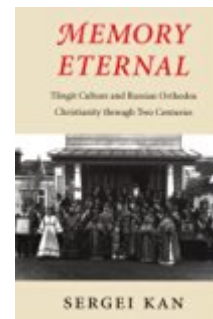


Sergei Kan. *Memory Eternal: Tlingit Culture and Russian Orthodox Christianity Through Two Centuries.* Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1999. 696 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-295-97806-2.



Reviewed by Olga Tsapina

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Memory Eternal is a groundbreaking book that cuts across many themes: the history of Russian America, Alaska's indigenous peoples, the Russian Orthodox Church, and popular religion. A result of twenty years of study of the Native American cultures of southeastern Alaska, Kan's book is a thoroughly researched, innovative, and truly interdisciplinary study that successfully combines methods of history, anthropology, and social science.

The book exceeds the somewhat limited scope of a history of Christian missions in the New World, which often tends to underrepresent or even neglect the Indian side of the story. Kan refuses to treat the Tlingit as merely a casualty, (or beneficiary), of the "civilizing" effort of missionaries and politicians. Contrary to the conventional image of Native Americans as passive recipients of Europeans' "pacification," "edification," or "enlightenment," Kan treats Tlingit as "conscious historical actors" who determined their own destiny, sometimes concurring with the newcomers, and sometimes going against their policies.

The modern Native cultures have been often dismissed as not "authentic" enough to be worthy of study. Instead the emphasis has been made on the "original" or "pre-contact" traits of Native American culture, and studies of Indian Christianity were designed to recover the kernel of traditional beliefs and customs from the superficial coating of religious and cultural values imposed by Europeans. Kan's work is a study of Native American Christianity as indigenous cultural system, which eventually became one of the main components of Tlingit ethnic identity.

The core of the research is the era between the late 1870s and the late 1910s. However, Kan recreates the two hundred years of ethnohistory of Tlingit-Orthodox relations in its entirety, from the first contact to the present day. Kan's interdisciplinary approach, founded on complex analysis of numerous written accounts (the list of written sources includes records of the Alaska Russian Church archives, Russian American Company, journals and letters of Orthodox and Presbyterian missionaries, reports of the Russian and American officials, materials of the Presbyterian mis-

sions, etc.), visual materials and artifacts, and results of his own extensive field study of Tlingit oral history, has produced very impressive results.

The book tells the story of the evolution of Tlingit Orthodoxy as an indigenous cultural system, created by Native Americans rather than imposed by the missionaries, a result of a dialogue rather than "influence." This cultural system was rooted in the Orthodox theology, Russian popular religion shared with the Tlingit by ordinary Russians, and the Tlingit's own traditions. Thus, Orthodox rites reinforced the traditional Tlingit rituals, expressing them in Christian terms and metaphors. Kan thoroughly examines the Tlingit Orthodox cosmology, ideas of divine beings, power of prayer and sacred objects, communion, forgiveness (an especially difficult concept to comprehend), the role of women, Church organization and hierarchy, and ideas of death and afterlife. At the same time, he successfully avoids the temptation to interpret Tlingit Orthodoxy as a new, syncretized religion. He shows that Tlingit Christianity does not deviate from the dogma or liturgical canon of the Eastern Orthodoxy, but rather creates its own, national version.

The story of the evolution of this remarkable phenomenon makes for riveting reading. Kan follows Tlingit-Orthodox relations from the first contacts with Russian explorers and traders, the years of Russian rule (1790s-1867), the sale of Alaska and establishment of American rule, challenges of the Progressive era, World Wars, and the civil rights movement. The history of Tlingit Orthodoxy unravels against a backdrop of social, political, and cultural history of Alaska and its Native peoples. (One wishes, however, that the story of the Alaskan mission were also presented in a broader context of history of Russian Orthodox missions to the indigenous peoples of Siberia, Central Asia, Far East, as well as Chinese and Japanese missions.)

Since the first encounter with Europeans, Tlingit were willing and even eager to contact newcomers. However, they always regarded themselves as the sole rightful owners of the land, and insisted that all transactions be made on their own terms. They were especially persistent in being treated with "respect," the most valued element of Tlingit morality.

Russians, who were interested primarily in fur trading rather than exploiting the land, did not attempt to disturb the Tlingit subsistence economy or social traditions. Russian colonization policy, forged during the conquest of Siberia, tended to rely on collaboration with local Native leaders and utilizing local social and cultural infrastructures. The Tlingit interpreted this practice as "respect." However, any infringement of the Tlingit territorial rights, or any signs of "disrespect" produced immediate and at times harsh retaliation. The fear of Tlingit resistance made the Russian government refrain from forceful measures. As a result, during Russian rule, the foundations of the indigenous culture and social order, including Tlingit independence, remained largely intact. Although relations between Russians and Tlingit were far from idyllic, both cultures managed to establish a viable symbiosis that lasted until the sale of Alaska in 1867.

