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ALEUT IDENTITY AND INDIGENOUS COMMERCIAL FISHERIES

Katherine L. Reedy-Maschner

Pembroke College

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Summary

The 21st century Aleut of the Alaska Peninsula and eastern Aleutian islands are dependant on an indigenous commercial fishery, arguably one of the world’s most volatile industries. While continuing to harvest traditional foods, they have translated a long relationship with the sea into commercial enterprise that permeates every aspect of Aleut life, from family relations to engagement with the global community.

This study traces the fisheries as they relate to the expression of individual and community relations and to the development and experience of Aleut identity in the Aleut fishing village of King Cove, Alaska. I thus argue that the term ‘identity’ itself requires definition within a specific cultural milieu. For the Aleut, commercial fishing has become a cultural system in which participation and success are sources of pride and family connectivity, as well as food and cash. I examine how status structures within the fishing franchise both shape individual and community identity and underpin social relations. As such, I argue that striving for status forms a foundational aspect of these processes. In this context, I propose alternative explanations for identity development that include the important relationship between status as something that is both an aspect of personal identity as well as part of the structure of community identity.

As commercial fishermen, who are not only involved in market exchange but in capitalist enterprise, this is an unconventional primary self-definition within the Alaska Native community, which affects how they are seen and defined by others. I am thus challenging the assumption that Alaskan indigeneity is inextricably linked to ‘subsistence’ and contributing to the on-going critical discussions about indigeneity within anthropology more generally.

These indigenous peoples are highly modernized and embedded in global processes, which negatively affect their access to fisheries. The potential loss of identity tied to a marine ecosystem—through changes in marine productivity, market forces, management plans, and environmental policies—is creating social conflict, economic burdens, and political pressures for the Eastern Aleut. I therefore examine behavioural responses, both positive and negative, to changes of fisheries access, policy, and local systems of status and identity. Aleut communities are struggling to claim an indigenous identity that encompasses their entire way of life: one that is based on progressive commercial interests. Here I explore how the Aleut fight to be recognized as indigenous people and as legitimate commercial fishermen, and struggle to combat damaging policies set forth by environmental groups and government agencies. A major finding of this study is that the struggle to preserve local rights to commercial fisheries has become indistinguishable from social and cultural requirements.
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Foreword and Acknowledgements

Cold Bay, North Pacific, June 4—aboard the F/V Aleut Kid.

Our Aleut fishermen friend picked us up at the dock in Cold Bay, Alaska, a long, unprotected deep water port where the logistics of getting a baby from a high dock down a slippery ladder onto a rocking boat with a strong wind blowing was enough to make me want to turn around and go home. I watched anxiously from the deck of the boat as my husband Herb attached a rope to the baby backpack and lifted the pack onto his back with 10-month-old Alexander strapped in. Herb’s camp manager Russ held the rope on the dock while Herb and Alex descended the ladder.

Now that we are on board and sipping coffee in the warm, dry wheelhouse, I relax a bit, but clutch my son tightly. This boat seems to plow through the water rather than rock on the surface, and for the first time, I don’t reach for the Dramamine. Finally, I relinquish my son to the captain who holds Alex on his lap while steering the boat, and cracks the window to let the air and sea spray on his face. Later, I lay down with him on a bunk and let the boat rock him to sleep.

We are on our way to King Cove, my research site of the past two years, before dropping my husband and two of his crew off at his remote archaeological field camp. For the next six weeks, he will be unreachable, only able to call me on his satellite phone at $5 per minute. On board with us is an Aleut man who was raised in Cold Bay and has volunteered his labour on my husband’s crew. He was not told that he was Aleut until he was a teenager, and has spent the last three decades making up for lost time. He is now an expert kayak (baidarka) builder and basket weaver and teaches these crafts at the Alaska Native Heritage Center in Anchorage. The boat captain remembered going to their unplumbed, non-electrified house years ago. “There was a dead seal hanging in the kitchen, a big ole bull kelp cooking on the stove that your dad sliced up to eat.” He shook his head. “They were eating old Aleut food. We don’t eat that stuff anymore.”

Looking out across the water, we see land that my husband and I have surveyed for ancient Aleut sites, having plodded over hummocky tundra in rain and wind, mapping hundreds of ancient villages, camps, historical trapping cabins and World War II debris. For most of our time in the Aleutian region, we have looked out at the sea from the land. But now it strikes me, after so many boat rides, that for thousands of years, this has been the view of the Aleut: the land from the sea.

This was also the view of my grandfather’s, the sailor Ralph Croner, from the 1930s to the 1960s. He was a Merchant Marine navigation officer and served all over the Pacific Rim on everything from the Bureau of Indian Affairs ship the U.S.S. Pribilof to the geodetic survey ship the U.S.S. Explorer to the F/V Cyrus, a seagoing tug that had been converted into a crabbing vessel, the only ship he ever captained. He also served on Alaska Marine Highway ferries, the M/V Matanuska and the M/V Tustumena. The latter ferry still serves the Alaska Peninsula and Aleutian chain based out of Homer. A month and a half before the present trip, my husband, our son and I rode this very ship between King Cove and Cold Bay on our way home to Idaho to prepare for a two-week trip to Japan. The purpose of the trip was to bring back artefacts from an ancient Aleut
village in Port Moller excavated by Japanese archaeologists in the 1970s and 80s. My grandfather also spent a great deal of time in Japan, Korea and the Philippines on ships, where he insisted that the women fell hand over foot for him. He was very vain, and a swarm of “sweet little gals” always seemed to be on hand when he was choosing gifts for my mother and her siblings. He seemed to have a girlfriend in every Pacific port. Though he always said that Filipinos were “the most beautiful people in the world,” he came home to the old Croner homestead in Fairfield, Idaho, with a Korean woman and her daughter, much to the family’s horror. My step-grandmother was reportedly a laundress or a prostitute in Korea, the stories were unclear. Her name was Dung Nam, but my grandfather called her Tsunami, after the huge sea wave caused by undersea earthquakes or volcanic eruptions in the Pacific Ocean, shortened to Sue Nam.

