

Shifting Identities: Alaskan Creoles and the Russian Orthodox Church in Post-Purchase Alaska

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Abstract This article examines the relations between the Creole community and the Russian Orthodox Church after the 1867 transfer of Alaska to the United States, analyzing how Creole identity and 'Russianness' were reconfigured when imperial power receded, and American governance and missions expanded. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry, the study explores the Russian Church's periodicals and the archival materials, showing how Creole mimicry redirected the group away from the ROC toward American institutions, producing growing mutual indifference and reshaping Orthodox Alaska's social and religious ecology.

Keywords Alaska. Creole. Russian Orthodox Church. Mimicry. Indigenous population.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Theoretical Premises. – 3 The Birth of the Colonial Estate and Its Enshrined Ambiguity. – 4 The Pre-1867 Encounters with ROC: Codifying the Creole Class. – 5 After the 1867 Sale. – 6 The Immediate Reproachment. – 7 The Native 'Rediscovery' of Orthodoxy. – 8 Preserving Distinctiveness. – 9 Americanization and Moral Decay. – 10 Creole Priests. – 11 Conclusion.



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And what's 'Russian' about them anyway?
It is easier for God to create new human beings than
to improve these ones.¹

1 Introduction

The 1867 sale of Alaska to the United States undeniably marked a transformative event for countless individuals across both continents, sparking a quest for new solutions to the resulting turmoil, in both material and spiritual terms. Drawing on postcolonial theory, especially Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry, this article explores the complex relationship between the Creole community and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in Alaska following the sale of Alaska to the United States. The analysis is based primarily on archival materials from the Alaska Russian Church Archives (ARCA) and published clerical accounts, with the empirical focus falling largely on Sitka and with Creole perspectives often inferred indirectly from ecclesiastical records where direct testimony is limited.

In Alaska, the word 'Creole' referred to the offspring of Russian and Indigenous² individuals, akin to the *métis*/*mestizo* of the Spanish colonies, with the term being first used in the Alaskan context in 1805.³ It is worth noting that Alaskan Natives could hardly be considered a monolithic group. The Tlingit, for instance, were a significant part of the local Orthodox parish, residing in the vicinity of Sitka. Other groups included the Aleuts (Unangan) from the Aleutian Islands and the Eskimo (Inuit-Yupik), who had limited contact with Russian missionaries in the northern regions due to logistical challenges. The Athabaskan peoples, on the other hand, were not extensively involved, and the ROC's presence in the interior of Alaska was mostly constrained to the Dena'ina.⁴ Yet the term 'Creole' was applied

The text largely draws on the Author's master's thesis titled *Identity Construction of the Russian Orthodox Church in Alaska (1867-1917)*.

1 Kamenskii, *Report on the State of the Sitka Diocese*, 1895-98, in ARCA, D 335, reel 220, 1.

2 In this article, the terms 'Indigenous' and 'native' are used interchangeably as synonyms. The capitalization of 'Indigenous' aligns with the standards of specialized organizations, such as the Arctic Council. This choice is meant to highlight political and historical communities, rather than merely identifying individuals from a specific location.

3 Vinkovetsky, *Russian America*, 40; Lydia Black, however, asserts the term's later appearance in the Church records of the Novo-Arkhangel'sk (Sitka) parish in 1816. Black, *Russians in Alaska, 1732-1867*, 215.

4 Znamenski, *Shamanism and Christianity*.

regardless of the Indigenous parents' belonging to one or another ethnolinguistic community.⁵

Under the Russian rule, Creoles occupied a distinct position, with specific privileges and responsibilities. However, after the territory was sold, they faced diminished socioeconomic position and legal ambiguity under the new American system, which, together with the novel necessities of the Russian Church, could not help but profoundly affect their relations.

2 Theoretical Premises

Postcolonial literature has suggested new ways of examining the agents of colonial processes, including those viewing the construction of their identities. Although this paper is mainly concerned with the evolving relations between the Creole community and ROC after the departure of the Imperial forces, traces of the colonial period remained, especially given the Diocese's persistent formal subordination to the Imperial institutions.⁶ In this regard, Homi Bhabha's lens sheds new light on the interpretation of the dynamics between the two after 1867.

Bhabha delves into the notion of mimicry as a colonial strategy of control, encouraging cultural adaptation while deliberately preventing its full realization, with the colonized remaining "almost the same, but not quite".⁷ The process is marked by ambivalence, as the appropriation of the behaviors, customs, and other aspects of the dominant culture is strategically limited within the authoritative discourse, despite the strong aspirations of the colonized to reinvent itself to become one with the dominant power. Referring to Lacan, Bhabha defines mimicry as merely camouflage, while "the desire to emerge as 'authentic'" through this process becomes "the final irony of partial representation".⁸

5 Smith-Peter offers a comprehensive analysis of the ethnic makeup of the early Creole mothers and their status within native society. Smith-Peter, "Creating a Creole Estate", 365.

6 During the historical period in question, the Holy Synod held the supreme command. Following the abolition of the Patriarchate by Peter I in 1720, this body assumed responsibility for all Church matters. The tsar retained oversight of the institution through the lay Over-Procurator, who managed its operational functions, transforming the Church into a de facto ministry. This was reflected in the missionization efforts, and "the connection between Church and state has been so strong that it is almost impossible to separate the [two] elements". Neill, Chadwick, *A History of Christian Missions*, 182.

7 Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man", 127.

8 Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man", 129.

A colonial subject's cultural rapprochement is restricted by its threatening nature. Colonial authority relies on maintaining a clear distinction between the ruler and the ruled, as a closer resemblance to the colonial power's image would disrupt the hierarchy. The 'normative knowledges' of a colonizer's noble mission to educate the subjects are 'deauthorized' when mastered by the colonized to the point of appearing artificial, with this authority exposed as merely performative. Therefore, the mimicry represents a compromise "at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed".⁹ The fixed in-betweenness manages the contradiction between the colonial power's aim to produce a colonial subject similar enough to govern yet different enough to dominate.

Bhabha highlights the dilemma for the colonial agents of "mixed race who taken all round resemble white men but who betray their colored descent by some striking feature or other and on that account are excluded from society and enjoy none of the privileges".¹⁰ Alaska Creoles' ambivalent position after the sale of the territory to the United States would place them under this very quandary.

3 The Birth of the Colonial Estate and Its Enshrined Ambiguity

The 1741 expedition led by Vitus Bering (1681-1741) and Aleksei Chirikov (1703-1748) to the coast of Southeast Alaska¹¹ marked the first documented Russian encounters with the local Indigenous population. Crew members formed alliances with native women, a practice perpetuated by the *promyshlenniki*,¹² who arrived in the subsequent years. However, these alliances inevitably left behind the breathing and walking traces designated as Creoles.