The same type of relations was established between the Tlingit and Russian missionaries. The missionary drive of the Russian Orthodox Church was much more modest than that of the Catholic and Protestant missions. The first missions started to work in the last decades of the eighteenth century, when moderation and patience in dealing with the "heathens" became the official course of the Holy Synod. Russian missionaries were cautious about meddling in secular affairs and undermining local leaders, be it Russian-American Company managers or Tlingit headmen.

Certain aspects of the Orthodox theology and missionary practice facilitated their reception by the Tlingit. The Orthodox traditions of mourning

and commemorating the dead seemed the most attractive to the Native people, with their traditional emphasis on veneration of ancestors. The most noticeable trait of the Orthodox missionary practice was the use of vernacular in preaching and later in portions of the liturgy. Russian missionaries tended to utilize the indigenous beliefs and interpret them in Christian terms. Many of the Russian missionaries were dedicated and learned clerics who were genuinely interested in the local culture. Prior to becoming Innokentii, first bishop of the Alaska diocese, the priest Ivan Veniaminov was a skillful and dedicated preacher and a quite perceptive anthropologist who had worked among the Aleuts and Tlingit in 1823-1838. Although Orthodox preachers were generally tolerant towards the local customs, this tolerance did not amount to promoting a syncretized Orthodoxy. Thus, Veniaminov simply believed that temporary concessions to "heathen" customs was nothing but a way to gradually attract them to Christianity. As a result of this policy, the first decades of proselytizing did not change the authentic Tlingit religious system.

This uneasy balance was tipped with the arrival of the "Boston Men." Unlike the Russians, who were concerned primarily with extracting the region's fur, the Americans were eager to explore all of its resources. American missionaries, with their emphasis on eradicating the "old customs" and instilling Christian and American values, also differed from their Orthodox counterparts.

The Presbyterian missionary drive in Alaska, inspired by the Rev. Sheldon Jackson, operated on the assumption that the subsistence economy and traditional ways of life were "primitive," inferior to the American economy and values, and, therefore, doomed. However, like their Orthodox predecessors, some Presbyterian missionaries, such as John Brady, saw certain affinity between the Tlingit way of life and American values. Whereas the Orthodox preachers were unhappy about the

"materialism" of the Tlingit, Brady saw it as a substantial advantage that, together with their sedentary way of life, would help them embrace American values. The authorities concurred with the Presbyterian missionaries in their optimistic views of the Tlingit acquisitiveness as a way to incorporate them in "civilized" world.

The well-meaning missionaries used rather drastic means in their relentless effort to incorporate "uncivilized" Indians into "Christian society." The co-educational boarding school for the Natives known as the Sheldon Jackson Institute, the Sitka Industrial School, or the Sitka Training School was one of the most important and effective innovations. Although the school provided excellent education in the "three Rs," the classroom instruction and sermons explicitly condemned all aspects of native culture and life, going as far as making students wash their mouths after speaking their Native tongue.

Despite these, at times heavy-handed, encroachments on their traditions and the increasing Native involvement in the market economy, the Tlingit retained the earlier ambivalent views of Americans. Even in the turn of the twentieth century, despite all outward appearances of having been fully "civilized" and, perhaps thanks to this ostentatious compliance with the White man's standards, the Tlingit retained a great deal of social, political, and cultural independence. In fact, they continued to "tolerate Americans as a necessary evil" (p. 280). Kan shows that the rise in Tlingit interest in Christianity and education in 1870's was essentially an indigenous movement, an endeavor to help the Tlingit adjust to and benefit from the presence of the powerful newcomers. In fact, it was the Tlingits' willingness to be included in the world of the White man, motivated by the desire to be treated with "respect" that was the key element of success of the Presbyterian missions.

Although the Tlingit, especially the younger generation, understood the advantages of a Pres-

byterian education, they were becoming increasingly resentful about the absence of the "respect" they had established with the Russians. The "lack of respect" from the Presbyterian missionaries and educators eventually resulted in their shift towards the Russian Orthodox Church in Sitka and several other northern Tlingit communities in 1880-90's.

The story of the rivalry between the increasingly impoverished and understaffed Russian Orthodox and the well-financed Presbyterian missions is one of the most fascinating stories of the book. It seemed that at first the Orthodox Church was doomed to lose. In the first years after the sale of Alaska it became obvious the influence of Russian Orthodoxy was rather superficial. The Russian Orthodox mission was despised as "foreign," while the Presbyterians enjoyed wide support of the authorities, especially in the first decade of American rule. The Presbyterians, putting the traditional Protestant anti-Catholicism to the good use, accused the Russian Orthodox mission of promoting superstition, idolatry, and even making new converts "swear allegiance to the emperor of Russia" (p. 236). The Russian priests, increasingly frustrated that government money went to finance the Presbyterian boarding school (thus putting the impoverished parish school at an obvious disadvantage), responded in kind, attacking the Presbyterian preachers as "sectarians." Kan demonstrates that, although both missions regarded Tlingit as "children" and objects of their "enlightening" endeavors, they in fact, were "shrewd manipulators of the two missions," and sometimes even played one mission against another.

