

## The Russian Arctic between Missionaries and Soviets: The Return of Religion, Double Belief, or Double Identity?

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### Introduction

The present article is a revised version of a paper presented at the conference State Religion and Folk Belief held in 1998 at the University of Minneapolis, Minnesota. It is in response to the questions formulated by Dr. James D. Tracy about the relationship between state-sanctioned religion and popular belief. Should these two forms of belief be treated as antagonistic, or are they complementary forms of common devotion? If neither of the two extreme views is adequate, then what can be said of the links between the two forms of spiritual response to the challenges of the environment?

I would like to comment on this dilemma from the perspective of an anthropologist with 25 years of research experience in the Russian Far North among the indigenous population of Chukotka, Kamchatka and eastern Yakutia. The situation I describe here is peculiar because, in this case, the state religion was introduced into the area from outside by an ethnically and culturally different group, and clashes with the indigenous set of “popular beliefs.”

### Indigenous tradition and new ideologies: 20<sup>th</sup> century Chukotka

In the early 1990s a Pentecostal congregation emerged in Sireniki, a small settlement located in the south-east of the peninsula and populated with Eskimos and Chukchis as well as Russians. This religious movement was established by a group of non-Native church leaders originally from North America,<sup>1</sup> who came to the area with the mission of “bringing the word of God” to the post-Soviet spiritual desert. The congregation grew rapidly, and by 1995 had become quite influential in the village.

In 1996 I recorded several interviews with local residents asking them about their attitudes toward this phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> The interviews I quote from below were recorded with two women, a 55-year-old Yupik Eskimo college teacher (A), and a 35-year-old Chukchi journalist (B), both permanent residents of the city of Anadyr, the capital of Chukotka. Both women were worried about the increasing influence of the Pentecostal group, especially because the newly converted members of the congregation were consciously and rather aggressively turning down all traditional

cultural practices, condemning them as “devil’s deeds.” Here is how the story runs:

One year passed since the death of P. [her relative – N.V.], and the time came to “summon” him [i. e., to carry out a ritual of “catching the soul:” several people crawl to the cemetery and throw a rope on a special peg – “catching the soul” in order to secure the return of the deceased ancestor; afterwards everybody sits down for a feast, feeds the soul with a special kind of biscuits and eats the cakes themselves – N.V.]. I asked my niece to bake the cakes for the ritual, but she refused, saying that this was nonsense and that she wasn’t going to take part in feeding “your devils.” I didn’t believe her, I thought she wasn’t serious, that she was just lazy and playing up. She is my niece, so she must obey. So I called her the day before in the evening: “Well, have you baked them?” I asked, “Bring them here.” “No, Aunt,” she said, “I told you I would do nothing. This is a sin, to feed the devils!” “These are not devils,” I said, “These are your own ancestors!” “Whatever you say, but I am out,” she replied. So I had to bake the cakes myself, and it took me the whole night. (A)

The other informant tells about her attitude toward the activities of Pentecostals in the city of Anadyr:

I have a very guarded attitude toward them. I am worried because our people are not protected against this invasion, against this psychological attack. In recent years many people have appeared, especially among the young, who do not know our traditions, our customs. The seeds these sects sow have landed on well-prepared ground. Whereas in the past it was filled with something – communism, socialism – today there is nothing. It is empty, and this emptiness creates fertile soil. I have a friend. I learned some time ago that, she had begun to attend the sermons of the sect. Well, she began to go there, and she changed. I can’t say she knows our beliefs and our ways very well, but she at least speaks our language. Her parents spoke nothing but Chukchi to her, told her about our customs. And the Pentecostals have made her forget everything, give up everything. I am really scared by this. They are taught that all Chukchi customs, traditions, rituals – all this comes from the devil. (B)

It appears, then, that there exists an explicit conflict between a segment of the population that prefers to revive “the old ways” and another that seeks an alternative. The sect now enjoys stunning success in the village of Sireniki: more than one third of the total population of about 400 are

ardent and passionate followers! The question is why. Why have the Pentecostals (and some other messianic religious groups active in the area) been so successful? Is it simply that they stepped in to fill the “spiritual vacuum” left by the collapsing Soviet ideology? Or does the explanation lie deeper, in implicit semantic rhymes, in undertones common to the two systems, “Christian” and “popular” belief?

