

Patterns in the Adoption of Russian Linguistic and National Traditions by Alaskan Natives

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Abstract: *During the past two and a half centuries the traditions and culture of the native people of Alaska have been affected first by the Russian and then by the Anglo-American culture. The traces of the Russian influence can be observed even 150 years after the cession of this territory to the US, as verified by the expeditions of Russian America Heritage Project documenting sustained the Russian influence, the religious one in the first place. At the initial stage of exploration of Russian America, influence was predominantly exercised through taking amanats (hostages) resulting in close contacts between the Russian fur hunters and the representatives of native population. In contrast to Siberia, where this practice originated from, Alaskan amanats were treated quite kindly and passed the Russian customs and traditions to their kin. After Russian American Company was established, the Russian Orthodox Church took over as the primary bearer of the Russian cultural traditions with the men of faith acting as advocates of the native population in the colonial administration among other things. The Russian Orthodox Church retained its authority and the primary role of the mediator between the civilizations even after the cession of Alaska.*

Key words – Russian America, Alaska, indigenous peoples, cultural heritage, amanats, hostages, Russian Orthodox Church.

I. INTRODUCTION

The culture of native Alaskans changed drastically in the past 100 years from a nomadic life and the use of stone implements prior to the mid-19th century to advanced technology by the late 20th – early 21st centuries.

The local population was exposed to the European culture in two major stages. During the 18th century and up to the 1860s, the indigenous peoples (the Aleuts, the Tlingit, the Athabascans, the Yupik, and the Inupiat) came in contact with a powerful Russian culture possessing wholly different life support systems based on the cultivation rather than the foraging of food, and on Orthodox Christian faith; shortly, these had a profound effect on all the life spheres of the native population. It is noteworthy that the traces of Russian influence are still found 150 years after the US purchased Alaska.

The aim of this research is to identify and analyse the ways and methods by which the native peoples of Alaska

adopt Russian traditions and integrate them into their own unique cultures.

II. METHOD AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Critical analysis of regulatory, narrative, and other historical sources was implemented to meet the study objective. The Russian cultural borrowings were identified during the Russian America Heritage Project with the help of semi-structured interviews with representatives of the native groups of Alaska, based on a pre-generated questionnaire followed by the reviews of the data acquired.

Between the 1860s and the present day, the European civilization in its Anglo-American form began affecting regional populations. It was similar to the Russian culture in terms of its economic form and subsistence, i.e. based on agriculture and animal husbandry rather than foraging; however, cultural principles embedded in the Protestant form of Christianity were different.

When Russians started exploring the American continent, contacts with indigenous peoples became inevitable and proved, in fact, vital for Russians. The Canadian scholar J. Gibson suggested the concept of “dependence” of Russians upon the native workforce and food supplies, on sexual relations with native women, etc [9, p. 358-359]. Indeed, Russians adopted garments (parkas) best suited to the severe climate of the Aleutian Islands, the marine hunting methods, the survival skills for the harsh environment of Alaska and the Aleutian Islands, etc. The quantity of furs delivered to Russia depended largely on the skill and craft of the natives who sold these furs to Russians or joined their hunting parties. To secure themselves, Russian fur traders widely used the system of *amanats* (hostages) tested in Siberia; those often provided valuable information on the neighbouring people and lands and were also frequently employed as guides.

Reports by Russian seamen and pioneers mention *amanats* quite often. For example, cossack S. T. Ponomarev and pioneer S. G. Glotov for the Chancery of Bolsheretsky Ostrog described their stay on Umnak and Unalaska Islands in 1759–1762 where they convinced several local *toyons* (chiefs) to swear formal allegiance to Russia and to pay *yasak* (tax or tribute). The Aleuts also provided two *amanats* who were taken by Russians to Kamchatka. Ponomarev and Glotov wrote in

their report: “And upon leaving the said islands after those people chose to swear allegiance, our kindness and amiability making them want to be ruled in the future and wish that Russian people would always come with their ships, and promise to pay *yasak* faithfully, they volunteered to provide the little nephew of the first island’s *toyon* Shamshuk, a boy named Mushkalya (whom we named Ivan), aged about 12 or 13, as an *amanat*, whom we brought here in the greatest safety possible along the way and delivered to the Chancery of Bolsheretsky Ostrog herewith” [2].

