

People convert to a religion for various reasons and the resilience of the newly created alliance with a religious entity is usually highly instable. Oftentimes such conversions are nominal in nature, might fade away in course of generational changes, and have no lasting affects on the people or their culture. For the Sugpiaq of Nanwalek, however, Russian Orthodoxy, essentially a foreign religious practice, became “native” (and Native) in the sense that it is incorporated into everyday Sugpiaq reality, and referred to as such by all in the community. Russian Orthodoxy has an over two hundred year long history on the Kenai Peninsula of Alaska, during which time it has persevered as the one and only religion in the community of Nanwalek. Examining the unique history and practice of Orthodoxy in the area sheds light on the process of integration of a foreign religion into a Native Alaskan community, extending to the point where Orthodoxy is considered the “traditional” religion and associated with the Sugpiaq both within and outside of the community.

The focus of this dissertation is that of contemporary Sugpiaq Russian Orthodoxy, which is formulated by the close correlations between missionization and religious syncretism, as well as by culture specific conceptual analogies created through the process of religious synthesis. In Sugpiaq Russian Orthodoxy, Russian traditions and Russian Orthodoxy are mediated through Sugpiaq cultural logic, perception of reality, and ontological understanding to create and re-create a culturally specific religious identity. To better understand the process of internalization I explore the interrelations and interactions between Orthodox and traditional Sugpiaq understandings of power, hierarchy, social status, and authority. By doing so, this dissertation offers an insight into how people interpret certain aspects of their religion according their own ontological reality in order to integrate foreign religious ideas into the local cultural context.

In this dissertation, based on the system of Sugpiaq Russian Orthodoxy, I propose a new term, conceptual analogy, which explores peoples’ thought processes in relation to the transformation of religious meaning to that of cultural significance, as well as the cultural dynamics that govern the selection and maintenance of religious affiliations. Although conceptual analogy is not restricted to one particular religious or cultural tradition in general, the analogy conceptualized is always culture specific. Therefore conceptual analogies can be found in all situations where an ongoing conversation develops through syncretism, an inherent aspect of religion, as cultural internalization and re-conceptualization.

Russian Orthodoxy is one of the most important constituents of Sugpiaq identity, understood not simply as a spiritual ideology, rather as a cultural factor influencing social behavior and the practical life of the village. Conceptualizing Russian Orthodoxy through the Sugpiaq understanding of reality made it possible for people in Nanwalek to maintain their Orthodox faith by fully integrating it into the community so that Russian Orthodoxy is no longer a foreign religious concept, but rather a significant component of Sugpiaq identity.