It is well known that Soviet power, starting from the late 1920s, oppressed quite ruthlessly all traditional cultural practices, going so far as physically eliminating the shamans (Slezkine 1994, 187; Chichlo 1981, 279–307; Forsyth 1989, 83–6; Forsyth 1992, 287–99; Mandelstam-Balzer 1990, vii–viii). Its whole ideological vehemence was aimed consistently at wiping out all alternatives, all diversity in thinking and behavior. For decades, those of us who worked in the North heard hushed complaints from the indigenous people that “our tradition is being lost,” that “our languages are not spoken any more,” that “the young people do not remember our rituals,” etc. Yet now, with the collapse of Soviet ideology and the downfall of the huge machinery of oppression that supported it, it appears that many indigenous people, instead of turning with a sigh of relief, so to speak, to their traditions, prefer to fall into the arms of a religious group that practices rituals and adheres to beliefs that are presumably even more remote from those of “the ancestors” than were the Soviet substitutes.

But are these practices and beliefs really so remote? I do not expect, or pretend, to give a clear answer to this question, but the situation certainly warrants analysis and comment.

### **Indigenous tradition and new ideologies: 19<sup>th</sup> century Alaska**

Since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century missionaries of various denominations have been active in Alaska. Before 1867 the Russian Orthodox Church was the principal agent of Christianity in the area; after 1867 the situation changed, and Protestant churches took the upper hand. Let me briefly outline the main attitudes of the two churches toward Native cultures, beliefs, and languages, in doing so, I primarily follow the small but valuable book by Richard Dauenhauer (1997).

Dauenhauer compares the activities of two eminent missionaries, Fr. Ivan Veniaminov and Fr. Sheldon Jackson. Brief biographical sketches of both men are appropriate here (Dauenhauer 1997, 6–15; see also Oleksa 1992, 127–34).

Ivan Veniaminov was born in 1797 in the small Siberian village of Anginskoe in the district of Irkutsk. After graduating from the seminary he married, and in 1821 was ordained as a priest. In 1823, he came to Alaska

and the Aleutian Islands and began his spectacular career as a priest, scholar, and educator of the area. In 1839 he returned to Russia, entered the monastic order under the name of Innocent and was elevated to Bishop. In 1867 he was appointed Metropolitan of Moscow, the highest position in the Russian Orthodox Church. Fr. Innocent died in 1879, and in 1977 he was officially recognized and canonized as a saint of the Orthodox Church, the enlightener and apostle of America (Dauenhauer 1997, 6–7).

Veniaminov's main effort was in education. He established a bilingual school in Sitka, designed the alphabet and, with Ivan Pan'kov, an Aleut leader, translated scripture into the Aleut language. His students, such as Yakov Netsvetov, continued his work and translated the Gospel into Central Alaskan Yupik and other Alaskan languages (Dauenhauer 1997, 7).

Fr. Veniaminov is, of course, an exception; not all Orthodox missionaries were so talented, intelligent or devoted, to say the least. Still, one might agree with Dauenhauer that, in principle, in Eastern Orthodox tradition language and religion were not inseparable, that the Orthodox Church endorsed the development of Native languages, and that, generally, "... the Orthodox tradition maintains great respect for the language and culture of the individual" (Dauenhauer 1997, 8). What is perhaps more important is that, however ugly its deeds might be in other areas, for Alaska Natives of the time, Fr. Veniaminov was the Russian Orthodox Church.

