

The Aleuts and the Pacific Eskimo in the colonial economy of Russian Alaska in the mid 19th century

Marcus Lepola
(*Åbo Akademi University, Turuk, Finland*)

Abstract

Native labor practices are an important dimension of colonialism. By the mid 19th century the Russian American Company had implemented forced labor practices on the “Aleut” population for a long time and also effectively restricted and forced native mobility along the Alaskan, and even along the Californian coastline. There seems to be a shift in labor practices and some tendency to diversification of labor among the native population from 1819 onward to the end of the Russian era in Alaska in 1867. In this paper I will attempt to look more closely on labor mobility and economic practices among the colonized natives and reflect on the general impact the colonial economic structures had on the Aleut and Pacific Eskimo societies. I also attempt to assert that there is a difference in how the Aleut and Pacific Eskimo participated Russian colonial economy. Sitka as a permanent residential of native workers is also discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Aleut, Pacific Eskimo, Russian Alaska, kaiur, baidarka, Sitka, colonialism, colonial economy, fur hunting, RAC.

Introduction

The Russian Empire had a foothold on the North American continent for almost a century and included mainland Alaska, the

Aleutian, Pribilof and Commander and Kurile Islands, temporary settlement in California and Hawaii, and eventually even Sakhalin. To most Russians Alaska was even more remote than Siberia but due to its distant location Russia was for almost half a century a powerful rival of Great Britain, Spain and the United States for the control of the abundant resources of the Northwest Coast. The Russian colonies required people of every profession and trade, and so attracted people from across the large empire, especially from the areas with strong seafaring traditions such as the Baltic provinces and Finland.

The Russian occupancy of Alaska evolved from the extensive process of eastward expansion that had been launched by Muscovy in the mid-sixteenth century. Furs and weak native resistance in the Siberian tundra fueled the expansion and by 1639 Russian Cossacks and *promyshlenniki* (fur hunters) reached the Pacific. (Gibson 1976:3-6)

The explorations of the Danish-born mariner Vitus Bering triggered a phase of rapid expansion to Alaska when his second expedition to the North Pacific returned with valuable sea otter furs to Petropavlovsk. This expansion across the Pacific was spearheaded by the *promyshlenniki* who were allowed to conduct their businesses in Alaska without official governing. This resulted in ruthless and brutal treatment of the indigenous populations of Alaska, and the passive inhabitants of the Aleutian Islands suffered the most in the hands of the Russian furriers. (Ibid)

This first violent phase of Russian occupation (1743-1797) bench-marked the future relationship between the Russian masters and their Aleut subjects. The Aleuts were skilled in handling the kayak and harpoon, and the Russians needed such expertise in order to pursue the maritime fur trade. So the Aleuts were ruthlessly exploited. Half of the males between the ages of eighteen and fifty were forced to hunt under the supervision of Russian foremen while relatives were held hostage. Such

exploitation halved the Aleut population between the middle and the end of the eighteenth century. (Ibid:7-8)

The first phase of Russian occupation was followed by three other phases. The Second being the Baranov phase 1799-1819, saw the emergence of the Russian American Company (RAC) and was characterized by southward expansion – as far as California and Hawaii – in the face of stronger native opposition and growing foreign competition. New Archangel or Sitka became the new colonial capital, succeeding St. Paul’s Harbor on Kodiak (Ibid:9-23).

The third or halcyon phase 1819-39 was characterized by corporate reorganization, a reorientation of settlement northward and inland, less active native hostility, and more regulated foreign company. Subordinate and conservative colonial administration prevailed over the independent management by hard-boiled veterans (Ibid).

The last phase or the waning phase 1840-1867 was one of readjustment, contraction, diversification and deterioration. The company charter was renewed in 1841 for another twenty years. The company became more of a government institution controlled by bureaucrats and officers and even less of a commercial enterprise managed by merchants (Ibid).

This paper focuses on the role of the “Aleut” population in the colonial economy of Russian Alaska from 1819 onward during the third and fourth phases of Russian rule in Alaska. Native labor practices are an important dimension of colonialism. By the mid 19th century the Russian American Company had implemented forced labor practices on the “Aleut” population for a long time and also effectively restricted and forced native mobility along the Alaskan, and even along the Californian coastline. There seems to be a shift in labor practices and some tendency to diversification of labor among the native population from 1819 onward to the end of the Russian era in Alaska in 1867. In this paper I will attempt to look more closely on labor mobility and economic practices among the colonized natives and reflect on the general impact the

colonial economic structures had on the Aleut and Pacific Eskimo societies.

It is of special interest to compare native labor practices in the colonial capital of Sitka against the social landscape of Aleut and Pacific Eskimo culture. I also attempt to assert that there is a difference in how the Aleut and Pacific Eskimo participated Russian colonial economy. Sitka as a permanent residential place of a growing working class of “Aleuts” is also taken in to account in this study.

The Aleut and the Pacific Eskimo

The Russian term “Aleut” was a general term used for both the native population of the Aleutian Islands and their neighbors to the east, the Pacific Eskimo. The first group, the Aleuts or the Unangan as they are also called, traditionally inhabited the islands of the Aleutian archipelago, the western tip of the mainland peninsula and the Shumagin Islands (Lantis 1984:163).

The Pacific Eskimo, now termed as Alutiiq or Sugpiaq, ranged to the east of the Aleuts, along the whole coast from Kupreanof Point to Cooks inlet and Kodiak Island. The Pacific Eskimo consisted of a series of Eskimo groups; the populous Koniag inhabited Kodiak Island, The Chugach occupied Prince William Sound east to Cordova. (Clark 1984:185)

Contact between these groups in pre-Russian times was often aggressive. Inter-tribal warfare was commonplace among both groups and violence reached a critical point just before the Russian intrusion (Pierce 1978:51,123)ⁱ. The Aleut and the Pacific Eskimo resembled their Indian neighbors more than their Eskimo cousins, especially in the size and organization of the war parties and in taking high status prisoners to serve as hostages or slaves. Mistreatment of prisoners was common. Captives of war are considered a key source for cultural diffusion between these groups in pre-Russian times (Lantis 1984:177).

