

**CULTURE CHANGE AND IDENTITY  
AMONG ALASKA NATIVES:  
RETAINING CONTROL**

by

Ann Fienup-Riordan

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*Ann Fienup-Riordan is an independent scholar who received a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology from the University of Chicago in 1980. She has lived, worked, and taught in Alaska since 1973. The focus of her work has been the history and oral traditions of the Yup'ik Eskimos of western Alaska and how their way of life has and has not changed over the last 200 years. Her books include The Nelson Island Eskimo (1983), When Our Bad Season Comes (1986), The Yup'ik Eskimos (1988), Eskimo Essays (1990), and The Real People and the Children of Thunder (1991). In 1991 the Alaska Historical Society named her Historian of the Year for her research and writing on the history of Alaska Natives.*

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## INTRODUCTION

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*We have to know our culture and ourselves before we can face the future.*

*Joe Friday, Chevak, 1910-1991*

Personal and group identity among Alaska Natives today is based on ancient cultural traditions that have been modified by rapid culture change in Alaska during the last two hundred years. Anthropologists define culture as the system of symbols and meanings around which people organize their lives and interpret their experience. Culture is not a thing but a view of the world that guides people's actions.

A person's cultural identity is the realization of these cultural values in social action. External markers of cultural identity include language, food, clothing, arts, and physical traits. More subtle markers of identity include attitudes, conceptions of time and oneself, and ways of communicating. Although a person's cultural identity can be read to some extent from these markers, identity is realized in people's actions and is not a fixed list of traits.

Culture change is the rule rather than the exception. Change is normal, not abnormal, in the course of human events, but in a given situation can be either positive or negative. It is not inevitably good or bad. One can view culture change as a negotiation process with creative, although not necessarily painless, outcomes. The idea that Native peoples are being "acculturated"—either gradually or rapidly through intense immersion—into dark-skinned counterparts of non-Natives is misleading. Instead of viewing individuals as responding to fixed cultural norms, in the last twenty years anthropologists have shifted their emphasis to understanding how people continually reshape their lives in the course of everyday experiences.

Some anthropologists argue that in the discontinuities between the values people hold and the continually shifting circumstances of everyday life we find the primary driving forces of change. Applied to the situation in Alaska, the increasing discontinuity between so-called "traditional" cultural values of Alaska Natives and the modernized social relations of the larger society is changing how Alaska Natives both understand and act in the world they live in. Their cultures have always been and continue to be changing.


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## HISTORY OF ENCOUNTER BETWEEN NATIVES AND NON-NATIVES

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Too often debate collapses the long history of culture change in Alaska into the catch-phrase of conflict between the "traditional" and the "modern." In fact, the meaning of this opposition has changed dramatically since the original encounters between Alaska Natives and Euro-Americans. To understand culture change in Alaska today, we need to understand how Alaska Natives have responded to changing conditions during the last two centuries. This encounter encompasses seven overlapping stages in the relationship between Alaska Natives and the people who came to live among them: resistance, co-existence, population disruption, attempted assimilation, global incorporation, dependency, and empowerment. During each of these stages, Alaska Natives differently defined and expressed their personal and group identities.

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Before the arrival of non-Natives, more than 75,000 Natives lived in Alaska. These people differed widely, spoke more than 20 different languages, were adapted to as many ecological niches as Alaska's environment could support, and were divided into several hundred societies consisting of members of closely related family groups. Their personal identity reflected the society into which they were born. They did not identify themselves as Alaska Natives and only in very specific contexts—such as contacts with speakers of another language—did they see themselves as Tlingit, Athapaskan, Aleut, Inupiat, or Yup'ik. Their primary allegiance was to their families and tribal groups. For example, people of Nelson Island in western Alaska thought of themselves first as Tununarmiut (people of the village of Tununak), second as Qaluyaarmiut (people of Nelson Island), and only as Yupiit (literally "real people") or Yup'ik Eskimos in comparison with people who did not speak the Yup'ik language. Genetic heritage did not carry the same weight as it does today in the recognition of an individual as an Alaska Native. Language, family membership, and local residence determined personal and group identity.

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## RESISTANCE

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Confrontation between Alaska Natives and outsiders began with the arrival of Russian fur traders in the mid-1700s. Similar to the European experience with American Indians, early contacts between Alaska Natives and Russians created tensions that frequently deteriorated into violence. Most early explorers reported tense encounters with Alaska Natives. The Natives demonstrated what has been characterized as "realistic opportunism" (Graburn 1969:93)—a general friendliness and willingness to trade when it suited them, mixed with a capacity to kill the intruders and take what they wanted by force if they thought they could get away with it. Early explorers and traders were painfully aware of Alaska Native intergroup warfare because it disrupted their own activities.

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## CO-EXISTENCE

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As time went on, however, peaceful relations generally replaced hostility and suspicion between Alaska Natives and Euro-Americans. A period of co-existence, during which Alaska Natives remained largely self-sufficient, replaced the initial period of resistance. Although Russia claimed Alaska, non-Natives came to Alaska primarily to exploit resources rather than for territorial expansion. Except for Russian enslavement of Aleut seal hunters, Euro-Americans were not disposed to antagonize Alaska Natives but rather desired friendly relations. They retained colonialistic attitudes, but the newcomers needed Alaska Natives' help as guides and trappers and required their goodwill and instruction to see them through the perils of life in Alaska. As a result, relations between Natives and non-Natives in Alaska during the nineteenth century were relatively peaceful, much less often disturbed by the murder and bloodshed that characterized Euro-American encounters with Native Americans in other parts of the New World.

The first non-Natives to come to Alaska were the Russian traders and explorers. Though they established trading stations, they did not come in large numbers or introduce dramatic technological innovations. In western Alaska the Russians failed miserably in their attempts to get local people to increase their harvest of specific fur bearers. Higher prices served only to decrease the number of pelts needed to satisfy each Native's wants. Cultural need continued to be the determining factor in trade relations. The Russian attempt, like that of the American traders who followed them, to foster a paternalistic pattern of dependency among Alaska Natives largely failed.

