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St. Lawrence Island Yupik Language Workshop

Aron L. Crowell

The Yupik and Iñupiaq languages of Bering Strait, each representing a vast endowment of Arctic culture, history, and knowledge, are diminishing. UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* considers the several dialects of both to be definitely or severely endangered based on the declining number and increasing age of fluent speakers. The Yupik spoken on St. Lawrence Island and its close cousin, the Chaplinsky dialect of northeastern Chukotka, are perhaps more fortunate than others, with a combined total of some 1300 speakers. However, few under 30 have a complete command of the language and most children are no longer learning Yupik as their mother tongue.

The Arctic Studies Center is seeking to assist community-based educational efforts to revitalize Bering Strait languages as part of the Smithsonian's Recovering Voices initiative, funded by a current grant from the National Park Service's Shared Beringian Heritage Program. Under the grant, ASC is hosting workshops to record indigenous languages and the knowledge they embody, and from these discussions with fluent speakers will produce two video series for use in K-12 language education. For the latest workshop in January 2012, Yupik language educator **Chris Koonooka** of the Bering Straits School District joined a distinguished delegation from St. Lawrence Island including **Ralph Apatiki Sr., John Apassingok, Lydia Apatiki, Elaine Kingeekuk, Angela Larson, Merlin Koonooka, Vera Metcalf, and Jonella Larson. Vera Kaneshiro** was unable to attend because of illness, despite her enthusiasm for the project and its connection to her life's work in sharing St. Lawrence Island culture, language, and heritage.

Sessions were held in the Community Consultation Room (CCR) of the *Living Our Cultures, Sharing Our Heritage: The First Peoples of Alaska* exhibition gallery at the Anchorage Museum. Beautiful and historic St. Lawrence Island objects – many acquired by Smithsonian collectors Edward Nelson in 1881 and Riley Moore in 1912 – were taken from the display for study in the CCR. The objects stimulated in-depth Yupik language commentaries that were recorded both as group discussions and as individual on-camera presentations. Ralph Apatiki, Merlin Koonooka, and John Apassingok shared extensive information and vocabulary related to tools and weapons for hunting and traveling on the sea ice, including a traditional walrus harpoon and a sled used for hauling skin-covered hunting boats. Lydia Apatiki, Elaine Kingeekuk, Vera Metcalf, and Angela Larson commented extensively on the design and making of skin boots (in many styles), bird and seal intestine parkas, and other clothing.

Together the group reconstructed memories of how to play the lively circumpolar “bird game” using carved walrus ivory birds (*meteghlluwaaghet*). After looking at museum examples, Elaine brought out her own set for a round of play. Players throw down the birds like dice, some of which land upright on their flat bottoms (meaning they are “alive”) while others (the dead birds) tip on their sides. Play rotates around the circle of players as each collects winning birds and “wrestles” them against the birds held by others. Rapid Yupik repartee accompanied the action in the CCR – redubbed Yupik Las Vegas – and ended with winner Chris Koonooka holding the entire set.

Altogether the workshop yielded over 20 hours of fluent Yupik discussion on a wide range of cultural and historical topics, providing rich content for the edited teaching videos and accompanying teacher’s guide. Over the next year ASC staff will work with Chris Koonooka on translation, transcription, and production of these materials. The Anchorage Museum co-hosted the workshop, and its collections staff including **Monica Shah**, **Darian LaTocha**, **Julie Farnham**, and **Ryan Kenny** brought the objects from their cases and presented them to the group. ASC intern **Molly Johansson** ably assisted throughout the week and is helping Chris Koonooka and Dawn Biddison to produce the edited digital files and transcripts. We thank the National Park Service for its generous support and Kawerak, Inc. as our regional partner in producing the Yupik language workshop.