Both groups can be described as maritime as their settlements were along the fringes of the coast. Both groups also employed the kayak, known by the Russian designation *baidarka*, and they also developed a two-hatched version used especially in the sea otter hunt. Whales were pursued from kayaks, using poisoned spears. (Lantis 1984:175, Clark 1984:187)

Even if the vessels used by both Pacific Eskimo and Aleuts were all commonly referred to as *baidarkas*, one has to consider that these vessels are very different both in design and use. The Aleut *baidarka* is a more slender version of the wide and bulkier Pacific Eskimo model used by the Kodiak and the Chugach. The Kodiak paddlers used single bladed paddles almost exclusively and they also paddled mostly in a kneeling position, placing grasses under their knees. By comparison the Aleut sat with their legs straight in front of them and used a double bladed paddle (Zimmerly 2000:15-36). The RAC preferred to use the Pacific Eskimo model to the Aleut kayak as it was more versatile.

Most food came from the sea: whales, sea lions, fur seals, sea otters, occasional walruses. The fish were salmon, halibut, codfish, flounder, herring, sculpin; of invertebrates, chiefly sea urchins but clams, limpets, and mussels were also eaten. Birds eaten were duck and geese, occasionally cormorants and others (Lantis 1984:174-75). Land mammals were also caught, especially by the Pacific Eskimo (Clark 1984:189).

The typical Aleut house, a semi-subterranean house made of driftwood called a *barabara*, was large, containing several nuclear families, most of them related through males. A village might well be composed of kindred. The Aleut settlements were smaller and more scattered than those of the Pacific Eskimo. Sororate and levirate marriage-practices existed among both groups as well as polygamy. (Lantis 1984:176, Clark 1984:192)

Economic activities followed a natural cycle that formed a calendar for other aspects of life (Clark 1984:190). Work was gender specific, the men hunted and fished mainly from their

baidarkas and the women gathered food sources in the vicinity of the dwellings. Women cured skins and sew clothing for the men (Pierce 1978:140). Women also participated in the manufacture of the baidarkas by sewing the skins on the frames. For a single hatch Pacific Eskimo baidarka six large seal skins were necessary (Birket-Smith 1953:47).

As whole the Aleut and the Pacific Eskimo cultures resembled each other both in economic, material, social and ceremonial aspects.

The Aleut and the Pacific Eskimo did not submit themselves to Russian exploitation without struggle. As the first waves of promyslenniki hit the Alaskan panhandle they forcefully made the Aleuts and the Pacific Eskimo hunt for them. Methods of torture and random killings were also used to intimidate the Aleuts in to submission. The Aleuts and the Pacific Eskimo joined forces in 1761 in an attempt to rid themselves of the Russians and managed to hold their ground for some time until the resistance was brutally ended by the merchant Ivan Solovief in 1766 who armed a large force of promyslenniki and wrecked havoc on all the islands they encountered, brutally ending the uprising (Gibson 1980: 168-70).

The 18th century can be considered as a very violent period for the Aleuts and the Pacific Eskimo. The brutality resonated in to the 19th century under the harsh rule of governor Baranov. Accidents that affected the hunting fleets between 1798 and 1800 resulted in the deaths of over two hundred men, a huge loss for the Pacific Eskimo. The Pacific Eskimo were worn down by the arduous tasks given by the company; men were constantly hunting sea otters or gathering eggs and women constantly busy picking berries or sewing clothing, such as the *kamleikas* (spray shirts made of seal gut used by kayakers), the latter given as payment to others. (Pierce 1978:58,137,147)

Men as well as women were made to work for the company. The women had to dig sarana (yellow lily harvested for food), and pick berries in the amounts order by the Russian foremen. Those

not able to fit the quota had to buy the missing amount from others and present it to the company. The amount of labor forced on the Aleuts and Pacific Eskimo was inhumane and upheld by treats of violence and force (Ibid:140).

The natives were forced in to a closed economic system in which they were given the worst end of the deal. The Russians were in control of all materials and goods produced by the Aleut and Pacific Eskimo populations and used this system shamelessly for their own economic gain. This cruel system of exploitation did however not survive long in to the 19th century.

Early census data from 1815 and 1817 shows a total figure of 8367 Pacific Eskimo and Aleuts living scattered along the Alaskan coast, the males numbering 3960. Children are apparently not included in this census report. The exact ethnicity of the “Aleuts” is difficult to establish due to the fact that the census data is location specific. In addition the Aleut Islands and the Northern Islands (Pribilof) were a subdivision of the Kodiak department. This data suggests an Aleut population of 2239 people in comparison to a much larger Pacific Eskimo population of 6128. The largest concentration being on the island of Kodiak a total of 3252 Pacific Eskimo (Dmytryshyn, Crownhart-Vaughan 1976:16). Native women also intermarried with Russian colonials and their offspring became the creoles (children of mixed decent) of Russian Alaska.

A series of epidemics continued to ravage Aleut and Pacific Eskimo populations in the early part of the century, the worst epidemic being the small pox scourge of 1835-1838 which led to a 25 percent fatality rate among the natives. The “Aleut” population dropped from 7000 to 4000 in just few years time. This fact in combination with the constant shortage of European workers at the colony led to a growing demand for native workforce and natives and creoles received education locally. (Gibson 1976:46-7)



Illustration of men's and women's dress, Aleutian Islands, ca. 1820 from Choris, Louis. *Voyage pittoresque autour du monde*, ch. 7, pl. 9. Paris, Impr. de Firmin Didot, 1822.

The Aleut and Pacific Eskimo as laborers in the colonial economy

The backbone of the Russian colonial economy was the lucrative trade in sea otter furs. The main goal of the RAC was to make profit, and as previously mentioned the sea otter skins were the most profitable. As the RAC became more organized the company became more focused on administrative control of available resources and distribution within the Alaskan area. The hunting fleets are a key part of this colonial distribution system as these wide scale operations required a developed colonial labor

system in which the Pacific Eskimo and Aleut societies had to be involved as whole.

