

CONSTRUCTING THE SURVIVAL STORY ON EDGE ISLAND IN ORAL NARRATIVES BY RESIDENTS OF MEZEN

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TATYANA V. SHVETSOVA

Northern (Arctic) Federal University named after M.V. Lomonosov,
Arkhangelsk

VERONIKA E. SHAKHOVA

Northern (Arctic) Federal University named after M.V. Lomonosov,
Arkhangelsk

SVETLANA A. DULOVA

Northern (Arctic) Federal University named after M.V. Lomonosov,
Arkhangelsk

The article investigates oral narratives by modern residents of Mezen about the survival of four fishermen marooned on Edge Island (Spitsbergen) in 1743–1749. It presents an analysis of how the historical event described in the 18th century by Pierre-Louis Le Roy has been transformed into modern oral stories. The main focus is on the role of institutional (museums, schools) and informal (family lore) channels of memory transmission, as well as the influence of social status, education, and profession of respondents on the structure and content of their narratives. The study is based on field materials collected during 2022 fieldwork in the town of Mezen in the Arkhangelsk region. The results show that the narrative of the Mezen “Robinsons” has been primarily preserved among cultural and educational professionals, while the remaining respondents are either unfamiliar with the narrative or have substituted it with their own experiences. The key elements of the narrative (shipwreck, existential struggle, rescue) are identified, as well as their folkloric and modern interpretations. The article contributes to the study of mechanisms of transmission of historical memory and demonstrates how book versions of events are adapted in the oral tradition, combining elements of primary and secondary orality. The work is interdisciplinary in nature, combining methods of folklore studies, anthropology, and sociology.

Keywords: Mezen “Robinsons” narratives, oral narratives about survival, narrative coding, structural-semantic analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2023, it was 280 years since four Russian sailors were forced to spend six years stranded on Spitsbergen. Spitsbergen (Norwegian Svalbard) is an Arctic archipelago between 74° and 81° north latitude, consisting of three large islands (West Spitsbergen, North East Land, and Edge Island) and many smaller ones. About 60% of the territory is covered by glaciers. Since the 12th century, the archipelago was known to Russian Pomors under the name “Grumant” as an important fishing area. The survival event was described by Professor Pierre-Louis Le Roy¹ of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences in 1766.² The adventure journey schema clearly recognizable in the plot is easy to reproduce because of its cultural rootedness and high anthropological relevance. Le Roy’s book was reprinted until the 20th century, translated into different languages, commented on, retold, replicated on various media, appeared in media outlets, and adapted to new media (film, animation, computer games). An illustration of secondary orality is the transformation of oral Pomor legends into digital formats, which preserves elements of the archaic plots. This includes modern interpretations of the story (films, games).

The story of the survival of the hunters from Mezen on Edge Island (one of the islands of the Spitsbergen archipelago) is inspired by true events. Edge Island (Norwegian: Edgeøya) is the third largest island in the archipelago, with an area of 5,074 km². In the 18th century, it was an important sea fishing area, where Russian Pomors and Norwegian seal hunters hunted walrus and whales. The remains of several fishing camps have been preserved here.

In 1743, a crew of sailors set out for the Spitsbergen islands to hunt. A few days later, the wind changed and the ship was carried to the east, where it was trapped in ice. Four of the crew went onto the icy shore to find a place suitable to spend the winter. Navigator Aleksei Inkov and his comrades returned to the place where they stopped after finding an old hunting hut, but neither the koch³ nor the other hunters were there. The koch was prob-

¹ In the 1730s, Le Roy was invited to Russia and served for several years as a tutor to the eldest son of Duke Ernst Johann von Biron (banished to Pelym, Tobolsk province), then as a tutor to the children of Count Peter Ivanovich Shuvalov.

² Researchers disagree on the exact date of the publication of Le Roy’s book. Mikhail Ivanovich Belov claims that Le Roy’s story was first published in St. Petersburg in French in 1766. Two years later, publisher Johann Friedrich Hartknoch published it in Riga-Mitau from the original manuscript in German (Belov, 1975). Alexander Ignatievich Andreev writes that the German translation was made from French, inaccurately and with lacunes (Andreev, 1946), whereas Vladimir Yulyevich Wiese writes in the introduction to the 1933 edition that the German text was first published in 1760 (Wiese, 1933). Sergey Vladimirovich Obruchev in his book *Russkie pomory na Shpicbergene* [Russian Pomors on Spitsbergen] (1964) claims that the book first appeared in German in 1768 (Obruchev, 1964). Currently, there are freely accessible editions in French dating from 1766 and in German dating from 1768, which can be regarded as the earliest. In Russian, an abridged version of Le Roy’s story first appeared in 1772; the author of the translation is unknown.

³ A koch is a traditional Pomor fishing vessel (15th–20th centuries) used for hunting, trading, and exploration of the Arctic. It had an egg-shaped hull (which ensured stability in ice), shallow draft, and good maneuvering ability. On such vessels, the Pomors went on sea hunts (for seals and walrus), transported cargo, and explored the coast. The Pomors are Russian settlers of the White Sea region; the term “koch” comes from the regional word “kotsa” – ice belt.

ably destroyed by the pressing ice, and the hunters died. For six years, Aleksei and Khrisanf Inkov, Stepan Sharapov, and Fedor Verigin survived on the Arctic island. It was only in August 1749 that the ship of the Old Believer Amos Kornilov accidentally moored on their island. The distressed fishermen returned home on that ship. However, only three people returned, because Fedor Verigin did not survive to see the rescue – he died on the island from scurvy.

The miraculous return of the missing fishermen became known outside of Arkhangelsk. The three Mezeners were summoned to the capital to be asked about everything that had happened to them and to find out how they were able to survive in the harsh conditions. Le Roy himself interviewed the Mezeners, probably in Count Peter Shuvalov's house. According to some accounts, the Marine Fleet Commission conducted interviews with other fishermen who had visited Spitsbergen independently of Le Roy in order to ascertain the potential of a northern sea route. Their report supposedly contained information regarding the survival of the Mezen hunters on Edge Island (Andreev, 1946). However, this document was not found in the archives.

