

SERGEI BOGOJAVLENSKY AND HIS LEGACY IN ALASKA

SOCIOCULTURAL RESEARCH

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Sergei Bogojavlensky (1941–2013), a Harvard-trained social anthropologist-turned-physician, who conducted pioneering research in the Inupiat community of King Island in the 1960s, passed away in Anchorage in October 2013, at the age of 72.¹ His anthropological career was short and his name is not widely known among arctic anthropologists, particularly among younger scholars. His Ph.D. thesis on King Island (Bogojavlensky 1969) was never published; yet, it was probably one of the most widely read unpublished dissertations of his era. This paper summarizes some highlights of Bogojavlensky's life and professional career, and serves as a historical preface to a sequence of excerpts from his dissertation, which follow.

Bogojavlensky, born in Helsinki, Finland, to a Russian family, graduated from Harvard College with a B.A. in Russian history and literature.² In 1963, he entered the graduate program in Harvard University's Department of Social Relations for Interdisciplinary Social Science Studies. In fall 1966, together with his first wife, Ann Ilona Rahnasto (d. 2006), he went to the Bering Strait area to conduct fieldwork for his Ph.D. He spent the next 20 months, until July 1968, living and traveling among four Bering Strait communities – the town of Nome, to which most of the King Islanders had relocated by the time of his fieldwork; Ukivok (*Ugiuvak*, King Island) village on King Island that was converted into a seasonal (spring-fall) residence for many of the island families; Little Diomede, and Wales. A vigorous and energetic young man (Fig. 1), he hunted with local Inupiat and learned how to build wooden frames for the King Island hunting kayaks. He also learned to speak fluent Inupiaq, a feat not attained by many in the field of Inuit/Eskimo research.

Robert Fuller, his friend from the Harvard era, remembers visiting Bogojavlensky in Alaska in the winter of

1968. Together they took a small bush plane from Nome and landed on an ice strip off Little Diomede Island in the middle of Bering Strait (Fig. 2). "It was a remarkable trip," Fuller recalls. "Sergei spoke Eskimo [Inupiaq] to local people and he was happy being in those small villages surrounded by 3-foot-thick ice" (pers. comm., 1 November 2013).

Upon returning to Harvard in July 1968, Bogojavlensky worked for several months to process his field notes. At that time, anthropological training at Harvard was arranged along two separate tracks: one at the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, primarily in archaeology, and the other at the Department of Social Relations, which offered degrees in psychology, sociology, and social anthropology.³ In April 1969, he submitted his 250-page doctoral thesis, "Imaangmiut Eskimo Careers: Skinboats in Bering Strait," in which he summarized the results of his research and residence among the King Island, Diomede and Wales Inupiat. Irven DeVore, evolutionary anthropologist and curator of primatology at Peabody Museum, was his supervisor. Harold Conklin, then at Yale, another committee member, instilled in him the need to learn the local language for successful anthropological fieldwork. Harrison C. White, professor of sociology, was another influential figure during Bogojavlensky's Harvard years, as seen from a warm personal acknowledgement in his thesis.

The intellectual climate in the Social Relations program at Harvard helps explain the focus and content of Bogojavlensky's thesis. On the surface, its aim was to test Robert Spencer's (1959) study of Inupiaq kinship, social organization and, specifically, the social role of skinboat captains (*umialit*). Spencer's fieldwork was done in northern Alaska, primarily in Barrow in the early 1950s;



Figure 1. Sergei Bogojavlensky, Nome River, Seward Peninsula, summer 1970(?). Courtesy Robert Fuller.

Bogojavlensky believed it might also be relevant to the Inupiaq communities in Bering Strait. Unlike Spencer's rather general and ahistorical treatment of Alaskan Inupiaq social relations, Bogojavlensky's thesis offered a detailed and personalized description of social life of a small Bering Strait hunting community—Imaangmiut ("people of the open water")⁴—in the 1960s. The main social players on King Island, as Bogojavlensky argued, were not individual boat captains but rather the competing male social groups he called "factions," which were often in bitter rivalry for prestige, political power, access to resources, and women.

