

# Christianity helped keep culture alive

By Bill Hess

Tundra Times Staff

The songs they sing are strong. The stories they tell are old, and rich with the life of a people who have long thrived in the rainforests and waters of Southeast Alaska. There have been no books to pass these stories along; only word of mouth.

Yet they often pinpoint to the year events which happened many centuries ago. The traditional clothing they wear when they perform their songs and dances is not only colorful, but the designs and figures on them tell clan and tribal histories; the elaborately carved animal, bird and sea-life figures on their wooden hats also speak to those who understand their meanings.

These are the people of Angoon, located on Admiralty Island, and they have kept their way alive despite the onslaught of foreign culture, religion, and lifestyles. Often, Christianity has been the major battle-ax used in battering down the religions and cultures of Native people, yet Matthew Fred gives credit to a great Christian leader for helping to save the Tlingit religion and culture.

"Father" John Venimienoff, who was anointed Bishop Innocent, became Patriarch of all Russia, Fred, who is the traditional chief of Angoon, explains. He talks of the days before Russia sold what rights

it held in Alaska to the United States. Bishop Innocent spent a great deal of time in Alaska, Fred explains, and built several cathedrals, such as those in Unalaska and Kodiak.

"In observing our culture, he encouraged Tlingits not to relinquish practicing their religion," Fred explains. "He wrote a letter to the Czar. 'I find no fault in the tradition of the people . . . I encourage them . . . Christianity and their religion run parallel together . . .'" Matthews quotes Bishop Innocent.

"Later on, when other religions came in, they were ignorant to our religion. They started to accuse us of practicing paganism! For many years, we did not practice our religion," Matthews relates.

"Until in the late 30's, we realized that even our children perhaps would not know such a thing existed in the past. We realized Bishop Innocent was right; our way was good!"

Matthew brings up an incident which is still told among the Tlingits. "When the shaman, the medicineman, went into a trance, he went around the fire three times, like the sun goeth around the earth. The first words he utters are, 'It's becoming visible! I see the River of Lie, and into the River of Life flows the Stream of Stealing, and into the River of Life flows the Stream of Killing; into the River of Life



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Matthew Fred, traditional chief of Angoon, performs at Celebration 82 in Juneau.

flows the Stream of Lying . . . by the time he hath gotten through, he had just recited the ten commandments!

"And he would tell the people, 'if you live by these rules, you will not offend the Spirit Above Spirits, Nobleman Above Noblemen; in other words, he was telling us the same thing as the Bible; King of Kings, and Lord of Lords.'"

Fred expresses pleasure over the cultural revival sweeping

through Alaska, but warns against bringing too much of the modern world into traditional happenings. Clocks, for example, can get in the way. A ritual has no time structure," Fred explains. "Once

it starts, it must finish. Time is no barrier!"

It is important for people to get together, to observe each others songs and rituals, and for the old to teach the young,