

## Introduction: How to write Alaska Native Histories

**NOTE: This is an unfinished draft which I am making available in the interest of open discussion. Some of the citations may be incomplete. I have not done a final fact-check. There may be mistakes. If you have comments, or find a mistake If you have comments, please use the comments page on the website. Please do not quote from this version without communicating with the author. [jhaigh@alaska.edu](mailto:jhaigh@alaska.edu)**

*“Whether explicitly or implicitly, knowingly or unwittingly, political actors locate themselves in time as they frame their aspirations and formulate their plans. To do so, they rely upon both the material record of the past (archives, oral and artistic traditions, embodied practices) and a set of ideational strategies or modes of narration (romantic, tragic, ironic, picaresque). Their picking, sorting, and re-working uses history as a resource and remakes the past in the image of its imagined future, whether in the courtroom or on the streets.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“However, the factor that may prove most decisive for Indian persistence is a highly developed level of historical consciousness, a continuing sense of identity as separate peoples for whom power resides in maintaining their distinctness. History, so viewed, is not something that happens to Indians; it might better be conceived as a potent force that they actively utilize, refashion, and manipulate as a survival mechanism”<sup>2</sup>*

*“The different Indian senses of the past are rarely random strings of unrelated existential happenings. Usually they are structured in ways that highlight selected cultural meanings and preferable social processes, representing them through the medium of well-worn symbols. In these “histories” moreover, high value is placed upon the maintenance of Indian conceptual autonomy over time, in as consistent and reassuring a fashion as possible ....in order for that history to make sense in Indian terms, and to pass on essential meanings distilled from collective experiences....in order to bring it in tune with an inherited worldview to warn about moral consequences so as to have maximum impact on the “history of the future.” [Nabokov *Native Views of History*<sup>3</sup> p. 53]*

This work is planned an alternative narrative of Alaska history centering the experience of Alaska Natives, and de-centering the experiences and observations of outsiders. How can I, as a non-Native presume to write about a Native point of view? First of all, in the discipline of

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Warren center at Harvard fellowship proposal request

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Fogelson, *The Ethnohistory of Events and Non-Events*

<sup>3</sup> Peter Nabokov, “Native Views of the Past”, in *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas, Volume 1, Part 1*. Bruce Trigger and Wilcomb Washburn, eds, 1996. p. 53

history, we are all outsiders, none of us were there. I use the translated and transcribed stories and accounts of Native people. I stand on the shoulders of Native elders and Native and non-Native scholars who have collected, translated, transcribed, and published oral histories and narratives. I trust that the Native elders who worked with the scholars had confidence in the person they were working with, and in the process. I know that the translation and transcription process can introduce problems.

I use Ernest Burch's work, based on his work with numerous Inupiat historians and elders from the Northwest Arctic. I use the works of the Richard and Nora Dauenhauer who have put together a huge volume of work on the Tlingit. I use the work of Sergai Kan, also on the Tlingit. I use the work of Adeline Peter Raboff, who worked, with both stories she collected from her mother and father, and others that relate to the topic of the Koyukon and Gwich'in histories in the western and central Brooks Range. I use the work of Larry Mercurief on the Unangan, and Allison Drabak, Gordon Pullar on the Alutiiq/Sugpiaq. I rely on the work these and other scholars have done to collect this information and to interpret it. These works must be read critically, as must all works.

This will be a post-colonial, critical historical analysis. Scholars today use post-colonial or decolonizing to mean an attempt to recognize indigenous experience and indigenous point of view separate from the framework of the colonial past in which they found themselves. Colonialists established not only a political and economic world, but an epistemological world, in which the western world was better, and assimilation into it was progress. They also established a vocabulary that comes to dominate the understanding of the colonized, prioritizing progress, the caviling influence of outsiders, gratitude for western education. This comes also

with an erasure of vocabulary and narrative to describe loss of culture. What would indigenous lives and experience have been like absent these influences? How else could it be described? Scholars and indigenous people have been working describe lives outside of the colonial framework.

This is not an anthropological review. Much has already been written about cultures, house types, art, belief systems, and ceremony. In fact, historians have typically ceded the entire story of pre-contact Native life to the anthropologists. As the Alaska Humanities Forum acknowledged: “This information is important but it does not help people understand Alaska Native societies today.... [and] leads to the stereotyping of Alaska Natives as seal hunters with dog teams and kayaks.”<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of this book is as both history, and as background and context so that modern Alaskans and others might understand the range of conditions and issues that Alaska Natives are facing today and how they are both similar to and different from American Indian tribes. The main point of view will be to truly attempt to look at and present the history of Alaska from the perspective of the people who were already here as principal actors and originators of historical action.