On the Aleutian Islands, like in Siberia, Russians preferred taking children as hostages, since it ensured maximum loyalty of their parents. Also, fur traders felt safer having children as *amanats*, as they were much easier to feed; adult men and women, generally of higher social standing, were taken in fewer cases.

Generally, the documents show *amanats* were widely used at the initial stages of colonization of Russian America. The Imperial authorities supported this practice in every possible way on the Pacific Islands. Like in Siberia, the main purpose was to obtain *yasak*, which would be quite difficult without *amanats*. In the interests of state policy, the government encouraged fur traders to treat indigenous *amanats* as “kindly” as possible. Thus, the Instruction dated September 16th, 1778 issued by F. G. Nemtsov, the Governor General of Irkutsk, for Irkutsk merchants sending their ships to hunt and trade at the Aleutian and the Kuril Islands emphasized the requirement to take care of *amanats*, “who, in addition to kind treatment, shall be provided with food in abundance” [7, p. 172].

A few years earlier, in 1775, First Major M. K. von Boehm, the Commandant of Kamchatka, included a veritable guideline on *amanats* in his instructions to I. M. Antipin leading an expedition to the Kuril Islands [7, p. 153]. It specified not only that *amanats* should be taken to ensure safety of the Russians, but a certain “cultural” component was expected – in particular, von Boehm recommended that the indigenous *amanats* be taught the Russian language and customs to ensure successful acculturation of the native population in the future. Thus, *amanats* later served as carriers of the Russian culture in the Aleutian society, and became not only a political and economic tool but a cultural one as well.

R. G. Lyapunova, an expert in the history and ethnography of the Aleutian Islands, noted the cultural aspect of *amanats* taking in her monograph: “From the very beginning, Russians widely used the system of taking hostages, mostly children of *toyons* aged 8 to 14, to ensure their safety. This system was very convenient to teach the Aleutians the Russian language and to introduce them to the Russian cultural traditions” [15, p. 59].

After permanent settlements were established on the island of Kodiak by G. I. Shelikhov, the number of hostages increased considerably, reaching up to several hundred. The “Rule” adopted by Shelikhov and his sailors on December 11th, 1785 asserted “...After a year’s time

here and at Kenai, we have found some peoples from whom, after many battles fought and many extreme hardships and dangers suffered, we have received over four hundred *amanats*, of whom we trained many boys as interpreters and in addition taught some the Russian letters” [18, p. 178-179]. The first school in Russian America was established on the island of Kodiak specifically to teach hostages.

Upon return to Russia, Shelikhov, in his report dated April 19th, 1787, informed I. V. Jacobi, General Governor of Irkutsk, of his company’s success in America, including the establishment of neighbourly relations with the natives: “When, on our request, those inhabitants started coming who were disposed to peace by our goodwill and, to ease their subsistence, leaving many of their children to me as *amanats*, a method was revealed to me that would be henceforth beneficial to our country, since I believe that the best can be brought to them through their natural kin by teaching those of the *amanats* chosen and found capable, subject to their free will, through those of my workmen conversant with reading and writing in Russian and with good manners, by establishing a school for this purpose, to which their fathers also were willingly inclined and in which true success has already been achieved” [18, p. 211].

Shelikhov’s main competitors – the company of P. I. Lebedev-Lastochkin – also used *amanats* for gradual acculturation. Thus, George Vancouver, an English explorer who visited Cook Inlet in 1794, saw several houses in one of the Lebedev’s company forts (St. Nicholas Fort), inhabited by native children baptized as Orthodox Christians and successfully learning the Russian language [20, p. 142]. Summing up his observations, Vancouver wrote: “Although the Russians did not appear to us either studious or learned, yet it was understood that in all their establishments the children of the natives are taken at an early age to apartments provided on purpose, where they are maintained and educated in the Russian language, and no doubt instructed in such principles as are most likely hereafter to be advantageously directed to the interests of that nation” [20, p. 201].