Hundreds of Pacific Eskimo as well as some Aleut men annually partook in the extensive hunting-expeditions organized by the company. Feeding the population was also an ongoing issue and all economic exploits involving the colonial natives had to be seasonally adjusted so that partaking hunters were able to return home in time to catch salmon for their families. For this reason the season only lasted for the summer, from May to August. The salmon runs, an important food resource, start in June and last until September. If there was a shortage of fish the RAC had to supply the Aleut and the Pacific Eskimo populations with expensive imported food. (Dmytryshyn, Crownhart-Vaughan 1976:53-55)

The hunts organized by the company were fairly large undertakings, usually two ships were required to transport the parties to the hunting grounds, between 1818 and 1825, 55-100 baidarkas took part in the hunts. The southwestern coast of Alaska was prime hunting grounds for the fleet. The Aleutian Islands were not included in these large scale hunts. (Pierce 1978:56).

The large hunting fleets were divided in to village parties consisting of five to ten baidarkas, who hunted in designated areas (Ibid:138). As a sea otter was spotted it was surrounded and the party dispatched harpoons at it. As it got wounded by one or several harpoons it had to surface more often until finally overcome by its wounds. Sea otters were caught by the hundreds during the early 19th century but the stock gradually diminished. For instance the RAC records show that 109 large otters were taken in 1820 and only 51 skins in 1829. (Dmytryshyn, Crownhart-Vaughan 1976:35,140)ⁱⁱ

Single Aleut hunting parties of 10-14 men and 5-7 baidarkas were transported east as far as Kamchatka with company ships in the spring to hunt on uninhabited islands until autumn. The only rations they were left with besides their hunting gear of arrows and

spears was some tea and sugar. Prevailing weather conditions sometimes made it difficult to retrieve these parties and one group of 12 Atka Aleuts had been left stranded on the Island of Buldyr for three years. (Sahlberg 2007:246)

The fleets were supervised and led by Russian hunters, the *baidarshchiks*. The village toion was responsible for gathering and distributing provisions for the village party. Hunters could draw necessary supplies on account when being sent out. The supplies cost from 10 to 30 rubles per baidarka. The amount was deducted from the profit of the hunt. Many hunters chose not to buy supplies for the hunt in order to receive full payment. The payment for furs varied from year to year but as a rule the contracted hunters received no less than a fifth of the amount that promyshlenniks received. A large sea otter pelt was worth 10 rubles to the native hunters. In addition to this each two-man baidarka received 6 lavtaks, 2 whale gut kamleikas, 7 pounds of whale whiskers for tying and whale sinew for sewing as well as some whale-oil for water-proofing. (Dmytryshyn, Crownhart-Vaughan 1976:51, 52)

The Pacific Eskimo living or dwelling on the mainland of Katmai peninsula supplemented the colonial winter diet with mountain sheep which they hunted from November to May. At Sitka halibut and cod fishing provided additional work opportunities for the “Aleut” living in the colony (Dmytryshyn, Crownhart-Vaughan 1976:99). The surplus catch was sold for monetary compensation to the Russians.

As rule the kayaks used during the summer hunting season were the property of the company and the company was dependent on the skills of the Aleut and the Pacific Eskimo in order to maintain them in working order.

The Aleutians lived in smaller, more scattered communities compared to the more centralized Pacific Eskimo and their range was also more stretched across the islands in the Aleutian archipelago. The Aleuts posed a logistical problem for the

company since there was no way of gathering enough hunters from the islands and returning them in time from the sea otter hunts along the South Alaskan coast. In this case the company would have had to provide for both the family and the hunter during the winter. Kodiak was much more central and the population density was higher. Furthermore the sheer difference in kayak-design between the Aleut and the Pacific Eskimo posed another practical issue. As mentioned earlier the kayak models were considerably different and mixing these types would have posed many practical problems for the RAC.

Most of the hides or *lavtaks* for the baidarkas were likely secured at the breeding grounds on the Islands of St. Paul and St. George (Luehrmann 2008:86). Accounts tell of as many as 120-150 000 sea lions being killed annually on these islands. This was done by means of clubbing and Aleuts were employed for these duties by the company (Sahlberg 2007:217-218). Hides as well as fat were important raw materials for the maintenance of the large company controlled baidarka fleet.

It seems that economic and practical circumstances almost entirely excluded the Aleuts from active participation in the large hunting fleets. The Aleuts became more engulfed in harvesting the fur-seal rookeries on the Aleutian Islands (Simpson 1847:130-31).

The overall Aleut contribution to the large southern hunting fleet was the supply of raw materials for kayak construction and maintenance. The Aleut were involved in more small scale hunting expeditions closer to home, harvesting rookeries or stationed on uninhabited islands looking for occasional sea otters during the summer months. The colonial economic system introduced the Aleut and Pacific Eskimo societies to a monetary economy and a growing amount of European goods. The harvest of natural resources was overseen and controlled by the RAC and the surplus was distribution within the Alaskan colonies and settlements.

Pacific Eskimos and Aleuts as inhabitants and workers in Sitka

Peoples' identities in colonial settings were often associated with the jobs they performed, which varied from unskilled manual laborers and domestic servants to semiskilled or skilled crafts persons, artisans, agricultural specialists, and managerial staff (Lightfoot 2004:26). The town of Sitka – Novo Archangelsk in the middle of the 19th century was the economic center and the largest colony in Russian Alaska. The town consisted mostly of Russian style wooden houses. The larger streets were covered by planks, but for most part the streets were muddy and wet due to heavy rain fall. The Governor's Mansion was the most dominant building in town, even larger than the Orthodox Church. An armed stockade separated the town from the adjacent Tlingit settlement. There was a strict social hierarchy in place among all the colonists and this system was directly linked to occupational categories and salary levels of the RAC.