The theme, Native Nations past and present will emphasize continuity between the Native Nations which existed prior to colonial invasions, and Native nations and tribes today, as Native people are working to revitalize and reinvigorate their cultures. Today, the Alaska Native political and social landscape includes a plethora of Alaska Native organizations, from the Regional Alaska Native corporations, to the associated non-profits, tribal governments, IRA

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.akhistorycourse.org/teachers-guide/understanding-the-past-is-essential-to-understanding-today>

governments, and village corporations. It is impossible to understand this framework without understanding the background of the Alaska Native people and what they have been through from before the colonial invasions, through the early American period, and through the modern era. They have been through a lot; it has been a struggle but there are now many examples of a growing movement towards cultural revitalization.

Native intellectuals and scholars, along with anthropologists, ethnographers, and archeologists have studied and documented individual Alaska Native cultures for more than 100 years. Native intellectuals, scholars, academics and elders have contributed thousands of hours, sometimes as 'informants,' and in the last thirty-five or forty years as authors, and scholars in their own right. There are thousands of hours of oral histories on tape and transcribed, and hundreds of monographs and books.

The problem this book seeks to address is the lack of a single work that can tie these stories together in a narrative addressing the history of Alaska which centers Alaska Native experience, and using the latest in historical theory from the field of American Indian studies. This work will build on oral history, anthropology, and history, and can serve as an introduction to the landscape of Alaska Native organizations today. While the format of an anthology can include many different first person voices and points of view, a narrative history is a powerful tool which can connect a range of stories and contexts.

There are a number of problems with writing Alaska Native histories. I am going to introduce these problems here, and then deal with these issues as we progress through the introduction, and in the rest of the book. The first problem is what to call it. A History of Alaska Natives? Alaska Native Histories? An Indigenous History of Alaska? On a larger scale, the history of Alaska as it is now taught, and usually related is entirely told from a colonialist

perspective. Thus, as historians have recognized from other fields, the periodization of this state history itself reinforces this perspective. No less an authority than the Alaska Humanities Forum has used the term “white commemorative history”<sup>5</sup> to describe how the traditional narrative of Alaska history.

Another major problem is the actual terms usually used in the presentation of Alaska History. First, the term Alaska Natives is itself a colonialist category encompassing many different ethno-linguistic groups who, in some cases, had nothing in common prior to colonization. No-one was an Alaska Native prior to the establishment of a territory called Alaska.

The very terms we have used to describe and periodize the history of Native peoples become part of the problem. The term “contact” is used ubiquitously as a dividing line between pre-history and history, and between anthropology and history. But “contact” becomes a euphemism when it is used to describe a history that involved enslavement, and the death by disease of 50% or more of populations. ‘Contact’ implies and justifies the term “pre-history.” To label as “pre-history” everything that happened to Native peoples before the arrival of Euro-American colonial powers is to deny those people a history of their own.

Alaska Native anthropology most commonly categorizes indigenous peoples of Alaska by language, as a series of ethno-linguistic groups. Until quite recently, scholars and Native people themselves were content with the terms Eskimo, Aleut, Athabascan, Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian. But these are just very general categories, like German speaking people, or Celts. These categories and terms are being questioned and refined every year. Each ethno-linguistic

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<sup>5</sup> “Understanding the Past is Essential to Understanding Today,” <http://www.akhistorycourse.org/teachers-guide/understanding-the-past-is-essential-to-understanding-today>

group was historically, and are still today, divided into numerous smaller groups: do we refer to them as Nations, tribes, bands, sub-groups, or something else? I will mostly use Nations, and I will discuss this issue at length in Chapter 2.

To really understand Native Nations, the linear, chronological, historiographic method we are used to applying to history does not serve us well, especially with its reliance on written records from those who arrived. First, it is important to first acknowledge that the modern tribes do actually represent the historic Native Nations, and see that modern Alaska Regional Corporations, the entities created as part of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, and their related tribal organizations, are mapped onto the geography of these ancient nations.

And, then, of course, what is history? Who owns it? Who gets to tell it? What sources count? I will also be using the work of Peter Nabokov and others who have written about historiography and epistemology, and the need to get past the classification of oral history as myth and story, while simultaneously elevating the value of the work of academic anthropologists and historians. Since in reality, we need the work and insights of anthropologists and historians, it will require a textual analysis of their work, and a re-writing to correct for point of view.

I begin with a review of Native nations from a political perspective, focusing on trade and economy. Then I move to colonial encounters, in each specific space, ranging from enslavement and forced labor to trading relationships. No matter how these encounters began they all led to massive deaths due to disease, which led inevitably to changes in the structure of nations. This was accompanied by disenfranchisement. Then the pressures to assimilate through the work of missionaries and government.