According to Le Roy, his interview with the hunters took place in early 1751. Preparing the collected material for publication took him a considerable amount of time.⁴ It was not until 1766 that the first edition was published in French,⁵ and two years later, in German.⁶ Later, Le Roy's work was translated into Dutch,⁷ English,⁸ Italian,⁹ and only then did the

⁴ In preparation for the publication of the interviews, Le Roy exchanged letters with scientists who provided explanations about the Arctic flora and fauna, the climate and geographical location. He also corresponded with the director of the blubber trade in Arkhangelsk, Solomon Vernizober, who described his meeting with the "Robinsons" in a letter to Le Roy and added his own thoughts about Robinson Crusoe. Le Roy received additional information about the fortunate return of the Mezen fishermen from a letter written by the chief auditor of the Arkhangelsk Admiralty, Mr. Klingstadt (probably Timofey Klingstadt, i.e. Timotheus Merzahn v. Klingstädt) – active state councilor, vice-president of the justice college of Livonian and Estonian affairs. In 1740 he arrived in St. Petersburg and soon gained a position in Arkhangelsk under the voivodship administration (Academy's Dictionaries and encyclopedias, n.d. Klingstadt, Timofey. Available at: https://dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enc_biography/56041/Клингшдет (accessed 1 September 2023)). Thus, the book *Prikljuchenija chetyreh rossijskih matrosov k ostrovu Ost-Shpicbergenu bureju prinesennyh, gde oni shest' let i tri mesjaca prozhil* [The adventures of four Russian sailors, brought to the island of Ost-Spitsbergen by a storm...] is based on three sources: Vernizober's letter, the description of the story by the Mezen hunters compiled by T. Klingstadt, and the interview conducted by Le Roy in St. Petersburg.

⁵ Par Mr. P. L. Le Roy, professeur d'histoire, et membre de l'Académie Impériale des sciences de St. Pétersbourg: De l'Imprimerie de l'Académie des sciences], 1766. URL: <https://mezrob29.ru/le-roy-p-l-2/>

⁶ Le Roy P. L. *Erzählung der Begebenheiten vier Rußischer Matrosen, die durch einen Sturm bis zur wüsten Insel Ost-Spitzbergen verschlagen worden, auf welcher sie sechs Jahre und drey Monate verlebt haben. Nebst einigen Anmerkungen über verschiedene in Rußland eingeführte Gewohnheiten, und über Sachen, welche die Religion dieses Landes betreffen*. Riga, Mietau: Hartknoch, 1768.

⁷ P. L. le Roy, *Kort, naauwkeurig en echt-relaas van het gebeurde aan vier Russische zeelieden, welke by ongeluk geraakt zyn op het unbewoond eiland Oost-Spitzbergen, waarop zy zes jaaren en drie maanden op een wonderbaarlyke wyze hebben doorgebracht*. Petrus Conradi, Amsterdam 1768. URL: <https://mezrob29.ru/p-l-le-roy-kort-naauwkeurig-en-echt-relaas-van-het-gebeurde-aan-vier-russische-zeelieden/>

⁸ Le Roy, Pierre Louis. *A Narrative of the Extraordinary Adventures of Four Russian Sailors, Who Were Cast Away, and Lived Six Years, on the Desert Island of East-Spitzbergen*. Printed and Sold by John Trumbull, 1785.

⁹ Leroy P.L. *Istoria delle aventure accadute a quattro marinaj moscoviti, spinti da una tempesta presso l'isola deserta d'Ost-Spitzbergen*. Napoli: Presso Donato Kampo, 1773.

text appear in Russia. By this time, the author of the original had already returned to his homeland and did not participate in the Russian translation published by a St. Petersburg printing house.

After its first publication in Russian, the story of the Russian whalers' calamity spread across Russia in various versions. These included retellings in 19th-century magazines and newspapers,¹⁰ a translation from German of "The Adventures of Russian Industrialists" (by M. V. Arkhangelskaya with the note "Borrowed from the works of Grisi") (1891),¹¹ an adaptation of the story in N. K. Lebedev's geography textbook *Arkhangelskie robinzony* [Arkhangelsk Robinsons] (1935),¹² and full-fledged works of fiction in the 20th and 21st centuries. It is worth noting that in 1949, the Soviet Diafilm factory released a five-thousand-copy print run of the film *Russkie robinzony* [Russian Robinsons] (author – S. Mogilevskaya), based on the history of the sailors from Mezen. A little later, K. S. Badigin's *Put' na Grumant* [The Road to Grumant] (1953) story was used to make the film *More Studenoe* [The Frigid Sea] (1954). The story about the hunters from Mezen was published in periodicals of the second half of the 20th – early 21st centuries *Pravda severa* [Truth of the North] (1946), *Nauka i zhizn* [Science and Life] (1973), *Chudesa i priklyucheniia* [Miracles and Adventures] (1996), *Sever* [The North] (2001, 2012, 2019), *Zhivopisnaya Rossiya* [Picturesque Russia] (2002), *Moskovskii zhurnal* [Moscow Journal] (2004), *Hunting and hunting economy* (2013), *Pomorskaya stolitsa* [Pomor Capital] (2018), *Zhivaya starina* [Living Antiquity] (2018), *Arkhangelsk* (2019). Currently, the number of various retellings and variations of Le Roy's work has been growing on the Internet, sometimes with a reference to the author and sometimes without it.¹³ Moreover, in 2023, the animated film *Grumant* (based on Le Roy's book) was presented at the All-Russian competition *Russia in Cartoon Stories*, and the computer game *Arctic-GO!* based on the event with the Mezen "Robinsons" was written by the Northern (Arctic) Federal University named after M. V. Lomonosov in collaboration with the FermGames game development studio.

The way in which this fragment of the history of Arctic development spread suggests that the residents of Mezen may know this story from various sources: books, magazines, television, and the Internet. Schoolchildren in Mezen receive information about this event during history lessons and native (Russian) literature lessons or during excursions to the local history museum. At the initiative of the museum, at the beginning of the 21st

¹⁰ *Russkiy vestnik* [The Russian Messenger] (1812), *Syn otechestva* [Son of the Fatherland] (1822), *Severnaya pchela* [Northern Bee] (1846), *Magazine for reading to pupils of military educational institutions* (1846), *Arkhangelsk gubernia gazette* (1846, 1896), *Rus* (1846), *Podsnezhnik* (1862), *Children's reading* (1871), *Drug naroda* [The Friend of the People] (1876), *Russkaya zemlya* [Russian Land] (1899).

¹¹ Arkhangelskaya, M.V. 1891. *Prikljucheniia russkikh promyshlennikov* [Adventures of Russian Industrialists]. Moscow: I.D. Sytin and Co., 71 p.

¹² Lebedev, N.K. (1935). *Arkhangelsk Robinsons. A story about the adventures of four Pomors on an uninhabited island in the North Polar Sea*. 3rd ed. supplement. Moscow: State educational and pedagogical publishing house, 32 p.