In his thesis, Bogojavlensky challenged the earlier romanticized picture of power relations in Alaskan Eskimo society built on authority, order, economic and hunting prowess, and respect. Instead, he presented a graphic and highly individualized description of what one needed to become a successful boat captain and of the role of supportive social networks that made it possible. His final chapter, chronicling the thirty-year history of King Island boat crews from the late 1930s to the late 1960s—with its accounts of rising and fading power of competing boat "factions" and their leaders—reads like a bestseller. It spins stories of jealousy, oppression, trickery, conflict, and



Figure 2. Sergei Bogojavlensky on Little Diomedede Island, spring 1968, with wife Ann, John Iyapana (the Inuit man to the left), and Paul Sterling II (to the right), who was then teaching at the local island school. Big Diomedede Island is visible in the background. Courtesy Robert Fuller.

mischief in a small village of a few dozen families living on an isolated island in the middle of the frozen sea.

Many of Bogojavlensky's contemporaries in arctic anthropology in the late 1950s and 1960s studied people's personal relations in small, tightly knit Eskimo societies (e.g., Briggs 1970; Burch 1975; Graburn 1964; Lantis 1972). Yet his 1969 thesis offered perhaps the most candid picture of community life, one rife with long-term rivalries and competing loyalties that often led to violence. For the then-emerging field of hunter-gatherer studies (of which his Harvard supervisor, Irvan DeVore, was one of the founding figures [Lee and DeVore 1968]), Bogojavlensky's thesis was a trove of insider data on the daily life of modern hunting people. This was by no means an image the King Islanders themselves would likely have chosen to present to the outside world. Their preferred self-portrait was an idyllic picture of a loving and caring people settled on the barren rock they called home, like the one projected in Paul Tiulana's fictionalized memoir, *A Place for Winter* (Senungetuk and Tiulana 1987).

Many anthropologists familiar with Bogojavlensky's thesis praise its deep, albeit somber, insight into King Island community life. Bogojavlensky never published his masterwork. The speed of change triggered by the relocation of the King Islanders to the mainland town of Nome (completed in 1967–1968)⁵ overtook his research. His keen, high-resolution insight on Inupiaq social relations was suspended in some not-so-distant past, while the King Island people in Nome became immersed in feelings of nostalgia, despair, and injustice due to governmental relocation. The dissertation fell through a crack in history. The 1970s brought Native land claims, empowerment, and political activism to Alaska. Bogojavlensky's thesis on social relations in the now-closed and dispersed King Island community occupied an awkward position in the new political climate of the land claims era.

I always wondered why Bogojavlensky never tried to conceal King Islanders' identities in his thesis—other than by using their Inupiaq rather than official English names. It was equally puzzling why he was so explicit in revealing often disturbing and quite personal details of people's social relations. I found one possible explanation in that at the time he was already contemplating a career in medicine. His Harvard-era friend, David Thomas, believes that he did not see his future in anthropology and was considering a switch to Harvard Medical School even while working on his King Island thesis (pers. comm., 6 November 2013). Thus, Bogojavlensky may never have intended to convert his dissertation into a published book, which would have required a more cautious and discreet approach. Whatever the story, Bogojavlensky's anthropological career, besides his unpublished thesis, included occasional teaching,⁶ one co-authored paper (Bogojavlensky and Fuller 1973), and a children's book, *Kammaga—My Boots* written in English by Margaret Bartko (1972), which he translated into King Island Inupiaq. The whereabouts of his personal papers are unknown.