The negating of a historical past through the way that anthropologists and historians have written about Native people, and the epistemological erasing of a Native world view are systemic. The forced assimilation of Native people accompanied by a growing white population changed the places where Native people lived and the economy they faced, and led to internalized oppression, as many chose to erase their Native identity. Finally, some adopted a politics of respectability, a concept borrowed from Black history, as they sought leave behind their traditional customs and emulate the dress, language and lifestyles of the dominant culture in order to be taken seriously in the new white world.

### **Summary History**

Alaskans and others like to say that the difference in relations between dominant culture and indigenous people in Alaska versus the Lower 48 was that there was no violence and no outright warfare here. That is not actually the case. Just as in the Lower 48, the initial confrontations between Native groups and dominant cultures took many different forms. The Unangan and Sugpiaq of the Aleutian Islands, Alaska Peninsula and Kodiak confronted hostile Russian fur hunters who used violence to literally enslave them into forced labor. In Southeast Alaska, the Tlingit fought against the Russian America Company as they invaded Tlingit lands, and lay waste to their resources. Inupiat on the Northwest coast of Alaska were at first part of a trading economy with the Chukchi across the Bering Sea, then the number of large ships increased, all seeking furs that were increasingly valued for the Chinese market. Then outsiders discovered the bowhead in the Bering Straits, and the Inupiat watched as over 200 whaling ships arrived to lay waste to their resources. The Dené people living in the interior of Alaska were favored with a location that was more difficult for outsiders to access and so participated in a

mutual trade and faced less pressure, well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and in some cases, into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

But no matter the nature of first encounters, invasive disease took a horrible toll everywhere, leading to the death of 50-90% of the population. After the toll of disease, the Native Nations lost valuable culture bearers, Nations themselves disappeared, and regional and local bands were forced to consolidate. As a dislocated and traumatized population, they were especially vulnerable to the appeal of Christian missionaries.

From the early twentieth century, through the 1960s and even 1970s, many young people were sent to the BIA boarding schools outside the territory, as Alaska Natives faced the same pressure to assimilate as other Native Americans. Many more Native students attended BIA schools where they were penalized for speaking their own languages. They faced the same federal policies that emphasized relocation to cities, and termination of American Indian Tribes. The theory of internalized oppression explains how a people could become so demoralized that they begin to identify with the oppressors. I believe that this explains why Native people were nearly invisible in Alaska society towards the middle of the twentieth century. Young people at schools outside of Alaska were urged to take up 'useful' occupations, and set goals that would lead to success in an assimilated life. 'Subsistence hunter,' or 'whaling captain's wife' were not considered suitable goals. Marriages into the dominant society continued to contribute to the erasure of Native culture.

The nadir of the Alaska Native population in the mid-twentieth century was a period of dramatic growth for the white American population of Alaska. Political and civic leaders promoted the ethos of development. And they got their cue from the federal government itself. At the time of the Alaska purchase, in 1867 the federal government assumed ownership of all of

the territory, all of the property of the subcontinent west of the Canadian border. As Native leaders have pointed out, this claim far exceeded the lands that had ever been explored, let alone occupied by the Russians themselves. But that played no part in the assumptions of the new government. The Federal government paid no attention to the potential claims of Native tribes and groups as they appropriated land for Federal National forests and parks, including the Tongass National Forest, Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, and Mt. McKinley and Glacier National Parks, or for military establishments including Ladd Air Base in Fairbanks and Fort Richardson in Anchorage. In the run-up to World War II, the government appropriated land and constructed a string of airfields for the lend lease program of ferrying planes to Russia: many of these sites were in, or right next to Native villages. There was no requirement for any kind of notification or public process. Native people recounted their lack of knowledge of these projects until the first bulldozers showed up.

At the same time, Native people faced the same racism as minorities across the U.S., in the form of overt discrimination across all walks of life, and signs on business announcing ‘No Natives or Dogs.’” Members of the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood in Southeast successfully shamed the Alaska Legislature into passing the first Civil Rights Act in the nation, in 1945. But that was not the beginning of the work for civil rights, it was actually the culmination of more than thirty years of effort that began with the founding the Alaska Native Brotherhood in Sitka in 1912.

Ironically, many young men and women used their education to work on organizing together to reclaim their land and heritage. In particular, Mt. Edgecumbe School in Sitka, opened on an abandoned military facility after the war, educated Alaska Native students from villages across Alaska. The experience at Mt. Edgecumbe, while a lonely one for many, ultimately led to

creation of a pan-Native activism. This new generation built on the activism and efforts of previous generations to finally win a land claims settlement, flawed though it was. Flawed though it was, the land settlement paved the way the renewal of Native tribes and cultures, ongoing today.

### **Problems**

Teaching Alaska history over the past seven years has made it clear to me that the traditional master narrative and periodization is inadequate, out of date, and proceeds from a very colonialist perspective. We in the history department begin with “before contact,” focus on the chronology of Russian Colonization, followed by the early American period, and then the march to the inevitability of Statehood. Trying to include the Native experience within this framework will never yield a responsible history.