A similar observation was made on Kodiak by Archimandrite Joseph who noted that the *amanats* accustomed themselves to the Russian way of life and moderated the “barbarian manners” of their fathers. These hostages from different tribes were maintained by Shelikhov’s company (in fact, by those natives who were subjugated by the company) that provided them with clothes and food. Also, according to Joseph: “Those of the *amanats* who are found more capable than others are also taken to the school established on Kodiak, not by force, but by their own volition” [3].

The colonial authorities did not discourage *amanats* from regular meetings with their relatives, sometimes even permitting the former to visit their kin in the native settlements. A. A. Baranov instructed I. A. Kuskov, commander of Fort Constantine, on the hostages taken from the Ahtna: “Also, letting their *amanats* visit [their

kin] (as offers, up to half of them) is possible...” [6]. In another letter dated September 25th, 1798, the Governor recommended that Kuskov should arrange the “rotation” of hostages taken from the Eyaks (“Ugalakhmiuts”).

Continued residence with Russians helped many *amanats* to master the Russian language. Thus, according to F. P. Litke, a renowned seaman, when the sloop “*Kamchatka*” was visited on August 11th, 1818 by Sitkan chief Katlian, a nephew of the latter acted as an interpreter. Litke wrote about him: “I always understood the elder, who was the fairest man of all. His features were most noble, his eyes were black, full of fire. He was an *amanat* a few years before and spoke Russian well” [19].

Amanats were an organic part of the Russian colonization in both Siberia and Alaska (especially at the early stages of exploration), a feature distinguishing it significantly from the Spanish, English, and French colonization of the New World. In general, taking hostages proved to be efficient for subjugation of the native people, primarily on the Aleutian Islands, where it served not only political, but also a significant economical purpose, like it did in Siberia. Moreover, elements of the Russian culture and language spread among the indigenous peoples of Alaska mostly through *amanats*.

Some authors, both in Russia and abroad, believe that the Russian colonization in America compares favourably to the Spanish or English colonization followed by methodical extermination of the native population – the Indians. In their opinion, more productive and peaceful contacts between Russians and natives were due to a more democratic makeup of the fur hunters [1; 14; 17]. This statement is disputable, particularly when the Aleutian revolt on the Fox Islands is considered. What is more, the “democratic makeup” of the colonists by no means had an optimal effect on the nature of the colonization process [10, p. 163 - 167]. This was once noted by M. V. Golovin who reported on the methods used by Russian fur hunters for subjugation of the Aleutian Islanders: “They both hunted by themselves and traded from the natives for various trinkets and, quite often, when an opportunity presented itself, took by force those things that the natives would not exchange in good will... Being wanton and reckless people, mostly convicts exiled to Siberia, they held their own lives cheap and thought the same of the others’ lives, while poor Aleuts were little more than animals for them...” [16, p. 51].

Each company strived to control more Aleuts, who had become the primary source of workforce by 1770s: they were recruited for kayak flotillas formed for sea otter hunting and led by one or more Russian hunters. After having recruited several dozens of natives, Russians transported them and their kayaks on sailing ships, often several hundred kilometres away from home, to other islands or even to mainland Alaska. Furs brought by the islanders were taken from them by Russian workmen in exchange for some beads, necklaces (“*korolyok*”), and tobacco leaves [11, p. 384]. Fur hunters often gave their

goods in advance, thus indebting the natives. If fur hunters recruited Aleuts through a civil contract, a different system was used. Only a few natives hired themselves out to Russian explorers and seamen, and these were mostly interpreters. Non-economic coercion of the Aleuts prevailed, including use of force, and took veiled forms when the natives returning after the hunt received token payments of beads and trinkets, small knives and hatchets. This non-economic coercion on the part of Russian fur hunters was so blatant that the Siberian administration, concerned with oppression of the inhabitants of the Aleutian Islands in mid-1770s, demanded that no offence, violence, robbery and killing shall be used against the islanders on pain of death, and acknowledgement was requested from the workmen [5, p. 51 - 51]. On the other hand, to encourage payment of *yasak* and to win the sympathies of the Aleutian *toyons*, the administrations of Okhotsk and Kamchatka and the General Governor of Irkutsk provided various gifts to loyal natives – beads, tin plates, needles, tobacco, and even naval dirks and red broadcloth coats [13, p. 174].

