The Colonization of Alaska Natives
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At least seven Nations of people, each possessing a distinct language, culture, history, spirituality, and land base inhabit the lands known as “Alaska”. They are called the Athabascan, Iñupiat, Yup’ik, Tlingit, Haida, Aleut, and Tsimpshian Nations. They are the original peoples of the land -- the Indigenous Peoples of Alaska.

These Indigenous Nations, like many others in the past several hundred years, fell prey to the European Nations as they embarked on their process of colonization. This process, based on human greed for wealth and power, resulted in the break down of relations between many Nations of human beings all around the world. This is the story of how colonization came to the Indigenous Peoples of Alaska.

Around the mid 1700’s, Alaska was being approached from both the east and west. The British, French, and Spanish were on their way towards Alaska from the east, already having encountered the Indigenous Nations of the Mayans, Incas, Iroquois, Cherokee, and Navajo among many others. From the west, a Russian man named Vitus Bering was sailing towards Alaska from Russia.

The French came to Alaska from the northeast, bringing fiddle music, tea, crackers, tools, and booze. They came to trade for furs from the Na-Dine (Athabascan) peoples of the area. The village of Fort Yukon now sits where the Gwich’in have gathered for thousands of years to celebrate and trade. The European fur traders set up a trading post in Fort Yukon. The fur traders used alcohol to exploit the people for the furs they sought.

On his second voyage, Russian Vitus Bering landed on one of the Aleutian Islands. The Russians were also interested in furs, particularly the sea otter pelt. Sea otter pelts were worth the value of gold in China at that time. The Russians had a hard time catching the sea otters on the rough waters and therefore resorted to enslaving the Aleut people to hunt for them.

The Aleut women and children were held hostage by the Russian fur traders. The Aleut men had to bring them many sea otter pelts every day in order to see their family. During that period the Aleuts organized two unsuccessful uprisings against the Russians.

The goal of the colonizer was to claim ownership of the land and exploit the resources and Indigenous peoples wherever they went. In Alaska, the resource the colonizers were initially after was fur, later it would become wood, salmon, gold, and oil. The goal would not change but the method to exploit would adapt to be appropriate with the times.

Russia was first, among a small group of European Nations, to claim that Alaska was their territory. None of the Indigenous Nations of Alaska participated in that claim. At that time in history Indigenous Peoples were looked at as being less than human, so we were not included in discussions about our own lands. Later, the Russians were defeated in battles by both the Tlingit and Ahtna Nations.

The Russian claim to Alaska would be equivalent to the Indigenous Nations of Alaska laying claim to a European nation-- such as England or France-- without that nations consent or awareness. It is an outrageous thought, yet that is what happened with the Indigenous Nations in Alaska.

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1 Throughout this essay the word “Indigenous” and “Indigenous Peoples” will be used intermittently with “Native” and “Alaska Native”.
2 Fort Yukon is located, along the Yukon River, in the northeastern interior of Alaska, and is home to the Gwichyaa Gwich’in.
3 The Aleutian Islands are located in southwest Alaska.
By the mid 1800’s, Russia worried that the newly created colonial government called, the United States of America, would try to forcefully take Alaska in their westward expansion. Russia met with the United States and in 1867 signed an agreement called the Treaty of Cession, wherein the United States paid Russia a few cents per acre for the land in Alaska.

The Russian claim to ownership of all the land in Alaska and their right to sell the land through the Treaty of Cession was illegitimate for at least two reasons. First, the Indigenous Nations of Alaska, who are the true land holders, did not participate in the discussions or negotiations. Second, the Russians had been defeated in battle and confined to a few trading posts. At the very most, the Russia had claim to those trading posts and the few acres of land they were allowed to settle upon.

The United States was aware that the Indigenous Peoples in Alaska might not accept their illegitimate deal with Russia. In the Treaty, the Indigenous Nations of Alaska were referred to as the “uncivilized native tribes”. One of the first actions the United States initiated was to send military convoys through Alaska to assess the threat Indigenous Peoples might pose to them. They counted the Native population, how many guns, and evaluated how resistant Alaska Natives might be to U.S. colonial activities.

Alaska Native people treated these military convoys with the hospitality that our cultures are known for presenting to guests. In one instance, Chief Setsui1 and his people saved a whole convoy by finding, feeding, clothing, and guiding them to the Yukon. Chief Sesui was later highly recognized by the United States military for his leadership. After concluding that the Indigenous Peoples were not a hostile threat, the United States proceeded with the colonial process.

The United States government worked to assimilate our peoples through the eradication of our Native knowledge, philosophy, languages, spiritual practices and beliefs. In some places teachers had to ban both the Native and Russian languages. In some cases poison was applied to the tongues of children if they spoke any language other than English.

The Indigenous Peoples were not allowed or were highly discouraged from participating in any of the colonial “freedoms”. These prohibitions included land ownership, business development, and even shopping in stores. There were signs that read “No dogs, No natives” on some buildings.

The United States was after control of our land and resources. They had to deal with what they termed the “Indian problem”. The U.S. had tried massacres, treaties, and reservations in the continental United States and those methods either didn’t work well or were politically unacceptable. So in Alaska, the U.S. worked hard to assimilate Alaska Natives; attempting to both legislatively and educationally convince us that we do not have the rights of sovereign peoples and nations.

In 1959 the United States established the State of Alaska and granted Alaska land which the United States never legitimately owned. Similarly, in an attempt to legitimize United States ownership of land in Alaska, Congress unilaterally enacted the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) in 1971. During the discussion and formation of this legislation the Alaska Indigenous nations were not involved. Furthermore, this legislation was never legitimately agreed upon between the Alaska Indigenous Nations and the United States.

ANCSA was a deal wherein the United States paid nearly 1 billion dollars for taking Alaska Native lands, leaving 44 million acres to native corporations. ANCSA established these Indigenous run for-profit corporations to receive and manage the land and money.2 The Act was created to eventually lead to the loss of the remaining 44 million acres of land from Indigenous control. Although it was a struggle, the Indigenous Peoples succeeded in getting amendments to ANCSA in 1987 to protect the land.

1 Chief Setsui was of an Athabascan leader from central-southeastern Alaska.
2 The Neetsaii Gwich’in from Venetie and Arctic Village refused to participate in ANCSA, they did not accept money or the corporations.
To this day the control over our people, land, and resources by the State of Alaska and United States is based on illegitimate negotiations and unilateral decisions. Within international law, one Nation of people does not have the right to illegitimately control another Nation of people. Indigenous Peoples were not initially considered Nations by the Europeans and Russians, because they were not sure Alaska Natives were even human beings.

Today our traditional Indigenous governments have national and international recognition. Yet, the Indigenous Peoples of Alaska, like many other Indigenous Peoples throughout the world, continue struggling for the recognized rights to our traditional lands and way of life. We are striving to make things better for our people while attempting to address the historical injustices that are at the foundation of many of these struggles.

The relationship between the Indigenous Peoples of Alaska and the United States needs to be addressed. This relationship is out of balance. Indigenous Peoples are struggling for basic human rights, quality education, and jobs. Yet, the colonial governments and European based corporations are making billions of dollars in profit from Indigenous land and resources in Alaska every year.

Our place as human beings in the world is out of balance. Through greed, fear, and over-consumption, we have hurt many relationships between one another and our relationship with the earth. Our path as humankind needs to be altered to incorporate values of respect, unity, and balance.

\[1\] In the case of Alaska Natives, "colonial governments" refers to both the United States government and the Alaska State government.