Sheldon Jackson was born in 1834, graduated from Union College in New York, and was ordained in 1855. In 1877 he came to Alaska. After five years he moved to Washington DC, "from which base he was very active and quite powerful in Alaskan politics" (Dauenhauer 1997, 9). Jackson died in 1909 highly honored by the Presbyterian Church (Dauenhauer 1997, 10).

Sheldon Jackson also established schools, but these schools were based on totally different principles from those established by Veniaminov. According to his key statement of 1880 (quoted in Dauenhauer 1997, 14):

The Board of Home Missions has informed us that government contracts for educating Indian pupils provide for the ordinary branches of an English education to be taught, and that no books in any Indian language shall be used, or instruction given in that language to Indian pupils. [ ... ] instruction in that vernacular is not only of no use to them but is detrimental to their speedy education and civilization. [ ... ] Pupils are required to speak and write English exclusively . . .

As a result of this policy, until the 1960s Alaska Native languages were prohibited in school; they were suppressed as "detrimental" to the process

of civilizing the aboriginal population. Christianity was considered incompatible with any language other than English, or any culture other than Western European/American.

Of course, Sheldon Jackson was, in his own way, also an exception to the general run of missionaries. Not all Protestant missionaries were so militant in their attitude toward Native cultures and languages. But again, we are talking about a specific area at a specific time. For the Alaskan Native, the policy of Sheldon Jackson was, for many years, the policy of the Protestant churches, however different its actions might be elsewhere.

The attitude to these two systems of Native education – the Russian Orthodox and the American Protestant – was clearly expressed by Alaskan Natives themselves when, in the 1880s, well after the 1867 purchase of Alaska, Orthodoxy enjoyed a sudden resurgence in popularity. To some extent this may have been their reaction to a sharp turn in educational policy, from bilingual education and religious activities in the Native vernacular to English-only assimilationist schooling. I suspect, however, that the main reason lies deeper, and that it can be explained, among other things, by a noticeable parallelism between Russian Orthodox beliefs and practices and those of the Native population of the Far North.

### **Indigenous tradition and new ideologies: How close are they?**

Take, for example, the Tlingit Indian group of south-western Alaska. Even the very first steps of Russian Orthodoxy in the area were taken in a language that was fully comprehensible to the Natives, although this was probably unintentional. In 1836, during the terrible smallpox epidemics, about half of the Tlingit population of the area died. Meanwhile the epidemics barely touched the Russians, the Creoles and the Natives who lived in Novo-Arkhangelsk on the island of Sitka (Kan 1996, 620). This was interpreted by the Tlingit as fitting a familiar pattern: Russian “healers” seemed to be more effective than the Tlingit shamans, thus proving that their faith was “better.”

Many of the customs accepted by the Orthodox Church were quite close to those of the Native peoples, and fully comprehensible to them. One example: “... a menstruating woman was not allowed to attend church services. After the birth of a child, the priest was invited into the mother’s house to pray for her purification [...] The mother had to wait forty days before entering the church” (Kan 1996, 625). These rules, as Kan’s informants testify, “made perfect sense” to them (p. 626), and were “closer to pre-Christian Tlingit ones than to Presbyterian ones” (p. 630). The Orthodox priests were, on the whole, less strict and more flexible in

their reactions to Native traditions, partly because, as Dauenhauer puts it, the great strength of the Orthodox church was its Native-born clergy (Dauenhauer 1997, 7).

More rigorous adherence to canon, to the rules of the Church, and a more intolerant attitude toward Native (“pagan”) traditions, practices, and beliefs among Protestant missionaries would often put them into situations where their efforts proved fruitless. For example, Yupik Eskimos of Alaska had a custom of loudly crying and shouting over a deceased person. According to Native beliefs, this was done in order not to let the soul of the deceased fall asleep. If the soul falls asleep, it will not be able to “leave” in a proper way and, consequently, will not be able to “return” properly. Moravian missionaries naturally misinterpreted these shouts and cries as a furious expression of grief, that is, as reprehensible behavior from a Protestant point of view. They tried to undermine the practice by explaining the concept of eternal life to the Yupik Eskimos. All such indoctrination was, of course, entirely wasted, because the Eskimos never had the slightest doubt about the existence of eternal life, and the practice was aimed precisely at ensuring it (Fienup-Riordan 1990, 72–6).

