Alaska Native peoples inherited customs, languages, and intricate ways of knowing the land of their birth. There are many ways to configure the groups of languages and pre-colonial nations depending on your perspective. Most agree that there are 20 indigenous Alaskan languages with many dialects within each language. Likewise, most agree that there are two predominant language families that divide the coastal Inupiat, Yupiit, Unangan and Sugpiat peoples from the Athabascan, Eyak and Tlingit languages.

Language has a lot to do with culture, but environmental factors are even more influential. Four environmental zones affect Alaskans. These are the Arctic, the Aleutian, the Sitkan and the Interior zones. Tundras along the western and northern coasts identify the Arctic zone while the windy, yet mild Aleutian zone lies along the Alaska Peninsula, western Kodiak, and the Aleutian Islands. The landlocked Interior zone is bound on the north by the Brooks Range and the south and east by the Alaska Range. Finally, northern rainforest characterizes the Sitkan zone of southeast Alaska on the western side of Canada. The nations within each of these zones have met the challenges of their environments in ways that conform both to the land as well as to their value systems. In many cases the value systems are further defined by ancient religious traditions that, despite culturally unique variations on themes of gender and power, have allowed harmonious interaction with nature. Individual pre-colonial cultural members learned to develop their mature identities within this matrix.
Agency, power relations, and cultural factors, such as religious traditions and language contribute to identity. Among pre-colonial Alaska Natives agency and power were intertwined through subsistence: providing food and shelter for the family. Religious traditions controlled when, where, and how one negotiated identity in a dangerous world where one had little control over climate and large predators. In the post-colonial era subsistence activities continue to forge identity, but in a politically charged atmosphere of racism and eroding colonialist power relations. Native children of the 21st century enjoy more choices and empowerment than did earlier generations, but the cost is complex and easily swept away as being little more than acculturation or assimilation. In this essay I examine the value of pre-colonial religious traditions and language, as well as the post-colonial impact of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) of 1971 and the ANCSA 1991 Amendments of 1988.

A question sometimes asked is why haven’t Alaska Natives simply recognized they are assimilated Americans and behaved like Americans? A question often thought, written, and asked aloud, but never capable of changing the reality: Alaska Native peoples after nearly three centuries of violent invasion by Europeans, Asians and Americans continue to make their national identities a top priority. As Émile Durkheim wrote in 1912 about the collective consciousness of societies,

"[S]ociety is by no means the illogical or alogical, inconsistent, and changeable being that people too often like to imagine. Quite the contrary, the collective consciousness is the highest form of psychic life, for it is a consciousness of consciousnesses. Being outside and above individual and local contingencies, collective consciousness sees things only in their permanent and fundamental
aspect, which it crystallizes in ideas that can be communicated.” (Durkheim, 1995:445)

Despite the social engineering efforts of mid-20th century Americans to create profit-making corporations of Alaska Natives through the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, the ineffable collective consciousness of each Alaska Native nation has maintained and in most cases strengthened their enduring legacies of distinction. Indeed, they have been helped and funded by several agencies of the United States government, private not-for-profit agencies related to the environment, religious groups, and arts, as well as the collective consciousness of Native Americans in both continents. Beginning with the United States Constitution that identifies Native Americans as “domestic dependent nations” (U.S. Constitution, Article 1, Section 8, clause 3), the federal government has acknowledged the separate status of Native American peoples as distinct nations to be included in American affairs.

Many positive changes in relationships between the mainstream American public and Native American nations occurred during the 20th century. A significant barrier broke when Alaska Natives formed inter-ethnic activist groups, such as the Alaska Native Brotherhood in 1912 and the Alaska Native Sisterhood in 1913. The Great Depression affected all peoples throughout the globe, and in 1934 the United States took the separate and distinct status of its indigenous nations to create two major acts: the Indian Reorganization Act especially for reservation residents and the Johnson-O’Malley Act, which provided welfare funding for Native peoples who live off the reservations. Both acts continue to serve as legal and economic protections into the 21st century. The 1960s
social reforms against poverty, racial and sexual discrimination also included counter
movements like the American Indian Movement and the Indian Occupations of Alcatraz
Island in 1969. The collective consciousness of the 1960s inspired such federal acts as
the Indian Child Welfare Act (1978) and the Native American Religious Freedom Act
(1978), and, of course, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971.