While we in the history department teach the history of Alaska as an inevitable march towards statehood and development of resources, “Natives of Alaska,” as a subject, falls to the purview of the Anthropology Department and the realm of pre-history. After contact, historians could comb the written records, the stories of travelers and explorers, missionaries, traders, and government officials: still there was no Native point of view at all. However, even early anthropologists seemed to be reluctant to listen to Native voices when it came to their own history.

There was, until quite recently, a bright, yet very jagged line between anthropology and history. The line was ‘contact,’ jagged because it occurred at different times for different tribal nations. According to this formulation, on one side, before contact, was pre-history, and the subject matter of anthropologists and archeologists, with their specialized methodologies, and academic vocabulary. On the other side was history, with its nearly total reliance on the written

record. Native peoples had no written record, so by definition, at least according to orthodox historians, they had no history. As late as 1991, ethno-historian Ernest Burch said “most of [his] colleagues still did not believe what Natives have to say about their own histories. According to Burch, “many representatives of the social science disciplines in Alaska” at the time used terms like “‘narrative history,’ ‘oral history,’ and ‘memory culture’ as pejorative phrases.”<sup>6</sup> He went on to say, “The archaeologists do not believe anything that is not manifested in stone tools or middens; the historians do not believe anything that was not written down on paper by a contemporary observer; and the ethnographers do not believe anything they have not seen with their own eyes. Ironically, but perhaps appropriately, many Natives do not believe archeological, historical, or ethnographic accounts of traditional Native life — when made by Euro-Americans — unless they are corroborated by the oral testimony of elders.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, until very recently, the last twenty-five or thirty years, neither anthropologists nor historians have taken seriously Native ideas or conceptual understandings about their own history. As Paul Ongtooguk has said, “Anthropologists can only explain what they see using concepts, words, evidence, and vocabulary that comes from their own culture”<sup>8</sup>

Thankfully, Native intellectuals working with anthropologists, oral historians and Native intellectuals in the state has continued to fill in the gaps in this history. Anthropologists, historians, oral historians and have worked to push back the frontiers of what we can know about Native nations prior to incursions by the Russians, Europeans and Americans. When we seek to write indigenous histories, it is not enough to do a better job of seeking out written documents

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<sup>6</sup> Burch, 1991

<sup>7</sup> Burch, 1991

<sup>8</sup> Paul Ongtooguk, “Alaska's Cultures: A view from the inside: Traditional cultural literature.”  
<http://www.akhistorycourse.org/articles/article.php?artID=278>

that might mention Natives, or seek to fill in holes in the narrative. It is not enough to look for clues to the historical experience within the thousands of hours of oral histories, although this is certainly a start.

Working on Alaska Native histories requires an epistemological walk back to first principles: What is history, according to whom? Whose history is it? As I have begun to think about how to tell the story of Alaska Natives and explain modern organizations and tribes, it has become clear to me that the subject requires a rethinking and reconceptualizing of semantics, identity, epistemology, historiography, and even history itself. The linear, chronological, historiographic method I am used to is itself problematic.

But as I struggle to write a history, I am also confronting the epistemological issue of how Alaska Natives themselves think about, construct, and transmit their own histories. Alaska Native intellectuals and scholars have contributed thousands of hours to recovering and recording traditional history, stories, legends, and languages. Too often, these have been categorized as legends, stories, or myths, something apart from the western academic discipline of history. Peter Nabokov deals at length with this issue in *Forest of Time: American Indian Ways of History* (Cambridge University Press, 2002). As Ernest Burch explained, Alaska Natives have their own ideas about what constitutes history, and their own ways of transmitting that history, through stories, place names, and commemorated with formal speeches at ceremonial occasions.

Epistemologically, how do we know what we know? I believe that the historiography of Alaska Native history, that is who has studied it over the past 50 to 100 years, and to what end, explains a lot. Alaska anthropologists and historians together observed assiduously the demarcation line of contact. I have been an Alaska historian for thirty years, and I have seen this

dichotomy in operation. As a historian, it sometimes seemed as if anthropologists felt that they owned the story of Alaska Natives and controlled how it was to be understood.

My approach is an attempt to bridge past and present through the continuity of Native Nations following the theory delineated by Ernest Burch. These distinct Nations had largely disappeared by the time the academic disciplines of Anthropology and History had developed in the German Academy and brought practitioners to Alaska. With only sporadic contact with isolated populations and no comprehensive look, Russian and American explorers and whalers were left ‘describing the elephant’ through only random contacts and what they and the anthropologists who came after them saw was a dispersed, impoverished, remnant population.<sup>9</sup>

In the writing of history, it’s the words on the page that count. If the majority of words and pages are about Russians and Americans, it is not an indigenous history. An indigenous history must center Native people as the actors, and tell the history from a Native perspective, the perspective of the people who were in Alaska, not the passive language, where Eskimos ‘were met’ for the first time; and the encounters are described from the perspective of those who arrived as ‘he saw’ and ‘they saw.’