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## POPULATION DISRUPTION

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The nineteenth century was characterized by tremendous population disruption for Alaska Natives. Communicable disease—such as the smallpox epidemic of the 1830s—rather than either military conquest or relocation was the culprit. The vulnerable Native population was devastated, and whole villages were wiped out. Populations dispersed and shifted. The population decline also undercut interregional social distinctions, undermined leadership, disrupted personal relations, and demoralized the people. (Fortuine 1989; Wolfe 1982).

An Alaska Native, Harold Napoleon of Hooper Bay, recently attributed the severe social problems found throughout western Alaska today—alcoholism, violent crime, suicide, child abuse—to the unacknowledged trauma of the “Great Death,” the epidemic of 1900. He likened the situation of survivors of this and other epidemics, including the influenza epidemic of 1918-1919, to post-traumatic stress syndrome suffered by Vietnam war veterans. Never resolving—let alone admitting—this trauma, several generations of Natives suppressed emotions such as confusion, guilt, and feelings of inferiority (Napoleon 1990).

Some Yup'ik readers have criticized Napoleon's analysis because it lays the ultimate blame for personal problems in the 1990s on events of nearly a century before. These critics argue that to overcome such problems as alcoholism and family stress, individuals must assume responsibility for their own actions. Ironically, this characteristically Yup'ik attitude toward personal problems, including disease—the belief that they are within an individual's control—supports Napoleon's thesis. In a culture that holds people accountable for their own fates, the guilt and shame attending the epidemics, not to mention the pain of losing one's loved ones, must have been tremendous. The ongoing impact of epidemics and other traumatic disruptions of Alaska's Native peoples should be kept firmly in mind in future discussions of issues of personal identity among Alaska Natives. Moreover, the impact of epidemic disease need not be pushed back to the turn of the century, as tuberculosis in the 1930s and 1940s took as many Native lives as any single epidemic, even the “Great Death.” The first comprehensive study of Alaska death rates in 1930 found that among Alaska Natives who died, tuberculosis killed one in three (Oswalt 1990:145).

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## ATTEMPTED ASSIMILATION

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Even before the epidemics of the 1900s, Alaska Natives were beset by non-Natives whose goal was not co-existence with Alaska's first people, but rather their assimilation. Christian missionaries first attempted the cultural conversion of Alaska Natives. By the end of the 1800s, a dozen Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox churches had established mission stations throughout the state. Before 1900 progress was slow except in the Aleutian Islands and on the Pacific rim, where the Russian Orthodox Church was firmly established. But following the epidemic of 1900, whole villages elsewhere converted (Fienup-Riordan 1991; Kan 1988; VanStone 1964, 1984:153).

Missionaries employed an intense five-fold strategy of building, speaking, teaching, healing, and traveling to undercut traditional ways of being and to provide appropriate “civilized” Christian alternatives. Modern medicine showed itself superior to amulets and incantations. Likewise, the missionaries' technology worked to attract converts: the power of their goods proved the “truth” of their religion (Sahlins 1985:38). Evidence suggests, however, that Alaska Natives may not have viewed the missionaries as having unique or superior power, but rather power as Natives traditionally defined it.

The turn-of-the-century epidemic, as well as the widespread disruptions associated with commercial whaling, gold mining, and reindeer herding, caused Alaska Natives to see the discipline and order that the missionaries preached as a novel spiritual solution to an unprecedented social and economic crisis. Combining their traditional sensitivity to the spirit world with the discipline of the Protestant work ethic, many found it possible to become

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ferent Christians without ceasing to be Alaska Natives. For example, the Moravians working among the Yup'ik Eskimos on the Kuskokwim committed themselves from the beginning to the transfer of responsibility and authority to a Native clergy. As a result, they provided alternatives worth considering in a situation of rapid social change, which the Yup'ik were able to use according to their own practical purposes.

The emotional debate at the turn of the century accompanying conversion to Christianity may have been comparable—in intensity and in its importance to personal identity—to today's debate concerning subsistence. Although secularization has affected church membership of Alaska Natives, as in industrial society more generally, membership in Christian denominations remains an important aspect of Alaska Native identity.

Christian missionaries were not the only ones working to transform Alaska Natives. Following the U.S. purchase of Alaska in 1867, the first Organic Act of 1884 provided schooling for Alaska Native children. As the careers of many bush educators make clear, the separation between church and state was not a deeply held belief at that time. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Protestant missionaries conspired with the federal government to accomplish the twin goals of "civilizing" and Christianizing America's aboriginal populations. William T. Harris, head of the Bureau of Education between 1889 and 1906, wrote, "We have no higher calling in the world than to be missionaries of our idea to those people who have not yet reached the Anglo-Saxon frame of mind" (Ducker 1991:4).

Non-Natives attributed the failure of their educational efforts to assimilate Alaska Natives to the Natives' inherent inferiority. On the contrary, this presumed "failure" often was intentional, as Native parents originally saw little value in the schooling that the bureau offered. Their reaction can be compared to that of the seventeenth-century Iroquois chiefs who politely declined the invitation from William and Mary College to educate seven young Indians. The chiefs stated that white men could not teach the boys what they really needed to know. However, if the white men would send them seven of *their* sons, they would do their best to make men of them.

The colonial attitude of the Bureau of Education was explicit. In 1906 the bureau chief proposed teaching Natives "what a white man wants of them, so that the white man can use these men for things that are useful for his civilization" (Ducker 1991:14). One key to Native usefulness in white society was knowledge of the English language, and the bureau zealously promoted its instruction. Its superior status as "the language of civilization" was assumed. This exclusive use of English in government and missionary schools, often harshly enforced, was a direct and intentional assault on Native identity.

The impact of teachers, like that of missionaries, was not restricted to the class-room. Under their direction the people built new houses, dug gardens, and gained access to an unprecedented array of trade goods and new technological developments. Although farming proved difficult, Reverend Sheldon Jackson, a Presbyterian educator, introduced reindeer herding in the 1890s partly in an effort to turn hunters into herders, thus moving Alaska Natives one rung higher on the ladder of civilization. Herding ultimately failed, however, in part because it conflicted with hunting and trapping.

