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Sources of Parental Ambivalence Toward Education in an Aleut Community

J. S. Kleinfeld

I*LIAKA** is a small, isolated village in the Aleutian Islands. In 1967, the resident population consisted of 201 natives and 45 whites. Iliaka is 40 miles from the closest village and nearly 800 miles from the closest urban center. A DC-3 which calls bi-weekly is the only means of passenger transportation.

According to the archeological record, the Aleutians have been occupied for at least 8,000 years, initially inhabited by coastal people from Asia who drifted along the southern perimeter of the Bering land bridge to its southwest corner at Umnak.[1] From a pre-Russian population estimated between 16,000 and 25,000, Aleuts now number roughly 2,000.[2]

Aboriginal Aleuts were highly skilled marine hunters and fishermen. Perhaps in response to a harsh and precarious economy, aboriginal culture emphasized community cohesion and mutual aid. With the products of the hunt distributed on a community-wide basis, the welfare of every individual was cared for.

The history of white contact in Iliaka, beginning in 1759[4] when the Russians established a settlement, demonstrates the gradual decline of this culture. The process of culture disintegration accelerated after the U.S. purchase of Alaska in 1867, and it became even more rapid in the World War II period. Early in the war, Iliakan Aleuts were evacuated to towns in southeastern Alaska where their interest in modern goods and their dependence on a money economy increased. When they returned from the evacuation, they found that all their boats had been stolen or destroyed by the military. Deprived of the means to follow traditional fishing and hunting activities, the Iliakan turned to the only means of employment available — unskilled occasional labor.

In the mid-1960's, five king crab processing plants opened in the Iliaka area. The plants created abundant job opportunities but the Aleuts considered these unskilled, low-paying, intermittently available

*All names are fictitious in order to protect anonymity. This paper is based on data made available by Dr. Dorothy Jones, Institute of Social, Economic and Government Research, University of Alaska.

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jobs undesirable. Marginal factory jobs provided no opportunity to realize either the values of the traditional society or those of the dominant society. Since every crab plant job above the unskilled level is filled by a white, Aleuts do not perceive opportunities for advancement. The lack of desirable jobs in the community increasingly encourages the educated young to emigrate.

The king crab plants have brought a growing population of whites to Unalaska. These whites, similar to their predecessors, disparage Aleuts for their incompetence and laziness. Furthermore, the whites attempt to dominate community organization and decision-making. For example, while only about 20% of the resident population was white, over half of the members of the city council were white. Subsequent to the period of the field work for this study, the whites organized a "take-over" of the school board. The Aleut community considers the growing population of whites its most serious problem. "If all the whites would leave, we would have no problems," is the common lament.

The attitudes of Aleut parents toward education have been shaped by this complex of historical, economic, and social conditions. Aleut parents' attitudes toward schooling are inconsistent and contradictory. School achievement is valued because it offers some hope of a well-paying job. The price of school achievement, however, is perceived as the loss of Aleut identity and sense of community.

School Disparagement of Aleut Ways

Since Iliaka parents have limited contact with the contemporary school, their attitudes toward it have been shaped to a large degree by memories of their own school experiences. Parents vividly recall the personal humiliation inflicted upon them for their Aleut ways under the earlier BIA educational policy of "culture change." Teachers ridiculed them for eating raw fish, using "stinky" fish oil and practicing similar Aleut customs. Parents especially resented the teachers' injunctions against speaking the Aleut language. "When the kids started to talk Aleut, they (the teachers) would scold them and tell them to stop talking that foreign language," bitterly recalled one parent.

While the educational rhetoric has changed from the "education for culture change" of the parents' school days to the current "education for cross-cultural enrichment," Iliaka parents' present contacts with the school tend to confirm rather than disprove their expectation that school is a place where Aleuts are shamed because their life styles differ from those the school seeks to inculcate. Enlightened modern teachers rarely attack the traditional culture, in part, because there

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is little left to attack. Rather, contemporary teachers frequently demonstrate a romantic interest in reviving the old culture.

The teachers, however, still subtly disparage the life style of the Aleuts. The Aleut life style is now more closely related to the ways of the "culture of poverty" than the traditional culture. Thus, it is fair game. One student, for example, described his humiliation when the teacher, angry at the class for misbehaving, warned them that they would all grow up to be lazy, good-for-nothing drunkards like the boy's parents.