ANCSA has had a tremendous and ongoing impact on Alaska Natives identity with its
cutoff date of birth (December 18, 1971) for inclusion into its provisions. All Alaska Natives
born after that date were expected to assimilate into the mainstream population and/or inherit
ANCSA shares from their parents and grandparents. In cultures where huge families and longer
lives have become the norm, many original shareholders are alive and well and continue to own
their own shares. In 1987 (enacted in 1988), Congress passed the “1991 Amendments” to allow,
among other things, each of the 12 in-state regional ANCSA corporations to vote include
descendants as shareholders. Of the 12 regional corporations, four (Arctic Slope Regional
Corporation, NANA, Doyon Limited, and in 2007, Sealaska) have voted to grant descendants,
commonly known as “Afterborns” shares. These shares differ among the four corporations, but
generally speaking, they are life-estate stock that cannot be passed on. Older “afterborns” are
now in their mid-30s and many do not own shares of any sort. Even the corporations that voted
to include their “Afterborns” followed American laws by incorporating a cutoff date and number
of new shareholders.

Why are so many Alaska Native corporations leaving out their children? The answer is
both complex and yet can be reduced to notions of money. Adding more shares to the pool calls
for a diminution of the amount of money to be distribution to each shareholder. Moreover, those
who have inherited shares commonly receive less than 10 shares because of the large size of
families. Thus, the amount of money available to any given new shareholder diminishes over time.

The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act stands out as a leading factor in contemporary Alaska Native identity, but other factors offer ordinary social benefits and barriers to individual self concepts of success: Language and religious beliefs. For the Alaska Native whose indigenous language remains active in the family, identity becomes an easy measure to hold up to the world as proof of one’s right to be seen as indigenous. Since speaking any language but English was prohibited in Alaska between the late 19th century through the mid-20th century, most contemporary Alaska Natives do not have facile command over their indigenous languages.

Languages may not determine culture, but they do shape thought and epistemological modes of learning. Take this Iñupiaq term: aavzuuk. First, it is a complete sentence meaning “constellation consisting of two stars which appear above the horizon in late December, an indication that the solstice is past and that days will soon grow longer again.” (Fortescue, Jacobson, and Kaplan 1994:1) Structurally polysynthetic, the Iñupiaq language allows the speaker to economize on sound to maximize meaning with simply inclusion and replacement of key morphemes. Such morphemes are explicit in terms of direction, number of speakers, number of listeners, height from the horizon line, and time. Second, in this example Inupiat epistemology makes use of language to impart astronomical knowledge of the constellations, calendric data, and patience about the presence or absence of light. Implied within the term, aavzuuk, is the suggestion that the Iñupiaq speaker will learn what to expect of the environment and other creatures in it at this time of year. Thus, the Iñupiaq sense of a maturing self grows with knowledge of the language. Likewise, religious traditions are explained and made a part of everyday life in the indigenous languages, knowledge that becomes awkward in translation and
culturally prohibited in the daily hegemonies of contemporary life in Alaska. For instance, the Dena’ina Athabascans of the upper Cook Inlet area have seven discreet terms for religious practitioners: El’egen, K’ech’eltanen, Qatsitsexen, Yuq’ Hdn’lanen, Hkut’ K’el’anen, Behnaga Dnadlunen, and Gashaq (Kari and Boraas 1991:9). Each of these terms refers to key elements of Dena’ina spiritual, medical, social and political knowledge. Learning about the religious traditions is still a strong possibility, but implementing the knowledge depends in some part on intimate knowledge of the language.

In conclusion, while many factors lead to development of individual identity, most Alaska Native people develop anomalous awareness of themselves based on their relation in time to postcolonial history, their relationship to the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, their individual knowledge of language and their inheritance in whatever form it might take of traditional religious traditions.

References

Alaska Department of Natural Resources. 200. Fact Sheet, “Land Ownership in Alaska.”


United States Constitution, Article 1, Section 8, clause 3.