Whereas Bureau of Education personnel originally promoted a far-reaching program of cultural assimilation, by the 1920s they sought to "preserve" Natives on reservations away from the "bad elements" of white society. Whereas desire for aboriginal lands in the Lower 48 states had pushed Indians onto reservations to clear the way for white settlement, government employees working in Alaska at the turn of the century sought to "buy time with space" by segregating the Natives from encroaching whites so that they might "learn at a measured pace" (Ducker 1989:1). Although their paternalistic perception of Alaska Natives as their "children" was based on assumptions of cultural superiority, their actions effectively provided at least some Alaska Natives with a new context in which to express their cultural identity. In many cases, the means of domination and assimilation turned out to be a mechanism for self-representation. Alaska Natives appropriated the new programs on their own terms as opportunities to support a way of life they valued.

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Teachers and missionaries challenged Natives to selectively incorporate the trappings of western civilization. They not only attempted to shield Natives from “no-account” whites, but provided alternatives, some of which Alaska Natives accepted and some of which they did not. The missionaries and Bureau of Education employees made only limited progress in their efforts to transform Alaska Natives into laborers in the larger society. Their mission of change had an undeniable impact, but in the beginning Alaska Natives largely dictated the terms of their success.

Although Alaska Natives increasingly spoke English, lived within four walls, worked for wages, and attended church, they remained independent, their lives focused on extended family relations and the pursuit of the traditional sources of food and warmth they had relied on for centuries. In western Alaska a handful of Native people took up animal husbandry and gardening, interior Indians trapped for furs, and Natives in southeast and southwest Alaska worked seasonally commercial fishing. But Alaska Natives ultimately ignored or modified these new activities when they conflicted with traditional subsistence and settlement patterns. Though much had changed, much also remained of their aboriginal view of the world. Most important, for the time being they continued to be masters of their own lives.

## GLOBAL INCORPORATION

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Anglo-Protestants began to lose their dominance in American life and culture as the twentieth century developed. Their efforts to create a Christian nation including all inhabitants of the United States has subsided, and the colonialist aspects of their activities are now points of guilt and embarrassment (Prucha 1988).

By the 1920s, in Alaska as well as the Lower 48 states, science and technology began to replace religion as the means of salvation. By 1900 the gold rush had brought miners, prospectors, and traders north. Alaska’s resources were exploited as the United States industrialized. Alaska Natives rarely reaped advantages from this development. Non-Native entrepreneurs employed them when it made economic sense and ignored them when it did not. (Rogers 1969:22; Chance 1984:649).

During World War II, with the arrival of military personnel and attendant service industries, the non-Native population for the first time grew as large as the Native population. The strategic location of Alaska in the rapidly expanding Cold War brought about a shift in the economic base from natural resource exploitation to military preparedness (Chance 1984:649). Although some Alaska Natives serving in the armed forces gained valuable leadership experience and exposure to the outside world, Alaska Natives largely remained outside this development.

## DEPENDENCY

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By the time Alaska became a state in 1959, the relative lack of commercial resources and the geographic isolation of many Native communities had reduced contacts with and innovations from the outside world. Although in some parts of the state this isolation allowed Alaska Natives to keep their language and many aspects of their traditional way of life, in others it had disturbing economic consequences. For example, in the 1920s the standard of living of a Kuskokwim fisherman was moving ever closer to that of a typical rural resident of the Lower 48 states (Fienuip-Riordan 1991:228-309). By 1960, the economic position of Alaska Natives was falling further and further behind nationwide averages (U.S. Federal Field Committee for Development Planning in Alaska 1968:528). This change did not reflect an actual economic decline but rather the relatively stagnant economic position of Alaska Natives compared to the dramatic rise in the U.S. standard of living. Outside observers found the economy of village Alaska so depressed they predicted the villages’ slow but steady disappearance. As in the case of the projected assimilation of Alaska Natives, this prediction has not come true.

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In the 1960s, the federal War on Poverty sought to diminish the widening economic gap between haves and have-nots, which included most Alaska Natives. State and federal agencies advocated economic development in rural Alaska to allow Alaska Natives "to make the transition from their present subsistence existence to a more self-supporting one with adequate income and employment" (U.S. Department of the Interior 1967:25-26). Programs emphasized equal opportunity and full participation. But as with the more blatantly assimilationist policies of the first half of the century, the implication was still that non-Native society was the goal toward which Alaska Natives should be striving. Critics of these policies promoted the special status of Alaska Natives, given their history of social and economic exploitation, supporting preferential as opposed to equal treatment (Chance 1984:651).

## CULTURAL REFORMATION AND EMPOWERMENT

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After statehood Alaska Natives mobilized to protect their land interests—which were threatened as never before—and to address their social needs. Reacting to land selections by the new state government, Native organizations made land claims throughout Alaska. Those claims remained unresolved until it became clear that oil fields recently discovered on Alaska's North Slope could not be developed until the Native claims were settled. In 1971 Congress passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), which awarded Alaska Natives 44 million acres and \$1 billion and called for establishment of business corporations to manage those assets. Despite the rhetoric of self-determination in ANCSA, the corporate structures it established have served mainly to assimilate Alaska Natives into the larger economy and society. Yet in working toward the passage of ANCSA, disparate Native entities for the first time reaffirmed and expressed a positive group identity as Alaska Natives. To be eligible for recognition under ANCSA, the new law required Natives to prove their biological and historical status as Alaska Natives, including their parentage and the lands they traditionally occupied. Questions such as who could be enrolled as a Native and who could claim subsistence hunting and fishing rights brought to the fore new issues of Native identity. But the provision that excluded children born after 1971 (the "afterborns") from acquiring corporation stock except as heirs further created a division between the ANCSA corporations and segments of the Native community.

