Russian Orthodox Clergymen’s Studies of Nature and Population of Siberia and China (Late Seventeenth – Early Twentieth Centuries)

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Abstract: On the basis of the archival and published materials I performed the research of a role of the Russian Orthodox mission in Beijing in formation of Russian and world sinology. Value of works of the Russian priests for development of ideas on the Nature and Natives of Siberia and border regions of the Russia and China in XVII – the beginning of the XXth century is shown. Special attention is paid to works of the father Iakinf (Bichurin), the Archbishop Nel (Isakovich) and St Innocent (Veniaminov) and their research on customs and religious beliefs of tribes and peoples of Siberia, Buddhism, Manchurian, Mongolian and Chinese languages.

Keywords: Orthodoxy, Natives, Buddhism

In connection with militant atheism, Soviet historians have paid virtually no attention to the role of the Church in ensuring the national interests of Russia in Siberia and the Far East, exploring the natural resources and the indigenous population of those vast regions of Eurasia virtually unknown before by Europeans. Therefore, I believe it is necessary to some extent fill the void in the research gap, to restore historical justice and to highlight the role of the Russian bishops and missionaries in exploring Siberia and China, especially since this subject lately, getting increasing attention not only of Russian\(^1\) but also of foreign researchers, an example of such can be Stephen P. Brown who defended in 1995 at Oxford University thesis, on the role of the Russian Orthodox Church.\(^2\) It should be stressed, however, that the vast majority of these works focuses on ecclesiastic missionary and pastoral activity of Russian priests and monks but rarely their authors consider subject matters related to the study of nature and indigenous population of these areas.

The Russian colonization of Siberia with the first steps has been accompanied by an intense activity of the Orthodox Church, which built temples and monasteries in wilderness areas, blocked the unbridled actions of Russian Zemleprokhotsy [pathfinders and hunters] and Cossacks in their relation to local tribes, and preaching the faith of Christ among these tribes. Missionary work was impossible without learning the local languages, beliefs and customs of local tribes, and that pursuits from the earliest stages of the Russian colonization of Siberia laid the foundations of the Siberian Linguistics and Ethnography.

These aspects of the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church as regards indigenous peoples of Siberia and the Far East, very vividly reflected in the outline review of Orthodox missionaries activities among the Northern non-Russian nationalities of Siberia in the Seventeenth - Nineteenth centuries,

\(^1\) Consult, for instance: Феофан Затворник, святитель. Православие и наука. М., 2005; Лука (Войно-Ясенецкий), святитель. Наука и религия. М., 2001 и др. [Feofan Zatvornik, Syvatiel’ Pravoslavie i nauka /Orthodoxy and Science. (Moscow, 2005); Luka (Voyno-Yasenskii), Syvatiel’ Nauka i Religiya /Science and Religion/ (Moscow, 2001), and others].

\(^2\) S. P. BROWN, The role of the Russian Orthodox Church and Orthodox missionary work in Nineteenth Century Siberia and Russian America. Thesis # D192407 (Oxford University Trinity, 1995).
preserved in the Fond of the Holy Synod of Russian State Historic Archives (St. Petersburg).³

In the Seventeenth century, priests and monks as well, as defenders of the Russian borders with China on the Amur, and primarily Fort Albazin, have suffered hardships of frontier life and military ruin by Manchu, which resulted in some of them ended up as prisoners in Beijing. The Russian Orthodox Mission in China had its beginnings with the capture of forty-five Russians when the Chinese Emperor Kangxi (Kang Hsi), of the Qing dynasty, captured Albazin (1686), a Russian fortress on the Amur River. Among those captured was Father Maxim Leontev, an Orthodox priest. He was brought with the prisoners to Beijing late in the year 1685. There he settled in the ambassadorial quarters in the northeastern section of the city and served his small community for twenty years, using a converted Chinese temple as his chapel. The chapel was consecrated to the Holy Wisdom of God. In 1695, Father Maxim received documentation from the Metropolitian of Tobolsk recognizing the consecration of the church and directed Father Maxim to commemorate the Chinese emperor and to begin preaching to the Chinese. Father Maxim reposed in 1712, thus ending his informal mission.