¹³ All texts about the "Robinsons" from Mezen appear in a digital repository (a corpus) created by the participants of the Russian Science Foundation project No. 22-28-20412 "Project of a multimedia corpus of texts about the Mezen Robinsons" and are available at: mezrob29.ru.

century, eleventh-graders in the city were presented with a reprint of Le Roy's essay with a cover from the book by the American mountaineer and journalist David Roberts, *Four Against the Arctic* (Roberts, 2003). Incidentally, D. Roberts and H. Olmsted, Professor of Literature from Harvard University, visited Mezen, with Roberts not only retelling the story of the "Robinsons" from Mezen, but also describing his own experience of survival in the Arctic.

Mezen regional historian N. A. Okladnikov published the book *Rossijskie kolumby. Mezenskie poljarnye morehody i zemleprohodcy (XVI – nachalo XX veka)*. [Russian Columbuses: Mezen Polar Navigators and Explorers (16th century – early 20th Century)] (Okladnikov, 2008). One of the chapters in the book retells the story recorded by the French historian in the 18th century. This publication is in the home library of nearly every resident of modern Mezen.

It seems probable that there are no obvious connections between the story and any particular folklore tradition, and, most likely, this is a case of secondary orality (in the terminology of E. A. Havelock (Havelock, 1986) and W. J. Ong (Ong, 1982)). Although, it is worth noting that, in its oral form, the story "acquires" localized and personalized folklore tropes (miraculous rescue, fight with a bear, hut-savior, cursed place, omens and superstitions, witchcraft, etc.). The story of the adventures of Russian sailors on Edge Island in 1743–1749 exists in various forms and variations in the public space.

The reproduction of the narrative about the "Robinsons" of Mezen led to the idea of examining various ways in which the story appears in Mezen. Therefore, a study leave to Mezen took place in the fall of 2022, during which narratives as told by inhabitants of modern Mezen were recorded.

The primary aim was to ascertain how the events of 280 years ago were retold by the inhabitants of Mezen. In the course of the research, we aimed to answer the following questions: in what ways is the story of the 18th-century "Robinsons" of Mezen transmitted and transformed in the modern local community; how do institutional (museum, school) and informal (family traditions) channels of transmitting the historical memory interact in Mezen; and in what forms (oral stories, museum narratives, digital representations) does the memory of the event of 1743–1749 exist in modern Mezen?

We study the narratives about the survival of Mezen fishermen in 1743–1749 by looking into their structural and semantic features.

We hypothesize that the memory of the hunters from Mezen is preserved in the form of "secondary orality" (Ong, 1982), where Le Roy's book versions are adapted to oral storytelling practices. Moreover, we hypothesize that modern residents of Mezen perceive the story of the "Robinsons" not as a single canonical text, but as a set of variable story blocks, combined depending on the context (family conversation, school lesson, excursion).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The analysis of oral narratives was carried out within the framework of Pierre Nora's theoretical concept of "lieux de mémoire", developed in response to the transformation of the relationship between history and memory in contemporary society. P. Nora argues that collective memory, crucial for social identity, is now stored in "symbolic places" rather than in lived experiences (Nora, 2001). This concept provides a valuable framework for the analysis of collective memory and its role in the formation of historical narratives.

Recent studies of methodological approaches to the analysis of oral narratives as carriers of memory based on Pierre Nora's theory, highlight several effective strategies. Scholars emphasize the importance of interdisciplinary approaches that combine sociological, psychological, cultural, and historical traditions (Nechaeva, 2020). Functional, phenomenological, poststructuralist, and socio-historical approaches are identified as key theoretical frameworks for the study of collective memory. The constructivist approach seems particularly promising for the study of cultural memory in contemporary digital contexts (Tolkacheva, 2016). Researchers propose to consider places of memory as heuristic tools and epistemological frameworks for studying the past, allowing for multiple interpretations and commemorative practices while maintaining their significance (Golovashina, 2022).

By using the concept of "lieux de mémoire" as a theoretical basis in this study, we attempt to identify the role of oral stories in preservation and formation of collective memory about the history of the survival of the fishermen from Mezen on Spitsbergen in 1743–1749.

The study focuses on narratives recorded during unstructured interviews. The biographical interview method was used to collect data, the main goal of which was to "turn the interviewee into a storyteller" (Putilova, 2015). We followed the strategy described in the work of V. F. Zhuravlev (1994), dedicated to the concept of narrative interviews by the German sociologist Fritz Schütze. The strategy involves three phases: 1) the narration phase – the beginning of the interview and the main story (the researcher's request or question); 2) the phase of narrative questioning (additional questions clarifying the request, disposing the respondent to narration); 3) the analytical phase – the final part (respondents receive the status of a "theorist", they are asked to draw conclusions, evaluate, and explain the event).

The data was transcribed and analyzed in a three-step procedure. The first step was to transcribe the oral narratives using the TRUD system (transcription of oral discourse) by M. Makarov, which ensures a quick response from the reader to the translated live speech. The system proposed by M. Makarov, "having absorbed the critically processed experience of the theory and practice of transcription of oral discourse, remains a complete,

adaptive, fairly simple system that does not require special training for the user and is suitable for computer processing” (Makarov, 2003).

The second step included initial structuring of written texts – dense coding based on the method developed by T. Voronina and I. Utekhin (2006) and further external coding to build a theory and conceptualize the material. The dense coding procedure involves dividing the text into topics and subtopics in accordance with the course of the interview and its objectives.

The third step was the creation of an interpretative scheme which took into account the specifics of the material. In order to do that, we employed the concept of plot structure developed by B. Kerbelite (1989) and the principle of schematization proposed by T. A. Kitanina (2005), based on Kerbelite’s work.

2.1 DATA PREPARATION AND COLLECTION

At the preliminary stage, a set of questions was devised to collect unstructured interviews with residents of Mezen and the Mezensky District. The aim of the interviews was to assess the respondents’ degree of reflection concerning the story involving the Pomor koch team in the 18th century. –In addition to formulating the questions, a list of interview topics was also compiled (degree of familiarity with the story of the hunters from Mezen, the source of information about the subject matter, awareness of relatives of the surviving hunters, scientists collecting materials on this historical fact). The respondents were Mezen residents who lived in this area all their lives or came from nearby villages (Koida, Kamenka, Soyana). There were a total of 28 interviews, each lasting between 0.5 and 1.5 hours. The sample was selected so as to ensure equal representation by gender, age (generations), level of education, and social status.