Passage of ANCSA and its aftermath initiated a diffuse yet nonetheless important cultural reformation in much of rural Alaska. The substantial changes that many Alaska Natives are seeking in the political system are neither total nor immediate. In an important sense the movement has restorative elements that place it in contrast with many other transformative and reformative movements (Aberle 1982:319-320). Today, the major issues that animate Alaska Natives—as stated in the Alaska Federation of Natives' *A Call for Action*—are regaining control of their land, resources, and local affairs; improving economic conditions; and maintaining Native language and values. Although these issues are not new, they focus public debate to an unprecedented degree.

Many Alaska Natives seek a return to the "old ways." In political and economic terms, the "old ways" refer to the 1920s, after many technological improvements had been introduced into rural Alaska but before Alaska Natives had experienced subordination to federal and state government control and related dependency (Fienup-Riordan 1990:221-231). We see signs of this reformation all around us—in the Native sovereignty movement; debate over subsistence rights; revival of intra- and inter-village winter dance festivals; hosting of local and regional elders' conferences; and increased awareness of and concern for the preservation and use of Native languages and oral tradition. Such activity reveals the desire of Alaska Natives, often frustrated, to take control of their land and their lives, and to assert their pride in being Alaska Native.

As yet, these trends have not developed into a single, concerted, unified movement. Nevertheless, the many small and large arenas in which issues of Native cultural identity and political control are articulated indicate an increased awareness of and value placed on being an Alaska Native in the modern world.



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## SUMMARY

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To date, Alaska Natives have changed in some respects and remained the same in others as a result of exposure to and interaction with the non-Native world. Like other Native Americans, they have been much more motivated to preserve what they can of their traditional view of the world in their reactions to missionaries and agents of change in general than has been appreciated. Conversion to Christianity, for example, did not comprise a blanket denial or retreat from the old ways. Such a reading of history represents the colonial ideal, not the complex reality of culture change, simultaneously involving appropriation, resistance, and translation.

Many outsiders continue to view Alaska Natives as culturally bankrupt, as having lost their original and authentic past in their forced encounter with the non-Native world.<sup>1</sup> The general public and policymakers alike are fooled by appearances—Alaska Natives speaking English and wearing suits—into thinking that the distance between the world-view of Alaska Natives in village Alaska and non-Natives in urban centers is a short one. Non-Natives should not be so quick to assume Alaska Natives' loss of cultural identity. Alaska Natives are not soon-to-be-white-men, and considered policy must always take this into account.

## CASE STUDIES IN CULTURE CHANGE: TWO EXAMPLES FROM WESTERN ALASKA

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The above discussion gives a general outline of culture change and changes in personal and group identity among Alaska Natives. This history has been played out differently in various parts of the state, and these historical differences in part account for current differences between Alaska Native groups. Some parts of village Alaska experienced the radical discontinuities—and attendant problems—associated with rapid culture change much earlier than others. The following discussion draws from the recent history of the Yup'ik-speaking residents of western Alaska, an area of the state where this process has been relatively recent and where social problems associated with rapid culture change are at present particularly intense.

Western Alaska can be seen to represent an extreme example of both the positive and negative consequences of two hundred years of culture change. During the past decade increased state government spending coincident with the oil boom has accelerated the rate of change in this region. Though only one hundred miles separate the two Yup'ik villages I have chosen as examples—Toksook Bay on Nelson Island and Alakanuk at the mouth of the Yukon Delta—their responses to change are markedly different. The discussion centers around two very different issues—game regulation on Nelson Island and Alakanuk's recent suicide epidemic. The larger point I hope to make is the tremendous importance for community and personal identity and well-being of having one's feet firmly grounded in the past when attempting to reach into the future. This is not always within an individual's control but often has to do with the history of particular communities.

One of the most important issues facing Nelson Islanders over the last ten years has been their relationship with their land and resources. In the past this relationship was not one of possessive ownership. Rather, humans were able to take fish and game by virtue of proper attitude and action. People viewed animals as nonhuman persons

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<sup>1</sup>"I don't give a hoot what it means to be an Aleut. I've been to the Pribilofs. They talk about the death of their culture—what culture? They just drink, smoke marijuana, hit children, shoot puffins and clobber seals on the head" (Priscilla Feral, President, Friends of Animals, quoted in the *Tundra Times*, Sept. 2, 1991, p. 2).

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possessing immortal souls as well as awareness comparable to that of humans. By this view, hunting and fishing could not directly deplete animal populations. Rather, human activity was instrumental only insofar as it influenced reactions in the animal world. A hunter's behavior did not affect a finite population of animals, only their accessibility (Brightman 1983). To this day, Nelson Island elders believe the consequences of hunting and fishing activity presuppose a more or less continuous supply of animals *as long as they are given the proper respect*. Contemporary elders instruct young men to limit their hunting so as not to offend the animals taken. Moreover, such an offense does not affect the supply of animals but simply makes them hard to find (Brightman 1983). Recognizing this perspective helps explain some of today's game management problems on Nelson Island.

One controversial issue is goose hunting. During the last 10 years the rapid decline in populations of several species of geese has resulted in a prohibition on hunting them during the early spring as well as during summer nesting and molting seasons. Although Nelson Islanders have cooperated with regulations, limiting their hunting of selected species, their attitudes toward the issue dramatically contrast with those of the biologists responsible for federal oversight of the coastal waterfowl population.

Nelson Islanders readily admit that they do not see as many geese in the spring as in years past. They are unwilling, however, to attribute this change to overkill, either through their own actions or those of hunters in California and Texas who harvest from the same populations during winter migrations. Although some younger Nelson Islanders find the explanation of resource decline through overkill sufficient, many reject it, maintaining that fewer geese are in evidence because the birds are not receiving the proper treatment and respect.