There is a vast distance between academic Western history, and the traditional histories of Native tribes and peoples. Western historical convention adheres to the written source and privileges the chronological and the narrative. Native American history, as Nabokov says, integrates the chronology of events with the meanings to their own people. Indigenous histories tend to be more episodic. Indigenous historians recount things that happened, with the Western urge to narrativized, that is, connect the events ‘so that they make sense.’ Thus, westerners

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<sup>9</sup> Burch, “From Skeptic to Believer, the Making of an Oral Historian,” *Alaska History*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1991

recounting a native legend for a western audience will always set the scene, and then wrap up the ending with ‘the moral of the story.’ The Tlingit weave their history into ceremonial Chilkat blankets, and recite it in traditional oratory at important ceremonies, noting its attachment to traditional objects, called *at.oow*. The histories of Native Nations are also inscribed on the land in place names. Just as Euro-American historians have constructed narratives that serve the needs of their own societies, Native people have constructed a non-narrative historical framework that serve theirs. It is abundantly clear that in constructing a narrative history of multiple tribes and peoples I am treading on thin ice, liable at any time to give way. First of all, as a historian, as much as I might like to think I can escape, I am caught in the web of historical time as the main framework, and inevitably wrapped up in my own western background and training as a historian. Second of all, as a review of multiple Native Nations and tribes, it will be impossible to include the viewpoints of all. So the best I can hope for here, is to provide a framework, a way in, a way of seeing, a way of looking and understanding, through which individual tribal histories can be seen, and hopefully made sense of within the larger context.

There is no doubt that there is a lot of room for improvement in the current master narrative of Alaska History. Alaska’s history as traditionally written usually includes a chapter on Native peoples, but then proceeds directly to the study of Russian America, with a focus on the motivations, and activities of the Russians. After all, the Russian explorers, traders, and administrators thoroughly documented their activities, and a trove of primary documents is something few historians can resist. The typical historical narrative then proceeds to Russia’s sale of Alaska to the United States, usually taking for granted Russia’s colonial claims by right of invasion, even though Russia never really owned any land in Alaska. No Native nation ever signed a treaty with Russia, or agreed to sell any land. But the history of Alaska proceeds

blithely onto the history of U.S. jurisdiction of “Alaska” even while the United States occupied only the town of Sitka, and patrolled only the trade in Southeast Alaska. The U.S. deployed only the most skeletal of resources to control it’s “new territory,” and for decades never really entered the interior at all. Into the 1880s, the U.S. controlled only some outposts on the southeast and southwest coasts as sites for resource exploitation: massive gold mines in Juneau, and a series of canneries to exploit the fishing resources.

Nevertheless, the master narrative is centered on the growing American control over the territory, and the struggle of the territory’s new white inhabitants for their own civil rights as the story to understand. The narrative is shaped to lend an inevitability to creation of the state. Only with the discovery of gold on the Yukon River, and the influx of gold miners into the Yukon Basin did the U.S. think about sending out exploration parties to try and gain an understanding of the vast interior of the territory they claimed to control. As at least the small coterie of Alaska historians knows, the men in these parties would have died if not aided in their travels by the Native Alaskans they encountered. The influx of Euro-American gold miners truly began to change the territory. Yet, even with the settlement of Fairbanks and Nome as mining towns, added to the population of Sitka, Juneau, Skagway, and Valdez, the white population remained under 30,000 people. It was only as a defense colony in World War II and the Cold War that the white population grew enough to demand consideration as a state.

Even when attempting to include the story of Native peoples of Alaska, historians trip over the different experiences of the many different Nations. The experiences of the Tlingit were very different from those of the Yup’ik. And grouping speakers of eleven different languages as Athabascans obscures vastly different stories. When attempting to retell the story of Alaska from

the point of view of the original inhabitants, we need to acknowledge, as many historians of Native America have noted, that there is not one history, but many.

Most narratives that seek to explain Alaska Natives begin with the Alaska Native Language Center map of Native languages. The map is an ethno-linguistic representation: it represents the larger areas within which people speak languages belonging to a particular language family: Inupiat and Yup'ik, commonly grouped together as Eskimo languages; Unangan and Sugpiak grouped together as Aleut; Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian, as the languages of the people on the southeast coast of Alaska, and Athabascan speaking peoples in the Interior. In the case of the Athabascan language speakers, there are actually eleven different languages in Alaska. But the map does not really delineate the actual political structure of Alaska before contact.