We were interested in the following questions:

- Do modern residents of Mezen know about the event of the six-year stay on Edge Island and the rescue of the surviving fishermen?;
- If they do, where did they get the information from?;
- Do they believe that it was possible to survive on the island in the harsh Arctic climate for a long time?;
- Which story elements impressed them the most and were remembered more than others?.

The interview methodology encompassed three distinct phases.

The narration phase. In this phase, the researcher formulated the question (the “initiating formula”): “How long have you lived in Mezen? Are you familiar with the tale of the Mezen fishermen who persevered on Edge Island during the 18th century? We would like

to interview you. Please tell us what you know”. The respondents were informed that their stories would not be evaluated, but that the information that would be received from them, including any descendants of helmsman Aleksei Inkov, who were among the respondents, would be very interesting.

During the interview, if the narrator had difficulties answering, other questions were asked to encourage the narrator to continue telling the story.

The phase of narrative questioning. Here the interviewer asked clarifying questions that prompted a more detailed analysis. Here are some examples of narrative questions:

A. Appealing to a specific period in the respondent’s life: “Tell us about the time in your life when you worked in the printing house. We know that Le Roy’s book was reissued there with the cover from D. Roberts’s book”, or: “Try to remember: when did you first hear the story of the hunters from Mezen? From which source did you learn about it?”

B. Addressing the mentioned situation: “Tell us in more detail about the situation when you, like the hunters from Mezen, suffered a disaster in the ice.”

The analytical phase. In the final part of the interview, the respondents were asked to evaluate the events from their own point of view. For example: “Do you think that the hunters could have survived for six years and three months in the Arctic cold?” or “Do you believe that such a story could have actually happened?”.

The interviews were conducted without preparation: the respondents did not prepare for the interview in advance and did not refresh their memory about the history of the hunters from Mezen.

All interviews were open-ended. The interviewees’ spontaneous speech was recorded, no time was provided to prepare the answer. As a result of the analysis of the received narratives, we concluded that “more is said in spontaneous speech: the internal editor does not always have time to translate feelings and characteristics into established formulations” (Guchinova, 2022). We agree with this observation by E. B. Guchinova.

Over the course of four days, a total of 28 individuals were interviewed. The respondents ranged in age from 25 to 70.

Table 1. Respondents by social status. Source: compiled by the authors.

Social status of the respondent	Qualification	Any additional knowledge of the event?	Number of people	Gender
Filing clerk	Intermediate	No	1	f
Taxi-driver	Unqualified worker	No	1	m
Long distance bus driver	Unqualified worker	No	1	m
Cleaning worker	Unqualified worker	No	1	f
Head of the Department of Culture of Mezen	Manager	No	1	m
Secretary of the Head of the Department of Culture of Mezen	Intermediate	No	1	f
Mail carrier	Unqualified worker	No	1	f
Curator in the House of Craft	Intermediate	No	5	m (1) and f (4)
Entrepreneurs (hotel owners)	Intermediate	Yes	2	m and f
Librarian	Intermediate	Yes	2	f
Library director	Manager	Yes	1	f
Museum director	Manager	Yes	1	m
Cashier in a cafeteria	Intermediate	Yes	1	f
Museum guide	High	Yes	2	f
Lawyer	High	Yes	1	m
Bailiff executor	Intermediate	Yes	1	m
Retiree	Unqualified worker	No	1	m
Fisherman	Unqualified worker	Yes	2	m
Salesperson in a souvenir store	Intermediate	Yes	1	m
History teacher	High	Yes	1	f
Total respondents:			28	

Sixteen of the respondents were women and twelve were men.

All respondents were reluctant to answer questions at the beginning of the conversation. Fourteen out of twenty-eight respondents told the story of the four Russian sailors, interweaving it into their personal biographical narratives. Thus, the findings are based on the analysis of 14 interviews, which allows us to identify key narrative strategies, but not their prevalence in the community, which is a limitation of this study. When asked about fishing in their family, they reminisced about their relatives (grandmothers, grandfathers, parents,

etc.) with additional links to the Mezen hunters. Some respondents (the secretary, the mail carrier, the salesperson, the driver, the filing clerk, the cleaner) could not remember any information about the narrative at all. The remaining respondents possessed the knowledge, however, the degree of retention of the plot in their memory varied. In all 14 cases, the participants reconstructed the events through the prism of modern survival values.

The respondents were divided into three categories: (1) those who did not know the story (people with no special knowledge, who had no information about the history of the Mezen hunters); (2) respondents who were well aware of this historical facts; this includes library employees, respondents working at the Mezen history museum, and the school teacher; (3) descendants of the Inkov family. The third group of respondents reported that they heard the story from their grandparents and then received its confirmation in various institutions – at school, in the museum, or at the library. However, their answers were most often brief, without additional details.

2.2 DATA TREATMENT

After the interviews, the data was transcribed and coded. There are numerous instances where the narratives about the Mezen hunters were shortened and only the main points in the plot were emphasized.

Audio recording 001¹⁴

Respondent age: 47.

Gender: male.

Education: graduate degree.

Date of recording: 16 September 2022.

Place of recording: Mezen-Pinega highway.

Transcription according to the TRUD system

A1 @car engine noise@ Most likely they were frozen in by ice. They were carried by the winds to the islands. And they stayed there. {aaa} So, 6 years. After 6 years they were taken from there. Found... Since the ship itself was most likely [damaged] by ice. They themselves could not get out of there. They themselves could not repair it. They had to survive there... Build or use old huts that were there, and, accordingly, fish, hunt... That's how they were able to survive, to suffer the difficult conditions of the north. Something like that, in short.

Data coding

- 1.0. Most likely they were frozen in by ice. They were carried by the winds to the islands. And they stayed there.
- 2.0. So, 6 years.
- 3.0. After 6 years they were taken from there. Found.

¹⁴ The audio recording is available in the project's digital repository or text corpus at: mezrob29.ru.

- 4.0. Since the ship itself was most likely damaged by ice. They themselves could not get out of there. They themselves could not repair it.
 - 4.1. They had to survive there.
 - 4.2. Build or use old huts that were there, and, accordingly, fish, hunt.
 - 4.3. That's how they were able to survive, to suffer the difficult conditions of the north. Something like that, in short.

Audio recording 002¹⁵

Age of respondent: 30.

Gender: male.

Education: higher.

Date of recording: 16 September 2022.

Recording location: Mezen-Pinega highway.