Moreover, the majority of Nelson Island hunters oppose the activities of the biologists who have set up observation platforms in the wetlands north of Nelson Island to provide accurate counts of waterfowl returning in spring. Many hunters believe that the scarcity of geese can be directly attributed to the general lack of respect shown the birds during the crucial nesting season, rather than to either overkill or inadvertent upset of the local ecological balance. The Yup'ik explanation of hunting success and failure depends on proper social relations between humans and animals. This contradicts the idea that animal populations are manageable through selective killing. Although they grudgingly limit their kills to comply with federal regulation, Nelson Island hunters remain unconvinced that this limitation really strikes at the core of the problem. Rather they believe that offenses against the birds are the cause of their "hiding themselves from our sight," and only when such inappropriate behavior ceases will the birds return. Although they limit their hunting during the critical nesting and molting seasons, they may view their own actions less as a practical solution to the problem of population decline than as a moral obligation to animals, with desirable practical consequences.

Another resource conflict revolves around the herring fishery. When I first visited Nelson Island in 1974, residents were firm: they did not want a commercial fishery in local waters. Eight years ago, however, the waters adjacent to Nelson Island were opened to commercial fishing, and although the local people were apprehensive, they also recognized that new sources of income had to be found to support the island's growing population. Regulations initially limited the fishery to local use. However, gear limits were raised to increase the productivity of the fishery, permitting the entry of outsiders. Predictably, Nelson Islanders resent the inroads into the fishery made by non-Native fishermen.

Here again, the issue is not only economic but also moral and ideological. The non-Native fishermen think that each man has as much right as any other to harvest the herring. After all, they say, the Yup'ik fishermen don't own the fish. Nelson Islanders, however, believe that rights to the fish do in fact belong to them in the sense that they have relied on the herring for generations and have a social relationship, not to mention moral obligation, to them. For Nelson Islanders, rights to the herring are definitely inalienable, conferred by knowledge of them and prior use.

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What we can hope for is an increased knowledge and awareness among both Native and non-Native leaders and policymakers in western Alaska of the organization of social relations in general, and of human and animal relations in particular, according to different cultural premises. Without such mutual understanding, fisheries development and game management conflicts will accelerate. This is particularly true as declining revenues promote increased reliance on these resources. Although economic in character, these conflicts highlight cultural differences as much as the problem of disparate material circumstances. Their resolution is essential to maintaining the present quality of life on Nelson Island.

Also, in looking to the past to help us better understand the relationship between humans and animals on Nelson Island today, we must determine whether the same relations continue to dominate social action, or whether their meaning has become either restricted or transformed in new arenas of political and social debate. At present, some Nelson Islanders express the view that the geese suffer from overkill. Although they continue to affirm the need to respect geese as essential nonhuman persons, they have embraced the western view of wildlife as a limited resource subject to management through selective hunting. Such attitudes signal a fundamental ideological shift. It remains to be seen if and when this interpretation will become dominant.

Because of the strength of their point of view, Nelson Islanders have been successful in using the new economic means at their disposal to enhance and support their own ends. At the same time, Nelson Islanders are working to re-evaluate their traditional rules for living. Today more than ever before, this effort is a conscious one. Yet Nelson Islanders are far from dismissing their rich tradition as noninstrumental in their daily lives.

Not all villages have been as successful as those on Nelson Island in retaining the cultural vitality for which that part of the delta is known. Recent rapid social and economic change has had tragic consequences around Alakanuk. During my first visit to the community in 1978, Alakanuk seemed different from Toksook Bay in several important respects. None of the young people spoke their Native language. Perhaps just as significant, homes in Alakanuk were not grouped together but stretched along four miles of slough, with families clustered into what appeared more like small seasonal camps than a community. Although villagers pursued subsistence activities, they spent much less time and energy hunting and fishing than did the people of Nelson Island. Many older hunters held a traditional view of subsistence, but the majority of young men neither understood nor acted according to the view of the relationship between humans and animals described above.

These differences mark Alakanuk's history, which has been very different from that of Nelson Island. Its location along a major waterway meant that it was in contact with non-Natives and their commercial economy much earlier. The extreme social disruption associated with epidemic diseases also came early to the community, contributing to the fractured quality of village composition. The orphans from these epidemics were gathered in mission schools, where they were discouraged from using their Native language and traditions.

In 1982 I had another opportunity to live in Alakanuk. On average one person in every household was employed, 30 new houses were under construction, and the city government was both aggressive and successful in obtaining the state funds then plentiful for capital projects and other forms of municipal development. On the other hand, although villagers continued many seasonal harvesting activities, their overall reliance on local resources was below that of neighboring coastal communities. Young men especially were less active in subsistence pursuits than their Nelson Island counterparts and were not training to be skilled hunters.

In 1987 I revisited Alakanuk as part of a village economy study (Fienup-Riordan 1988). I found the village in a serious recession, evidenced by a slow but steady increase in unemployment, reliance on transfer payments, and (not surprising when one considers the costs) a substantial decrease in subsistence harvesting activity. Although

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the village birth rate was up, few new households had formed in the five years since I had last been there. People were gradually returning to the residential pattern characteristic of the village before the era of oil development: three-generation, extended families living under one roof.

But something much more disturbing than a housing shortage or decline in mean annual household harvest had taken place. An alarming number of violent deaths had occurred between 1982 and 1987. Eight villagers (seven men and one woman) had committed suicide during a 16-month period in 1985 and 1986. Another nine attempted suicides were reported, and additional attempts probably went unreported. These suicides and attempted suicides occurred among young adults between the ages of 18 and 30. All of the suicides were believed to be related to alcohol and drug use.

The suicide epidemic among this group of young adults cross-cut most local socioeconomic criteria. Although several of those who died were unemployed at the time, at least two of the eight had significant incomes. Some came from families with few close relatives within the community, but just as many came from large extended families. And although some came from households heavily involved in subsistence activities, equally many did not.

The one economic factor distinguishing households that experienced suicides was lack of income stability and predictability. All suicides and violent deaths occurred in households with incomes that were either unpredictable (because the residents had limited training or ability) or unstable (seasonal). Conversely, no deaths occurred in households with both stable and predictable incomes.