The European population was divided in roughly two main social categories based on rank and salaries. All Europeans were contracted employees of the company and in theory could return home when their contract was fulfilled. Even if salaries in Alaska were considered high, the cost of living was higher still since most things had to be imported. Many workers belonging to the lower social category soon found themselves deeply indebted and thus unable to pay for their voyage back home which left them stranded at the mercy of the company. Only employees that received higher salaries were able to return home. (Sahlberg 2007:211)

European and Russian RAC officials and their family members viewed their stay in Sitka as a temporary arrangement for earning money and prestige in contrast with the lower workers who became trapped in Alaska for an indefinite period of time.

The colonies were dependent on imported goods as provisions were constantly in short supply and prices soared.

Competition with the American and British traders forced the company to diversify its economy. Farming, fishing, lumbering, mining and shipbuilding became more important sources for revenue as the fur trade gradually declined (Gibson 1976:37-8). There were very few European women in the colonies so intermarriages between European men and indigenous women were common. In time the female offspring of these marriages, the so called “creoles” were often married to Russian men of the lower social category. As rule the children of these marriages became part of the European colony (Lepola 2002:74).

The colony was handicapped by the small number and limited skills of the Russians. Adding to this the unsavory reputation as a god forsaken wilderness at the end of the earth also discouraged immigration (Gibson 1976:47). The neighboring Tlingit had only restricted access to the colony. There was a permanent presence of Aleuts and Pacific Eskimo in Sitka due to the constant need of labor. Free native mobility was not tolerated by the company, but it is apparent that native travel between Sitka and Kodiak was made possible (Dmytryshyn, Crownhart-Vaughan 1976:104-105).

The Eskimo population in Sitka lived inside the walls of the colony, their baidarkas were needed for fishing and transportation of goods and people on a daily basis. It is very likely that the Aleut and Pacific Eskimo lived in a very close proximity to the harbor in Sitka, possibly in adjacent buildings. There is no clear indication as to segregation of the Pacific Eskimo inside the colony but Klebhnikovs reports indicate that there were three communal dwellings reserved for the “Aleuts” within the enclosure (Ibid:75,105).

As there were plentiful work-opportunities within the Russian colonial economy most Pacific Eskimo and Aleut were at least partly involved in the monetary economy. The selling of surplus catch to the Russians was most common way of earning money. The colonial situation also added a new social category to the Aleut and Pacific Eskimo societies that stabilized during the

halcyon era; the *kaiur*. The *kaiur* or the native worker is a problematic social category since the term was originally used for laborers levied by the company to work in the artels and harbors. According to Holmberg the first *kaiurs* were slaves freed from Pacific Eskimo captivity, as there was a growing need for company workers they were later recruited among natives who had “offended” the company and were thus punished with serfdom (1855: 78-9).

The salaries paid to *kaiurs* varied, in the early days of Baranov a male *kaiur* working in Sitka would only receive clothing and upkeep for his services. Later the salaries did improve and *kaiurs* received 1 ruble a day for their services (Dmytryshyn, Crownhart-Vaughan 1976:18, 51)ⁱⁱⁱ. The *kaiurs* were not a totally isolated social unit. It is likely that many Aleuts and Pacific Eskimo had worked as occasional *kaiurs* at one time, especially the women who often gathered berries, cured hides or sew clothing or baidarka skins for the company. But there was also a group of male *kaiurs* who worked full time for the company, either as hired service personnel or as free workers to the colony. These full-time *kaiurs* were not active members of the hunting fleets that were drafted from the Pacific Eskimo and Aleut settlements. Part-time *kaiurs* at Sitka took part in the seasonal hunt, provided they had access to a kayak and were in condition to handle it. (Ibid:77)

In 1825 there were some 400 men working as service personnel at Sitka, 309 of these were Russian, 58 creoles, 17 Kodiak Aleuts, 13 Fox Island Aleuts and 3 Indian Aleuts. In addition to these there were 147 non-service personell working at the colony. This group of “Aleuts” included 8 Kodiak Creoles and 129 Kodiak Aleuts (Ibid 40). The native workers made up a third of the labor force at Sitka, which is a significant number and the majority of these were Pacific Eskimo from Kodiak. These *kaiurs* checked weirs for fish in spring, prepare frames for drying fish, chopped wood, cut hay in the summer, trapped foxes in the winter and transported supplies. *Kaiurs* might also be put to work

gathering pine sap, making bricks and boiling salt in addition to other tasks they were required to do by the company. The wives of the kaiurs were also employed in many ways, processing skins, making clothing and gathering food (Pierce 1978:136-137).

These native workers were also found among the harbor workers. Most of them were stationed at the lake redoubt (Dmytryshyn, Crownhart-Vaughan 1976:40-41)^{iv}. The emerging creole-class was also employed to do the same tasks at the colonial "Aleut" but as time progressed the creoles were trained by the company for specific tasks and were given more high-paying jobs. The Pacific Eskimo and the Aleut were restricted to tasks that were more closely connected to their aboriginal skills or simple manual laborers.

There were some variations in the "Aleut" workforce at Sitka over time. In 1833 the native population at Sitka was reduced to 60 males and 76 females (Gibson 1976:18). The large number of females must suggest that not all of these women were necessarily Pacific Eskimo or Aleut, it is likely that some were of other native background that were married to Russian men. The variations within different censuses make it difficult to form an exact image of the native population in Sitka although it is apparent that there was a continuous "Aleut" presence at the Sitka during the 19th century Russian era. The Pacific Eskimo continued to make up the bulk of the native labor force at Sitka towards the middle of the 19th century (Borgå Tidning no 91, 1838).

The baidarkas manufactured in Sitka were predominately or exclusively of Pacific Eskimo type. Many of these were made by specialized Pacific Eskimo craftsmen who worked in the carpentry shops at the harbor. It is likely that this led to some standardization of the kayak model as keels and framing were made in a quick fashion that resembled an assembly line (Dmytryshyn, Crownhart-Vaughan 1976:77). The building of the baidarkas started in March at the central storage and materials to build the kayaks were provided for by the company. The kayak

laborers received a set monetary compensated for their work. (Dmytryshyn, Crownhart-Vaughan 1976:51, Sahlberg 2007:77) Traditionally each kayak was made according to the measurements of the individual builder who also was the user, but the requirements of versatility imposed by the RAC change the design of the kayak to suit most users. Later accounts from the Chugach suggest that their baidarka design did in fact change as result of Russian demands (Birket-Smith 1953:45).