Transcription according to the TRUD system

A1 @car engine noise@ They went fishing, went to sea. Their ship was somewhere in the Arctic, somewhere near Spitsbergen. I don't remember which island. [In the ice] either it got stuck, or they got off the ship, @noise disturbance@ that they went on reconnaissance. They lost the ship. And they had to @noise disturbance@ stay on the island. @voice interference@ There was an Orthodox hut there, abandoned. I think they had one gun for everyone... @knock@ And it turns out they set it up. They were engaged in fishing. Hunted animals. How many years did they have, probably? They were there for six, probably. That's how many of them there were, it seems to me that not all of them returned here... {cough} And then... Maybe the winter was warm and the ship approached that island. And so they were seen and were taken from their winter hut. @noise disturbance and creaking@ That's who wrote it down, I don't remember how they found out. Apparently there was someone there or some kind of retelling. Maybe some literate person. Or maybe, well, I don't know, I don't remember how it was --

Data encoding

- 1.0. They went fishing, went to sea. 1.1. Their ship was somewhere in the Arctic, somewhere near Spitsbergen. I don't remember which island. Either it got stuck, or they got off the ship, that they went on reconnaissance. They lost the ship. 1.2. And they had to stay on the island. 1.2.1. There was an Orthodox hut there, abandoned. 1.2.2. I think they had one gun for everyone.
- 2.0. And it turns out they set up a hut. 2.1. They were engaged in fishing. Hunted animals.
- 3.0. How many years did they have, probably? They were there for six, probably.
- 4.0. That's how many of them there were, it seems to me that not all of them returned here. And then...
- 5.0. Maybe the winter was warm and the ship approached that island. And so they were seen and were taken from their winter hut. 5.1. That's who wrote it down, I don't remember how they found out. Apparently there was someone there or some kind of retelling. Maybe some literate person. Or maybe, well, I don't know, I don't remember how it was.

¹⁵ The audio recording is available in the project's digital repository or text corpus at: mezrob29.ru.

The division of the text into themes and subthemes, the decoding and thematic division of the narrative shows that the story of the Russian sailors is familiar to the respondent, but without much detail. The narrative contains a set of basic elements about the survival of the Mezen hunters on Edge Island: going out to hunt, the wreck of their ship, arranging their home, hunting, returning home.

The historical episode about the sailing and survival of the Mezen fishermen on Edge Island actualized the stories of local fishermen about their own experiences similar to the events described in the 18th century. Recorded narratives can be classified as personal oral stories within the framework of “microhistory”. In essence, this is contemporary material – texts not detached from the narrator, actualized in the context of biographical narrative experience.

One of these stories was told by a married couple aged 39 and 46. They reported on their experience of wandering through the forest for 14 days and a miraculous return home.

Below we present this type of embedded narrative in schematic form. The scheme is a structured sequence of headings reflecting the content of the interview segments highlighted in the text.

- 1.0. My father is a native of Mezen.
 - 1.1. We had a karbass.
 - 1.1.1. It had a motor.
 - 1.1.2. My father ordered it.
 - 1.1.3. He caulked the motor.
- 2.0. We went to “Grumant”.
 - 2.1. erected memorial and intending crosses.
- 3.0. family agnomination.
- 4.0. watched an old Soviet film.
- 5.0. a large library of northern writers.
- 6.0. many Pomors died.
 - 6.1. people sometimes disappear now.
- 7.0. whether it’s true or not, no ends can be found.
- 8.0. they weren’t from Mezen.
 - 8.1. everyone was considered to be from Mezen.
- 9.0. Inkov creek.
 - 9.1. The Inkovs don’t live here.
- 10.0. They crashed, they survived (I vaguely remember, we watched it a long time ago).
 - 10.1. they built something there
 - 10.2. a lot of driftwood
 - 10.3. some small island.
 - 10.4. the savages came.
 - 10.5. they tried to eat seals.

- 10.6. they got scurvy.
- 10.7. the plot is half-fairy-tale.
- 10.8. a person can survive in any conditions.
- 10.9. it is impossible to keep a fire burning constantly.
 - 10.9.1. quicksand does not burn.
- 10.10. it is unrealistic to eat charred venison every day.
- 10.11. blood is a drug.

This narrative retells the outline of the plot about the Pomor hunters taken from the feature film *The Way to Grumant* (1954). In this plot, the following elements are dominant: the ship on which they went to Grumant – karbass; the mention of a toponym (Grumant – “mother”); memorial crosses; the death of Pomors while hunting; the details of their island Robinsonade. This narrative is supplemented by a description of the circumstances of a specific case of survival in the autumn forest for two weeks, as well as skepticism as to the ability of the sea hunters to survive on Edge Island in the 18th century.

3. RESULTS

The main goal of the study was to identify elements of the story of the survival of the Mezen hunters on Edge Island in 1743–1749 in the narratives of residents of Mezen and the Mezen region. During data collection, a corpus of oral texts was compiled from 14 audio recordings, which, according to certain criteria, can be correlated with memorates and fabulates.

The analysis of the responses revealed that the narrative was constructed in two ways: as a direct narrative (a continuous period of text filled with the telling of a single story) or an embedded narrative (a story is told within the framework of the first story, but the story that was started first is not interrupted).

The direct narrative includes the following plot elements:

the initial situation (setting out in a ship on a hunt);

consequences (a storm, as a result of which the ship is carried to the shores of Spitsbergen, where the hunters were not headed, and the ship is frozen in by ice; part of the crew disembarks and searches for a place to spend the winter, the hunters who remain on the ship in the ice disappear);

survival on the island (repairing the hut, going around the coast of the island, making weapons and tools, hunting and preparing food (drying and smoking meat), fighting with a polar bear, making clothes, shoes and dishes);

scurvy (the death of Fedor Verigin from illness);

rescue (noticing the vessel of the Old Believer Amos Kornilov, attracting the attention of his crew);

the result (returning home after a six-year stay on the uninhabited island, a trip to St. Petersburg, a conversation with Mikhail Lomonosov, the appearance of Le Roy's book).

This narrative structure is observed in the narratives by respondents who are well aware of the story.

The historical episode about the survival of the Mezen fishermen on Edge Island prompted local fishermen to share their own stories about similar events in the 20th century. Their narratives can be classified as oral stories within the framework of 'micro-history'. This is, in essence, contemporary material – texts that are not detached from the narrator and that are actualized in the context of biographical narrative experience.

The narratives of the residents of Mezen vary in the number of structural elements of the event. When reconstructing the story, museum and library employees refer to all the elements of the event, but do not go into detail or include their own opinions about the events they are retelling. The respondents whose occupation is related to hunting and fishing are impressed by the sailors' survival on the island in harsh conditions. In their stories, they include detailed biographical narratives about their own survival or the survival of relatives who found themselves in similar conditions.