Nevertheless, the merchant companies continued to subjugate the natives, as confirmed by the notes of James Cook who visited Unalaska in 1778. According to him, the Unalaskans had been completely subjugated by Russians, some of them living with fur hunters “as servants or slaves”; according to the explorer, those were adult men taken or bought from their parents by Russians at an early age [8, p. 396]. Thus, already in 1770s, the future class of “*kayurs*”, i.e. factual slaves of various merchant companies, started forming. James Cook wrote that about 20 Unalaskan children lived with Russians; they were probably hostages whom Russians taught their language, culture, and the basics of the Christian religion. The local Aleuts were taxed, and, as observed by Cook and his companions, any potential resistance was prevented by Russians by taking away their bows, spears, and other weapons, as well as large skin canoes that could transport groups of warriors [8, p. 396, 400].

In general, it can be noted that relations with the natives depended largely on the human factor. Though the government proclaimed gentle and humane treatment of the natives, the relations depended on the personality of the explorer who led the crew. Therefore, relations varied from peaceful trade and the Aleuts swearing allegiance to Russia to armed conflicts that sometimes ended in the extermination of one of the sides. It was the personality of the particular Russian coming into contact with the natives (predominantly their individual and business qualities) that brought along reception or rejection of the Russian traditions and customs. In terms of the nature and degree of the effect on the native population of Russian America, our countrymen could be provisionally subdivided into three groups:

- representatives of private companies and fur hunters of the Russian-American Company;
- official representatives of the Russian-American Company;

- representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Representatives of the first type had an influence over relatively small groups of the local population (with the exception of the initial period of exploration of Russian America when private fur-trading companies were active). It should be recognized that in most cases, relations were tense, if not hostile, which resulted, for example, in the Aleutian revolt on the Fox Islands. A relatively small number of fur traders were an exception, such as Andreyan Tolstykh, who endeared the natives thus promoting cultural exchange. For example, a *toyon* from Samii Island left a boy and his mother, as well as two women who could show the way to their island on occasion, for support and learning of the Russian language and customs [4].

Among the representatives of the second group were G. I. Shelikhov, A. A. Baranov, N. A. Rezanov, L. A. Zagoskin, the Governors of Russian America, and others. Their influence on the local population depended largely on the general policy of the company. Until the adoption of the second charter, the company had been in fact a commercial enterprise with profits largely depending on the exploitation of the natives. Therefore, introduction to the Russian traditions had been rather spontaneous and unsystematic. Starting in the 1820s, the attitude towards the natives improved significantly, which was reflected in the charters (dissolution of the *kayur* class, or a dedicated chapter on aliens in the third charter), and the imposition of the Russian cultural traditions became purposive.

Adoption of Russian traditions was promoted most significantly by the Russian Orthodox clergymen (St. Herman of Alaska, St. Jacob Netsvetov, St. Innocent, E. Belikov, and others).

After Russian America was sold, the number of inhabitants bearing the Russian cultural traditions was very limited. The official register of families entitled to leaving the colonies at the expense of the government in 1867 included 812 employees of the Russian American Company (RAC), as well as their family members; colonial citizens and Creoles were not permitted to leave Alaska.

Colonial citizens and Creoles lived in compact groups in several settlements on the Kenai Peninsula. The RAC settlements list drawn up by the governmental commissioner A. Engelhard in 1866 shows none of them. Thus, the Russian families, at least 150 individuals in total, were not permitted to leave Alaska at all.

As of 1869, about 200 Russians, over 200 colonial citizens, and over 1,500 Creoles still remained in Alaska. All of these people were bearers of the Russian cultural traditions. Russian was the native language for the colonial citizens, and most Creoles were bilingual. It should be noted that colonial citizens and Creoles were peculiar classes not typical for the rest of the Russian Empire, and their legal status was determined by RAC Charters. More precisely, Colonial citizens were Russian

employees of the Company who decided to settle in Alaska after their contract expired, while Creoles were descendants from marriages between Russians and the native people. Since Russians were very few, the RAC relied on Creoles, who were educated at the Company's expense either in Russian America or in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Irkutsk, and other Russian cities. In fact, both the classes were legally regarded as burgesses – urban freemen – and were bearers of Russian culture.

