3 or 4 pounds a year each.” Problems with tobacco delivery to Kamchatka and repercussions of the short-sighted policy of the state that had monopolized tobacco sale resulted in tobacco prices varying from six foxes for a pound in good years to a fox for a zolotnik (4.26 grams) in hard times. Müller supposed that to avoid complete wretchedness of Kamchatka peoples it was necessary to break state monopoly on tobacco trade and to charge for the state tobacco no more than twice the price at which it was sold to the Chinese. The scholar believed that prevalence of smoking among the Russian population of Kamchatka was largely

attributable to the Itelmen’s way of life. “Since they are either married to Kamchadal bondwomen or born from them, they have adopted all the Kamchadal practices and, hence, smoke as much tobacco as the Kamchadals do, or even more.”

Tobacco smoking was often perceived as a ritual. The shamans used tobacco, instead of fly-agarics, to excite and stupefy themselves. This is how Müller describes a spiritual ritual he observed with the Kachinsky Tatars of the Krasnoyarsk uyezd. “Then the shaman woman requested some tobacco for smoking though she did not smoke except during worshipping. This meant that it was not the woman but the devil possessing her who wanted to smoke. She was given, one by one, seven pipes stuffed with tobacco, which she <...> mostly shook

A Kamchadal settlement. Drawing from the book *The Peoples of Russia: Album of Paintings*. St. Petersburg, 1880





out, and, like before, she jumped out of the yurt after each pipe. After the last pipe she looked completely unconscious. <...> They supported her, and soon she recovered consciousness.”

The only “classical” narcotic the scholars referred to was opium, which was most likely brought to Siberia from Central Asia by merchants. Opium was predominantly taken by West Siberian “Bukhartsy”, as well as by the Tatars of Tobolsk, Tyumen, Tara and Tomsk. Müller mentioned this drug in his expedition notes. Most detailed reference on this subject can be found in his *News about the Yakuts and their shamans, about Yukagirs, Ostyaks, Tungus, Samoyeds, Kamasintsy, Taigintsy, Kachintsy, Tatars and about traditions of these peoples*: “The Tatars and Bukhartsy willingly have *afim* (opium) with tea, exactly like the Turks. One portion for a man is the size of a big pea. Opium makes them very merry and excited. If they have books difficult to understand, <...> opium clarifies their minds so that they can understand even the most difficult parts. People who take much opium become very thin and dried, no matter how corpulent they were, and ultimately catch tuberculosis.” Neither Müller nor Gmelin wrote anything about opium addiction, dwelling only on the consequences of excessive use of this drug.

The author and Editorial Board of the journal would like to thank the Department of Folklore of the Peoples of Siberia, Institute of Philology, Siberian Branch, Russian Academy of Sciences, and its researcher K. Sagalaev for the photos kindly supplied for this publication.

Two shamans: a man and a woman.
Drawing from the book *The Peoples of Russia: Album of Paintings*.
St. Petersburg, 1880

The Even settlement of Esso in the valley of the river Bystraya.

We can thus draw the following conclusions on the basis of the documents left by the members of the Second Kamchatka Expedition: the consumption of traditional alcoholic drinks by aboriginal Siberians was of seasonal nature; it was closely connected to pagan rituals and beliefs and did not turn aborigines into alcohol addicts on a mass scale. The travelers did not leave any evidence to the effect that the Russians had exerted a strong influence on the local population’s addiction to drinking, which they had practiced before the beginning of the 18th century.

The situation changed drastically only in the first half of the 19th century, when in 1833 the ban to bring liquor to localities inhabited by indigenous communities was lifted. From that time to 1902, when state monopoly on wine was established, aborigines had the right to sell liquor to their kinsmen on their own. In this way, not only merchants but the state itself pursued the policy of replacing commodity-money relations with commodity-vodka relations. In these years the aborigines were made drunkards on a mass scale and the peoples affected most strongly happened to be those whose traditional and ritual practices involved hallucinogenic mushrooms rather than alcoholic drinks.

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