Creoles came to constitute a distinct colonial class absent in mainland Russia,¹³ with their status being hereditary and passed

⁹ Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man", 130.

¹⁰ Freud, *The Unconscious* quoted in Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 127.

¹¹ Grinev, Bland, Solovjova, *The Tlingit Indians in Russian America*, 93.

¹² *Promyshlenniki* (plural) were the Russian fur traders and merchants, primarily of Indigenous Siberian descent, who usually banded in groups upon the arrival to Alaska. On the homelands and traditions of Russian pioneers in Alaska, the early *promyshlenniki*, see Black, "Promyshlenniki - Who Were They?".

¹³ The absence of a Creole estate in Siberia was due to the lack of necessity to terminologically distinguish the mixed population, who possessed sufficient skills in hunting local fur-bearers and were independent from the natives. Schweitzer, Vakhtin, Golovko, "The Difficulty of Being Oneself"; Schweitzer, Golovko, Vakhtin, "Mixed Communities in the Russian North"; Znamenski, *Shamanism and Christianity*.

down primarily through the male line. Although they were similar to the *meshchane* (burgher, plural), Creoles enjoyed several special privileges, such as exemption from taxation and state or military service. A by-product of the private connections between Russians and local tribes, Creoles addressed the government's persistent failure to recruit enough men for long-term service and the disruptive effects of insubordination and misconduct among most Russian employees.¹⁴ Their figures emerged as essential for the operations of the Russian American Company (RAC), a joint-stock corporation, licensed in 1799 by Paul I of Russia (1796-1801) and endowed with a monopoly through charters granted for 20-year periods, specifically in 1799, 1821, and 1844. Operating under the aegis of the Russian government, RAC exercised authority over all Russian colonies in the New World.¹⁵ This would underline the Creoles' image as one of the key elements in sustaining its commercial endeavors in Alaska.

Creoles acted as vital intermediaries between their Indigenous and Russian communities, as well as a crucial source of intelligence, especially important amid heightened concerns following the 1802 Tlingit attack on Fort St. Michael, the first Russian settlement on Sitka Island.¹⁶ Through their blood ties to the natives, they established connections that bolstered the Company's influence over local tribes, which was essential for maintaining stable trade relations. Despite instances of escape to the Indigenous relatives, the mixed marriages integrated the resulting families into the societal structure of the Russian *promyshlenniki*. This integration, in turn, included their conversion to Orthodoxy, with fathers baptizing their children and providing them with the relevant religious education.

The instruction of offspring from non-affluent families, incapable of providing high-level education, was funded by the RAC. These children either attended local schools or were sent to institutions in Russia to study navigation, medicine, mechanics, shipbuilding, or receive religious training. However, the Company's expenses had to be paid off, and upon graduation, Creoles were required to commit to a stay of at least ten years, during which they would serve the local residents for a suitable salary and living allowance provided by the Company.¹⁷ Although entitled to leave the colony for Russia after fulfilling their contracts, most Creoles, either owing debts to the RAC or bound to Alaskan territory by family ties, chose to remain. This pattern would align perfectly with the government's

14 Oswalt, *Kolmakovskiy Redoubt*, 36.

15 Grinëv, "Natives and Creoles of Alaska", 332.

16 Vinkovetsky, *Russian America*, 81-3.

17 "Ukaz on the Renewal". All translations from Russian are by the Author unless otherwise indicated.

intention of cultivating a segment of permanent, loyal, Russian-in-culture residents.¹⁸

Creoles occupied lower management offices, assuming the duties of the original Russian traders, ship masters, and clerks, and occasionally advancing to prominent positions. Meanwhile, they should not have interfered with the natives' activities, specifically sea otter procurement, as the latter were uniquely skilled in it, and kept aside from the Indigenous community. The natives, in turn, were deemed unnecessary to educate, since their hunting skills were the only expertise required to meet the RAC's objectives, which concluded the establishment of a strict labor separation between the two communities.¹⁹

Exposed to Russian culture through their living arrangements, while fluent in the languages of their Indigenous relatives and still linked to their matrikin, Creoles were devised to embody the traits of both groups, yet not fully belonging to either. Lydia Black characterized them as "the social class deliberately created in order to have a bicultural stratum, members of which would be loyal to their native land, Alaska, and to the Russian cultural heritage brought to Alaska by an ancestor or ancestress".²⁰ Notwithstanding the recurrent cases of intermarriages with Indigenous people, the separation in labor and residence often fostered a sense of exceptionalism among Creoles. In the 1860s, when the Company's management encouraged them to hunt to compensate for the shrinking Indigenous population, they would resent: "the Creole, feeling European blood in himself, considers himself superior to the Aleut and does not want to live or work alongside him".²¹ Thus, Creoles found themselves caught between the Russian and Indigenous communities, never fully accepted by either.

18 Vinkovetsky, *Russian America*, 146-7.

19 Smith-Peter, "Creating a Creole Estate", 446.

20 Black, *Russians in Alaska, 1732-1867*, XV.

21 *Doklad Komiteta ob ustroistve*, 160.

4 The Pre-1867 Encounters with ROC: Codifying the Creole Class

Until the adoption of the second charter in 1821, the Company had the opportunity to extensively exploit the natives. However, the revised provisions limited its discretion by clearly defining the status of various groups of Alaskan residents, including the introduction of the Creole class. This initiated a shift from spontaneous and unsystematic to purposive imposition of Russian culture on the offspring of mixed unions, implying an intensification of Orthodox missionization intended to cement their distinction from the Indigenous ancestry. In response to claims about Veniaminov's²² focus on spreading religion among the natives, Murray suggests that Veniaminov's educational efforts in the school supported by the Russian American Company were intended to train Creole students for employment with the Company and to enhance Russian language proficiency among prospective church workers.²³ Before switching to the vigorous Christianization of natives, the state's demand for a base of permanent Russian-cultured citizens should have been met.