Despite all these obvious disadvantages, the Russian Orthodox enjoyed growing popularity among the Tlingit. Of course, the fact that the Russian Orthodox mission had been part of Tlingit life since the late 1700's was one of the most obvious factors behind this success. The richness of the Orthodox ritual and especially the tradition of

the commemoration of the dead seemed more attractive to the Tlingit faithful, especially when compared with "plain" worship of the Presbyterians. However, the main cause was the Tlingits' growing dissatisfaction with the Presbyterian missions. The Presbyterians' insistence on eradicating all "old customs" inevitably resulted in the alienation of the majority of the Tlingit. In the Orthodox Church they "could be both "civilized" and respectable, but also largely independent" (p. 239).

As Kan points out, the Sitka Tlingit found themselves in a unique situation when they had a choice between two different versions of Christianity. Presbyterianism offered "much greater material benefits and a quicker assimilation in the dominant society," while offering a "style of worship that did not make much sense" to the Tlingit (pp. 237-8). Orthodoxy, on the other hand, guaranteed neither material benefits nor quick acceptance by the mainstream society, but offered a style of worship consonant with Tlingit traditional spirituality. In the end, however, "Orthodoxy promised less but delivered more." The most important promise was "respect." For instance, an Orthodox priest, while encouraging elaborate funeral processions, did not shy away from attending the post-funeral memorial feasts in the village, something that his Presbyterian rivals blasted as "paganism." Albeit grudgingly, Russian and Creole godparents felt obligated to visit their Tlingit godchildren's homes, attend their weddings and funerals, and host them at Christmas and Easter parties.

Russians' and Creoles' increasing disaffection with the mother Church also contributed to the "Tlingitization" of Orthodoxy by the turn of the twentieth century. Some Russian priests, such as Fr. Vladimir Donskoi, regarded the Tlingit, despite their "pagan customs," as much better Christians than Russians and Creoles, whose faith he dismissed as formal and superficial and whose souls had sunk in cynicism, moral corruption, and even "freethinking." The main reason for the falling out

of Russians and Creoles with the Orthodox Church was traditional prejudice against Native Americans. This prejudice substantially exacerbated after the sale of Alaska, when Russians and Creoles strove to move up the social ladder and find their place among the White Americans by dissociation from the "uncivilized" Indians and the "Tlingit" Orthodox Church.

The Orthodox Church played an important role in the establishment of Native American brotherhoods. Thus Fr. Anatolii Kamenskii countered the Presbyterian model of the complete assimilation of the Tlingit as the only path to social and economic "progress" with his own outline of social reform based on the importance of Native "communes," similar to the Russian peasant communes. In 1896, following a long tradition of sixteenth and seventeenth century Orthodox brotherhoods established to combat the Catholic influence in Ukraine, he founded the St. Michael's Society of Temperance and Mutual Aid. Kan convincingly demonstrates, despite Kamenskii's designs, that the brotherhood promoted its own agenda of trying to assert the status of Tlingit Orthodox by successfully competing with the Creole Orthodox brotherhood and the Tlingit Presbyterians.

The growth and proliferation of the brotherhoods continued after Kamenskii's departure. Kan's skillful analysis of the composition of two Orthodox sodalities in Sitka proves their affiliation with the respective Native American clans. In both sodalities, women played a key role that often corresponded with their role in traditional ceremonial and social culture. These brotherhoods, initiated by the Church for the purpose of fighting "old customs," evolved into Native social institutions, largely independent of the Church. In the aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, when the Church was growing increasingly weak, these brotherhoods became the principal agent in fostering Orthodoxy among the Tlingit.

The main proof of the strength of Tlingit Orthodoxy as a cultural system is the remarkable

story of its survival between 1917 and 1967. The crisis started by the Bolshevik revolution and Russian Civil War was followed by the challenges of the World War II and the movement for the civil rights for the Native peoples of southeastern Alaska. The late 1960s were marked by the Tlingit political and ideological revival. One of Kan's consultants describes the late 1960s as the dawn of the era "in which it was all right to be Native" (p. 523). Kan demonstrates that the revival of Orthodoxy, by now a truly indigenous religion, has been an important part of national and cultural revival.

For centuries Eastern Orthodoxy has been the defining element of Slavic ethnic identity. Kan's book offers a unique insight in a non-Slavic and non-European version of Orthodoxy. *Memory Eternal* is indispensable not only for historians of Alaska, Native American cultures or Russian Orthodox missions. It is an important contribution to studies of history and sociology of popular Christianity and relationship between native beliefs and Eastern Orthodoxy. It is hoped that discussions of Kan's thorough, highly informative, innovative and luminously written research will open new venues for comparative studies of religion of Native peoples of the Russian Empire, as well as of "double faith" (dvoeverie) of the Russian peasants.

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