The official date of the founding of the Beijing Spiritual Mission is considered to be June 18, 1700. On this day, Peter I signed the Decree, stating: "For adoption and enhancement in the Orthodox faith and preaching of the St. Gospel for Pagan peoples [in China], also for tribute-peoples Baptizing, who are near Tobolsk and other Siberian cities live, the Great Monarch... after discussing the matter with his Holiness Patriarch [Adrian], ordered to the Kiev Metropolitian [Varlaam Jasinsky] to look for in Malorossiysian [Ukrainian] towns and monasteries of Abbots and Archimandrites or other famous monks and scholars of good human life, who would be Metropolitian in Tobolsk, and who could with God's Help to preach in China and Siberia against blindness and other paganism, a man who would lead to the knowledge and service to True, Living God, and... this Metropolitan should bring with him the good and educated not elderly two or three monks who could learn Chinese and Mongolian languages and literacy and their superstition, and who would enforce Saint Gospel arguments to many souls and to lead them from darkness of devil in light of the knowledge of Christ our God, and he should also protect there [in Beijing] living and visiting Christians from the charms of any idolizing paganism... and on example of his own life bring the Chinese Han people...to the Holy Baptizing."⁴

After the death of Peter I, Russian missionaries in contrast to Catholic do not engage in the proliferation of Christianity among the Chinese and Manchus, moreover, they did not participate in court intrigues. The mission was limited to maintenance of faith among Albazin veterans, carried out the Russian Government’s diplomatic assignments, provided accommodation and assistance to Russian trade caravans. The mission’s students have studied Chinese and Manchu languages. By virtue of the listed features, the Qing authorities treated Russian mission loyally. Orthodox mission escaped persecution made by the Qing authorities against Christians. The activities of the mission were subordinated to the Russian government diplomatic and political interests. This period lasted until 1860. During this period the composition and heads of the mission changed about every ten years and was generally included four clergy and six laymen. The laymen were usually students whose duty was to learn the Chinese and Manchu languages and then became interpreters and eventually consuls for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The mission was financed by, and received direction from the Russian government.

The tasks of the members of the Beijing spiritual mission was to study Manchu, Chinese and Mongolian languages, as well as history, culture and religion of China. The number of secular members of the mission included young people from among the students of higher educational institutions and the Orthodox Academy. Curriculum between students were distributed according to their previous knowledge, desire and abilities; they studied medicine, mathematics, literature and philosophy, a system of Confucius (551 – 479 BC), history, geography, statistics and law of the Chinese State. The Beijing

³ РГИА, Фонд 797, опись 96, № 45. 1869 г. Сводный обзор деятельности православных миссионеров среди северных ненецких народностей Сибири в XVII-XIX вв. [Russian State Historical Archives (RGIA), Fond 797, opis’ (inventory) 96, File # 45, 1869 year: Composite Outline of the Orthodox missionaries’ activities among Northern non Russian peoples of Siberia in XVII – XIX centuries]
Mission gave Russia the first eminent sinologists: I. K. Rassohin (1707-1761), A. L. Leontyev (1716-1786), I. Ya. Bichurin (1777-1853), O. M. Kowalewski (1800-1878), I. P. Wojciechowski (1793-1850), I. I. Zakharov (1814-1885), P. I. Kafarov (1817-1878), V. P. Vasilyev (1818-1900) and some others. The scientific legacy of these enthusiasts even today is a real Treasury of Russian and World Sinology. So, for example, the head of the Ninth Mission in Beijing, Archimandrite Hyacinth (Bichurin) essentially formed the basis of all subsequent European guidebooks on the capital of the Qing Empire. Hyacinth (Bichurin) was the head of the ninth spiritual mission from 1808 to 1820 year. He was one of the most brilliant in the entire history of the mission. In the missionary field he was not very active, but his students and Bichurin himself left a visible mark in the World Sinology. Bichurin quickly studied the language, got numerous acquaintances, who provided him with invaluable knowledge of the Customs and mores of the country. Fourteen years of life in Beijing became the stage of preparations for his scientific and literary activity. Bichurin has created many works on geography, history, literature in China and neighbouring countries, compiled several dictionaries. In 1837 he opened the first Chinese-language school in the Russian Empire. For his sinological contributions, he was elected to the Russian, German, and French Academies of Sciences.