Ethnohistorian Ernest Burch asserted that before the arrival of Euro-Americans, all of Alaska was divided into a large number of nations, or countries, small in terms of populations, but as distinct as those on a political map of medieval Europe. The Inupiat Nations on the remote Northwest Arctic coast, which Burch studied, had nearly entirely disappeared by the late nineteenth century due to encroachment and disease and thus were overlooked by historians and anthropologists who saw only a dispersed, impoverished, remnant population.<sup>10</sup>

Alaska Native Nations were devastated by disease with the arrival of colonial powers, leading to death rates as high as 75-90% in waves of smallpox, measles, influenza and TB. In many cases, the diseases arrived along the routes of traditional trading relationships, even before Euro-Americans themselves arrived to document the pre-contact population. Survivors were

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<sup>10</sup> Burch, "From Skeptic to Believer, the Making of an Oral Historian, Alaska History, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1991

forced to abandon many traditional villages, and came together at new sites surrounding missionary settlements, where they were pressured to abandon their traditional languages and beliefs and assimilate.

The population of Alaska Natives was at a nadir, and citizens of the many nations had relocated to villages by the time they won their land claims settlement in 1971. But the settlement also came at the tail end of the period marked by congressional efforts to literally terminate Indian Tribes. Thus the settlement eschewed both reservations, and tribal control. By decreeing that settlement monies would be deposited into newly created corporations. The Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act in 1971 thrust the traditionally communal Alaska Native peoples directly into a new and unfamiliar world of capitalist profit making corporations which are controversial to this day. Many Alaska Natives question whether the average Native tribal citizen has really gained anything. The settlement also thrust Alaska Natives into new and complex relationships with Federal Indian law. Since the settlement, Federal Indian Law has granted rights and privileges specifically to tribal entities in the Lower 48. While many people assumed that the settlement had extinguished tribes in Alaska, continuing litigations led to the recognition of Alaska Native villages as Tribes, equivalent to tribes in the lower 48, and eligible for all related rights and privileges. In 2016, the courts finally ruled that these tribes indeed have the right declare their lands as Indian Country if they so wish, a complex designation which confers additional opportunities. Since these rulings, many villages have chosen to reaffirm their tribal status and have been referring to themselves as Tribes.

One way to understand the Native Nations of the past is to look at their modern counterparts. These nations are revitalizing their cultures and reclaiming their history. While history and anthropology were once controlled by publishers and by the academic establishment,

Indigenous peoples now have access to tools and technologies like the internet and the world wide web to tell their own stories. Almost all of the tribes, villages, corporations, and non-profits have web pages, with a section “About Us.” This is the place where local village leaders and elders, on the one hand, and corporate leaders on the other, explain and present themselves to their own communities and outsiders. There are also a growing number of cultural heritage museums and non-profits. Here is where Native people themselves present their own version of their past, and explain its connection to the present and future. They build on the plethora of information from anthropology, linguistics, history, and oral history to create their own self-expressions.

### **Terminology and Identities**

The Alaska sub-continent extends from Canada’s Northwest Coast in the East almost to Russia’s Chukotka Peninsula in the West. The indigenous people living across these lands really had nothing in common until perhaps the beginning of the twentieth century. Indigenous peoples who occupied the northwestern-most part of North America are not really related to each other. Their shared history and identity as Alaska Natives is a result of the historical colonialist construct of the territory, and then state of Alaska.

The identity of ‘Alaska Native’ has only recently developed in conjunction with the battle for land claims and the need to maintain statewide organizations to represent Native issues. Only in relation to the land claims settlement in 1971 did the major Native groups come to have a shared history as they came together to establish the Alaska Federation of Natives. And it is a federation of distinct Native nations. It is not France; it is the European Union. Within this federation, each individual sub-group, nation, or tribe has a distinct history, based partly in

ecological and environmental factors, and partly on differing timing of, and experience with, Russian or American incursions and with missionaries and Christianization.

Also confusing, each Native group or nation has a number of names. Some names derive from how neighboring peoples referred to people, as transliterated by colonizers who first heard these names. Eskimo is said to have come from an Algonquin tribal description of their neighbors to the North. The Russians invented the term Aleut and applied it indiscriminately to the Unangan people of the Aleutian Islands, and the Sugpiaq of Alaska Peninsula, the Kodiak Archipelago, and Prince William Sound (which the Sugpiaq pronounce as Alutiiq.) The term Athabaskan comes from a Cree word for a lake in Northern Alberta. These are not self-names or words in Native languages of the people they purport to designate. Most Native nations today are seeking to revive their own name for themselves in their own language, or ethnonym, in most cases a word in their own language that means people: Inupiat and Yup'ik, Unangan, and Sugpiaq.