Eventually, Orthodox and traditional belief formed a curious mixture. The Tlingit, especially women, creatively combined “pre-Christian and Christian beliefs in a unique indigenous version of Christianity” (Kan 1996, 614). “Orthodox canon law, Russian and Creole folk traditions, and indigenous beliefs about the rules of conduct for Orthodox women became so intertwined that eventually most Tlingit could not distinguish them from each other” (Kan 1996, 626). “The Tlingit [ ... ] took what they needed from the Russian church to survive in the American-dominated new world and modified Orthodoxy to make it more their own religion” (Kan 1996, 631).

The reason for this specific feature of Orthodoxy may lie, as Eve Levin puts it, in the fact that “... the expansion of the Russian state guaranteed that new, still pagan tribes would always inhabit the geographical and social fringes of Russian society. These peoples were a constant reservoir for pagan ideas within the Russian population” (Levin 1993, 37).

In a sense, the revival and the prevalence of Orthodoxy among Alaskan Natives, especially among the Tlingit at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was a compromise. On the one hand, the higher social status of Christianity attracted them and they were unwilling to abandon it. On the other, they were unwilling to utterly reject their traditional beliefs and practices, or the freedom that was closely associated with these beliefs. Orthodoxy provided a convenient reconciliation (cf. Kan 1996, 622–3). Both “halves” of their identity – high status and traditionalist – are thus supported by one set of beliefs.

These circumstances resemble a common linguistic situation connected with code-switching<sup>3</sup> in which the speaker chooses (switches) not between language A and language B, but between the option of engaging in code-switching and the option of using one language throughout his speech. The use of language A, language B and both languages (code-switching) are all regarded by the speech community as equally accepted strategies of language behavior (Mayers-Scotton 1993). A person can use two codes alternatively in order to stress one of her/his two identities; or s/he can use both codes simultaneously in order to stress both identities. For example, bilingual residents of Nairobi use English/Kiswahili code-switching in order to demonstrate two conflicting identities, “educated” and “African”. Wolof/French code-switching in Dakar is used for the same purpose, to the extent that a third code (Urban Wolof) is created. It is regarded by everybody neither as language mixing nor as code-switching, but as an independent and self-sufficient language (Swigart 1992, 83).

### **Socialism vs. capitalism**

In both Alaska and Chukotka capitalist relationships were introduced alongside the missionary activities. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup>, and especially in the 19<sup>th</sup>, century Native traders appeared in Chukotka, and the idea of land and resources as property was introduced. This concept was completely alien to the Natives. The idea that a portion of the forest, or tundra, or river can belong to a person sharply contradicted the traditional attitude toward what Richard Nelson has labeled “the watchful world” (Nelson 1986, 14ff.). The human being is part of a landscape; landscape belongs to no one; people’s “state of health comes from taking part in constant interflow between animals and people and landscape” (Wolfe 1997, 15; see also Vitebsky 1992). Attitudes and behavior like those of a Russian who lived in Kamchatka in the 1910s and prohibited the Koryak Natives from fishing and hunting on “his” land (Shatalov 1984, 150) were entirely outside the comprehension of Native tradition.

This may be one of the reasons why many Natives so wholeheartedly welcomed the new “socialist” ideas of the first Soviet administrators in the 1920s. Publications from (and about) this period are full of reports of Natives greeting the new ideology with words like those of an old Koryak woman reported by Shatalov (1984, 160): “The Russians are now saying that all people are alike, be they Russians, or Koryaks, or Kamchadals, or Koreans. This is what our ancestors have always thought,” or: “The new Russian administrators tell the truth. They say what all our people always said, that the tundra, the forest, the birds, the fish belong to everybody” (Shatalov 1984, 177).