Therefore, the informants who contribute to the preservation of the story of the hunters from Mezen are professionals in the fields of culture and education. It is obvious that the narrative content is dependent on the social characteristics of the respondents. The degree of education and their profession have a significant impact on the details in their narratives. More highly educated respondents know the history of the sailors from Mezen and reproduce it almost verbatim. Respondents without a lower degree of education are not familiar with the plot in question or say that they know it from a book or a film but cannot retell it. Representatives of different professions retell the plot in different ways. Thus, museum and library employees recount the story in detail, with an emphasis on psychologically striking moments (for example, the meeting of Alexey Khimkov with his wife on the pier). Representatives of the tourism industry interweave the narrative of the sailors with narratives of their own lives, such as the narrative of survival in the forest during the cold season. Lawyers are also familiar with the adventures of the four Russian sailors, but they tell the story in general terms. Pomor fishermen consider the episode on Edge Island to be part of their everyday culture, so they retell similar situations from their own fishing practices. Gender does not affect the completeness of the narrative content. The social setting in which the survey was conducted proves to be a significant factor in the narrative of the people from Mezen. As a general rule, the narrative was retold in full when the interview took place indoors, whereas interviews outdoors proved unsuccessful. With regard to age, people between the ages of 40 and 70 reproduce the story verbatim, while people between the ages of 35 and 40 are partially familiar with the story. The younger generation, especially of lower education, working in the goods and services sector, are not familiar with the story of the survival of the hunters from Mezen.

Respondents working in the field of culture and education construct the narrative from the content blocks presented in the diagram (Fig. 1).

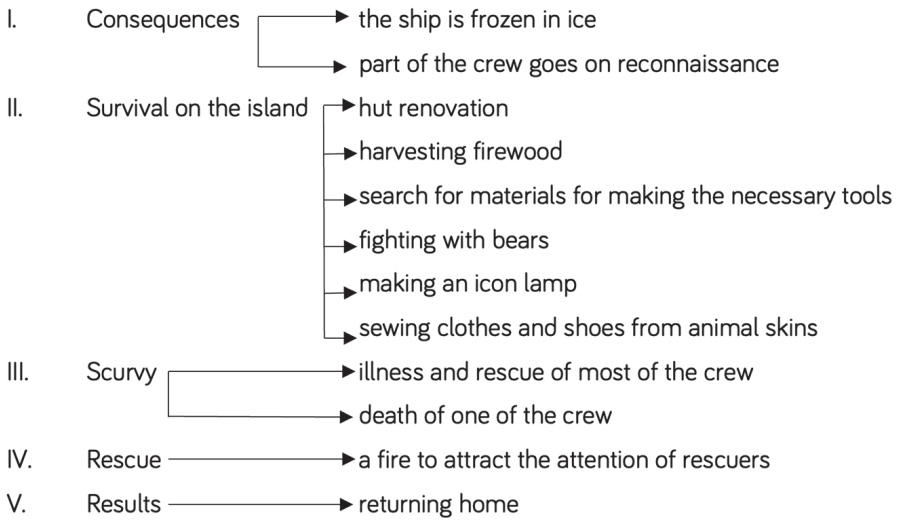


Fig. 1. The plot diagram of the story of the “Robinsons” from Mezen in the narratives of cultural workers.

The blocks in the diagram make it obvious that the initial situation is not evident in the consciousness of modern Mezen residents – the gathering of the hunters; the name of the deceased islander; the circumstances of the rescue from the island. Also, other key elements that were not mentioned by the respondents include:

- 1) the wind carrying the ship to the east coast of Spitsbergen Island,
- 2) four fishermen go in search of a hut for the crew to spend the winter,
- 3) the transportation fee is paid,
- 4) spending five months sailing on Amos Kornilov’s ship.

The following episodes appear as elements inserted into the narratives: the training of a young residents of Mezen to go to sea; methods of preserving matches and provisions; waiting for a fisherman to return from a year spent fishing; rescuing a crew from an ice block; a fisherman’s prayer.

The descendants of the Inkov family who reside in Mezen, Arkhangelsk, and Severodvinsk devote more attention to genealogy, which is comprehensively documented thanks to the tireless efforts of Mezen regional historians (N. V. Shulgina, L. V. Ryzhkova) and their relatives (K. Zabelina). The narrative of the survival of the Mezen hunters on Edge Island is not a subject of their constant interest, but they keep a notebook with the notes by N. F. Inkova, who was visited by the American journalist D. Roberts in 2001. At the same time, they proudly talk about the character traits of the Inkov family: determination, diligence, desire to be successful in their profession, and attain social status.

Therefore, the survey of the respondents failed to corroborate the hypothesis that modern residents of Mezen possess a high degree of familiarity with the narrative of the

hunters who spent six years stranded on Edge Island. Only three storytellers presented the narrative in a manner that closely resembled the one depicted in Le Roy's book. People working in the field of culture, tourism, education, as well as those who received secondary education in the local Mezen secondary school, were more familiar with this story. Nevertheless, as demonstrated by life experience, the majority of the surveyed residents of Mezen were unaware of the narrative.

Our hypothesis that the residents of Mezen would be familiar with the tale of the survival of the Mezen hunters since childhood has not been fully substantiated. However, it cannot be claimed that the information is completely unknown to our respondents either. Most often, people recall the story when asked specific questions. The descendants of the Inkov family do not transmit the narrative's content from generation to generation; however, they hold the belief that a comparable incident could have occurred to the Inkovs.

In the composition of formulaic texts about survival and in their subsequent narrativization, substantial significance is given to the following key words: koch, fishing season, weather, ice, prayer, etc.

It is difficult to argue that the available material reveals speech stereotyping of Le Roy's plot. The narrative of the Mezen hunters transforms into a plot in personal narratives, and the role of Russian sailors in distress is taken over by hunters and fishermen of the 21st century.

An examination of the contemporary Mezen residents' oral tradition reveals that the central plot episode for them is the episode of 'survival on the island', a Robinsonade that centers on the confrontation of man with the forces of nature.