Unbeknownst to many colleagues, Bogojavlensky made another definitive contribution to Alaskan anthropology. In 1966, while preparing for his Bering Strait fieldwork, he learned of the collection of historical photographs from King Island taken by Jesuit priest Father Bernard Hubbard (1888–1962), who lived on the island in the winter of 1937–1938. Over 2,000 photographs taken on King Island represent but a fraction of Hubbard's massive collection of almost 11,000 images from Alaska, now stored at the Archives of Santa Clara University in California.⁷ A smaller portion resides in the Historical

Collections of the Alaska State Library in Juneau. In addition, over 200,000 feet of raw film shot by Hubbard on King Island and other places in Alaska are housed at the Smithsonian Institution's National Anthropological Archives. Many people were aware of Hubbard's photography during his lifetime, but Bogojavlensky was the first to copy some of Hubbard's photos and take them back to King Island. According to Robert Fuller (pers. comm., 1 November 2013), King Islanders were "absolutely excited" to see the old pictures. After Bogojavlensky completed his Ph.D., Fuller helped him secure \$15,000 in grants from the Armand Hammer and Wenner-Gren foundations to make dozens of large prints from Hubbard's negatives. In 1970 and 1971, Sergei took the prints to King Islanders who had resettled in Nome and worked with them to record names and stories of people shown in Hubbard's photos. This type of work was later replicated by other researchers (e.g., Kaplan 1988; Krupnik and Kaneshiro 2011; Krupnik et al. 2002; Senungetuk and Tiulana 1987; Walsh and Diamondstone 1985), but Bogojavlensky preceded them at least by fifteen to twenty years.

Bogojavlensky (1969:37–39) discussed Hubbard's visit and his photography from King Island from the winter of 1937–1938 in his thesis, but covered it at greater length in a joint article with Fuller (Bogojavlensky and Fuller 1973), which was illustrated by two dozen Hubbard photos. That article was evidently the last anthropological publication he authored. In later decades, Hubbard's photographs were explored by many anthropologists, including Wendell Oswalt, Dorothy Jean Ray, and Deanna Kingston, and were used to illustrate scores of books, articles, exhibits,⁸ and online posts on King Island (e.g., Kale 2013; Kaplan 1988; Kingston 2003; Senungetuk and Tiulana 1987). Yet, Bogojavlensky's pioneering role in uncovering Hubbard's photos and his first-ever efforts to repatriate them to King Islanders were rarely acknowledged. The late Deanna Kingston (2003:119), herself a King Island descendant and one of the few anthropologists to cite his writings on Hubbard, called Bogojavlensky's treatment of Hubbard's photography "a combination of arrogance and insecurity within the young researcher, since he feels it necessary to show how much better his own work is than that of Hubbard." This was an unfair comment, as Bogojavlensky and Fuller (1973:66) had described Hubbard's photos as "superb prints, perceptive pictures of the highest artistic quality and scientific interest... To our knowledge, there exists no comparable photographic record of an aboriginal sovereign state in all of Arctic ethnology." Bogojavlensky

felt that Kingston's criticism was harsh and unwarranted (pers. comm. 2006) and was hurt by his colleagues' general ignorance of his work.

Despite his early shift from social anthropology to the medical profession, Bogojavlensky never disconnected from his colleagues in Alaska Native studies, particularly after he returned to Alaska and moved his medical practice to Anchorage in the early 2000s. A decade earlier, in summer 1990, when the U.S.-Soviet (Russian) border in Bering Strait was finally opened, he visited Yupik people in Chukotka and sailed back from Chukotka to Nome in a Native skin boat (Bogojavlensky to David Thomas, Sept. 1, 2004).⁹ In 2006, he started teaching classes in medical anthropology at the University of Alaska Anchorage. According to his friends, he attended a conference on shamanism in Budapest in the late 2000s and was enthusiastic about future work on shamanism and other indigenous issues in northern Eurasia and the opportunity to use his fluency in Russian, Finnish, Swedish, and other European languages. In his letter to Thomas (September 1, 2004), Bogojavlensky alluded that he continued (contemplated?) his work on two books, one covering "ethnohistory" and using field data from King Island from the 1960s, and the other focused on contemporary issues with some prospective fieldwork on the Russian side.¹⁰ He also engaged several immigrant Hmong residents in Anchorage in discussions about their shamanic beliefs and practices, including a few who were known in the Hmong community as practicing shamans (Stephen Langdon, pers. comm., 1 February 2014).