As of 1870, there were 483 Russians and 1421 Creoles living in Alaska. In 1880, there were 430 “whites” and 1756 Creoles. One of the causes for such change was that in 1880 census many mixed Russian/native families were listed as Creoles [12].

In 1835 and later, colonial citizens and Creoles were permitted to settle on Afognak Island, in Ouzinkie settlement on Spruce Island, and in Ninilchik settlement on Kenai Peninsula. After 1844, the permission was extended to some other settlements on Kenai Peninsula: Kachemak, Kasilof, Kenai, Knik, Matanuska, as well as in the Russkoye settlement on the other side of Kenai (Cook) Inlet. All of these settlements had been founded much earlier, and some of them bore Russian names until their renaming in 1844; thus, Kachemak is the former Alexandrovskoye settlement in Herring Bay, and Kenai the former St. Nicholas Fort. It was expected that people in these settlements would be engaged in gardening and cattle breeding; by establishing permanent agricultural settlements, the RAC hoped to obtain a permanent source of agricultural products that had always been in deficit in Russian America. The Kenai Peninsula was purposefully chosen for such settlements, being the place with the most favourable climate in Alaska.

Among these settlements, there was a special one – Ninilchik, where a large group of retirees stayed after having abandoned Fort Ross in California; back in California, these people were mostly engaged in farming and ranching. The whole population of Ninilchik kept Russian as their native language almost until World War II. Their main occupations were cattle breeding and vegeculture; there was a small chapel in the settlement, where the minister taught children to read and write in Russian; there were no roads to other settlements, and all communications with the outside world were by water. After Alaska was sold, Ninilchik was isolated from the outside world and remained a “reservation” of the Russian culture. Not a single ship entered its harbour after 1867 for 27 years [12].

In other settlements on the Kenai Peninsula the Russian language quickly came out of use after the sale of Alaska as a result of the Creole populations in these settlements either switching to the local languages or learning English. Apart from Ninilchik, the influence of the Russian culture remained largely in Kenai where the Kenai Orthodox Church mission was established in 1844. After Alaska was sold, Creoles and even some Russians were regarded as “uncivilized tribes” and retained this status until 1915 when they acquired rights equal to those

of Native Americans. Creoles, along with the other native populations of the US, became US citizens only in 1934, while in the Russian Empire they were treated as subjects.

While the Russian population of Sitka dwindled, the situation was different on Kodiak. It became home to those who failed to adapt quickly to the new, American way of life. It was inhabited by several dozen Russian and Creole families. They led a patriarchal life as fishers, farmers, and livestock breeders. Creoles, gradually mingling with the local population, forgot the Russian language. Only a handful of names of the families who lived on and around Kodiak after 1867 are known – those were the families of Petr Repin, Ivan Derganov, and Ivan Pestrikov. Some streets of the present-day Kodiak are named after the house-owners who once lived there: Simeonov, Sichenov, Volkov, Malutin, and Mitrokhin. Since the streets were named already during the American period, the families bearing these names remained to live there after Alaska was sold [12].

After the purchase of Russian America, the Russian Orthodox Church remained the main carrier of the Russian culture among the native population. In 1870, the Metropolitan of Moscow and Kolomna insisted at the Synod that an Aleutian and Alaskan Diocese seated in San Francisco shall be established. By the time of the sale, Alaska had already been subdivided by the Church into the Deaneries of Sitka and Unalaska and three missions: Kenai, Nushagak, and Kuigpak. During the 1870s, parochial schools reopened. In 1876, such schools existed on Unalaska, on St. Paul Island, and on St. George Island; in 1878 on Kodiak and Nushagak; in 1879, in the Belkofski settlement on Alaska Peninsula; and in 1880, on Sitka. The last parochial school was established in 1893 in Kenai. These schools, in addition to ecclesiastical subjects, taught the Russian language, and some schools taught reading and writing in the native languages.

For the first twenty years in the American period of the Alaskan history, the Russian Orthodox Church retained its undisputed influence among the native population. By the end of the 1880s, missionaries of other Christian churches appeared in Alaska. Therefore, during 1893 to 1903, the Russian Orthodox Church published 14 books in America and four books in Russia in native languages of the indigenous peoples of Alaska, thus promoting the spread of Orthodox Christianity among the local population.