One of the early examples of valuable materials which had been delivered to Russia by members of the spiritual mission is Land Map compiled from different correct, special Chinese maps while the Russian Caravan had been in the Metropolitan Chinese city Beijing, collected by College Assessor and Director Alexei Matveevich Vladykin, which translated by the same Director. Composed by Geodesy Lieutenant Herald Vladykin and the surveyor Mikhail Bashmakov in the year 1755, which I found at the Russian State Archives of the Military History in Moscow. Former student of the Beijing Mission (1732-1746) and Commissioner (Director) of the Russian trade caravan to China (1754-1755) Alexey Vladykin, on his return to Russia from Beijing in 1755, presented to the Senate the map of China mentioned above and Beijing's plan. In his report to the Senate Alexey Vladykin stated that he received map to be copied from the Imperial library, paying 1.5 thousand rubles in silver for right to withdraw the copies.

In the development of Siberia, the Russian Orthodox Church has played an important role. Monasteries were more than cultural and religious centers, because due to special privileges, they can provide security and support for farmers, and without paying taxes, they can lease their land at a relatively advantageous conditions for farmers. In circumstances where a State, even in the European part of it, very poorly fulfilled its social responsibilities and provided almost no care for the elderly and the sick, the Church has taken care of these virtually unprotected segments of the population, providing them with shelter and rudimentary care and treatment within the walls of monasteries. It should be noted that to ensure the medical needs of the monks, as well as in Europe, they created their own pharmacy gardens cultivating medicinal plants and local grasses and shrubs including those which were used by local tribes. This function of the monasteries was particularly significant in such poor developed areas as Siberia, where restless frontier life early can lead to serious illness and infirmity of soldiers and promyshebenniki. So, one of the reasons for the Foundation of the monastery in the year 1639 was providing service men who was crippled and elderly ... shelter and place to save their solves kindly at death's door.

Through missionary activity Church helped the State in the pacification of the Siberian natives, according to the Russian historian-Expat George Lantcev, creating a "citizenship schools", i.e. awareness of belonging to a united multi-ethnic State. In this process, an important, if not decisive role played learning of main Siberian peoples' languages and, in this regard, the Church has shown strong initiative when in the year 1802 in the curriculum of the Tobolsk Seminary was included the teaching of Tatar.
language. At the beginning of 1820s in the Irkutsk Theological Seminary there were taught the Mongol-Buryat language and learning plans have been put forward on the Yakut and Tungus (Evenks) languages. In 1824 at the Kazan University was allocated a special quota for graduates of the Tobolsk Seminary, so that they could continue studying Tatar language at the higher education level.

For the Russian Most Holy Synod, it was clear that to ensure the success of the Orthodox missions it was necessary to specifically prepare preachers, providing them with knowledge of the languages and traditions of Siberian peoples among whom they were supposed to keep preaching the truths of the faith of Christ. In this regard, on February 15, 1867 the Holy Synod accepted a proposal to organize a missionary classes in the Oriental Faculty of St. Petersburg University for two-year course for learning foreign languages (Tatar and Mongol; with their dialects) for missionaries and took over half the expenses and the admission of the Siberian Natives in the Tomsk and Irkutsk seminaries for training as future missionaries.

Dean of East Department: Professor Emeritus, Mirza Kazem-Bey was the author of the document below.

“Draft rules for the opening of the two-year course of Tatar-Mongol discharge for missionaries in the Faculty of Oriental languages in St Petersburg University.

1. A two-year training course of Tatar and Mongolian languages for those wishing to devote themselves to missionary service in the Faculty of Oriental languages, should be special and, due to short time, extremely intensive.

2. Applicants in this course are chosen according to the purpose for one of the two languages: Tatar or Mongolian. - Sufficient success in both languages during the course is unthinkable, safe a rare cases of special abilities of a young man to linguistic studies; thus it can only contend such students who completely feel his ability, strength and hope for a satisfactory success.