And then we have the Athabascans. They speak a variety of languages designated by linguists as Athabaskan, the word derived from the Cree name given to a lake in northeastern Alberta, Canada. Each of the eleven language groups is further divided into regional sub-groups, and each has their own term for people, a version of the generic 'Dené' in their own language, usually accompanied by suffix designating them as '—people of' a particular place. If we are going to use Inupiat, Yup'ik, and Sugpiak then the parallel self-name for Athabaskan speakers is properly Dené, which I believe will be the common terminology by the time this book is published.

The real problem with the terms American Indians and Alaska Natives is when they are used as a general category, and attitudes or experiences are attributed to all. Inupiat Nations on

the northern coast of the Arctic Ocean, for instance, were and are related to Inuit people from Alaska to Greenland. The Dené or Athabascan nations in Alaska are related to a much larger number of Athabascan nations stretching into what is now Canada, as well as the Navajo and Hopi, and some have had their homelands and peoples divided by the border. The cultures of the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian peoples of Southeast Alaska are much more closely related to tribes and First Nations of the Northwest coast of the U.S. and Canada. Like the Gwich'in and Han, the Haida and Tsimshian people are divided by modern national borders.

Neighboring nations maintained important trading networks, but many were also enemies and fought brutal war. There was a tremendous amount of distrust between Iñupiat in the north, and Dené in the Interior.

As the jagged line between history and anthropology suggests, there is not one history of Alaska Natives, but many histories. As Choctaw Historian D.L. Birchfield suggests in “the case against history,” there are many histories not just versions of what happened, but ways to explain and tell it, and to explain the experiences of the centuries.<sup>11</sup> With six major Native groups in the state, spread out from the North Slope to Southeast, and 229 villages or tribes, the history of Native peoples in Alaska is almost as complex as the history of American Indians. There is no one history, there are many varied histories. What territories did these nations occupy? How were they governed and organized, and how did they support themselves and conduct trade and other affairs with other nations?

Following the intrusions of European colonial powers, the different Native groups and sub-groups had extremely varied experiences with missionaries and Christianity. Various protestant missionary groups met and divided the missionary field in Alaska so as not to compete

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<sup>11</sup> Cited in Nabakov, *Forest of Time*

with each other or the Catholics. These incursions and related demands form part of the different histories of Native Nations. Each of these Christian missionary groups had different theologies and placed different demands on their Native converts, which ranged from some accommodation of Native belief systems to demands to give up belief systems and Native dancing altogether.

While Unangan/Autiiq and Sugpiaq peoples suffered devastating population losses, the Russian Orthodox missionaries who arrived with the Russian trading companies translated the bible into their languages and seem to have tolerated some syncretism.

The Tlingit people in Southeast Alaska did not, at first particularly welcome Russian Orthodoxy. But when the Russians themselves left, and the American Presbyterians arrived, some Tlingit people adopted Russian Orthodoxy as a form of resistance. They were able to successfully play off the demands of each against each other, as shown in the work of Sergai Kan.<sup>12</sup>

For other Native peoples, the demands to assimilate and/or completely leave their Native spiritual beliefs and customs behind depended on the particular Christian sect that established missions.

Experiences with education differed widely, and had far reaching effects on individuals, as well as their communities and tribes. In the early years of American control, education was delegated by the government to various missionaries. Some Native children had the advantage of village schools, at least through elementary school. However, some children as young as five or six were sent away to boarding schools. Few had the opportunity to move beyond 8<sup>th</sup> grade without going to a boarding school. Some students attended regional boarding schools run by

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<sup>12</sup> Sergai Kan, *Memory Eternal: Tlingit Culture and Russian Orthodox Christianity Through Two Centuries*. Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1999.

various missionaries, while others were sent outside of Alaska. Beyond just pressures to assimilate, the effects of these boarding school experiences was far-reaching. “Moral impacts” of boarding schools, included loss of cultural identity, language, and tradition. Some former students suffer effects of post-traumatic stress disorder due to the indignities and traumas of years in boarding school. And society wide, the boarding school generation did not have the advantages of being raised at home with a loving family inculcating traditional child rearing practices.<sup>13</sup>

One way to think about the Alaska Native histories is through the lens of internalized oppression, a theory being researched and written about by many psychologists, including E.J. David at University of Alaska Anchorage. Reacting to intense pressures to assimilate, accompanied by not so subtle messages that Native people and culture were ‘less than,’ many Alaska Natives internalized the messages of the oppressors, and decided to leave the culture, stop speaking the language, move to the lower 48 denying or suppressing their Native heritage.<sup>14</sup>

The Alaska Native Brotherhood, a civil rights organization formed in 1912 by Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian men of Southeast Alaska (and joined by the Alaska Native Sisterhood just a few years later) is an interesting case study. The bylaws of the ANB and ANS “prohibited participation in potlatches, the speaking of Native languages or the practicing of Native religions.”<sup>15</sup> There is still discussion today about why these prohibitions were so strict. Was it because the founders had attended the Sheldon Jackson’s assimilationist Sitka Training School