It is also significant that all the suicides clustered in the 20- to 30-year-old range. This group represents the largest sector of the population—105 men and women out of a total village population of 522. Between 1970 and 1980 the biggest growth occurred in the group 20 to 34 years old. That sector of the population increased from 14 to 24 percent in 10 years. Also, it is the members of this group who are normally looked to as the core of new households and future employment growth. However, present employment opportunity in the village is shrinking, and although children are being born at a rapid rate, new households have been much slower to appear.

Adolescents and post-adolescents typically fare the worst in periods of rapid culture change. Young adults are in the process of forming their personal identity—their basic orientation toward life. The formation of a strong identity requires continuity between the values and identifications learned in childhood and the roles available as adults, where those values can be expressed (Kleinfeld 1978:29). Finding ways to realize Native values in the context of western culture, which has shaped the significant goals available to young adults, is hard enough. When even these means of realizing personal identity are lacking, extreme frustration and confusion can result (Lantis 1980:7).

Value fragmentation at one point in time is as much a problem as value discontinuity through time in a situation of rapid culture change. The media and western consumer culture barrage village Alaska with diverse and unintegrated values, making it difficult for young adults to choose a future course (Kleinfeld 1978). Writing in the 1950s, Lantis (1957:126) had already noted that “the new people with their new standards have nearly overwhelmed the Eskimo, not in numbers but in wishes and wants.” With the introduction of cablevision—installed in Alakanuk in 1983—and young Alaska Natives’ increasing exposure to American popular culture, how much more intense is this encounter today?

Along with death through suicide, Alakanuk has also been subject to an alarming rate of accidental and violent death, and in most cases these deaths are related to alcohol use. Alakanuk’s experience is not without precedent in rural Alaska in general and western Alaska in particular. High rates of alcoholism, child abuse, sexual assault, violent crime, and mental health care problems plague the region as a whole. During the last ten years, despite ANCSA and all the state-funded schools and projects, these rates have increased rather than declined.

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Although violent, self-inflicted death is not unprecedented in the region as a whole, comparable episodes have not occurred in the more traditional and more tightly integrated communities of the lower coast or in the tundra or Kuskokwim villages that have organized into the Yupit Nation. Native residents within Alakanuk as well as throughout the region have repeatedly assessed the epidemic as a consequence of the conditions under which it occurred. They maintain that although individuals are responsible for their own actions, they cannot be expected to act appropriately if they are not in control of their land, language, and life. This assessment implies that a sector of Alakanuk's population has lost such a sense of control. The recent economic recession only made the situation worse.

A recent study of violent deaths among young adults in western Alaska villages both supports and refines the conclusion that social disruptions and the nontraditional character of the region were contributing factors in the suicide epidemic (Doak and Nachmann 1987). This study concerns a group of 643 children born in western Alaska (22 in Alakanuk) between October 1960 and September 1962. During the last 30 years these children have been subjected to continuing medical, psychological, social, and developmental observations (e.g., Maynard and Hammes 1970; Lum et. al. 1986). This group has experienced a total of 24 violent deaths, 7 of which were suicides, since 1974. Three of the recent 8 suicides in Alakanuk were from this group.

Doak and Nachmann attempt to determine how those who suffered violent deaths differed from a similar group matched for age, sex, and village of origin. Of sixteen items more frequently present in suicides and other violent deaths than in controls, four are statistically significant: 1) region of origin (i.e., from villages toward the mouth of the Yukon); 2) evidence of family success; 3) evidence of success in the subject; and 4) alcohol use in the subject. They conclude:

It seems possible...that in a region of disrupted cultural loyalties, bright and ambitious youth from families who have ventured most daringly into the socio-economic arena might be the ones most exposed to painful pressures which, with the help of alcohol, could tip them into disaster.

Personal success was the one item which marked the suicide group as different from other violent deaths. This lends itself to the speculation that, given the pressures which we have assumed pushed all of them toward some violent extreme, those who were most striving for excellence might be the ones most likely to take deliberate self-destructive actions rather than careless, unplanned ones. (Doak and Nachmann 1987)

Doak and Nachmann conclude that there is no single suicidal personality, and no particular set of circumstances can predict who will take their lives. Similarly, alcohol use, an unstable income, and cultural disruption do not necessarily lead to suicide and violent death. Though not causal, these conditions can set the stage for such possible action among some talented, energetic, young adults—primarily men—facing limited and frustrating social and economic opportunities. As Roger Lang, a former president of the AFN, once said, "These are the ones who try to cross the bridge with no one to greet them on the other side."

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

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The situation outlined above highlights the double-bind of Alaska Natives today. Where the people of Nelson Island have retained important aspects of their traditional beliefs, increasingly this world-view is coming into conflict with political decisions and management strategies that fail to recognize the cultural validity of their perspective. Where young Alaska Natives living in communities such as Alakanuk have left this past behind and, in some measure, have attempted to enter the modern world, they have found themselves blocked at the starting gate. What are some of the ways federal and state policy can address this situation? What lessons can we learn from the policies of the past—their failures as well as their successes?

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## POLICY ISSUES

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### HEALTH POLICY

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*Policies and programs should support the efforts of Alaska Native communities and individuals to deal with the problems of alcoholism, child abuse, violent crime, and suicide that are epidemic among Alaska Natives. These mental and physical health problems—many of which have their origins in earlier generations—are both caused by and are the symptoms of deeper problems: failed expectations, limited social and economic opportunities, and feelings of inferiority and inadequacy when childhood training does not prepare individuals for success in either the rural or the urban world. Although symptoms of larger issues, they are also health problems in their own right and need to be addressed as such.*

Doak and Nachmann's analysis of suicide in western Alaska, carried out for the Alaska Native Medical Center, can stand as a model of the kind of work that health care providers need for a more complete understanding of self-destructive behavior among Alaska Natives. Moreover, both Alaska Native and non-Native researchers need to build a more sophisticated basis for statements about traditional and modern methods of raising children and providing them with the tools they need for their adult lives. Only then can we understand and generalize about the results of their research (Lantis 1980).

