

Scholar studies battle to retain traditional values

HANOVER, N.H. — The fight to retain traditional values and practices has been twofold for the Tlingit Indians of Southeast Alaska — by the time they got used to the demands of Russian Orthodox missionaries, Alaska was sold to America and their culture became a target of Protestant missions.

How the tribe managed to retain an integral part of its culture has been the subject of study by Dartmouth anthropologist Sergei Kan for more than 10 years, according to Dartmouth.

Kan, a native of Russia who came to the United States in 1974, used his knowledge of the Russian language and history to explore little-known writings of 19th century Russian missionaries who traveled across the Bering Strait to Alaska.

“This allowed me to make a contribution in an area where very few Western scholars were using Russian sources,” says Kan, who was adopted by Tlingits during his visits to Sitka, once the capital of Russian Alaska and the capital of American Alaska from 1867 to 1912.

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In one instance in the late 1800s, the body of a deceased Tlingit was moved

SOUTHEAST ALASKA

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repeatedly because the Presbyterian mission did not want the woman buried in the Russian Orthodox tradition. In an 1897 letter translated by Kan, a Tlingit pleaded with the Russian ambassador to the United States to “extend” his protection to the church in Alaska.

Kan’s book on potlatches, *Symbolic Immortality: the Tlingit Potlatch of the Nineteenth Century*, will be published by the Smithsonian Institution Press this month.

Having completed research on the potlatch, Kan is now working on a comprehensive history of Russian-Tlingit relations.