3. In the first year, trainees, in their chosen subject attend all lectures of the teachers of the first course, in which they must engage in reading, writing and rudimentary forms of grammar. Moreover, the Faculty shall appoint two additional special lectures, in which listeners should practice in their acquired knowledge. These include: the correct reading, grammar analysis and, during the second semester, the compilation of phrases from already known words.

4. For the second year there would be accepted only those students who after additional (verification) lectures at the end of the first year could fairly freely read printed excerpts, analyze their grammatic and formulate phrases in language they are learning. - Here the trainees also attend all practical classes in each subject only in the 3rd course of faculty teaching, and moreover they are also prescribed for two hours per week for additional specially-practical exercises. These classes will be: a/reading more difficult articles, appointed by the teacher; b/in the learner language and conversation. By the end of the second year listeners of each language must:

1. Fluently read printed books in the language they are learning.
2. Translate into Russian language these articles.
3. Write from dictation.
4. Translate from the Russian into the language they are learning.
5. Be able to speak at least a little.
6. Exams, is not anticipated, because every additional class itself has a character test. For transfer from one class to another the teacher’s recommendation would be enough. –

7. Course trainees will receive a certificate on plain paper, highlighting their successes; but these certificates do not give them any rights.

9 RGIA, Fond 796, opis’83, 1808 year, # 984, Sheets 1, 3.
10 RGIA, Fond 802, opis’1, 1808 – 1839 years, # 3255.
11 BROWN, The role of the Russian Orthodox Church, pp. 144-154.
12 РГИА, Фонд 177, опись 68, 1867 год, № 42: По предложению Миссионерского общества о приготовлении миссаров. [Russian State Historical Archives (RGIA), Fond 177, opis’ 68, Year 1867, # 42: “On Missioners’ Society Proposal as regards training of missioners”].

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8. The students of the missioner’s course, with the approval of the Council of the University, shall be exempt from fees for listening lectures, designated for this purpose because the teachers of these lectures had expressed their willingness to be helpful for the Missionary Society.

9. No one may enter in the missionary course of the East Faculty without notice of the Missionary Society Board.

10. At the end of the course, Dean of Oriental Languages Department, or the Council of the University, reports the date and time of the test of a graduating missioner to the Board of Missionary Society, so, that if the Society wished, it could appoint its deputies to be present during exams.

11. At the end of the year the Faculty brings to the attention of the Missionary Society the names of persons at all incapable to continue classes at school, if such happened to be.

In the second half of the second year the trainees will be given a brief overview of the Muslim in the Tatar and Buddhist [religions] in Mongolian, with indication of main writings on these religions.

Dean Of The Faculty
Oriental languages M. A. Kazem-Bek.¹³

On October 1, 1867, Father Nil Archbishop of Yaroslavl and Rostov (whose activities in Siberia we shall discuss below), responded negatively to this project in general in his letter No. 2484 addressed to Comrade Ober Attorney of Holy Synod Yuri Vasilievich Tolstoy.

The main factors underlying the negative attitude of the Archbishop to the Project were as follows: two years is not enough, you need three, and preferably four, the training should be carried out from the beginning by religious books. The main thing is the oral language, and listeners should be taken from Siberian missionaries and priests, because there are many of those who have knowledge of local dialects. The Mongolian language is taught in all spiritual schools in Siberia; from 1852 by blessing of the Holy Synod, the Archbishop's House is provided with a modest school established to prepare the Church's Ministers for the churches as Russian, so Mongolian.

The answer of the Kazan Spiritual Academy on March 5, 1868 highlights the need to prepare missionaries from the natives and to establish their training also in Saint-Petersburg Seminary together with the Oriental Faculty of St. Petersburg University.¹⁴

Further discussion on the improvement of the missionary activities concerned the Altai Mountains Region and Irkutsk, and mission discussion touched one of the foundations of Orthodox missionary work in Russia which was the preaching of the faith of Christ among representatives of other world religions (in this case Buddhism); missionary among them had been forbidden by Catherine II. The leadership of the Missionary Society in 1860 - 1870 tried to revise this State policy, relying on its special study¹⁵. At that time Russian Government could not change its policy in this sensitive matter, especially due to the active drive of the Empire into the Central Asian (mainly Muslim) states, and the Russia’s strong geopolitical interests in the Buddhist Tibet.¹⁶