*Not only do we need to better understand the causes of individual and community problems, we also need comparable efforts to identify those characteristics that have enabled many Alaska Native individuals and communities to preserve a positive sense of community identity in spite of overwhelming odds. Given one hundred years of attempted assimilation and increasing dependency, we should be surprised not because some Alaska Natives have succumbed to despair, but because so many have retained a positive personal identity. The sources of strength—derived from a multitude of unique social and environmental histories—are as important to understand as the sources of problems.*

The Alaska Federation of Natives' recent report, *A Call for Action*, has heightened awareness of alcoholism and child sexual abuse as problems among contemporary Alaska Natives. Just as turn-of-the-century epidemics had profound and long-lasting effects on the mental and physical well-being of Alaska Native communities, so too these more recent diseases affect the lives not only of the individuals directly involved but also of their families and descendants. Policymakers need to look at the current procedures used to identify and to provide treatment for children suffering from fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) and for helping children from abusive families.

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### LOCAL GOVERNANCE

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*Federal assimilation policies officially ended with the Indian Reorganization Act in the 1930s. However, less overt efforts to assimilate Alaska Natives continue—as exemplified in the corporate system set up under ANCSA, the policy of mainstreaming in public education, and ambiguous public policies on the tribal status of Alaska Natives.*

*For most Alaska Natives, their identity as Natives is still linked to their relationship with the land, and retaining control of that land is a major focus of political effort. Alaska Natives are testing the limits of both Native corporations and tribal governments to accomplish this goal. The results will have important consequences for future Native identity.*

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Some corporations, such as NANA in northwest Alaska, have developed a strong corporate base apparently responsive to the needs and desires of corporation members. Some other ANCSA corporations, such as Calista, have not yet developed effective and integrated institutional means of fostering their members' identity as Alaska Natives. Reacting in part to corporate failures, real and perceived, some Alaska Natives have asserted Native sovereignty—inherent powers of self-government. Viewed narrowly, the sovereignty movement is a reaction against the ANCSA corporation model. More broadly, it represents a concerted effort to take back political and cultural control of village communities from outside influences and to assert cultural identity in a variety of positive ways.

*Increased control of, along with increased accountability for, the institutions directly affecting their lives will be essential to maintaining positive personal and group identity among many Alaska Native groups in the future.* Given resistance on the state and federal levels, as well as factional disputes within Native communities, it is unlikely that leaders of the sovereignty movement will be able to fulfill all their goals. Nevertheless, the debate concerning how to make government more responsive to the needs of Native people has been a positive process in itself, giving participants a voice in their future. Federal and state policymakers should give serious attention to Native calls for increased self-government—increased local control over schools, courts, land, local resources, and external funding.

*The institutional recognition of the special status of Alaska Natives will be critical to their ability to control their future.* Whatever form such control takes—tribal governance, resource management, business development, education, nonprofit corporations, regional cultural centers—the federal and state governments need to recognize that the capacity of Native organizations to control and mediate service delivery is essential for true self-determination.

## ECONOMIC POLICY AND RESOURCE REGULATION

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Although it is true that increasing numbers of Natives are moving to urban areas, they are by no means abandoning village Alaska in the face of economic recession. Many continue to identify with and rely on the mixed economy (with market, subsistence, and transfer sectors) that supports village life. Those who choose to stay in the villages may do so for several reasons: they value their ties to family within the village over an uncertain future in urban Alaska; they lack the skills necessary to find jobs outside the village; and, even if they have the requisite skills, in leaving the village they would lose access to the subsistence resources that form an important part of their income and diet.

*Economic policy should recognize that the mixed economy characteristic of village Alaska is not a phase in the ultimate assimilation of Alaska Natives but an economically necessary and culturally preferred form with which Alaska Natives identify.* Public policy should reinforce both the subsistence and market sectors of the village economy—because of their importance in their own right and because they can help offset the anticipated decline in future government transfer income in the villages.

*Policy should insure that Alaska Natives retain a voice in resource allocation that affects their communities.* As village populations increase at the same time government spending declines, hunting and fishing will remain important in village Alaska—both for what these activities produce nutritionally and as a focus for a preferred lifestyle and cultural identity. Co-management of commercial and subsistence resources, like what the Kuskokwim Salmon Working Group and the goose management program in western Alaska have provided, can insure fair resource allocation and provide a vehicle through which Alaska Natives can simultaneously express and affirm their identity.

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*Economic policy should encourage and support projects that allow Alaska Natives increased control of development in their communities and surrounding areas.* Debate will no doubt continue within and between Native communities concerning the merits of specific development projects. Yet Alaska Native communities must be allowed to make their own decisions and take increased responsibility for resource development and allocation in their own areas.

*Resource management policy would benefit from a broader definition of "traditional uses" of subsistence resources.* Factions argue over what constitutes "traditional use" to defend or oppose policies affecting Alaska Natives. Policymakers often give tradition a very narrow definition, as in the prohibition—recently struck down—of Alaska Natives' using sea otter pelts to make "non-traditional" items. Tradition is not a fixed list of traits or practices, but an innovative frame of reference that is constantly using new materials to realize past cultural patterns.

*Equitable public policy would recognize fundamental differences between the non-Native and Native views on the meaning of subsistence harvesting activity.* Non-Natives see fish and game as finite resources to be managed through selective hunting. Many Alaska Natives believe that animals are infinitely renewable if given the proper treatment and respect (Brightman 1983). This fundamental difference remains largely unrecognized, but even when it is acknowledged—as in the conflict between catch-and-release sport fishermen in western Alaska and Native residents who view catch-and-release as "playing with their food"—unequal power relations favor the non-Native point of view (Wolfe 1989).

## EDUCATIONAL POLICY

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Once the Yup'iks are culturally and linguistically deprived to the marrow of the bones, all Yup'iks will be lost in the mosquito-like swarm of Kass'aqs and will be no more than additional few Kass'aqs, even if they do not look white. The people's identity could be kept and consolidated more effectively through the language. (Miyooka and Mather 1979:1)

*Changes in educational policy may be the most important factor that could support personal and community identity and mental health among Alaska Natives.* Education in rural Alaska is not just a local business but a powerful industry tied to the needs and desires of the larger society. Who it employs, what they teach, how they teach it, and how they interact with the community in the process are of vital importance to Alaska Native mental health and well-being.