However special the Creole category was in terms of their official status, they were often addressed in a rather derogatory manner by the Russian clergy, even before the territory was sold. Creoles were portrayed as more akin to the natives than to Russians: "in these half-Aleuts, the mother's character almost always prevails and sometimes even completely suppresses the father's character".²⁴ Despite his commitment to their education, Veniaminov harbored strong doubts about the Creoles' intellectual capabilities and their aptitude for absorbing information, claiming that

where intelligence and reason are required – perhaps one in fifty is suitable, and even then only after four or five generations. Their character (though it has its good sides) is far from corresponding to their higher calling. They seem to want to rise in rank primarily

22 Bishop Innokentii (Ivan) Veniaminov (1797-1879) was a key figure shaping the ROC's missionization endeavors in mid-nineteenth century Alaska. Drawing from his experience of serving among the Siberian Indigenous people and the Il'minskii System employed in mainland Russia, he introduced methods, which are believed to have ensured the success of the ROC's Christianization efforts in Alaska. Formulated by Nikolai Il'minskii (1822-1892) and his associates at the Kazan Theological Academy, the approach embraced the lower expectations and patience required by the constraints of the local environment, emphasizing vernacular worship and the recruitment of Indigenous teachers. After decades of service in Alaska and the Russian Far East, Veniaminov became Metropolitan of Moscow and Kolomna to be later canonized as a saint in 1977 by the Orthodox Church in America. Nordlander, "Innokentii Veniaminov".

23 Murray, "Together and Apart", 100.

24 Veniaminov, *Zapiski ob ostrovakh Unalashkinskogo otdela*, 2: 20.

in order to have the opportunity to live more freely. And at the same time, they do not value their advancement.²⁵

Veniaminov was equally skeptical about their ability to serve as clergy. Creoles' upward mobility in the religious field was highly limited, and most held lower positions in the ecclesiastical hierarchy.²⁶ Even the brightest figures in the pre-1867 history of ROC were not immune to the Russian-born clergy's prejudice. Jacob Netsvetov (1802-1864), a Creole missionary who served in the same years as Veniaminov and later became a symbol of Orthodox Alaska, its Enlightener, canonized by the OCA in 1994, stressed the challenges he encountered in his work among the natives due to his mixed heritage, namely "tacit restrictions, heavy responsibility, conflicting loyalties, frustrated ambitions, and chronic self-doubt".²⁷ However, his very experience underscores the grounds for Veniaminov's concerns, and, faced with the need to maintain subsistence practices, Netsvetov would be observed permitting the omission of the rite during Lent. Thus, by employing more Creoles, the ROC risked inadvertently transforming their deep understanding of Indigenous lifestyles into a means of indigenizing the official Orthodox culture.

Veniaminov often provided positive evaluations of Creole characteristics. Yet these were not performed in isolation but were framed through comparisons among different Creole groups, particularly those with Indigenous ancestry linked to various tribes, thereby paralleling the language used to describe these tribes separately. This categorization was based on the extent of the groups' submissiveness, with the Aleuts, for instance, representing "exemplary Christians" for their simplicity, patience, nonmaterialism, and piety as compared to the Tlingits or Haida.²⁸ Consequently, the priest noted that "out of ten Creoles - especially those of Kolosh origin - probably four will turn out to be very respectable people; whereas among Creoles of other origins, it is unlikely that even among twenty-one could find that many respectable individuals",²⁹ which summarized the pre-1867 clergy's attitude to this group.

25 Veniaminov, *Zapiski ob ostrovakh Unalashkinskogo otdela*, 1: 190-1.

26 For this reason, despite a positive record of his previous efforts, Creole Shishkin's candidacy for the vacant position of the Nushagak missionary was rejected. Barsukov, *Pis'ma Innokentiya, mitropolita Moskovskogo*, 1: 190; Grinev, "Social Mobility of the Creoles", 26.

27 Easley, "Creole Policy and Practice", 64.

28 Vinkovetsky, *Russian America*, 169.

29 The Tlingit people were referred to by the Russians as Kolosh. Veniaminov, *Zapiski ob ostrovakh Unalashkinskogo otdela*, 3: 119.

5 After the 1867 Sale

The sale of Alaska brought about drastic changes in the socioeconomic status of Creoles. No longer did they represent a privileged class with secure living conditions, such as the previously mentioned educational funding and subsequent guaranteed employment at the RAC. With the Company's departure, these individuals were left without a source of income, forced to resort to petty crimes, prostitution,³⁰ occasional odd jobs, or meagre wages for serving American newcomers. Many relied on US government rations³¹ or pensions, if they were fortunate enough to obtain them.³² Thus, Creoles found themselves subject to a miserable existence in economic terms, occupying an ambiguous position in the new social hierarchy.

The Creoles' diminished status was exacerbated by the confusion surrounding their legal definition. Under the U.S. system, which primarily categorized individuals as either 'white' or 'colored' and either discouraged or outright forbade interracial unions, there was no conceptual framework for such a group of people.³³ The idea of mixed marriages stirred anxieties in both public and scientific circles due to speculations about potential degenerating effects. Beginning with William H. Dall's influential *Alaska and Its Resources of 1870*,³⁴ the term 'half-breeds' became a persistent label in literature and public discourse, shaping the views of both military and civilian leaders. These uncertainties were reflected in the emergence of the citizenship issue. The 1867 Treaty entitled the Russian residents of Alaska to enjoy all the rights, advantages, and immunities of citizens of the United States, except for "uncivilized native tribes".³⁵ The latter were to be governed by laws and regulations that the United States may further adopt regarding the local aboriginal tribes (Article 3). Yet the document contained no clear regulations governing the Creole population, thereby creating unofficial criteria

30 Most Americans who moved to Alaska were single men, which created a demand for women. Russian and Creole women were more accessible than natives due to their cultural proximity. An 1870 Sitka census recorded 35 prostitutes within a Russian and Creole population of 296, yet this might appear inaccurate, as not differentiating those living in unsanctified union with the American settlers. Lain, "The Decline of Russian America's Colonial Society", 150.

31 With the municipal government unable to provide aid, the army distributed rations to one-third of Sitka's residents for nearly four years. When this support ceased, several Sitka Creoles petitioned the tsar for relocation to Russia, but their appeal was ignored. Lain, "The Decline of Russian America's Colonial Society", 151.

32 Fr. Sebastian Dabovich lists Creoles who previously worked for the RAC and were left without a pension. Dabovich, "Alaska".

33 Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages*, 3.

34 Dall, *Alaska and Its Resources*, 12.

35 "Treaty Concerning the Cession".

such as income, education, and moral character. Amid the general confusion following “the abandonment by Russians”, those who remained in Alaska did not occupy high positions in the colonial socioeconomic hierarchy and were largely unproficient in English. In the hierarchy established by British fur trader Emil Teichmann during his 1868 visit to Alaska,³⁶ at the top were a small group of respectable Americans, followed by traders, saloon keepers, and spirit dealers. The Creoles, in turn, were placed in the third class and lower (with only the natives below them), while a select few respectable “white” Russians were elevated to the second class. They were mostly viewed as “superstitious, filthy, drink-addicted, lazy, stupid, immoral, and generally unfit for United States citizenship”.³⁷ Indolent and idle, Creoles “lost all ambition”.³⁸ The misconduct of the low-class Americans stationed on the territory, bored in anticipation of combating the natives’ unrest, only compounded the humiliation emanating from the forfeiture of their “white” status.