The teachers' attacks on the Aleuts' life style occur both in the context of school lessons and the teachers' self-assumed community duties. The teachers may be unaware that they are disparaging Aleut ways. Ironically, the humiliation may be an unintended result of following model school lesson plans. According to teachers' manuals, for example, an ideal school lesson might concern subjects of practical use such as proper health practices or adequate nutrition. Such manuals also urge the teacher to make these school subjects relevant to the child's life experience. Yet, parents are upset to learn that teachers ask the child in class what he eats for breakfast at home. Aleut parents perceive such lessons as part of the teachers' general intrusiveness. One mother was mortified when the teacher sent her son home with a note telling the parents to bathe the child. Several parents were angry and embarrassed when teachers enjoined them to budget and plan their purchases more carefully.

In short, the school system undermines the self-respect of Aleut parents and children by teaching "better" ways that are inevitably white, middle-class ways. The teacher's disparagement of Aleut self-esteem may be subtle and unintentional. In the context of the schools' earlier "culture change" philosophy, however, Aleut parents and students are highly sensitive to such implications.

Value Conflicts

Value conflicts between the Aleut community and the white, middle-class oriented school lead to the association of school achievement with adoption of white goals and values. While the contemporary material culture of Iliaka closely resembles that of western society, traditional value orientations persist and are often overlooked because of the western appearance of the Aleuts. Such value conflicts as present versus future-time orientation and familialism versus individual achievement have been discussed in detail elsewhere.[5] A less frequently discussed value difference, which also pits Aleut parents against white, middle-class teachers, concerns the appropriate ways of controlling a child's behavior. In contemporary Aleut culture, the tradi-

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tional emphasis on permissiveness and indulgence toward children persists. A misbehaving child might be scolded but physical punishment is rare.

Teachers' frequent use of corporal punishment is the only educational issue that galvanizes the usually reticent Aleut parents into direct confrontation with the school. But the parents' efforts are in vain. The teachers justify their continued use of corporal punishment on the basis of the Aleut parents' inability to control the child. Therefore, the task must fall to the teacher.

From such opposition between parents and teacher, the child learns that his parents support him in resisting the school. His parents view the school as a dangerous situation, which requires their intervention and protection. The child learns that misbehavior in school may bring affectionate, nuturant responses from his parents. In large Aleut families, such individual attention from the parents may be highly valued.

The schools represent values and ways of behaving that may be offensive or demeaning to the Aleut community. Consequently, in a situation of conflict between the teacher and the child, the Aleuts tend to support the child in his opposition to the teacher's demands rather than to support the teacher in his demands for behavior leading to school achievement. Aleut parents' general resentment of the whites' threatened or actual domination in their community strengthens their resistance to the school. The white teacher in the dominant society's school is only another symbol of white authority. Since white authority is usually directed toward changing Aleut ways, opposition becomes a strategy through which Aleut parents and children can affirm their Aleut identity.

For Aleut children, the schoolroom becomes the arena where the drama of culture conflict is enacted and where their choice will be made. To the Aleut peer group, the alternatives are clear. The white students do well in school. The Aleut students do not. In fact, more than 60% of the 1966 Aleut student body had school failure records, and over half of the high school-aged Aleut students had dropped out. As one student explained, "It would be embarrassing to be good in school! Everyone's bad except the white kids." In short, school failure becomes an emotionally charged expression of Aleut identity and group solidarity.

Conflicts About Education as a Means of Mobility

The belief or the hope that education is the means to a good job is the primary source of positive parental attitudes toward the

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school in Iliaka. Yet, parents question the desirability of such mobility when it separates the child from the Aleut community.

Concerned with the future well-being of their children, nearly every Aleut parent verbalized support for education. All desired their children to finish high school, and many aspired to college or other forms of post-high school training. School failure dooms the child to the crab plants. As one mother said, "I don't want him to go to school at home. If he lives home, he will end up working in the crab plants and becoming a drunkard like everyone else and not caring about anything or anyone."

Thus, while parents may reward negative school behavior, they also support school achievement. Parents expressed great pride, for example, at their children's graduation from high school. One mother of ten worked for many weeks in the crab plant in order to obtain the money to attend her oldest child's graduation from the Indian school at Salem, Oregon.