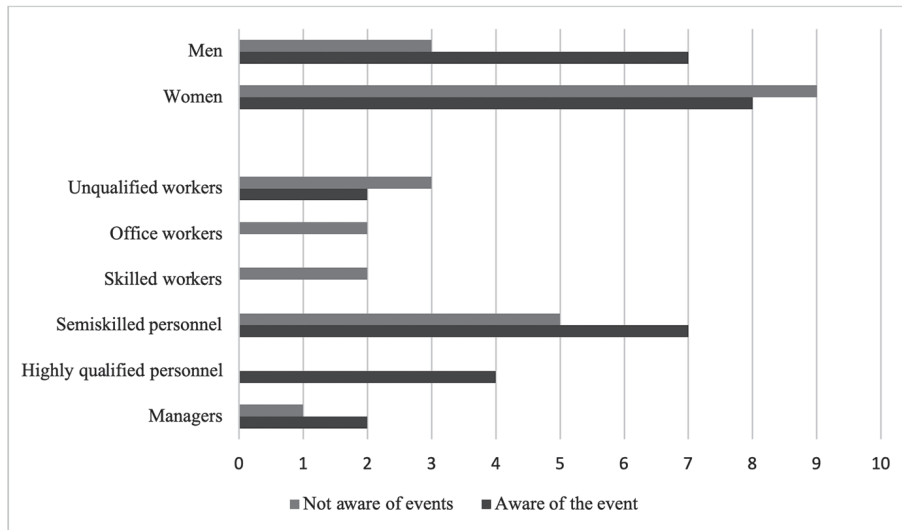


Fig. 2. Distribution of respondents by gender and level of professional qualifications.

Figure 2 illustrates the respondents' distribution. The vertical line represents the distribution of the respondents by gender and level of education. The horizontal line depicts the number of respondents who are well aware or unaware of the narrative of the survival of the people from Mezen in the Arctic. The diagram indicates that the narrative is more familiar to individuals in occupations that require higher or specialized secondary education, such as managers and specialists in the domains of culture and education.

It is possible to establish a connection between the content of the answers and the respondents' place of work. Managers and highly educated employees offer detailed versions of their own stories about the sailors from Mezen, which are similar to the text by Pierre-Louis Le Roy. Unqualified workers generally recount one or two episodes that substantially parallel similar experiences in their own lives, such as being lost in the forest, winter fishing, disaster in the ice, and awaiting the return of fishermen from fishing, among others.

In the absence of any information, the narrative is constructed (composed) of various semantic blocks: a story about the construction of a kurbass; listing fisherman's provisions and describing how to preserve food and matches at sea; a rejection of the narrative regarding the possibility of surviving six years on an Arctic island; doubts regarding the efficacy of treating scurvy with warm reindeer blood; doubts regarding the ability to sustain a fire on a bonfire constructed from driftwood (raw timber); doubts regarding the origin of those who experienced a disaster in the Arctic; identifying a hydronym associated with the name of the heroes in Le Roy's book, Inkov's brook; voicing reasons for the disappearance of a fisherman in a familiar location; incorporating frames from a film about Robinson Crusoe into the narrative content; a narrative about a filmmaker who, in 2011, filmed a documentary about the Pomor fishermen in Mezen, preserving their dialect and professional vocabulary.

In the female narrative tradition, these accounts demonstrate persistent features of primary orality – including communal transmission of Nenets Arctic people encounter stories, syncretic religious beliefs, the evil eye as a mnemonic folklore device, and ritual practices like newborn “bathhouse washing” (cultural engram in Havelock's terms (Havelock, 1986)). Simultaneously, they exhibit secondary orality characteristics through 1) mediated remediation of wedding/funeral customs in modern ethnographic recordings; 2) intertextual layering where 18th-century fishing histories merge with contemporary folkloric retellings during interview performances, creating what Ong termed “post-oral” reconstructions of tradition (Ong, 1982).

Respondents from the “semiskilled” category name sources where they read the history of the Mezen hunters, referring to the following books: *Mezen – My Pomor Land* (1980), *Russian Columbians: Mezen Polar Navigators and Explorers (16th – early 20th Centuries)* (2008).

In order to support the conclusion that the narrative under study is frequently interwoven with other folklore genres, we will provide several illustrative examples from the interviews.

In some interviews, respondents mentioned episodes that were similar to fairy tale plots. One respondent (a fisherman, 55 years old) described how hunters on the island fought a polar bear using improvised resources. This episode aligns with folk tales about heroes defeating animals. The mention of sailors praying before being rescued in oral stories is reminiscent of the trope of miraculous intervention by higher powers in fairy tales. Respondents (especially the older generation) described an old abandoned hut on the island as a “gift of destiny”, which is typical of legends about miraculous refuges. At the same time, some informants (for example, descendants of the Inkov family) associated the death of one of the sailors (Fedor Verigin) with the “curse of the island”, which is typical of local legends. One interviewee (woman, 60 years old) mentioned that sailors treated scurvy with “warm reindeer blood”, which aligns with folk medicine and folkloric accounts of miraculous healings. Another respondent (man, 48 years old) added that “the ship arrived during a warm winter”, which recalls Pomor superstitions about the connection between weather and luck. Fishermen (three interviews) replaced the 18th-century history with their own stories about survival on the ice, which demonstrates the mechanism of oral tradition, where personal experience becomes part of a collective narrative. Descendants of the Inkov family mentioned that “the family did not like to talk about it”, which is typical of family legends with elements of mystery. One interviewee (man, 30 years old) said: “One gun for everyone – that’s how they survived!” which is close to modern jokes about hardships. Young respondents (aged 25–35 years) compared the story to the film *CAST AWAY*, which shows the adaptation of the narrative through pop culture.

These examples illustrate the hybridization of primary orality (e.g. fairy tale tropes) and secondary orality (film quotations), which confirms the conclusions of the study on the dynamics of narratives in contemporary culture. It is particularly noteworthy how Le Roy’s book version acquired folkloric elements in oral retellings, preserving archaic structures (e.g. “the hero’s test”) in new contexts.

4. DISCUSSION

Today, narratives are extensively examined by diverse disciplines such as psychology, medicine, folklore, history, and others. Biographical narratives (Kislitsyna, 2023), dream narratives (Gura, 2023), and narratives about deportations (Fan, 2022) provide an opportunity to assess the incorporation of a particular plot or event into cultural memory. Researchers use narratives to determine what stimuli bring to the fore a particular text or event in the memory of interlocutors (Ahmetova and Lurie 2022).

Although oral stories by the residents of Mezen were already studied from an interdisciplinary point of view by N. V. Drannikova (2020), who analyzed narratives dealing with the destruction of churches, she did not examine how residents of Mezen construct their stories.

The issue of narrative construction has been examined in studies dealing with other aspects, such as constructing narratives in video games through an analysis of the perception of their historical content and constructing narratives in online discussions regarding the Civil War in Russia (Bubnov, 2019).