The displayed prejudice exacerbated the existing tensions between the Creoles and the natives, as the former attempted to downplay their origins and distance themselves from the ‘savage’ facet of their ancestry,³⁹ both rhetorically and practically. A notable example is Sergei (George) Kostrometinov/ff, who, despite maintaining close ties with the ROC and becoming ordained, sought to erase his Indigenous heritage from public discourse. In this endeavor, Kostrometinov/ff was quite successful: the American press portrayed him as a “pretty thoroughly Americanized” gentleman.⁴⁰ This determination to associate oneself with a uniquely white origin would be passed on to further Creole generations.

36 Teichmann, *A Journey to Alaska*, 188.

37 Lain, “The Decline of Russian America’s Colonial Society”, 148.

38 Bailey, *Report Upon Alaska and Its People*, 24.

39 Distancing occurred also in tangible terms. According to Lieutenant Huggins, stationed on Kodiak and Afognak from 1868 to 1870 during the military rule in Alaska, there was almost no interaction between the two communities despite their proximity. Huggins et al., *Kodiak and Afognak Life*, 9.

40 Also, Elmer E. Montague, a then son of an American soldier dispatched in Sitka, recalled his childhood referring to Sergei Kostrometinov as white. Allan, *As the Old Flag*, 23.

6 The Immediate Reapproachment

The transfer of the territory could not but modify the relations between the Creole community and the Orthodox Church. The 1867 Treaty permitted the ROC to retain its land and maintain freedom of practice for its followers. Although the Orthodox Church in Alaska remained administratively subordinate to the Church in continental Russia and continued to receive financial support from it, this assistance was strictly limited, amounting to nearly \$60,000 annually to churches and schools.⁴¹ At the same time, the RAC's dissolution entailed not only the sale of its property and the dismissal of surplus personnel, but also the termination of the unwavering backing of the ROC's operation. In the context of the US open religious market, the removal of the monopoly on proselytizing led to a sharp increase in competition among missions.

The main competitor was the Presbyterians, who focused their activities on Sitka and the surrounding area. The efforts of Sheldon Jackson (1834-1909), arguably the most influential Presbyterian figure in Alaska, would be described as possessing "a personality and philosophy that matched those of John Calvin himself", despising sin and remaining always resolute in his endeavors. Serving first as a missionary among native peoples in the West, he would eventually lead the Rocky Mountain District of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions and then expand his outreach to Alaska in 1877.⁴² In the meantime, Jackson did not hesitate to leverage his extensive connections to federal high officials to advance his objectives. Among them were William Cleveland, a Presbyterian minister and President Grover Cleveland's brother, as well as John Eaton, Commissioner of Education and a devout Presbyterian. Following the enactment of the Organic Act of 1884,⁴³ these links appeared instrumental in securing Jackson's appointment as General Agent of Education in the Alaska Territory from 1885 to 1906.⁴⁴ At approximately the same time, Congress began to allocate funds for native education in Alaska, with Jackson coordinating the Moravian, Methodist, and Congregational high commands.⁴⁵ The endeavors would achieve their goal in the

⁴¹ Kostrometinoff, *Scrapbook of George S. Kostrometinoff, 1879-1908*, in Alaska State Library (ASL), MS 4-6-6.

⁴² Haycox, *Alaska Anthology*, 81-4.

⁴³ The Organic Act of 1884 established a form of civilian government, providing a governor, court officials, and General Agent of Education, appointed by the President and confirmed by Senate. The laws of Oregon applied insofar as they did not conflict with federal law, while reserving the natives' rights to their land, pending final disposition of land claims by Congress. Haycox, *Alaska Anthology*, xxii.

⁴⁴ Erickson and Brooks, *The Russian Orthodox Church*, 362.

⁴⁵ Haycox, *Alaska Anthology*, 146.

short term, and natives' interest in Orthodoxy declined dramatically. Thus, for instance, according to the Confessional Record of the Holy Trinity Church in Sitka for the year 1867, confession and communion were administered to only 60% of the approximately 500 baptized Tlingit, while Christian burials and church weddings were rarely performed that year, and most godparents remained Creoles.⁴⁶ In this regard, the latter emerged as a crucial element of the ROC's base for survival under new social-political conditions.

The ROC clergy's initial strategy would entail playing the racially divisive card and extensively favoring the Creole community. This stance starkly contrasted with the new dominant power's universally pejorative outlook on both Indigenous and Creole groups as nearly indistinguishable, reflecting the legislative ambiguity surrounding Creole identity. The ROC's attitude would manifest itself during the so-called '1879 Indian threat', a period of unrest that followed the American army's withdrawal, leaving a law enforcement vacuum and sparking fear among Sitka residents of a potential natives' attack. As an advocate for Creoles' interests, Fr. Nikolai Mitropol'skii, a priest in Sitka from 1875 to 1885 and a brother of Bishop Ioann Mitropol'skii (1870-77), played a pivotal role in shaping the rhetoric surrounding it.⁴⁷ The clergyman launched a broad campaign criticizing the behavior of the Indigenous people, both in public discourse and by submitting petitions to the government, under the threat of the Church's property being violated.⁴⁸ Natives' vandalism of St. Michael's Cathedral, according to the priest, extended to the "Russian" residents' belongings and posed a danger to their very lives. In his report, he requested a "guarantee against natives' abuses" and "more reliable protection and guard",⁴⁹ which he promised to substantiate, if needed, by the signatures of Sitka's Russian inhabitants. Later that same year, Fr. Mitropol'skii became the voice of his Creole parish, conveying their petition regarding the 1879 proceedings in a letter to the Ecclesiastical Administration. The plea to support them and intercede to ensure the safety of the parishioners constitutes the pinnacle in the post-sale rapprochement of the clergy with the "Russians" against both the "uncivilized natives" and the American

⁴⁶ Kan, *Memory Eternal*, 168.