Aleut and Pacific Eskimo women in Sitka were usually married to two or three husbands. This type of polygamy was known among the Russians as *polovinsbchiki* or half-timers. The men were compelled to leave their wives for several months at a time hunting sea-otters along the southern coast of Alaska and Northern California. (Dmytryshyn, Crownhart-Vaughan 1976:104-5, 111)^v

The hunters that were residents of Sitka were often assigned to catch and transport fish from the lake redoubt close to Sitka in the winter. They might instead of money receive payment in lavtaks. These they used to make their own baidarkas for use in the fall and winter for their own needs. (Ibid 1976:51)

The Pacific Eskimo or Aleut temporarily stationed at the Russian Fort Ross in California intermarried with California natives. These “Indian” spouses also learned how to make Aleut handcrafts such as whale gut kamleikas. Some male native Californians also found their way in to company service in Sitka (Lightfoot 2004:137). It is also probable that some of the native spouses also followed their husbands to the north and became integrated in to the Aleut or the Pacific Eskimo population.

Life in Sitka brought some challenges to the Pacific Eskimo living at the colony, but apparently there were benefits in living in an urban environment. The single biggest risk at Sitka were the Tlingit who apparently still considered the Pacific Eskimo as enemies which actively restricted the mobility of individual Pacific

Eskimo outside the colony as they were at risk of being attacked (Dmytryshyn, Crownhart-Vaughan 1976:101).

A skilled kaiur could get 15 rubles for building a three-man baidarka, by comparison the average pay for a hired Russian carpenter was 400 rubles a year. Repair-work on a baidarka was worth 5-10 rubles (Dmytryshyn, Crownhart-Vaughan 1976:51,80). The kaiurs received less pay than Russians for their work, on the other hand the kaiur was able to at least in part sustain himself by hunting and gathering, this was not an option for the Russian worker who had to buy all goods at high prices.

The kaiur occupation was different from traditional male occupations of the Pacific Eskimo and the Aleuts. A kaiur did not necessarily need to own his own baidarka, let alone hunt for his upkeep. Pacific Eskimo considered the baidarka and good hunting abilities as important male characteristics and a kaiur without a baidarka was ridiculed. The self image of a Pacific Eskimo male depended on being a hunter which was synonymous with owning a baidarka. One of the worst things to say to a Pacific Eskimo man was; - your father is no hunter, he has no baidarka (Zimmerly 2000:35).

The RAC had mixed views of the necessity of having kaiurs working for the company. Klebhnikov stated that the surroundings in Sitka were not suitable for the "Aleuts" and that they way of life in Sitka demanded twice as much as if they were living in their own environment. His statement probably refers to the fact that the Pacific Eskimo living in Sitka could not sustain themselves by traditional means only but also had to pay for provisions and clothes. He also concludes that alcoholism and venereal disease among the Pacific Eskimo was widespread. (Dmytryshyn, Crownhart-Vaughan 1976:105)

The traditional parkas and kamleikas of the "urbanized" Pacific Eskimo were replaced by expensive clothing made of good frieze or fine wool. The women favored printed cotton dresses.

Klebhnikov perceived this type of luxury harmful both for them as for the colony. The Pacific Eskimo working as kaiurs in Sitka enjoyed better economic benefits than their relatives back home, however the new way of life also cast a darker shadow. Alcoholism was a problem since the Pacific Eskimo were able to get alcohol through trade with foreign vessels, in addition venereal diseases were wide spread among the Pacific Eskimo resulting in infertility and a low birth rate. The Pacific Eskimo children raised in the colonial capital were also alien to the traditional lifestyle of their parents and had to fit in to the European colony (Ibid:105). The company took early steps in order to educate the children in basic skills so they could productive members of the European community (Borgå Tidning no 91 1838). It seems that the native children born in Sitka were effectively “creolized” by the company due to their inability to fit back in to the traditional society of their parents.

The kaiury cease to exist as the RAC withdrew from Alaska in 1867. The role of the kaiurs as a colonial phenomenon is therefore hard to come to terms with. Kaiurs are generally considered as workers enslaved through economic means that in theory were enslaved for life unless they were bought out or replaced by their families (Luehrmann 2008:71-72, 178). The term has not previously been extended to comprise the native colonial workforce of the 19th century even if the term was in common use even after the 1821 charter abolished the status of serfdom for the kaiurs. There was considerable development in RAC policy towards the native workers, especially during and after the halcyon era and that there was a positive shift in the status and salaries of the kaiurs. Considering the colonial situation as whole and the situation of the kaiurs was not that much worse than that of the Russian worker living in the colony. Many of the kaiurs of the mid 19th century Alaska seem to have chosen that road, at least according to the observations of Klebhnikov who stated that the free “Aleuts” living in Sitka could travel home to Kodiak to visit

relatives at their own leisure (Dmytryshyn, Crownhart-Vaughan 1976:105). This image is far from the cold and cruel reality of the Baranov phase of Russian Colonial Alaska.

The fact is that the Russians had included the Aleut and the Pacific Eskimo in a colonial system that was rooted in the feudal mindset of the time. As mentioned earlier, lower social classes such as Russian laborers were also forced to work for the company in economic servitude dependent on credit and unable to return home at their will (Lepola 2002:80-83).