Early policies of the federal Bureau of Education were primarily assimilationist from before the turn of the century. The bureau's requirement that only English be used in the classroom was especially destructive to Native identity and feelings of self-worth. Today, many rural school districts support active bilingual and bicultural programs. Yet the majority of these programs do not seek to maintain Alaska Native languages on an equal footing with English, but rather to use Native language instruction in the primary grades as part of an effort to mainstream students as quickly as possible. By high school, instruction in an Alaska Native language may take up 45 minutes or less in a student's day.

*All students need more than technique to succeed in life. They need pride in their heritage and an understanding of who they are as well as the belief that they can make valuable contributions to their families and communities.* The development of educational programs that provide practical knowledge without destroying personal identity is a current priority in Native American communities throughout the nation (Morrow 1987:279). Such education—reinforcing the value of being Native—may reduce the disproportionately high Native dropout rate.



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*As long as uniformity as opposed to cultural plurality remains the goal of the educational system, a disproportionate number of students will fail, emerging with low self esteem and ambivalence toward the wider society.* Conversely, pride in their unique heritage as Alaska Natives will carry students a long way toward a satisfying future: "Unless you are proud of where you come from you can't go anywhere" (Chance 1984).

Policymakers should consider a number of ways of supporting Alaska Native efforts to create and maintain a distinct identity through educational changes:

1. *Increase the number of Alaska Native teachers*, both to provide role models for students and to increase local control over the activities of this critical institution.
2. *Support effective bilingual and bicultural programs that are a collaboration between professionals and the local community, with the latter, not the former, retaining control.* Such programs are imperative for building positive identity and self-esteem among Alaska Native students. Educational policy should aim toward providing an educational system that responds to local needs. It must speak to the question "Whose school is it?" To the extent Alaska Natives perceive the educational process as an imposition, they will either resist or acquiesce.
3. *Establish bilingual and bicultural programs that not only identify and describe Native traditions but involve students in culturally and academically meaningful activities*—activities which allow students to reflect on their surroundings rather than tell them what their surroundings are (Morrow 1987:285). Such programs would also seek to give students insights into the larger American culture, its strengths and weaknesses, and how it can be used to Native benefit. Native communities can strengthen but never isolate themselves.

A good cultural heritage program built on an interactive model would not be a descriptive, static presentation of Alaska Native culture, but instead would consist of community-based projects that take students where they can hear a variety of Native voices representing their own cultural views: "The program thus reflects the struggle of indigenous people themselves to find out the limits of diversity in claiming their ethnic identities" (Morrow 1987:31).

The best cultural heritage programs are locally developed. But local groups need seed money to enable developers of successful programs to consult with local district personnel, get their development efforts started, field test their programs, and train teachers in their implementation. Without both institutional recognition and the necessary start-up funds, grass-roots efforts stand little chance of reaching their potential.

4. *Establish first-rate English language programs and technical training programs* such as computer science courses to enable Natives to fully realize their potential. Too many Native students suffer less from a conflict between Native and non-Native cultural values than from a lack of thorough grounding in either one. They are not fully functional in either their Native languages or English, and they need to be experts in both. Village Alaska is not a backwater where the unskilled can survive, but a unique way of life requiring special skills. The ability to walk between worlds is one of them. Educators must meet this challenge.
5. *Establish similar collaborative programs in urban schools to help non-Native students understand their own culture and its impact on Natives.* Many non-Native students educated in this state will remain here and become future community leaders. Understanding the complexities of village life is just as important for these future leaders as understanding the realities of urban life is for rural Native students. Just as rural students visit cities and participate in visits to Washington, D.C. for first-hand experience of life beyond the village, urban students would learn from even short visits to rural Alaska Native communities.

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6. *Teach the non-Native public about both the richness of Native culture and the problems associated with the lives of Alaska Natives today.* The Anchorage Daily News' "People in Peril" series and the Smithsonian's "Crossroads of Continents" exhibit hosted by the Anchorage Museum are two notable efforts in this direction. Increased understanding among non-Natives is particularly important because, although the Alaska Native population is increasing, the Native percent of the total population is declining. The stress and confusion suffered by individual Alaska Natives are not just personal problems but community problems. Moreover, they are not just Native problems but problems that the wider Alaska society must address as well.
  7. *Provide increased support for Alaska Natives to develop their own cultural programs and centers,* both as the focus for positive personal and group identity among Alaska Natives and as an institutional framework for collaboration with and education of non-Natives in the culture and history of Alaska Natives. For example, under a grant from the National Park Service "Keepers of the Treasures" program, the village of English Bay obtained support for an after-school tutoring program in the native language. This program was initiated by the village and for the benefit of village children. Such programs are vital in the support of positive personal and group identity among Natives.
  8. *Support research and writing which seek to understand culture change and the history of Native and non-Native encounter in Alaska,* with special emphasis on the events and policies that have fostered dependence or independence among Alaska Natives. Although the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Science Foundation, and the Alaska Humanities Forum provide federal funding to document the history and culture of Alaska Natives, no funding has been available at the state level since the disbanding of the Alaska Historical Commission six years ago. Alaska is a state in which the distance between the academy and the community is short. What historians and anthropologists write can inform both Native and non-Native understanding of the role of the past in the present. And Alaska Natives can and should take an increasing role in this research.

## CONCLUSION

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In sum, policymakers should try to enhance Alaska Native cultural identity as they simultaneously work to reduce Alaska Native dependency. Like the Moravians working among the Yup'ik Eskimos at the turn of the century, policymakers must commit themselves to the transfer of responsibility and authority for local health, education, and political and economic organization to Alaska Natives. Their role is not to determine the future of these communities, but to provide alternatives worth considering in a situation of rapid culture change. Alaska Natives can then selectively appropriate these means according to their own practical purposes. The choices must be theirs if they are to retain control over their lives, and control of their lives is an essential key to their positive identity as Alaska Natives.

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