⁴⁷ While his approach to natives and Creoles generally conformed to prevailing attitudes, personal factors also influenced Fr. Mitropol'skii's perspective. Married to the daughter of Andrew Kashevarov/ff, he had been involved in the social life of local "Russians" since his arrival in Sitka in 1875, extensively engaging with American residents and visitors, with his attitude towards the Indigenous reflecting "the fears prevalent among both the 'Russian' and the 'American' segments of Sitka's population". Kan, *Memory Eternal*, 196.

⁴⁸ "Iz istorii pravoslavnoi tserkvi".

⁴⁹ "Iz istorii pravoslavnoi tserkvi", 189.

forces deployed in the area but inactive in maintaining peace and order.⁵⁰ The wording demonstrates the unwavering support of the ROC for the Creoles' Russian identity - until circumstances shift the Church's priorities.

7 The Native 'Rediscovery' of Orthodoxy

A decade would pass, and the Orthodox revival among the Indigenous people would shift the clergy's focus away from Creoles. The latter steadily lost their relevance, being largely outnumbered by Indigenous parishioners.⁵¹ What is more, the use of Russian declined,⁵² as the anti-native sentiment discouraged many from attending joint classes at Russian schools,⁵³ complicating the priests' efforts to deliver their sermons effectively.⁵⁴ At the same time, Creoles entered marital unions with American settlers to secure a respectful place in the new political landscape and affirm their equally 'white' status. This, along with concerns about the younger generation's career prospects, further alienated them from the Church. Creoles' inability to reproduce themselves biologically and culturally would have inevitably clashed with the ROC's urgent need to sustain its viability through a sufficient congregation.

For Creoles, the Church became the last resort in post-1867 Alaska, assisting them in navigating socioeconomic changes and preserving unity, channeling their distress to officials, and providing a space to alleviate confusion. Therefore, the clergy's shift cast doubt on the ROC's ability to perform the function the Creoles had assigned to it, as evidenced by the case of Fr. Vladimir Donskoi (1886-1895), who succeeded Fr. Mitropol'skii. The new strategy entailed elevating the natives to secure their loyalty as a stable part of the parish, which had been weakened by the struggle against rival missionaries. Although the Indigenous people continued to practice their ancestral 'pagan' rituals, they were considered to possess superior personal qualities compared to the offspring of mixed unions. Manifest adulterers and apostates from the faith, their youth was marred by debauchery,

50 "Iz istorii pravoslavnoi tserkvi", 190.

51 The Creole birth rates were lower compared to those of the natives. Kan, *Memory Eternal*, 582.

52 A distinguished lay brotherhood member noted that numerous fellows were no longer proficient in Russian and required the statutes printed in the "American" language. *Minutes of the St. Nicholas Brotherhood*, 1895, in ARCA, D 323, reel 213.

53 Kamenskii, *Letter to Bishop Nikolai*, March 14, 1896, in ARCA, D 335, reel 220, 1.

54 Kan, *Memory Eternal*, 275.

drunkenness, and disobedience, exacerbated by hypocrisy and falsehood in their older age.

Moreover, the Creoles exerted a harmful influence on the morals of the Orthodox Alaskan community, setting a poor example for the Indigenous parish. They were blamed for defiling the natives after their baptism, and with the removal of a strict hand of the Russian authorities, “the wicked instincts of the white people began to reveal themselves in all their ugly force and nakedness”.⁵⁵ The image of this *chosen flock* only deterred the natives from embracing Orthodoxy, yet, “having joined it, they immediately take in from their enlighteners everything bad”.⁵⁶

Morally inferior to Indigenous people, Creoles were certainly incomparable to Russians, “worse than our Russian lower-class *meshchane* and peasants”.⁵⁷ In 1911, *Russian Orthodox American Messenger* would reference an article published in *Novoe Vremia*, which encapsulated the prevailing view of the Creole segment of the Orthodox parish:

Creoles, Métis, do not constitute, properly speaking, any distinct type or nationality. In the variegated amalgam that makes them up resides a feeble, motley, fragmented, mosaic-like soul, incapable of any form of greatness.⁵⁸

An idealized Russian identity was rendered unattainable, thereby dissociating Creoles from part of their ancestry. Initiated by Fr. Donskoi and intensified during Fr. Kamenskii’s tenure, the dominant rhetoric stripped the Creoles of their Russianness, which they aspired to uphold. Never were the Creoles called ‘Russian’, since no ‘true Russian’ would have voluntarily remained in Alaska after its sale to the United States:

And what’s ‘Russian’ about them anyway? Only that a drunk man or woman might stumble by mistake into the church and is capable of speaking the worst dialect of Russian (broken and disgusting to the ear) – that is all. Not to mention lack of respect towards the Church, lack of fear of God, no idea of honor, noble behavior, moral and civic duties, or spirituality; there is also no sense of self-respect (and where would it come from, anyway). [...] Everything that is good and kind has been totally twisted and broken up, and uprooted. How can any good influence be made on such [...]

55 Innokentii, “Otchet [...] za 1907 god”, 195.

56 Innokentii, “Otchet [...] za 1907 god”, 195.

57 Donskoi, *Letter to Fr. Antonii Dashkevich*, 1897, in ARCA, D 334, reel 218, 1.

58 Kedrovskii, “Starozhily Alyaski”, 274.

creatures? It is easier for God to create new human beings than to improve these ones.⁵⁹

By the late 1880s, the distinction between ‘Russians’ and ‘Creoles’ was no longer present in the parish records. Church members were now categorized as either natives or Creoles, while the term ‘Russian’ was exclusively used for Russian-born clergy and their families.⁶⁰

Notably, Sonja Luehrmann⁶¹ insists on the close resemblance of the Russian-born priests’ attitude to the Creole population and the American racially charged, derogatory rhetoric used in addressing the community by the salient expressions grounded in their social inferiority compared to the ‘whites’. These references pointed to the moral and physical attributes of the Creoles, stemming from the social, environmental, and hereditary conditions under which the community lived. Yet, although the language closely echoes Western racist ideologies that fueled colonial endeavors, this situation cannot be easily interpreted from the same perspective. The distinctiveness of the clergy’s discourse towards the Creole population becomes evident when contrasted with that towards the Indigenous population. Naturally pure, natives possessed the potential for improvement, lost in the case of the offspring of interethnic unions, hopelessly subject to rot in their moral and cultural decay.⁶²

8 Preserving Distinctiveness

Adding to the Creoles’ dissatisfaction with the ROC-natives reproachment was the clergy’s unwavering stance on segregating participation in the service and the use of church facilities. The refusal to construct a separate burial ground for Creoles, despite their financial contribution to the Orthodox cemetery’s restoration, elicited strong resentment.⁶³ This was also the case with appointments to the parish council, with the clergy endeavoring to uphold the tradition of selecting an equal number of lay leaders and official council members from both Creoles and natives. Beyond the Church, this forced unity was superficial. The settlement pattern did not change, with the two

⁵⁹ Kamenskii, *Report on the State of the Sitka Diocese*, 1895-98, in ARCA, D 335, reel 220, 1.