Although this “socialist” ideology existed only on paper in the former Soviet Union, it was nevertheless much closer to the Native tradition than the idea of private property, and its acceptance was therefore voluntary to a considerable extent. Over the decades of Soviet rule in Siberia, this ideology intertwined with the traditional beliefs and practices, forming an intricate web. For many Natives, especially the local elite, this created an ideological system that was both self-sufficient and self-justifying, just as their forefathers had created a system combining the Orthodox and Native traditions. On the other hand, in the early 1980s the Soviet ideology began to lose its prestige among the younger generation.

### **Is this an alternative?**

The collapse of the Soviet Union, and of the Soviet ideology on which it rested, created a “spiritual vacuum.” I believe that a certain parallel can be drawn between the situation in Alaska in the 1880s, as briefly outlined above, and the situation in Chukotka in the 1990s. With the fall in social prestige of “Soviet ideology,” and then the collapse of the ideology itself, Native communities began searching for a new identity and found themselves confronted with a dilemma. Either they could return to tradition, to the beliefs of their ancestors – a tradition, one must note, that had been largely forgotten and reinterpreted (Krupnik and Vakhtin 1977, 236–52) – or they could adhere to the Soviet values, which they had mastered over the previous fifty years. (Some of these values, as I have mentioned, were not too far from traditional “aboriginal” cultural values.) The former alternative has been labeled “neo-traditionalism” (see Pika and Prokhorov 1994; see also a concise outline of the concept in Pika and Prokhorov 1996); the latter can be called, by contrast, “neo-radicalism.” Although the two alternatives would seem to represent two extremes, in fact both are versions of the same “search for a new identity,” and both seek such an identity in tradition, although these traditions may be different.

In this situation, a significant percentage of the Native population of Chukotka, especially younger people, have chosen “a third alternative:” the new religion offered by the Pentecostal congregation, a group whose leaders set a very clear boundary between “true religion” and “pagan beliefs.” For these young people, the “Pentecostal option” probably represents a way of avoiding (or perhaps reconciling) the two alternatives, because both eventually meet in the concept of “tradition.” For these young people, the “Pentecostal option” offers a chance to break away from tradition, whether sanctioned by the ancestors, by Orthodox priests, or by the Bolsheviks.

The situation in today’s Chukotka is, in a way, similar to the one that existed in “Russian America” by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Of two



options – the state-supported (Calvinism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Orthodoxy or Bolshevism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) and the traditional (the culture of the ancestors in both cases) – people choose a third option: Orthodoxy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Pentecostal sect in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The two chosen options have probably been favored for similar reasons: they (a) stand in opposition to both the state-supported and the traditional ways, and (b) support a double identity (or support two conflicting identities simultaneously).

If this is so, then what is it that positions these two favored options in between the other two and makes them suitable for the cause? Is the practice of the Pentecostal congregation indeed so different from the traditional practices and beliefs of the Native population, as the leaders of the sect like to argue? Is the break with the “old life pattern” indeed so abrupt? What is there in the Pentecostal congregation’s religious practices and beliefs that makes this brand of Christianity so appealing for filling the ideological vacuum – more appropriate, in fact, than the “tradition of the ancestors”? Is there really an unbridgeable gap between this particular version of Christianity and the traditional beliefs and practices of the Native peoples of the Far North? Or is Pentecostalism perhaps regarded, paradoxically, as yet another version of the same old, and familiar, “shamanistic” tradition? I will leave these questions unanswered, because any definite answer will be less interesting, and more obvious, than the process of thinking that attempts to find such an answer.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I would like to offer a couple of unsystematic observations and ideas that, unfortunately, do not fall into a pattern, but may be useful for further research.