In the rigid colonial hierarchy at Sitka the Pacific Eskimo and the Aleut belonged to the lowest social category. The Russian colonial hierarchy was directly connected the occupation of the colonist. As native work opportunities were restricted to unskilled laborers or part-time work they were unable attain a higher status. The emerging class of creoles was quick to fill many of the lower category positions available within the RAC and the Aleut and the Pacific Eskimo were in time successfully out-maneuvered in the colonial labor market by their Europeanized relatives. The “Aleut” population at Sitka was in a steady decline during the 19th century, the growing number of creoles and the decrease in the sea otter population were at least in part the cause for this change. Epidemics that ravage the area between 1837 and 1839 seem to have had an considerable impact on the Sitka “Aleuts” In 1860 the creole population in Sitka had risen to 505, 249 males and 256 women. The European colonists numbered 452, figures of the Aleut population at Sitka during this time is unknown (Enckell 1980:2, 27).

The effects of Russian colonial economy on Pacific Eskimo and Aleut societies

The Pacific Eskimo culture adjusted to Russian rule during the early decades of the 19th century. The impact of acculturation was at this time limited to the gradual replacement of old beliefs by

Orthodox doctrine and a growing dependency on company goods. The company did however try to limit and even discourage Aleut and Pacific Eskimo dependency on imported goods as food was scarce in the colonies (Gibson 1976:51).

The Russians were keen to keep the Aleut and the Pacific Eskimo in a semi-traditional life, even if this conflicted with the notion of the native communities receiving payment for their services. There were good reasons for why the RAC chose a more conservative approach towards them. For one there was the practical issue of supplying the population with imported grain and goods. The abilities of the Aleut and the Pacific Eskimo to sustain themselves from the land and even to contribute to the food economy of colonial Alaska was not only highly appreciated as it was in fact the backbone of the whole colonial economy and the eventual decline of the fur trade also brought an end to the Russian colonies in North America.

The Aleut and the Pacific Eskimo formed an effective hunting and fishing machinery for the company. The hunting fleet was in need of constant maintenance and the Aleuts and Pacific Eskimo were assigned to these duties by the company.

The company had a paternalistic view of the Pacific Eskimo and the Aleuts, the Finnish governor Etholén was very outspoken of his perceptions of the “Aleuts” in his letter of protest to the planned re-organization of the colonies in 1863. He considered the Aleut, by whom he also included the Pacific Eskimo, as children, irresponsible by nature and unable to manage without the guiding hand of authority. His opinions echo that of his predecessor, Baranov. They were to be protected from unnecessary commodities, from alcohol that free immigration would bring, and from the right to freely choose their own place of abode. The regulations that Etholén drew up for the village elders of Kodiak in 1841 required them to see that there were sufficient food stores for the winter, not to put out to sea in harsh weather, not to eat

rotten whale meat and frequently washing themselves in the sauna (Varjola 1990:24).

The integration of Aleut and Pacific Eskimo societies in the Russian Colonial economy had started with Baranov and elaborated further by Chief Manager Muraviev in his directives to the offices of the company in 1822-23. It was declared that the Company must maintain the inhabitants of the islands (Pacific Eskimos as well as Aleuts) in their present way of life and keep a census of the population. The islanders were considered subjects of Russia. Males between ages 18 and 50 were obligated to assist the Company in catching sea animals. Half of the male population was used for hunting on an annual basis and informed of this in the month of January. It was also stated that those selected should preferably be from a family with more than one male member so that there was a provider available for the remaining family. Islanders should be governed by their own native toions, under the supervision of elders whom were recruited from Russian service personnel. These were to settle quarrels and dissatisfactions. Disagreements between the toion and the islanders should be resolved by the administrator of the office. The toions were empowered to select which hunters were to partake in the annual hunts. (Dmytryshyn, Crownhart-Vaughan 1976:40,50)

The Elders seem closely connected to the Orthodox Church as they are often found in the same category with priests and cantors in official censuses. Holmberg states that on Kodiak in the 1850's there was a division in to ordinary and hereditary chiefs and that the company toions were elected from the latter group (1855:78).

Before Russian times an Aleut of Pacific Eskimo "chief" was the head of a village composed of kin, if there were more than one extended family in a village the leader was the one from the strongest. Wealth was important but distribution of food was also important, a successful hunter would give food to others on three principles: obligation to relatives or partners, payment for loan of

supplies and generosity towards less fortunate (Lantis 1984:176-77, Clark 1984:193).

The imposed toion-institution further empowered single chiefs and centralized power on a village level. The new system also channeled wealth to some toions as a few strong leaders were able to manipulate the colonial economic-system for their own gain. The toion Deduchin on the Island of Amlia of the Aleutian Islands was described as a caring leader of 350 Aleuts and considered a wealthy man. He was described as presenting himself always clothed in a bird-skin parka with a sea otter-fur liner. He received all the goods his subjects collected, but in turn he had to cloth and feed them (Sahlberg 2007:247). The use of sea-otter for native clothing was banned by the RAC regulations so the fact that Deduchin was able to wear such clothing in public is proof of his powerful position.

The economic reward-system used by the company must have contributed to the development of a more rigid hierarchy within Pacific Eskimo as well as Aleut cultures. Every hunter was paid according to the amount of skins they caught. The number of sea-otters caught by each baidarka varied, experienced hunters sometimes took as many as 10-13, less lucky or less experienced hunters got only one, sometimes none (Dmytryshyn, Crownhart-Vaughan 1976:56). Successful hunters were able to make considerable earnings during one hunt and this must have had an impact on the perception of hunting as a high status occupation among the Aleuts and Pacific Eskimo.

As the Aleut and Pacific Eskimo society adjusted to the life of colonial Russia so did the native women. A man needed his wife just as much during the colonial era as in pre-contact times. He needed her to mend his kayak, fix his clothing, cure hides and collect food for the family. The company made sure that even unmarried women were put to work as *kauirkas*, preparing *inkola* (fish oil), digging sarana or fern roots, pulling reeds for nets and containers, harvest berries, melt whale fat, preparing and sewing

bird skins for parkas and seal gut for kamleikas (Pierce 1978:137). Native married women in Sitka were able to earn given new work opportunities during the summer months as fish-cleaners as they had did not have to care for their husbands needs. Surprisingly there was only little change in the marriage-practices of the Pacific Eskimo and the Aleut. It was common for two men to share a single wife. Traditionally only the most hard-working woman was allowed such privileges since this also meant that the wife had to attend to the needs of two husbands, sewing of clothing and curing the catches of both husbands.

