

Knowledge of Native Elders - *Alfred Stepezin*
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Summary by Jackie Bisbee

#5

Today Alfred spoke about the Aleut people, their religion, and the Russian influence on their religion.

The Aleut people did not practice a religion as some other tribes did. They believed in a "higher being," and they anticipated the "coming of their maker," but the Aleuts never had idols or built statues as symbols of their beliefs.

Over the period of 100 years as the Russians came, hunters, lay people, and officers of the ships began baptizing the Aleut people. Entire villages were baptized for the Russians' convenience so they could marry Aleut women, but also so the Russians could be comfortable and accepted within the villages. The Aleut people accepted baptism to the Russian Orthodox Church as the religion they had been waiting for.

Given the earlier influences, by the time the priests and missionaries came and started giving the Aleuts the sacraments and introducing the rules of organized religion the Aleut people had long accepted the Orthodox religion as their own.

"The Orthodox Church stands first in the life of the Aleut even before his culture; he let his culture die but he would not let his religion die."

The Aleuts left their pagan singing and dancing, and they used their voices "to praise the Lord in their own language"; this practice continues today.

Aleut men who carved masks, tools, and implements of war took their talents and put them into carving ornaments for the church. Lydia Black's book about Aleut art illustrates some examples of Aleut carvings that are found in the church at Unalaska.

"The Unalaska church is the oldest Orthodox church (standing structure) in the United States, it was built in 1825. Alfred spent two years at a seminary in Pennsylvania to learn more about his religion, and he is a sub-deacon in his church.

Alfred stated that the generation of people who were children during the WWII internment "grew up to be the least religious group" of the Aleut people. A young priest came to Unalaska, for a time, influenced those young people and brought them back to the church, but when he was withdrawn from Unalaska and sent to Japan that group of people became discouraged and lost interest in the church again.

Alfred told us about some of the Aleut taboos such as, a man should "never be near his wife the night before a hunt."

Furthermore, during menses a wife or daughter were prohibited from being near hunting gear and the house of a hunter. Alfred stated that in Orthodox practice there are similar beliefs: "a woman who has given birth cannot enter the church for 40 days," and when a girl reaches puberty she is not allowed to enter the church for 80 days ("at the end of her second period, then she can enter the church").

Alfred said "Orthodoxy to the Aleut is their life; they live by it," and still today when a man goes hunting he makes sure it is not a church holiday or the eve of a church holiday, and "he is very careful that he prays before he goes on his hunt."

In answer to questions Alfred talked about going to school at Wrangell Institute, and about the fishing industry at Unalaska. At first when Alfred went away to school it was because he had no choice; going to school was forced on them, but after a while he wanted to go and wanted the education. Alfred said the majority of the students attended because they wanted to, and now many of those people are the native leaders of today. Regarding the fishing industry at Unalaska, Alfred said there are canneries that operate year around processing the seasonal catches, and he added "Unalaska doesn't sit idle like it did" in the past.