Many Russians in the North have seen parallels between their beliefs and the beliefs of the shamans. In eastern Siberia and in Alaska, when Russians fell sick, they often sent for local shamans. The reverse was equally common: Natives would often send for a priest in a similar situation (cf., among many others, Bogoraz 1899, 123). In the 1930s, for example, several Yukagirs (an eastern Siberian Native group) came to a Gulag concentration camp to “borrow” a priest because somebody was sick in their village (Black 1992).

On the other hand, many Native people today interpret Christianity according to the Soviet model. For instance, in the Chukchi village of Lavrentia there is a man who calls himself a priest although he is not even baptized. When asked directly to name his denomination, he timidly

answered that he really saw no differences between them and “liked them all.” He somehow feels “responsible” for all denominations, be it Orthodox, Pentecostal, or other. Evgeniy Golovko, from whose field notes I have borrowed this charming example, rightly asks: Doesn’t this resemble the position of a Soviet “secretary for ideology” of a local Party Committee? (Evgeniy Golovko, 1997, personal communication).

Let me also refer to a stimulating paper by Eve Levin analyzing the concept of “double belief,” or, in Russian, *dvoeverie* (Levin 1993). She argues that the “conflict model of *dvoeverie*,” or “two-sided model,” – that is, a position in accordance with which *dvoeverie* came to signify conflict between two different religious systems, whether conscious or unconscious – is not fully adequate (pp. 32, 33). She states, quite correctly, that “the emphasis on conflict has distorted the evidence [...] The concept of *dvoeverie* demanded that scholars attempt to sort out what is pagan from what is Christian, leaving no room for overlap between the two systems, or for the development of beliefs that draw on both pagan and Christian concepts.” (p. 36) Instead, she suggests an approach in which “popular and elite religions overlap more than they conflict,” and “religious influences can move in both directions.” (p. 40) *Dvoeverie* is, according to Levin, a useful concept free of pejorative connotations, one that simply means “the conscious and deliberate practice of Christianity and paganism by the same person” (p. 46).

Eve Levin is not alone when she writes this way. Similar ideas can be found in works by Yuri Slezkine (1993), as well as in various ethnographic works on Siberia, from the old (cf. Bakhrushin 1927, 34ff.) to the most recent. In her dissertation about the life of the village of Sireniki in 1990, the same village I mentioned above, Anna Kerttula (1997, 122) cites numerous illustrations of the thesis that “In Sireniki, Orthodoxy, socialism, and Native beliefs [...] are syncretized.”

This brings us back to the village where we started. In 1993 I had a chance to watch a video recording of a rite of the Pentecostal congregation in the village, and I was startled by the obvious resemblance of the service to a shamanistic séance. Rhythmical shouts; ecstatic and stalwart dancing; the audience anticipating a healing effect as the result of the whole show – all this virtually replicated if not an authentic shamanistic performance then at least the popular perception of how such a performance should appear.

I would like to repeat that all these unsystematic observations do not, and are not expected to, answer the questions formulated earlier. Still, I think that certain resemblances between Native traditions, Orthodox Christianity, and the practices of old and modern religious sects, together

with the powerful concept of double identity, may help to explain the enormous popularity of new religions in the Far North. This popularity cannot be explained merely by declaring the (obvious) existence of a spiritual vacuum left by the collapse of Soviet ideology. After all, it is not enough to say that a belief has filled the vacuum; the question is, why this particular belief was chosen by people for that purpose.

## Notes

- 1 On the history of Pentecostalism, see: Synan (1997) and Grant (1997 [1931], 159–88).
- 2 This fieldwork was part of a joint project directed by Dr. Piers Vitebsky, Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, in which I participated together with Dr. Igor Krupnik, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- 3 Codeswitching and code-mixing – conversational strategies in which the speaker alternatively uses more than one language or more than one language variety within the same stretch of speech. This is done for various purposes (metaphorical, situational, conversational a. o.).

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