Grandpa Ralph drove a car like he was steering a ship, making big wide turns. He called himself ‘Celestial Sam,’ even wrote a novel with himself as protagonist, and sang hilarious sea shanties. For every new endeavour he would always say, “I’m getting my sea legs.” In his younger days, he boxed professionally with the nickname ‘Sailor’. We all wondered if he had gotten the sense knocked completely out of him; he used to make belts and purses for us by seaman’s square knotting, but had a harder time remembering our names.

There is a strong oral tradition in my family; we are storytellers. Most of what I know of Grandpa Ralph comes from stories of my uncles, aunts, mother and grandmother, stories repeated hundreds of times with the same gestures, pauses and punch lines that I now find myself repeating. I wish I had paid closer attention while he was alive. Grandpa Ralph was in the Pribilofs where he squeamishly witnessed a fur seal harvest, and used to tell stories of islands with no trees, just wind. Many Aleut elders in King Cove remembered a few my grandfather’s ships passing through, and one geodetic survey ship that anchored near King Cove for a winter.

When I tell people in the Aleutians that I am from Idaho, often the response is “ah, inland,” followed by a declaration that they could never be landlocked. I like to think that I inherited some of my grandfather’s love of the sea, if not his sea legs. I get seasick and my grandmother says with heavy emphasis, “So did he.” I get homesick for the smells, the harbour and the boats even though I grew up not just inland, but in arid southern Idaho amidst sagebrush, and I never learned to swim.

My interest in the Aleutians began in 1995 while an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and volunteered my summers on archaeological field projects on the lower Alaska Peninsula and Unimak Island, the easternmost in the Aleutian chain. Growing tired of tent life and pining for civilization I began to focus on the modern Aleut villages.

This project evolved from a study of interpersonal violence and crime in Eastern Aleut society using a combination of diverse theoretical perspectives and methodologies to one in which violence and crime are two lines of information in a broad analysis of the processes and consequences of social, cultural and economic change. Proposals rarely survive the field. Variable levels of violence and crime have been quantitatively established for Eastern Aleutian villages, but
preliminary research lead to the discovery that there is less violence and crime than anticipated and, though important, is only part of a story of Aleut identity that needs to be told. My focus shifted to one of defining Eastern Aleut identity and what happens when that identity is threatened both internally and externally, and extended to a study of social disenfranchisement and threats to individual status, culture and community.

This research examines theoretical perspectives not yet applied to the realm of culture change among Alaska Natives or American Indians. Secondly, the examination also provides an understanding of what cultural persistence is, the conditions under which it occurs in its great variety, and the consequences of change from the perspective of the local Aleut population. Eastern Aleut culture can no longer be separated from the commercial fishing economy.

Though I had considerable experience in the region in other capacities, dissertation fieldwork began in the spring of 2000. ‘Gatekeepers’ were contacted, many of whom I had previous experience with. Attendance at relevant public meetings in King Cove and in Anchorage was invaluable. Partway through fieldwork, I received a National Science Foundation grant; application was made possible by being granted a research affiliation on the Idaho State University Anthropology faculty, otherwise impossible as a student at a foreign university.

During the spring, summer and fall, I lived in the village of King Cove, first at the Fleet’s Inn Hotel owned by the King Cove Corporation, then with the tribal council administrator and her daughter, punctuated by stays in a small house belonging to an elder when she was staying in Anchorage. In the winter of 2000, my husband and I learned that we were going to have a baby. Despite my doctor’s green light to continue my research, a visit in the winter of 2001 to the village of False Pass was interrupted by medical concerns and I had to return home to Idaho for tests. I was able to return to King Cove soon thereafter for several weeks before it was decided that I should return to Idaho to be close to my husband and my doctor. To my surprise and gratitude, concern for my own well being resonated throughout King Cove. I requested and was granted permission to intermit from the University of Cambridge the summer of 2001 before our son was born. In the winter and spring of 2002, research resumed with baby in tow with visits to Sand Point, Nelson Lagoon and King Cove through the end of summer 2002 and again in 2003.

The notion of being incorporated into a Native family, as so many arctic anthropologists have been (I think somewhat self-indulgently, for example Briggs 1970:20 “I rather hoped I might discover myself Eskimo at heart.”), is not part of the Aleut way. I lived with a few families in several extended households, cared for their children, helped with life plans and college applications, and participated fully in household duties. A great deal of my time was spent in the household of the most politically active woman in the village and with her extended family. The people of King Cove welcomed my husband and me and liked how we divided our attention between “studying the living and studying the dead.” At the same time, they were ‘hands off’; they
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