It is interesting to note that the Orthodox Church allowed polygamy, even in the colonial capital. Reasons of practicality seem to have influenced this decision. Women were scarce in Sitka, free “Aleuts” living in the colony were often away from their families so it was common for a women to have two husbands. Curing skins and materials for clothing was very arduous and time consuming, but as it become more usual to buy cloth more time was available for other tasks.

Finnish as well as Russian museum collections are teeming of beautiful artifacts from Alaska dating back to the Russian colonial times. Many of these artifacts are of Pacific Eskimo and Aleut origin, and to a large extent manufactured by women. Twined baskets made of grass, braided cords, parkas, kamleikas and many more exquisite objects bear witness to the skilled craftsmanship of their makers. Many of these objects such as the miniature baidarka models suggest that the Aleuts and Pacific Eskimo developed specialized souvenir trade (Varjola 1990:210-213).

The material culture of the Aleut and Pacific Eskimo seems to have remained relatively stable in the local communities. The colonial natives living in Sitka became more accustomed to European goods but as they were hired based on their own traditional skills the core of material culture changed only little. Their children however became detached from the culture of their

parents and where probably educated and integrated in to the colony.

Many islands in the Bering Sea were settled by Aleuts, moved there by the RAC to harvest the wildlife population, especially fur-seals. These Islands include the previously unsettled Pribilof and the Russian Commander Islands. These islands were settled by inhabitants that for most parts derived from the Aleutian Islands. In some cases, as in the case of Copper Island there were also people from a Pacific Eskimo as well as mixed Tlingit decent (Jochelson 1933:41-44).

The small scattered Aleut communities were fairly isolated from the rest of the colonies. Difficult weather conditions often made it difficult or even impossible for passing vessels to make port. Life on the Aleutians must have been very different by comparison to the Pacific Eskimo living in larger, more concentrated communities along the mainland, with only 5-6 days sailing to Sitka. The distance between Sitka and Kodiak could also be traveled by native means whereas this was virtually impossible for the Aleuts as they were living on the furthestmost islands of the Aleutian archipelago.

The lives of the Aleut were still as much in the hand of the company as the lives of their Pacific Eskimo neighbors. But in the case of the Aleutian settlements there was less official supervision and hunting was apparently often conducted without Russian overseers, the *baidarshchiks*, as was the case with the earlier observation made by Sahlberg. This suggests that the toions of the smaller Aleutian settlement played a large part in organizing hunts and collecting the catch as well as distributing the received payments among the villagers. The example of the powerful Aleut toion Deduchin can thus be considered as norm for most small Aleut societies of that time.

The colonial economy formed the Aleut and Pacific Eskimo societies in a very profound way. The colonial economic system impacted Aleut and Pacific Eskimo communities in different ways

depending on the geographical location of the villages. It seems the natives in Sitka enjoyed more economic freedom than their family members back home in the native villages. The extended family survived as a basic social unit, at least in the rural areas. The village became a more important sociopolitical unit in Aleut and Pacific Eskimo society due to the fact that Russian colonial policy was structured to work on a village level and the colonial government actively resisted free mobility of the Aleut and Pacific Eskimo, Sitka was the only known exception in this rule. The policy of the Russians is almost identical to the Feudal system of serfdom that existed in Russia at the time. This government structure focused power on certain chosen individuals in respective villages who were obligated to act as chiefs and middlemen between the company and the indigenous population.

The colonial era also saw the emergence of a more urbanized population of Pacific Eskimo who seem to have excluded themselves from the toion-system imposed on Aleuts and Pacific Eskimo living in rural settlements. It is not clear how the Aleut and Pacific Eskimo societies organized themselves in Sitka, but it seems that they were not entirely disconnected from their relatives back home.

Conclusion

The impacts of the colonial economy and change in Aleut and Pacific Eskimo society cannot be fully appreciated without consideration to the changing colonial economy as a whole. In the beginning of Russian colonialism Aleuts and Pacific Eskimo were forced in to a closed colonial economic system. The Russians gradually improved the working conditions and treatment of the native workforce. Early violence and raging epidemics drastically reduced the Aleut and Pacific Eskimo numbers. The remaining colonial native societies were as whole involved in the colonial economy which evolved around generating profit from the hunt

for sea otters and the redistribution of materials and goods within the company. The Aleut and Pacific Eskimo cultures became tightly interwoven in the economic fabric of Russian America and many elements in the material culture survived the Russian era because they were regarded as necessary to the colonial economy and actively preserved by the RAC policy.

Food was always an issue and traditional and the Aleut and the Pacific Eskimo provided the colony the means to sustain itself. Russian Colonial Alaska did not only rely heavily on the abilities of the colonized natives but was in fact totally dependent on the traditional skills of the Aleut and Pacific Eskimo.

The state of the colonial economy as whole forced the company to rely heavily on the Aleut and Pacific Eskimo. The RAC acted as middleman and distributor of regionally produced supplies and goods among the colonies and native settlements as well as exporting and importing supplies and goods. The supplying of the hunting fleets is a good example of this system as the supply chain engaged Aleut and Pacific Eskimo societies as whole.

The 19th century saw the emergence of an urbanized class of native workers. The RAC had mixed views on the urbanization of the Aleut and Pacific Eskimo as they gradually became more dependent on European goods and were to a lesser degree unable to sustain themselves. The native workers in Sitka were effectively restricted to work as unskilled laborers or with tasks closely connected with their traditional skills by the creoles that were also employed at Sitka and trained for more advanced positions by the RAC. The colonial natives also managed to create new work-opportunities for both sexes manufacturing souvenirs for European visitors.