¹² RGIA, Fond 177, opis’ 68, Year 1867, # 42, Sheets 17 – 19.
¹³ RGIA, Fond 177, opis’ 68, Year 1867, # 42, Sheets 20 – 42 back side.
¹⁴ RGIA, Fond 797, opis’ 36 – II otdeleniye, # 302: Po predlojeniyam Missionerskogo obshchestva ob uluchsheni iAltayskoi i Zabaykalskoy Irkutskoy missii... ob otkrytii dvukhgodichnogo kursa tatarskogo i mongolskogo yazyka pri Sankt-Peterburgskom universitete [On proposal of the Missioner Society about perfecting of Altai and Transbaikal Irkutsk Mission... about opening of the two years course of Tatar and Mongolian languages in Saint-Petersburg University], 1866 – 1870 years. On 103 sheets.
Two Russian church hierarchs played a particularly important role in the strengthening of the Orthodox in Eastern Siberia and in exploring its nature and the indigenous population. They were Bishop and Archbishop of Russian America and Siberia (later Metropolitan of Moscow and Kolomna), St. Innocent (Veniaminov) (1797-1879) and Bishop of Irkutsk, Nerchinsk and Yakutsk Nil (Isakovich) (1799-1874). Both were tireless missionaries hierarchs-travelers and scholars. Nil, during consecration in Irkutsk (1838-1853) swept by his missionary activity almost all of Siberia, Far East, Yakutia, Kamchatka and the Aleutian Islands, he became acquainted with such peoples as the Chukchi, Kamchadals, Nanai, Koryaks, Yakuts, and Buryats.

Bishop Nil did a lot for improving education in the local Seminary, for which he invited many educated priests from the central provinces of Russia.

Among the peoples of Siberia he paid the most attention to the Buryat Mongols, seriously studying Tibetan Buddhism (Lamaism), lifestyle and Buryat language, strongly encouraging his co-brothers for the same pursuits. In 1840 Archbishop Nil built Chikajskij monastery on the Chinese border near Kyakhta. In 1851 he founded Nilo-Stolobenskiy Skit at the southern foothills of Sayan Ridge near Buryats settlements. Having studied the local languages, Nil with his employees began translations of liturgical books and, despite the enormous difficulties to the year 1854 in Kazan, he published translations into the same pursuits. In 1840 Archbishop Nil built Chikajskij monastery on the Chinese border near Kyakhta. In 1851 he founded Nilo-Stolobenskiy Skit at the southern foothills of Sayan Ridge near Buryats settlements. Having studied the local languages, Nil with his employees began translations of liturgical books and, despite the enormous difficulties to the year 1854 in Kazan, he published translations into Mongolian language of the Gospel (partially), the Book of Hours, prayer book and other major canonical writings. After departure from Irkutsk (in 1853) Bishop Nil finished the fundamental work on Buddhism, which was one of the first in Russia.17

The enlightened hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church sets out in his work the history and basics of the Buddhist faith, describes the hierarchy of priests (lamas), the organization and functioning of the monasteries (Datsans) on the basis of his study, mainly the religious practices of the Buryats and Mongols. At the same time, Nil makes extensive use of his knowledge in ancient philosophy and mythology, citing, in addition to the sayings from the Bible, numerous quotes in Latin and ancient Greek, illustrating his (very carefully expressed) ideas about the proximity of the Buddhism to beliefs before Christianity. In particular, he carries out the parallels between the colorful and noisy rituals of Buddhist holidays and services with pagan orgies.18 Detailing the moral fabric of Buddhism, Nil just finds them proof that the more moral edification in such regulations of the pagan world, the more proof for words of our Great Teacher: “when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law: they are a law for themselves even though they do not have the law since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them...” (ROMANS II:15-16).19

