Between Worlds - Culture Shock

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Assimilating Natives into American society was an undercurrent of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

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Some workers at the Red Dog mine dining hall walk past the steaming chicken cordon bleu and homemade strawberry shortcake for what they really savor.

They're headed to the freezer to pull out seal meat and muktuk.

The dining hall at the world's largest zinc mine offers a first-class feast, but it also represents a culture clash as Alaska Natives and corporate America mesh.

\"You hear a lot of complaints about food because they haven't eaten omelets before and haven't had prime rib every Sunday,\" said Nelson Walker Jr., mill operations field trainer at this mine in Northwest Alaska, about 90 miles north of Kotzebue. Congress viewed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act as a way for Natives to assimilate into Western society. But companies such as Cominco Ltd., which runs the Red Dog, discovered they needed to accommodate traditional Native lifestyles as well

Vincent Okpealuk's family lives by hunting and gathering traditional food around Wales. \"My family had defined themselves by walrus,\" he said.

PHOTO BY BRIAN WALLACE

Cominco, a Canadian company, provides a freezer for workers to store traditional foods, such as seal, caribou and muktuk, which is whale skin and fat. Mine managers also became more flexible about giving time off for subsistence hunting and fishing, and for attending village funerals.

Meanwhile, workers had to adapt from the relaxed pace found in villages to more

rigid work hours.

\"You take that person out of the village and culture shock him with a time frame, you're going to have some problems,\" said Walker, an Inupiat Eskimo.

Cominco faced turnover rates at the Red Dog as high as 25 percent a year, but brought that rate down to just 14 percent last year by adjusting schedules, providing incentives and working to reduce culture shock.

Adjustment at the Red Dog and in other corporate businesses comes in part from the switch from subsistence hunting and fishing to a 9-to-5 regimen, or longer regular hours. The weeks spent hunting a whale, putting the meat away and preparing for a whaling festival may look like tremendous work to non-Natives, but it often doesn't feel as trying as office or industrial work to those whose families have hunted whales for generations.

\"It's life. It isn't a lot of work. It's life,\" said Arnold Brower Jr., an Inupiat Eskimo whaling captain, who works at the North Slope Borough in Barrow.

\"This is work,\" he said, pounding his desk. \"This is work.\"

At the Red Dog, part of Walker's job is trying to convince people that working 12-hour shifts for two or four weeks straight is worth it. His main bait is a pay scale that shows workers can earn $80,000 annually within an estimated four to six years. As he talked during a tour of the mine, a computer screensaver with bright dollar signs rolled across a screen behind him.

Nelson Walker is an Inupiat Eskimo and a trainer for the Red Dog mine: \"You take that person out of the village and culture shock him with a time frame, you're going to have some problems.\"

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PENN

Money is sometimes only a temporary incentive in Native culture, because people traditionally worked until they had just enough to get by, said David Thompson,

president and CEO of Cominco, based in Vancouver, British Columbia.

\"They will work for a bit and then they'll stop,\" said Thompson, a non-Native. \"Our value system is work all the time, and they say 'What's the point?' \"

About a third of the mine's work force lives in Anchorage, and that suits Cominco just fine. Once workers buy a house in Anchorage and get a mortgage, they're a lot more likely to stay on at the Red Dog, Thompson said.

Small efforts help bridge the culture gap. Showing up for work on time at the Red Dog has sometimes been a problem for those used to hunting and fishing when they need to, rather than punching a time-clock.

One group of mill workers addresses that by meeting for coffee each morning 30 minutes before their shift starts. If someone doesn't show up, a colleague will find them to make sure they get to work on time.

Vincent Okpealuk, 53, lives in the northwest Alaska village of Wales and has grappled with the melding of the two cultures. His family defined itself by hunting walrus, but he also lived in California for 10 years. Okpealuk questions whether it's possible to balance Native and Western ways.

\"I have the damnedest time finding common ground,\" Okpealuk said. \"A lot of Native culture is spiritual and doesn't jibe with Western culture. A lot of Native culture is sharing and functions on behalf of the community. That's totally askance with Western culture. Melding the two -I've found it almost impossible.\"

Yet Native corporations have attempted to do just that.

Arctic Slope Regional Corp. provides subsistence leave to its employees. Cominco allows workers a choice of work shifts that allow one or two weeks off at a time. They can also use annual or sabbatical leave for subsistence.

Red Dog workers from Native villages continue to hunt and fish in their time off, but corporate schedules don't always mesh with the timing of fish runs or the passage of game.

In Buckland, about 170 miles from the mine, smelt run for just a few days each year. If mine workers from Buckland have to work during those days, they'll lose out on most of their traditional diet, said Mida Riley, who previously worked at the Red Dog and now lives in Selawik.

\"They think they're doing us a real big service, but it doesn't work,\" Riley said. \"You have to make that choice -money or subsistence.\"

Walker, however, believes the two cultures can be mixed and it's happening not only at corporations, but in villages.

The cultures are like two roads, he said, and the mine sits at the intersection.