

Report on a voyage in the Aleutian Islands Stepan Cherepanov (1762)

Russian fur trappers and traders began colonizing Alaska in the 1700s. In the report from which this selection comes, Russian trader Stepan Cherepanov describes an exploratory voyage he made from Russia's Pacific coast, eastward into the Aleutian Islands. By the time Cherepanov made this voyage, indigenous peoples of the Aleutians had been interacting with Russian visitors for close to two decades. In his account of Aleut culture, Cherepanov highlights what he perceives as a parallel between Aleut religion and Christian practice, and he recounts how an Aleut came to request Christian baptism.

After preparing stores of dried sea cow meat and fat, we set sail on June 2, heading east-southeast until we reached the Aleutian Islands on June 26, where, stopping, we hunted sea otters on the island called Ottaku, which is about one hundred versts long and twenty versts wide. [...]

On that island live foreigners called Aleuts. There are two other islands nearby, one at a distance of about forty versts and the other about twenty versts; not large, one somewhat more than twenty versts long and the other fifty or less, both very narrow; unforested, with low stony mountains. On all those islands, there live up to forty males of the aforementioned Aleuts, with a greater number of females. The men have one, two, sometimes three wives; toions^a might have up to four. They live in earthen yurts, like those of the Kamchadals,^b which they enter from the top; they live in their yurts in groups of two or three, or alone; there is one large yurt in which their toion lives with his close relations. [...]

We could not tell whether they professed any faith, nor did we see any shamanism. They have chiefs, like the toions of the Kamchadals, whom they obey. I did not observe among them punishment for any offense, but I learned that if their toion was angered by some fault of one of his intimates, they would, for some time, not speak to one another; otherwise there appears to be no punishment among them. The people treat each other affectionately.

During the winter, they live in the abovementioned yurts; during the summer, they have no fixed dwelling but roam all around the island, hunting. Wherever one is successful in his hunting, he stays there; when he can catch nothing, he moves on, living off shellfish washed ashore from the sea.

For clothing, they wear parkas sewn from the guts of sea lions and from the skin of a bird called *uril*. They make shoes from the throats of sea lions, with flippers for soles. In the wintertime, when it becomes very cold, they wear coverings of woven grass over their clothes of bird skin.

These people greatly enjoy Russian provisions, including clothing, several items of which our party bestowed on them as gifts. We did not provide gifts of foodstuffs, because our supplies

^a *toion* = an indigenous leader

^b *Kamchadals* = an indigenous people of eastern Russia

were limited; but whenever we ate, we never failed to share with the Aleuts, as a result of which they came to regard us as their particular friends.

We did not recognize among them a faith beyond what any decent person believes. They live and do everything simply. When we Russians set out on some business and call on the name of the Lord God for his aid and blessing, or when we sail out in our baidaras^c to go hunting, everyone observes silence and then, calling on God's aid and entrusting ourselves to his mercy, says, "God help us"; these foreigners also, before hunting, pray, "God bless." Similarly, before setting out in their baidaras, they all observe silence and say the same thing we do: "God help us."

They understand quite well the Orthodox Christian faith, and they do not doubt that there is truth in us because of a remarkable manifestation, through faith, of what was clearly the blessing of God, namely: In the year 1761, the foreigner Leontii (about whom more will be said farther down), who has since traveled here, was then at home, gravely ill because of a wound on his arm, so severe that the bone was visible. Everyone despaired, thinking it was impossible that he could survive; he could not raise himself up unless lifted by others. But Leontii's father, whose name is Makuzhan, came to our ship and said that his son wanted to be baptized, thinking that thus he might recover, to which we responded that he should have hope, because our God is great and quick to bestow his grace on one who calls on him with faith. To that, Makuzhan replied, "If your God is good, then my son will recover," and so he was enlightened by holy baptism, which he received from the company of the ship of the Lalskii merchant Vasilii Popov, who in 1761 was at that island. As soon as he had been baptized, he showed clear and excellent improvement, and he recovered. Then Leontii's father Makuzhan, rejoicing, told us, "Your God is very good," meaning "great."

^c *baidara* = a boat made by covering a frame with animal skins

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