Describing in detail the Buddhist concept of transmigration of souls (reincarnation) and based on their religious practices identify babies successors (reincarnants) of departed senior lamas (especially the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama), Archbishop Nil, following the Russian orientalist Stepan V. Lipovtsov20 underlines that Chinese (Qing) authorities to strengthen their rule in Tibet and the impact on the entire Buddhist world, actually banned this religious practice and changed it for legislative appointment of religious rulers. The attitude of the official authorities of the Russian Empire to the representatives of the world religions (Islam, Judaism and Buddhism), as well as to the basics of their religious practices were built on the basis of strict non-interference policy of the State, traditionally practiced since ancient

17 Нил (Исакович Николай Федорович) Буддизм, рассмотриваемый в отношении к последователям его, обитающим в Сибири (СПб., 1858). Nil (Isakovich, Nikolay Fedorovich) Buddhism, rassmatrivaemyi v otnoshenii k posledovatelyam ego v Sibir. [Buddhism described as regards its believers living in Siberia] (Saint-Petersburg, 1858).
18 Nil (Isakovich, Nikolay Fedorovich) Buddhism, rassmatrivaemyi v otnoshenii k posledovatelyam ego v Sibir. [Buddhism described as regards its believers living in Siberia] (Saint-Petersburg, 1858): 124-125.
19 Nil (Isakovich, Nikolay Fedorovich) Buddhism, rassmatrivaemyi v otnoshenii k posledovatelyam ego v Sibir. [Buddhism described as regards its believers living in Siberia] (Saint-Petersburg, 1858): 152.
times and officially promulgated by Empress Catherine II. In accordance with this policy, the missionary activities of the Russian Orthodox Church, at least until the beginning of the Twentieth century, in accordance with the strict regulations of the Holy Synod is strictly forbidden to Baptize the persons professing Christianity in any form, Islam, Buddhism or Judaism, i.e., one of the world’s religions. Their activities of the Russian Orthodox Church, at least until the beginning of the Twentieth century, in accordance with this policy, the missionary to Siberia and particularly told in details about his journey from Irkutsk to the upper reaches of the Lena, then by this great Siberian River to Yakutsk and back by the same way up the Lena. Although the main purpose of the enlightened priest of the Russian Orthodox Church was to familiarize with the activities of priests and missionaries, he pays considerable attention to the description of nature and population of Siberia and Yakutia, collect samples of rocks and minerals, analyze geology, vegetation, animal world and in General natural resources. In all his travelogues Nil shows not only a deep knowledge of classical languages and literature, but also an outstanding ability of well educated and capable for keen observation naturalist. So, crossing the Ural Mountains Nil much ponder about their origin and development, quite rightly arguing about weathering processes of more friable lays of rocks included in arrays of Granites. Passing the Tobolsk, Archbishop Neale presented his rich mineralogical collection to the Tobolsk Seminary.

Nil pointed out the decline of water resources of rivers and lakes, as well as lakes’ degrading into marshes which processes he explained by unlimited extermination of forests.

Archbishop pays great attention to the development of processes of mutual influence of the local population and Russians. Typical in this respect, is the following description of one of the settlements where he and his companions spent some time: Village Bantaiskaya with a good station [kind of a small inn] and cozy yard. This convenience is rarely found on the tracks of the Siberia. This place deserves a special attention due to the fact that in language, clothing and all home life it demonstrates a type of transition. Russian aliens, step by step succumbing to the influence of the natives, becoming Siberians, and the natives seem to become more and more Russian. This phenomenon of the transitivity is instructive. When observing it in detail, one can learn a lot for Ethnology. Besides, Nil pointed out that Yakut language in these regions had become more ordinary used by Russians then French in their European gentry society.

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21 For details, consult: Postnikov A. V. Stanovlenie rubezhey Rossiim Tsentral’noi I Srednii Azii (XVIII – XIX vv.). Rol’ istoriko-geograficheskikh isследований i kartografirovaniya: Monografiya v dokumentakh [Forming of Russia’s Boundaries in Central and Middle Asia: Monograph in documents]. Ed. Academician Myasnikov (Moscow: Pamyatniki istoricheskoj mysli, 2007): 293–425: Приложение № 7 “Секретно” О магометанстве в Киргизской степи и об управлении духовными делами киргизов [Published for the first time].