Orthodox Christianity can definitely be regarded as the most notable effect of the Russian period in the present-day Alaska. Many representatives of the native population perceive the Russian period in their history through Orthodox Christianity, and most of them know the names of the American Orthodox saints: Peter the Aleut, Herman of Alaska, Innocent Veniaminov, and Jacob Netsvetov. Many local residents also know simple Orthodox missionaries who served during the Russian period of Alaska, while the names of secular explorers of Russian America (Kolmakov, Zagoskin, Baranov) are far from being common knowledge.

The Russian traditions in the native culture of inland Alaska were studied by M. G. Malakhov's expedition in 2009 – 2013 as a part of the Russian America Heritage Project; this is the biggest Russian expedition in Alaska since times of Russian American Company. Due to the wide area covered, it revealed the most important aspects associated with the Russian period of Alaska history. The results of the expedition show a rich Russian heritage that is still widely present in the life of the local Alaskan population and is yet to be thoroughly studied and understood.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A relatively short period of communication between the Russian culture and the culture of Alaskan natives added much to the customs and traditions of the latter due to the influence of the Russian people. The study focused on the two channels through which the Russian national traditions were "transmitted" to the native population – the amanats (hostages) and Orthodox Christianity. Amanats played the key role in conveying the national traditions during the first stage of the Russian colonization. The importance of the cultural aspect of the practice of taking amanats for the native Alaskans was proven by a variety of documents. In general, Russian colonists in Alaska endeavoured to treat amanats in a more humane way since their own safety depended on it. Orthodox Christian faith became another form of introducing the Russian customs among the natives of Alaska. Russian clergymen, who had the closest and most confidential relations with the local population during the period of the existence of Russian American Company, played a particular part in the process. The human factor was also of importance – the personality of a company agent or of a Russian Orthodox priest, their everyday practices affected the pattern and the degree of reception of the Russian traditions by the natives of Russian America.

The studies conducted by the expedition revealed a broad stratum of Russian borrowings, primarily linguistic ones – at the present day, Alaskan natives use up to 200 Russian words in their language.

It should be noted that linguistic borrowings represent a complex subject to study at present. Firstly, active contacts between the native speakers of the languages ceased more than a century ago. Second, neither Russian nor local languages are native for most of the modern American scholars, which hinders any linguistic studies considerably. Third, a number of native languages lack some of the sounds of the Russian language, which results in the transformation of Russian words to such extent that at times makes them hardly recognizable. Quite interestingly, interviews with the present-day Alaskan natives show that they perceive these Russian borrowings as an integral part of their natural language rather than a foreign borrowing.

Among other things, Russian names and surnames became widely spread as a result of the introduction of the

Russian Orthodox faith. Russian Orthodox Christianity is the primary heritage of the Russian times in the history of Alaska. After the cession of Russian America, the Orthodox Church remained as the main bearer of the Russian culture among the local population. The expedition revealed that over 75% of residents in the areas with predominantly native population are Orthodox Christians.

The borrowings mentioned above, as well as the traces of the Russian culture in the everyday life (bathhouses, the funeral ceremony, log-cabin designs, elements of clothing), indicate that the Russian cultural traditions firmly established themselves as part of the culture of the native people of Alaska.

IV. CONCLUSION

The studies conducted by the expedition show that, though the period when people from Russia were in close contact with the natives was very short, it had profound effects, both material and spiritual, on the traditional way of life. Materially, the present-day inhabitants of inland Alaska employ such elements of the Russian culture as bathhouses, log-cabin designs for living premises and utility buildings, etc. Contact with the Russian civilization influenced the cultural and spiritual development of local populations significantly, which is reflected in the presence of numerous Russian borrowings in the language (such lexical units as names and terms) and the Russian Orthodox religion. It should be noted, that Russian Orthodoxy was the main contributor of the influence on traditional native culture and beliefs. Orthodox faith became the primary carrier of the Russian civilization, and the mainstay of cultural and spiritual diffusion of the Russian world in the feelings and culture of the native Alaskan population. The vast majority of local residents following the Orthodox rites know the names of Russian missionaries and worship Orthodox saints.

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