The Pacific Eskimos and Aleut economies appear to have developed differently as it seems that the Pacific Eskimo were presented with more work opportunities than the Aleut. The Aleut were distributed and scattered to populate new areas across the Bering Sea in the hunt for marine mammals. The Pacific Eskimo

did not experience such large scale moves to other islands. The Pacific Eskimo were more active in the large sea otter hunting fleets and kayak building in Sitka than the Aleut.

The Aleut were involved in more small scale expeditions closer to home, harvesting rookeries or stationed on uninhabited islands during the summer months. Even if the lives of Aleut and Pacific Eskimo were controlled by the company some individuals living in more remote areas were able to work the system and become quite powerful. These individuals had a large role in collecting the sea otter catch as well as distributing the received payments among the villagers.

The RAC strengthened its control of Pacific Eskimo and Aleut villages through the impose toion-system but in the same time colonial natives living in Sitka were subjected to less control as the colonial control-system which was designed to work on a village level did not extend itself to an urban setting with natives originating from mixed settlements.

The native workers at Sitka became more entangled in European culture, but their numbers were in steady decline due to the growing number of creoles filling the colonial labor market, the decreasing sea otter population and the impact of epidemics that ravaged the native population in the late 1830ies. As whole the role of the Aleut and Pacific Eskimo societies as economic backbone of the Russian American Company cannot be exaggerated. Their skills, resilience and ability to sustain themselves as well as their colonial masters kept the Russians in Alaska for several more decades than the circumstances would otherwise have permitted.

References

- Birket-Smith, Kaj (1953) : *The Chugach Eskimo*. Nationalmuseets Skrifter, Etnografisk Raekke VI. Köpenhamn.
- Borgå Tidning no 91 17.11.1838*, National Library Digital Collections, Helsinki, Finland.
- Clark, Donald W. (1984): "*Pacific Eskimo: Historical Ethnography*". In Damas, David & Sturtevant William C. (eds.): *Handbook of the North American Indians: vol 5 Arctic*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution.
- Dmytryshyn, Basil & Crownhart-Vaughan, E.A.P. (1976): *Colonial Russian America. Kyrill T. Khlebnikov's Reports 1817-1832*. Portland : Oregon Historical Society.
- Enckell Jarl (1980): *Finländarna i Sitka under 1840-talet*. Unpublished manuscript, the Enckell family archives, Åbo Akademi University Library.
- Gibson, James R. (1976): *Imperial Russia in Frontier America: The Changing Geography of Supply of Russian America, 1784-1867*. New York : Oxford University Press.
- Gibson, Arrell M. (1980): *The American Indian: Prehistory to the Present*. University of Oklahoma. Heath and Co.
- Holmberg, H. J. (1855): *Ethnographische Skizzen uber die Völker des Russischen Amerika. Erste Abtheilung*. Helsingfors : H.C. Friis.
- Jochelson, Waldemar (1933): *History, Ethnology and Anthropology of the Aleut*. Carnegie Institution of Washington. Publication No. 432.
- Lantis, Margaret (1984): "*Aleut*". In Damas, David & Sturtevant William C. (eds.): *Handbook of the North American Indians: vol 5 Arctic*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution.
- Lepola, Marcus (2002): *Koloniala mönster i Sitka under medlet av 1800-talet – Kulturkontakt och kulturkonflikt mellan ryssar, finländare*

- och ursprungsbefolkningen i Alaska*. Unpublished MA-Thesis. Turku : Åbo Akademi University.
- Lightfoot Kent G (2004): *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants : The Legacy of Colonial Encounters on the California Frontiers*. University of California Press.
- Luehrmann, Sonja (2008): *Alutiiq Villages under Russian and US Rule*. Fairbanks : University of Alaska Press.
- Pierce, Richard A. (1978): *The Russian orthodox religious mission in America 1794-1837 with materials concerning the life and works of the monk German and ethnographic notes by the Hieromonk Gedeon*. Translated by Colin Bearne, ed. Richar A. Pierce. Kingston, Ontario: Limestone press..
- Pierce, Richard A. (1986): *Builders of Alaska. The Russian Governors 1818-1867*. Alaska History No. 28. Kingston, Ontario: Limestone press.
- Sahlberg, Reinhold Ferdinand (2007): *En resa kring jorden 1839-1843. Anteckningar från Sydamerika, Alaska och Sibirien*. Skrifter utgivna av Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland 701. Borgå.
- Simpson, Sir George (1847): *An Overland Journey Around the World during the years 1841-1842*. Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard.
- Varjola, Pirjo (1990): *The Etholén Collection; The ethnographic Alaskan collections of Adolf Etholén and his contemporaries in the National Museum of Finland*. National Board of Antiquities, Vammala : Vammalan kirjapaino Oy.
- Zimmerly, David W. (2000): *Qayaq. Kayaks of Siberia and Alaska. Second edition*. Fairbanks : University of Alaska Press.

Received: June 5, 2010

Accepted: August 27, 2010

Notes

- i The tribal fighting which had gone on before the Russians came was so fierce that whole villages could be wiped out as a reprisal for the death of one man.
- ii The catch varied greatly on annual basis, for instance 86 large sea otters were caught a year later in 1830.
- iii Kaiur was originally a Kamchatkan word for a hired worker. In Alaska the term came to refer to a native, generally of Pacific Eskimo origin pressed in to Company service.
- iv In 1825, 17 Kodiak Aleuts, 13 Fox Island Aleuts and three Indian Aleuts 17 were working as service personnel in the Sitka colony. 58 creoles were also employed among the service personnel.
- v According to Klebhnikov some 145 free “Aleut” males lived at the colony in 1825 at their own request and sometimes travelled to Kodiak to visit their relatives. This suggests that the “Aleut” were actually Pacific Eskimo. When comparing his statement to the chart we find that 17 Kodiak Aleuts are accounted for as service personnel and 129 as non-service personnel. In total they amount to 146 which is in accordance with Klebhnikov's statements. In addition to these he states that there are a total of 250 “Aleuts” with their wives and children in Sitka at this time. This statement is incoherent if compared to a previous census that only accounts for 167 “Aleuts” of different origin. It is probable that has also included women and children in to this account.