If high school graduation is an occasion for parental pride, college graduation brings pride to the community. The Aleuts uniformly admired the one family that had an offspring who graduated from college. This student, like many high school graduates, had left the village to seek suitable employment.

That Aleut high school graduates frequently leave the village to obtain good jobs creates yet another source of negative feelings toward school among Aleut parents. School success will probably bring the disintegration of the family, especially tragic in a culture where familial values are strong. As one Aleut parent said: "First they took my oldest son (to the Bureau of Indian Affairs school), then my daughter, and when it came to the third, I said — no he stays. When they go, you know, a lot of them don't come back." In a village remote from employment centers, the Aleuts' goals of family and community cohesion conflict with their goals of economic success.

While parents verbalize high educational ambitions for their children, they appear to covertly communicate their desire for the child to stay at home and remain a member of the community. One mother, for example, urged her daughter, who was a good student, to complete high school and become a secretary. However, she confided her pleasure when the daughter quit school and worked in the crab plant. "Two of my girls already live outside. At least Helen will be home," she said with satisfaction.

Parents question not only the desirability of education when it brings separation but also whether education leads to mobility when

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it is desired. There is no guarantee that school success and emigration will actually lead to a good job. As one returned emigrant reported:

> I wanted to go to art school but that didn't work out because Indians from incorporated places are ineligible. So, they apprenticed me to a man who made fire place screens. Hell, that was no better than what I could get at home. So I came back . . . The second time out, I got a job selling Christmas trees from a live, arctic native.

Since the successful emigrants rarely return to the community, it is the unsuccessful who form Aleuts' views of the opportunities outside. Role models of successful natives are generally unavailable to Aleut students.

Aleut parents and students are caught in a double bind. If school success brings a good job, the Aleut student is lost to his community and disappears into the white world. And if the Aleut student remains in the community, he has no need of school achievement.

Summary and Conclusions

Aleut parents' negative feelings toward education derive from their perception of the school as a white-dominated institution which disparages Aleut ways and attempts to prepare Aleut children for mobility into the white world. The hope that education will lead to a good job is the primary source of Aleut parents' positive feelings toward school. Yet, this aspiration is equivocal because parents doubt that education guarantees a good job and because they question the desirability of economic success when it severs the child from the Aleut community. No way is perceived whereby school success can be integrated with Aleut identity.

The newly emerging native organizations in Alaska — and elsewhere — may offer a way to resolve this identity conflict. The members of these organizations appear to be evolving an identity based not on a pale imitation of whites or on a futile attempt to reconstruct a long dead past, but rather on the pursuit of the social and economic interests of natives throughout Alaska. Regional native associations and community action programs are concerned with such issues as securing compensation for native lands, stimulating cultural heritage study programs, securing jobs and services for the villages, and improving the quality of village education. This modern Alaska native movement may have the potential for providing new and culturally relevant educational goals for native students. Members of these organizations may provide role models of natives who use education not as a means of mobility into white society but rather as a means of strengthening the Alaska native community.

In order to pursue their social and economic goals, these organizations need educated natives. The anticipated multi-million dollar

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settlement of native land claims should provide the opportunity to expand substantially their efforts and could offer secure economic futures for educated natives. As the editors of the *Tundra Times* point out.

> Our native college men and women must strive for greater achievements in school. They will be in demand, first on the seasoning basis for some time under more experienced administrators. In time, and according to their particular talents, they would be elevated into more responsible positions and be in key slots to help to perpetuate the continuing programs and services in the future. (Tundra Times, April 8, 1970, p. 2)

Village parents and students must be made aware of these native organizations' need for educated native youth. Role models of modern Alaska natives who use western academic skills to achieve native ends must be made visible to the village communities.

While the specific methods through which this could be done must be decided by natives themselves, one possibility might be arrangements whereby state or local school systems contract with regional native associations to provide counseling, career development, and home liaison services for native students and parents. The promise of this type of approach is suggested by such recent experiments as Juneau's Talent Search Program. This program, directed by the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood, succeeded in encouraging seven of Juneau's 16 first semester drop-outs to return to school and 15 of the 31 native high school seniors to enroll in college.

The transformation of the school from an institution offering only mobility into white society into an institution offering also the role of modern Alaska native could help to resolve the conflict between school achievement and native identity and community perceived by village parents and students. Education could instead be viewed as the means to preserve and strengthen the Alaska native community in the modern world.

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