⁶⁰ *Parish records confessional list, St. Michael Cathedral*, 1864-96, in ARCA, D 415.

⁶¹ Luehrmann, *Alutiiq Villages*, 142.

⁶² Surprised by the natives’ “knowledge and piety”, the clergy highlighted their natural “industriousness and moral laxity” compared to the Creoles’ dishonesty. Veniaminov, *Zapiski ob ostrovakh Unalashkinskogo otdela*, 3: 120.

⁶³ Erickson and Brooks, *The Russian Orthodox Church*, 359.

communities continuing to reside separately, like in Russian Town in Sitka or in the Creole *derevnia* (village) in Afognak.⁶⁴ Yet, these divisive lines should not have been present within the ROC's domain.

In light of the official objection to their separation from Indigenous parish members, Creoles opted for a more gradual and subtle path. They continued to fulfill their responsibilities as godparents, participating in major celebrations such as the annual Annunciation Day procession, covering the march across the entire city. However, their involvement in activities that fell outside their formal sacramental or godparental obligations diminished, as seen in the 1890 case, when Creole choir members began to withdraw, unwilling to share it with the natives.⁶⁵

Another framework that could preserve the separation between the two ethnic communities was the system of Orthodox brotherhoods and their adjunct temperance societies. In cities with a significant Orthodox population, sodalities were divided along ethnic lines, with separate Creole brotherhoods established in Sitka, Juneau, and Afognak.⁶⁶ Although the first Creole entity was established already in 1885, long before its Indigenous counterpart, the Brotherhood of the Standard-bearers of Archangel Michael soon declined, only to be revived in 1892 as the reorganized St. Nicholas Church Brotherhood. The sodalities elected their own officers, with the parish priest serving as either the president or the "spiritual advisor",⁶⁷ and their statutes addressed the most exasperating problems of the time. The Brotherhood's primary aim was to enhance the spiritual and physical well-being of its members, providing support during illness and assistance to widows and orphans, while also addressing the challenges posed by persistent drunkenness and financial hardship. Additionally, it sought to strengthen members' commitment to the Orthodox faith and the Church, fostering a love for the Russian language and maintaining a connection to their Russian heritage.

The brotherhoods organized various extra-liturgical activities, such as the monthly "tea gathering", where members engaged in informal conversations about current affairs, collected and verified monthly dues, and addressed other matters.⁶⁸ On Sunday evenings, everyone gathered in the school hall for moral and religious discussions, gospel readings, and to raise awareness about the

64 In Afognak, the Indigenous people lived separately in the so-called *zhilo*, an archaism that can be translated close to the settlement. Kashevarov, "Afognakskaiia Rozhdestvo-Bogorodichnaia Tserkov", 508.

65 Donskoi, *Letter to Bishop Vladimir*, December 28, 1890, in ARCA, B 6, reel 10, 1.

66 Innokentii, "Otchet o sostoianii [...] za 1907 god", 207.

67 Kan, *Memory Eternal*, 306-7.

68 Chubarov, "Novyi istoricheskii pamiatnik v Sitke", 108.

dangers of alcohol. During these sessions, the chairman, clergy, and schoolteacher presented religious articles and shared the lives of saints with the attendees. In July, a fraternal picnic was held, inviting all Sitka residents, while a special Christmas festivity (*iolka*) was held in December. Each sodality celebrated its patron Saint's Day with great enthusiasm, as demonstrated by the Sitka Brotherhood's "St. Nicholas Day" celebration, which began with a liturgical procession and extended into the evening with a fraternal dinner, accompanied by unceasing speeches and music.⁶⁹

However, internal squabbles, factionalism, and declining interest in the Church led to low attendance and limited outcomes relative to native sodalities.⁷⁰ The opportunity to function separately from natives did not alleviate the tensions but, at times, intensified them, creating an insurmountable border.⁷¹ This was particularly evident in the struggle over the distribution of insignia among members of both institutions, which underscored the efforts to reinforce the "naturally privileged" status of Creoles. So unthinkable it appeared to be relegated to the position of the natives via a joint usage of the sacred objects: "We are neither fools nor Kolosh to wear the same kind of badges; we do not wish to be equated with them".⁷² The coexistence of the two sodalities entailed their vibrant competition, with their rivalry extending from organizing public festivities to attempts to secure superior patronage by forging special connections with the clergy. This, however, received nothing but repeated criticism from the priests, who accused the Creole Brotherhood of idleness for diverting their attention from issues requiring special treatment.⁷³

The low membership was also attributable to the strictness of the statutes. The purpose of resolving the drunkenness issue conflicted with practices at the very core of the community and with the festivities that upheld unity. The January *sviatki* season, characterized by heavy drinking, was criticized by Russian-born priests. Creoles, in turn, saw it as an attack on their own "Russian" culture, viewing the celebration as "one of the few remaining authentic and unique cultural traditions that not only set them apart from the rest of the

69 Kashevarov, "Otchet o deiatel'nosti", 192.

70 The sodality also aimed to provide mutual aid, a crucial function during the challenging post-sale period. However, this alone was insufficient to foster widespread involvement in the brotherhood's activities. Kan, "True Heirs to a Heroic Russian Past" 21.

71 See the case of the inadmission of Native Olga Tsakux in *Minutes of the St. Nicholas' Brotherhood*, 1895, in ARCA, D 323, reel 214.