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<sup>13</sup> Jim LaBelle, “Boarding School: Historical Trauma among Alaska’s Native People,” <http://www.theannainstitute.org/American%20Indians%20and%20Alaska%20Natives/Boarding%20School%20History%20Trauma%20Alaska%20Native.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> David, E. J. R. *Internalized Oppression: The Psychology of Marginalized Groups*. Springer, 2013. Article, Mark Tappan, Colby College: “Reframing Internalized Oppression.” [http://web.colby.edu/ed215s/files/2010/12/Tappan\\_TCR\\_2006.pdf](http://web.colby.edu/ed215s/files/2010/12/Tappan_TCR_2006.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.akhistorycourse.org/articles/article.php?artID=472>

and truly believed the teachings of the Presbyterian missionaries? Or perhaps it was because the organization was founded under the leadership of the church, and church leaders demanded this accommodation. Perhaps the founders realized that given the strictures on Native citizenship, they had to take pains to persuade the colonialist leaders in Sitka that they had renounced their Native beliefs. Were the ANB founders exhibiting classic symptoms of internalized oppression? Whatever their original reasons, by the 1920s the ANB had managed to subvert the original organizing principles sanctioned by the Church, and turned their attention to gaining their civil rights.<sup>16</sup>

Later on, as assimilationist pressures and overt racism continued, many Alaska Natives who had attended Boarding Schools and training programs Outside Alaska remained Outside, or settled in Anchorage, took up occupations and intermarried. Certainly it was easier not to be Native in the period from the 1930s to the 1960s. This too, I believe can be laid at the foot of internalized oppression.

The politics of respectability is a theory developed in regards to Black history, describing the pressures on middle class African Americans to be more respectable, smarter, harder working, and better dressed in order to make their way in White society. Certainly this also applies to the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood, the educated class of Native Alaska in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> These pressures played out very differently by the time of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971.

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Metcalf, *A Dangerous Idea, The Alaska Native Brotherhood and the Struggle for Indigenous Rights*, UA Press, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> “Black People and the Victorian Ethos:” Respectability Politics, Black Organizing, and Black Power <http://aaihs.org/black-people-and-the-victorian-ethos-respectability-politics-black-organizing-and-black-power/>

Even this short summary of the Native Peoples of Alaska will illustrate the complexities. Native people in Alaska are unusual in the constellation of tribes in the US in that almost all of them still live on their ancestral lands (even if they do not possess the whole of their lands.) With a few exceptions, such as the Navajo, and Pueblo Indians, this is very different from the experience of the majority of the tribes in the Lower 48 who were evicted from their lands, and now live on reservations far from the places their ancestors lived. However, since colonial influence and even before, people moved around. Tribal nations are just that: nations, they are not necessarily ethnicities.

Alaska tribes had never signed any treaties with the United States, nor had they lost their rights to the land. But getting those rights recognized would take more than 100 years. Discovery of a massive oil field at Prudhoe Bay, in the heart of the Iñupiat Nation finally put pressure on the new state of Alaska and the Federal government to resolve Native Land claims. Oil Companies wanted to build a pipeline across Alaska, at a time when the nation faced an oil supply crisis, and pipeline would have to cross lands to which Native nations still had claims.

Alaska Native peoples have made tremendous efforts to reclaim their lands and rights beginning with the first American Indian/Alaska Native civil rights organization, the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood in 1912. Alaska Natives came together across Nations to form the Alaska Federation of Natives in order to organize around righting for Native land rights. While the settlement had many flaws that continue as a source of dissatisfaction, the Alaska Native Corporations and non-profits have gained respect of the Alaska majority business community, and modern tribes and organizations are rebuilding their cultures and their languages. The Corporations and major regional non-profits have provided a focus and structure.

While Alaska is still plagued with unwarranted racism, I believe that the rise of Native Nations has led to increased self-awareness and valuing of Native culture. Corporations, tribes, villages and non-profits are now using modern tools, like web pages to narrate their own history, and self-representations of who they are, and YouTube videos to tell ancient stories and share oral histories. There is a new video game based on an Iñupiat story, and the Iñupiat have made an agreement with Rosetta Stone to provide language learning tools. Revivals of dancing, messenger feasts in Barrow, Native Olympics all over the state, and celebrations in Bethel and celebration in Juneau are just a few of these cultural events. This cultural and institutional revitalization has included and depended on recovery and reconstruction of languages and histories, identifying important values, and reviving ceremonies and traditional gatherings.

As the Alaska Federation of Natives, and the thirteen Alaska Native Corporations chartered by ANCSA, have continued to grow stronger economically and politically, they, and many village corporations, Native non-profits, and tribes invoke and wrestle with the past, its meaning, and how that past will inform the future.