Our result that narratives depend on the professional status of informants (particularly because of institutional transmission among cultural workers) finds parallels in a study concerning the oral history of the Pomor communities of the White Sea (Lur'e and Razumova, 2004). However, in contrast to our data, that study found a more active role of family memory, especially among the descendants of fishermen. This suggests that, in Mezen, there was a unique gap between “official” and “home” versions of history, possibly associated with urbanization or changes in fish industry.

Our findings concerning the hybridization of primary and secondary orality correlate with studies on contemporary urban folklore (Ahmetova and Lurie, 2022), where book plots are adapted in the oral tradition. However, in contrast to their data on spontaneous creativity, in Mezen the process is more institutionalized, which requires further study in the context of Nora's theory of “memory spaces”. Our material indicates an absence of variability that is characteristic of classical folklore texts.

The limited role of family traditions (only two cases among the descendants of the Inkov family) contrasts with studies of the memory of Soviet repression (Fan, 2022), where family narratives play a key role. This can be explained by the characteristics of the event (survival on Spitzbergen was not traumatic in the same way as deportations); local characteristics (in the Pomor tradition, professional identity (fisherman/seafarer) often dominates over family identity (Minaeva & Gorter, 2013)).

The results of the study are also consistent with the N. Drannikova's (2020) findings concerning the role of museums as “canon custodians”, but add an important nuance: even in a small town, museum narratives may not penetrate into everyday communication. This raises the question of methods for “reviving” historical memory through creating interactive programs involving local residents, recording family stories related to fishery, using digital formats for young people.

5. CONCLUSION

The study, which analyzed 14 narratives of modern residents of Mezen, allows us to reach cautious but significant conclusions concerning mechanisms of transmitting historical memory. Although the results cannot be extrapolated to the entire region due to sample size, the identified patterns show key trends in the perception of events from the 18th century.

The results of the study partially confirm the initial hypotheses.

Firstly, Le Roy's book has indeed been adapted in oral practice, but mainly among cultural and educational workers (8 out of 14 respondents). This corresponds to W. Ong's concept of the mediation of tradition through institutional channels.

Secondly, the narratives show a clear dependence on the social status of the narrator, rather than free combinatorics of blocks. Fisherman (3 interviews) use personal experience to replace 18th-century history, which is closer to primary orality.

The hypothesis about intergenerational transmission of the survival story of the hunters on Spitsbergen was not confirmed. Only two respondents under 40 were capable of reproducing the plot, and both mentioned the school curriculum rather than family legends.

Institutional sources such as museums and schools were the primary means of transmitting history (in 9 cases), while family legends were only recorded among 2 descendants of the Inkov family. Furthermore, a disparity was discovered between official and everyday memory. Museum employees (3 interviews) provide a canonical version, while other respondents either do not know the plot (5 cases) or replace it with personal experience (4 interviews). The memory is largely fragmentary, which is confirmed by the number of fragmentary cases (11 out of 14). Complete narratives were preserved only by cultural workers, where they represent a specialized skill.

Overall, the residents of Mezen are very reluctant to reproduce the story of the Mezen hunters' survival in the Arctic. For the majority of respondents, the adventures of the four Russian sailors remain a historical event that has undergone modifications due to the influence of cinema. The primary source for the preservation of the narrative of the "Robinsons" from Mezen and its transmission to the next generation are individuals working in the fields of culture and education. A limited number of respondents presented a comprehensive narrative that encompassed the initial situation (gathering the team and embarking on the hunt), its consequences (the storm), survival on the island, hardships (scurvy, the death of Fedor Verigin), rescue (transportation fee paid), and the outcome (the return of the "Robinsons"). This version is closest to the content of the book by Pierre-Louis Le Roy, which is considered the document that first captured this event. Another group of respondents replaced the story about the hunters with personal narratives about dramatic events from their own lives. The third group of Mezen residents denied being aware of the episode that became part of the local history. Among the respondents, the descendants of the helmsman Aleksei Inkov stand out in that they do not wish their connection with the legendary character to be widely known.

In general, fabulates associated with the Mezen hunters who survived on Edge Island exhibit a fusion of *primary orality markers* (e.g., communal storytelling, folklore elements like the Nenets evil eye, and mnemonically structured survival narratives) with traces of *secondary orality* (mediated retellings through modern local historiography, where fishing tropes, forced forest wanderings, and childhood memories of mastering seafaring skills are recontextualized in written or digital formats). These narratives blend mythic immediacy with contemporary reflexive adaptation.

On the whole, the sample of 14 interviews, although stratified by gender, age, and profession, is insufficient for broader generalizations. Particularly problematic is the representation of youth (only three individuals under the age of 35), Pomor descendants (2 respondents), and rural residents (all interviews were conducted in the town of Mezen). Therefore, future research should expand the sample to at least 50 respondents, including residents of villages of the Mezensky District and a targeted search for bearers of family legends.

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KONSTRUIRANJE PRIČE O PREŽIVLJAVANJU NA OTOKU EDGEØYA U USMENIM PREDAJAMA STANOVNIKA GRADA MEZENA

Članak istražuje usmene predaje suvremenih stanovnika grada Mezena o preživljavanju četvorice ribara nasukanih na otoku Edgeøya (Spitsbergen) između 1743. i 1749. godine. U radu se analizira kako se povijesni događaj, koji je u 18. stoljeću opisao Pierre-Louis Le Roy, transformirao u suvremene usmene priče. Članak se bavi ulogom institucionalnih (muzeji, škole) i neformalnih (obiteljska predaja) kanala prijenosa sjećanja, kao i utjecajem društvenog statusa, obrazovanja i zanimanja ispitanika na strukturu i sadržaj njihovih narativa. Studija se temelji na materijalu prikupljenom 2022. godine tijekom terenskog istraživanja u gradu Mezenu u Arhangelskoj oblasti. Rezultati pokazuju da je predaja o "Robinzonima" iz Mezena prvenstveno sačuvana među kulturnim i obrazovnim stručnjacima, dok ostali ispitanici ili nisu upoznati s predajom ili su je zamijenili vlastitim iskustvima. Identificiraju se ključni elementi narativa (brodolom, borba za preživljavanje, spašavanje) te njihove folklorne i suvremene interpretacije. Članak pridonosi proučavanju mehanizama prijenosa povijesnog pamćenja i pokazuje kako se knjižne verzije događaja adaptiraju u usmenoj tradiciji, kombinirajući elemente primarne i sekundarne usmenosti. Rad je interdisciplinarne prirode te se oslanja na metode folkloristike, antropologije i sociologije.

Ključne riječi: naracije o "Robinzonima" iz Mezena, usmena predaja o preživljavanju, narativno kodiranje, strukturno-semantička analiza