72 Kamenskii, *Letter to Bishop Nikolai*, December 23, 1897, in ARCA, D 432, reel 276.

73 Innokentii, "Boi 'Variaga' v Chemul'po", 274.

Sitkans but were [...] partially appropriated by the latter as part of the town's special heritage".⁷⁴

Yet whenever the brotherhood's operations aligned with the Church's needs, its members and the institutions themselves were deemed worthy of praise. The respective engagement could reaffirm their Russian identity, with statistical data on the composition of various sodalities recognizing them as Russian. The most pressing need was financial, with the clergy particularly valuing the generous donations that sustained local facilities. The Creoles' motives appeared intrinsically pure whenever they aided the poor and the sick or contributed funds to the procurement of church attributes.⁷⁵ They would advance the local Orthodox cemetery, support the construction of a road leading to it, make generous donations to the orphanage, regularly distribute allowances on the occasions of the Paschal and Christmas feasts, and offer one-time disbursements to those in need at various times.⁷⁶ In 1907, they contributed to the local Orthodox community by investing in the maintenance of the Sitka Cathedral and by extending support to those facing financial hardships following the 1906 San Francisco earthquake.⁷⁷

The celebration of St. Nicholas Day in Sitka would be accompanied by a speech by the Bishop, who underscored the essential nature of charity, urging it to be seen as "the most natural obligation of every person".⁷⁸ The members of the Brotherhood of St. Cyril and Methodius in Juneau were acclaimed as the best part of the local parish, supporting the school and church facilities through all possible financial means and "trying to be a Russian and Orthodox element of the parish", thereby fairly bearing the name of a Russian sodality.⁷⁹

Perhaps playing on the Creoles' dissatisfaction with being equated to the Indigenous population, the priests contrasted these achievements with the lesser contributions from the native brotherhoods, encouraging the Creoles to maintain their financial inputs.⁸⁰ These expectations might also shed light on the clergy's

⁷⁴ Kan, "True Heirs to a Heroic Russian Past", 22.

⁷⁵ See the money collection for the acquisition of the tabernacle in Kashevarov, "Sitkinskoe Sv. Nikolaevskoe Bratstvo v 1905 godu" 249. Also, in Kashevarov, "Otchet o deiatel'nosti", 192.

⁷⁶ Chubarov, "Novyi istoricheskii pamiatnik v Sitke", 108.

⁷⁷ Innokentii, "Otchet o sostoianii [...] za 1906 god", 168.

⁷⁸ Chubarov, "Novyi istoricheskii pamiatnik", 113.

⁷⁹ Innokentii, "Otchet o sostoianii [...] za 1906 god", 191.

⁸⁰ Unlike the native sodality, the members of the Creole Brotherhood in Juneau were said to have given up their last means to purchase full priestly vestments. Innokentii, "Boi 'Variaga' v Chemul'po", 273.

occasional appeals to the US government to take care of the Creoles' well-being. Yet, the general focus on the Indigenous parishioners as the prevailing population of Alaska, the derogatory rhetoric permeating the priests' records, and the absence of active efforts to engage the Creoles suggested that the Church's interest in their protection was mainly to secure their ability to donate. Strong recommendations were forwarded to Washington to increase access to the first-hand resources and to guarantee pensions for the retired Alaska Commercial Company's servants.⁸¹ A bill would be compounded by the Creoles' request for their priest's intervention to contest American regulations on the indirect payment to the Alaskan population, thereby preventing the Creoles from donating to the Church.⁸² They were portrayed as living rather challenging lives, with their "hearts rejoiced as we [they] gazed on the church, our [their] place of prayer and comfort, at the knowledge that we [they] were able, by our [their] own labor, to support the House of the Lord".⁸³

Individuals who did not demonstrate a willingness to provide financial support faced, in turn, considerable criticism in turn. The Creoles in the north, for example, were claimed to stubbornly resist the ROC's influence, and "were it not for the stipend-paid priest, they would abandon Orthodoxy for whichever confession required nothing to be paid".⁸⁴ When a priest called upon them to assist in preserving the church from deterioration, the Creoles merely accused him of being demanding and meddling in their lives. Hence, although their financial contributions temporarily restored their Russian identity, their inaction led the clergy to conclude that "the best of the Russians returned to their homeland, the rest mingled with the Americans".⁸⁵

9 Americanization and Moral Decay

Although the establishment of the brotherhoods offered a partial solution to the issue of alcohol abuse, they fell short of achieving their proclaimed goal of strengthening the Russian language proficiency and proximity to the Russian culture in general, reversing the ever-growing Americanization trend. The degree to which the ROC's discourse on American influence portrayed it as evil varied among priests. Fr. Donskoi attributed the issue to a misunderstanding of the freedom enshrined in the US Constitution, specifically to questioning

⁸¹ Dabovich, "Alaska".

⁸² "News from the Pribylof Islands", 256.

⁸³ "Orthodoxy in Alaska", 392.

⁸⁴ Innokentii, "Otchet o sostoianii [...] za 1907 god", 196.

⁸⁵ Innokentii, "Otchet o sostoianii [...] za 1907 god", 196.

Orthodox teachings.⁸⁶ Fr. Kamenskii went further in his criticism: “The children [...] are imbued with the spirit of the Americanized Creoles; [...] but the minute some effort is made to discipline them, they respond by saying, ‘this is not Russia where one can whip students’”.⁸⁷ Hence, the American rule would bring nothing but the unjustified permissiveness, “unbridled and falsely understood freedom”, resulting in the general “drunken bacchanalia”.⁸⁸

The growing tensions with the clergy compelled Creoles to seek greater independence. Troubled by Mitropol'skii's priesthood, the parishioners advocated for amending society's statutes to remove the priest from his position as an overseer of the Brotherhood's order and to allow members to manage the treasury funds without requiring his or the bishop's consent. The 1867 Treaty was invoked and interpreted as granting lay Orthodox parish members ownership of the church's property. The claims were substantiated by references to the Presbyterian congregation, whose members could expel their ministers and exercise almost total control over the administration of their own church. In response, Fr. Vladimir Vechtomov, who took on the responsibilities in Sitka for just one month before the arrival of Fr. Donskoi in 1886, emphasized that only ROC authorities had the exclusive right to censor an ordained priest and were the sole owners of ecclesiastical property. Therefore, if the Creoles wished to take control, they had to involve the Indigenous people, since the treaty did not differentiate between the ‘Russian’ and ‘non-Russian’ Orthodox residents of Alaska.⁸⁹

For the clergy, the incident became a demonstration of moral decay, a loss of discipline, and a harmful example set by the Creoles for the native parishioners, whose diligence and allegedly strong devotion were heightened to be compared to the Creoles' misconduct. The initiative was immediately attributed to the pervasive influence of lower-class American frontiersmen and soldiers, with the “American civilization” being claimed to “only plant bad seeds in such a soil”.⁹⁰

By the turn of the century, resentment towards the Americanization of Creoles had taken on a tone of victimization. A successor of Fr. Kamenskii, Fr. Antonii Dashkevich (1898-1905) assumed, as he stated, the responsibility for the community revival of the “persecuted, abandoned Russian people, dying under the influence of a dry Americanism and utilitarianism, which devours and swallows

⁸⁶ Kan, “True Heirs to a Heroic Russian Past”, 25.

⁸⁷ Kamenskii, *Letter to Bishop Nikolai*, December 23, 1897, in ARCA, D 432, reel 276.