22 Nil (Isakovich, Nikolay Fedorovich) Buddhism, rassmattrivaimy v otnoshenii k posledovatelyom ego v Sibiri [Buddhism described as regards its believers living in Siberia], in two parts (Yaroslavl, 1874). Part 1, pages 24–25.

23 Nil (Isakovich Nikolay Fedorovich) Putevye zapiski o puteshestvii po Sibiri [Travel Notes on Journey through Siberia], in two parts (Yaroslavl, 1874). Part 1, page 70.

24 Nil (Isakovich Nikolay Fedorovich) Putevye zapiski o puteshestvii po Sibiri [Travel Notes on Journey through Siberia], in two parts (Yaroslavl, 1874). Part 1, page 79.


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Going down the Lena River, Archbishop Nil pays great attention to the changes in coasts under the influence of erosion processes, very professionally describing the origin and features of the development of these processes depending on the kind and strength of rocks compositing the coast. Nil observed a very bad effects of deforestation (particularly as a result of fires) on relief due to rise in flushing processes and erosion: Till the ridge is covered with a lot of wood it did not suffer damage. But after the fire, which exterminated the forest and naked ribs of mountains, the elements would get their strength and as if invisibly, work out and lead to collapse of mountain masses.

In his notes Nil has repeatedly pointed out the enormous impact of ice and permafrost on coastal processes and the topography of the Lena valley. He describes multiple landslides on the banks of the Lena River, the main reason for which, according to his observations, were “iced skull,” included into sediments. As a result of landslides there were a lot of floating islands with vegetation. Archbishop Nil vividly describes flood caused by ice jams during ice floes and plenty of troubles arising from these floods.  

During his stay in Yakutsk Nil paid considerable attention to the study of permafrost in the Valley of the Lena River. For his research he, in particular, used a deep well. As a result of these observations, he makes the following, absolutely correct from the perspective of modern science, conclusions: there is no doubt that it [the Valley of Lena] from the old times was exposed to flooding. Traces of them are evident not only in the lays of soils of the said well, but also in many other areas. Freezing of the soil at depths of over fifty sazhens [more than 100 m] was due to differences in precipitation and freezing during different periods.

Throughout his travels in Siberia, as well as during all period of his service in Irkutsk, Archbishop Nil collected detailed diaries of priests who traveled in all far flung corners of Yakutia, and in accordance with the Decree of the Holy Synod of December 1848, he left these diaries for use in his works. When describing these materials, Nil underlined that the voyages of travelling churches generally were enormous. So, the path traversed in the North-East Siberia by the St Nikolas Church in 1849 was 9130 verstas long; and the Church of the Annunciation in 1850 covered the distance of 7400 verstas at Northwest, through Zhigansk, Lake Zhessheja and up to Anabar. Such long travels during this period were not only ordinary, but even arbitrary. The area of these wandering covered territories from Chaun River up to the Yenisey River distanced from one another at 80°.

Archbishop Nil highlights among missionaries the Protoiereus (Archpriest) of Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church (Yakutsk) Gregory Sleptsov, who was devoted and zealous but often disobedient to Church superiors. To the end of his life, Sleptsov entered the Yakutsk Spassky monastery. The walls of the monastery did not changed his high spirit. He compiled a detailed recommendations on development of missionary activities in Yakutiya wilderness stressing the need to study Natives, there mores, customs, and faiths. Archbishop Nil, rightly stresses further: this Document, relating to the year 1815, has an important historical significance sketching the population in the province at that time, which remains to this day as little-known, so not enlightened. Science has not touched it yet. It should be added that these missionary routes have contributed significantly to the geographical exploration of territories, then virtually unknown to Europeans.

Above the Vitim River Nil observed about the coastal Ridge that it had experienced volcanic activities. He found that many lays in the ridge were in different positions as regards their ancient orientation. He believes that initially this region had been a relatively level plane which was crushed during formation of the ridge, as a result we now see different peaces of old plane positioned at different angles as regards each other. In general, his descriptions of topography and geology show his very good knowledge of them, highlighting, for example iron calcidonius, hornblende, amphiboles, spats, etc.