Sergei Bogojavlensky had a detailed and intimate understanding of the fabric of social life in Bering Strait communities, thanks to his keen eye, professional training, and unique experience. There are few anthropologists left who, like him, remember life in Native Alaskan communities in the 1960s—with dogsleds, kayak hunting, tarpaulin- and sod-covered cabins, men's houses, small elementary schools, and almost everyone speaking their indigenous languages. Unfortunately, Bogojavlensky shared little of his experience of a small-scale Inupiaq community network beyond the confines of his doctoral thesis.

This short essay precedes selected excerpts from Bogojavlensky's dissertation of 1969 that I believe best exemplify his anthropological vision and his style of writing. I also hope that this publication of sections from a thesis written forty-five years ago will help fascinate a new generation of scholars in the legacy of sociocultural studies in Alaska and reignite our interest in Alaska Native social sys-

tems in the decades of the pre-land claims era, so thoroughly documented by this underappreciated anthropologist.

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NOTES

1. On Bogojavlensky's life see: Krupnik 2014 and the obituary published in the *Anchorage Daily News* Oct. 30–31, 2013 at: <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/adn/obituary.aspx?pid=167766516>.
2. Bogojavlensky graduated from the Harvard College with the Edward Chandler Cumming Prize of 1963 for his honors essay. The prize, established in 1962, was awarded each year "to the member of the Harvard senior class concentrating in the field of History and Literature whose honors essay was of the highest distinction" (<http://histlit.fas.harvard.edu/content/student-prizes>). I am grateful to Sergei's wife, Yelena Lobanova for this information.
3. The Department of Social Relations for Interdisciplinary Social Science Studies at Harvard was a collaboration among three departments (anthropology, psychology, and sociology) starting in 1946. The program's faculty included several major figures in social sciences, including sociologists Talcott Parsons and

Alex Inkeles, psychologists Gordon Allport, Jerome Bruner, and Roger Brown, anthropologists Clyde and Florence Kluckhohn, John and Beatrice Whiting, and Evon Z. Vogt (Weil 1963).

4. Bogojavlensky (1969:8) introduced the new term, "Imaangmiut" (from Inupiaq *imaaq*, "open water") as a collective name given by the mainland Seward Peninsula Inupiat to the people who lived on the rocky islands of the Bering Strait. Linda Ellanna (1983) called the same people (plus the residents of St. Lawrence Island) "Bering Strait Insular Eskimos." The King Islanders call themselves Ugiuvajmiut (people of *Ugiuvak*).
5. The gradual move of King Islanders to the city of Nome and to other places on the Alaskan mainland took place during the 1960s; it was precipitated by the closing of the village school run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1959 and the resulting removal of all school-age students to the boarding school in Nome. Other factors often mentioned were difficulties in new house construction and village isolation during the winter. The island population dropped from 120 in 1959 to 35 in 1962 to just 9 year-round residents in 1966 (Ellanna 1983:178), when Bogojavlensky arrived to the area. The story of King Islanders' relocation was covered partly in Bogojavlensky's thesis (1969:41–42, 229–232). The most detailed analysis is Braem (2004). See also Kingston 2005:1090; Kaplan 1988:30; Senungetuk and Tiulana 1987:38–39.
6. At Clark University, Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) in the late 2000s.
7. Inventory of Bernard R. Hubbard, S.J., Papers. 1999. Santa Clara University. A finding aid is available through the Online Archive of California, <http://www.oac.cdlib.org>.
8. See special exhibit, "Father Hubbard: Glacier Priest" at the de Saisset Museum, Santa Clara University, 2001. Online at <http://www.scu.edu/deSaisset/exhibits/hubbard.html>.
9. David Thomas, Sergei's close friend from his Harvard years, kindly shared with me Bogojavlensky's e-mail of September 1, 2004, in which he described some of the key events of his life in the 1990s.
10. In our several communications with Bogojavlensky in the late 2000s he never referred to these projects; but he had stressed repeatedly his interest in "returning to Nome and the Bering Strait."

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