⁸⁸ Shalamov, “Kratkoe tserkovno-istoricheskoe opisanie”, 341.

⁸⁹ Kan, *Memory Eternal*, 245.

⁹⁰ Kamenskii, *Annual Report on the Conditions*, 1896, in ARCA, D 432, reel 276.

everything [good]”.⁹¹ All the deficiencies present in Creoles’ behavior appeared to be a result of the detrimental impact of the Protestant pseudo-democratic American ethos, which sought to replace the Church and remove its influence on Creole youth. Following a conversation with the head of the Baptist orphanage, Bishop Tikhon stressed: “various sectarians, of course, are not going to raise their foster children in the Orthodox faith”.⁹² In turn, poorly educated and lacking spiritual guidance, Creoles were viewed as vulnerable to the excessive freedom and insubordination resulting from the local individualism, as well as the confusion stemming from the overwhelming number of “sects” and “the absence of faith in God”.⁹³ Amidst the wave of cultural and linguistic Americanization, Creoles increasingly curtailed the clergy’s ability to maintain its authority. Russian priests denounced this shift as indicative of a moral decline, thereby widening the rift between the two.

10 Creole Priests

While Creoles faced biological and cultural barriers that discouraged them from having their children speak Russian, the unwavering loyalty and dedication of natives served as a significant counterbalance. In this context, however, a number of Creoles succeeded in gaining respect from American officials and a distinct stance in the eyes of the clergy. These were descendants of prominent families, local dynasties endowed with substantial economic and social capital, who timely ensured a quality education for their children. For ROC, these figures were considered invaluable given its aforementioned persistent manpower shortage and inability to produce such resources itself. Consequently, there was an increasing demand for the ordination of locally born priests, forcing reliance on occasional interpreters to maintain their Indigenous parish.

Individuals who had received religious education, were well-versed in Russian culture and Orthodox principles, and were fluent in Russian, English, Church Slavonic, and their native languages became crucial assets for the clergy to recruit as assistants, psalm readers, and diakons. Their relative economic independence was not merely an advantage but a quality that led Russian priests to turn a blind eye to the concomitant misconduct,⁹⁴ given the impossibility of

⁹¹ Dashkevich, *Letter to Bishop Tikhon Belavin*, 1898, in ARCA, D 334, reel 218, 5.

⁹² Popov, “Puteshestvie Ego Preosviashchenshestva”, 594-5.

⁹³ Kamenskii, *Report on the Sitka Parish*, 1897, in ARCA, D 335, reel 220, 2.

⁹⁴ One might consider the example of Andrew (Andrei) Kashevarov/ff. Kan, “Father Andrew P. Kashevaroff”, 3-20.

offering high salaries. Noteworthy examples of these Creole priests included Petr and Andrei Kashevarov/ff, Nikolai Rysev, and Petr Simeonov Dobrovol'skii. Contrary to expectations that Creole priests would show favoritism towards their community over the natives, they exhibited a different approach. Their deep understanding and connection with the natives set them apart from the Russian-born priests. The latter, vigorously anticipating the return to mainland Russia, were more preoccupied with “contrasting the ‘golden days’ of the RAC rule to the unbridled exploitation of Alaska and its Indigenous inhabitants by greedy and unscrupulous Americans”.⁹⁵

Yet, the ordination of Creoles was often met with resentment by the Russian-born clergy, and their concerns seemed justified, given the large concessions Creole priests made in their service. Netsvetov's case was not isolated, and instances of self-will in the performance of ecclesiastical duties became increasingly common as the Creole church staff expanded. In their stronger grasp of the natives' aspirations, Creole priests often became “agents of reverse influence by interpreting Christian doctrines in their own Indigenous manner”.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, the shortage of competent workers forced Russian-born priests to tolerate such transgressions, along with frequent instances of misconduct among the Creole clergy. While the Church assumed a more indigenized shape, the Creole would consistently appear less attached to their Russian ancestry.

11 Conclusion

The Russian American Company had cultivated Creoles as intermediaries essential to colonial governance and commerce, granting certain privileges, yet enforcing strict labor and residential separations from Indigenous communities, which produced both Creole exceptionalism and persistent non-belonging. The ROC, in turn, helped codify this estate through educational and missionization initiatives aimed at cementing Creoles' distinction from Indigenous ancestry, while depicting them as intellectually and morally deficient, constraining their ecclesiastical mobility, and thereby solidifying their in-between position.

The 1867 transfer of Alaska from the Russian Empire to the United States would disrupt colonial social dynamics. Creoles experienced

95 Geraci and Khodarkovsky, *Of Religion and Empire*, 194.

96 Znamenski, *Shamanism and Christianity*, 62. During his 1893 inspection of Alaskan missions, Bishop Nikolai Ziorov (1891-98) lashed out at Orlov and Bel'kov for their reckless and insubordinate conduct. Archbishop of Warsaw Nikolai, *Iz moego dnevnika*, 41.

a precipitous economic decline and legal ambiguity under US governance, as their status found no ‘conceptual space’ within the new system. At the same time, the intensifying competition with the rival missions weakened the Orthodox influence among Indigenous parishioners, and the ROC, as the only remaining imperial entity in the territory, came to rhetorically elevate Creoles as ‘Russian’ allies against ‘uncivilized natives’. The ultimate departure of the colonizer offered a potential escape from the “almost the same, but not quite” status of the rightful successors of the Russian Orthodox community, inherently distinct from the native population.

Yet the Indigenous Orthodox revival shifted the clerical priorities. By prioritizing openness and tolerance towards the natives’ occasional transgressions, the ROC sought to numerically strengthen its parish reversing the crystallization of the Creoles’ ‘Russian’ identity, now uniquely associated with Russian-born clergy. Creoles’ insistence on preserving distinction through selective, segregated participation only motivated the ROC’s accusations of their insubordination and disrespect of the social hierarchy, which were seen as stemming from their gradual ‘Americanization’ and moral decay. Although locally educated Creole clergy and assistants became indispensable and contributed to an indigenized Orthodoxy, their presence reinforced anxieties about authority and ‘reverse influence’.

The charm of camouflage would fade. While the Church proposed the unacceptable trajectory, the environment itself necessitated change. The aspiration of the colonized to reinvent itself to align with the dominant power came to be hardly contingent on their connection to the ROC. The supreme authority now shifted to the American state with its own acculturation agents and conditions for belonging. This new sociopolitical landscape would dictate the growing mutual indifference between Creoles and the ROC, ultimately shaping the nature of their interactions in post-purchase Alaska.

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