27 Nil (Isakovich Nikolay Fedorovich) Putevye zapiski o puteshestvii po Sibiri [Travel Notes on Journey through Siberia]. In two parts (Yaroslavl, 1874). Part 2, page 244.
28 Nil (Isakovich Nikolay Fedorovich) Putevye zapiski o puteshestvii po Sibiri [Travel Notes on Journey through Siberia]. In two parts (Yaroslavl, 1874). Part 2, page 244.
29 A versta equal to 1.0668 kilometres
30 Nil (Isakovich Nikolay Fedorovich) Putevye zapiski o puteshestvii po Sibiri [Travel Notes on Journey through Siberia]. In two parts (Yaroslavl, 1874). Part 2, page 41.
In the Vilyusk Archbishop Nil received dispatches from priests. These reports answered Nil’s questions about geology, mineralogy and similar subjects falling within the scope of science regarding the areas, where priests served. These answers are of very different quality, but Nil could find a lot of really helpful information especially regarding nature and population of these regions. In particular he pointed out the information about extinct or dormant volcanoes in Siberia. In the Vitim Ridge there was reported one acting volcano which in 1840 had emitted flame, smoke with the sulphur smell, and rocks. Volcano fire destroyed forest at 60 km in circumstance of the mountain.

Nil presented his rich mineralogical collection to St. Petersburg University. For scientific merit University elected Archbishop Nil as its Honorary Professor.

St Innocent (Veniaminov) whole his life was connected with Siberia and Russian America. Missionary work in his activities was inseparable from the study of the languages, customs, mores and traditions of the peoples among whom he preached the faith of Christ. St. Innocent was a great traveller-explorer whose most intensive voyages were performed in the Russian America, but after December 15, 1840, when he was consecrated Bishop of the new diocese of Kamchatka, the Kuril, and Aleutian Islands, he undertook the long and difficult travels through his new ecclesiastic domain. On August 18, 1842, Veniaminov arrived in Kamchatka. There, in the winter, he accomplished an amazing trip of 5,000 versts across the peninsula, traveling by horse, reindeer, and dog team, reaching Okhotsk in April 1843. From there, in the fall of the same year, he again set out for Russian America. He visited Kamchatka, more then once before 1850, completed yet another overland journey to Ayan (1847), and sailed aboard the brig Great Prince Konstantin to the Pribilov Islands, Unalaska, St. Michael Redoubt, to Michigmen Bay on the Asiatic coast, and to Kodiak.

He received the rank of Archbishop with the see at Ayan in 1850. Veniaminov traveled for almost ten years, beginning in 1852, through Siberia, Chukotka, Kamchatka, and Amur. In 1858 he accompanied Governor-General Muraviev on a voyage along the Amur river for negotiations with China that resulted in the Treaty of Aigun in May, which returned the Amur lands to Russia. On May 15, 1859, Veniaminov celebrated the first service in the Yakut language in the Trinity Cathedral in Yakutsk. In September 1862 he returned to Blagoveschensk, ending in a shipwreck that he survived.

Based on his rich experience, dedicated service in the Russian America and Siberia, as well as summarising the work of his colleagues, St Innocent compiled in 1840s an instruction for missionaries. Published only in 1900, this instruction became a practice of the Russian missionary activity immediately after St. Innocent compiled it.

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32 Modern volcanologists apprise the Nil’s evidence about active volcano in this region as deserving an attention. So, Dr. Alexander N. Zemtsov (1948 – 2012) thought that information about volcanic eruption in 1840 was of great scientific importance. He pointed out that many aspects of this eruption’s description should be analyzed in detail on base of later and recent data. Prince Peter Alexeevich Kropotkin (1842 – 1921) had visited these regions in 1860s (much later then 1840) and he saw fresh materials of eruption. For details consult: Земцов А.Н., Маркин В.А. Вулканы континентальной Азии. Земля и Вселенная, 2005, №1. [Zemtsov A.N., Markin V.A. Vulkany kontinental’noi Azii. (Volcanoes of Continental Asia) Zemlya i Vselennaya, 2005, # 1].

St Innocent (Veniaminov)
Archbishop Nil (Isaskovich)