

Between Worlds - Cultural Assimilation or Protection?

Cultural Assimilation or Protection?
by SVEND HOLST

Introduction of Native corporations in Alaska has at once undermined the cultures of Alaska's indigenous groups and helped revitalize them.

Either way, the varied cultures of Alaska's Native peoples have all been affected by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

"The idea of a Native corporation is not a traditional one," said Wally Olson, a Juneau anthropologist. "Some say it was intended to take Native lands away."

The corporate model is in conflict with the cultures of Alaska Natives, he said, but the impact of the Native claims act is minimal when compared to the huge change caused by the thousands of Americans and Europeans who've come to Alaska in the last 100 years.

Barb Weyiouanna of Shishmaref picks edible greens on a hillside near Wales. She ferments the greens in seal oil to preserve them for year-round use.

PHOTO BY BRIAN WALLACE

Natives account for just under 16 percent of Alaska's population, down from close to 100 percent before fur, fish and gold brought Russians, Europeans and Americans to the state.

Missionaries, the government and technological change have all served to undermine traditional cultures and lifestyles, Olson said. ANCSA, he said, is a drop in the bucket compared to the tidal waves of change brought by immigration.

However, a movement has blossomed in recent years. Interest in revitalizing traditional cultures in Alaska is growing. Fears that ANCSA might mean the loss

of all Native lands, in some places, reinvigorated tribal governments that had been dormant for years.

"I think there's been a resurgence, a renaissance, in traditional Native culture," Olson said.

Some Native corporations have helped promote cultural preservation efforts through funding and by setting up non-profit foundations.

The cultural assimilation that came with ANCSA's corporate model has been accepted by some, but others have kept their unique Native identities despite their shareholder status, said Steve Langdon, a University of Alaska Anchorage anthropology professor.

"The corporation as a vehicle has been received very ambivalently," said Langdon. "There was the danger that all identity -political and cultural -are represented as shares. That has been resisted."

That resistance was expressed in 1987. Then, ANCSA was amended to make it more difficult for shareholders to sell their shares publicly. Before the amendments were made, ANCSA allowed for Alaska Natives to sell their shares publicly 20 years after the act's 1971 approval.

The so-called "1991 amendments" alleviated some Native concerns that corporation land would be lost in one of three ways: non-Natives buying enough shares to control Native corporations, struggling corporations selling their land or the land being seized for non-payment of property taxes.

Complications stemming from the claims act have forced tribes to spend much of their energy figuring out how far their powers extend, said Stephen Cornell, director of the Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy and a sociology professor at the University of Arizona.

With Native corporations, tribal governments and a variety of non-profit Native organizations, some Alaska Natives struggle to find out how to affect change in their communities, he said.

On some reservations in the Lower 48, Cornell said, progress in improving the daily lives of Indian groups the last 20 years can be linked to an increase in their authority over social programs and land, which also supports traditional cultures. "It gives them a better way to attack internal problems," Cornell said. "Indigenous cultures are more likely to survive when the communities are calling the shots rather than outsiders."

With Native corporations controlling most Native land in Alaska, tribes have

little say, little control, over what is done with that land. Native corporations are legally compelled to make decisions for the good of all shareholders no matter where they live or how important they consider their cultural identity, he said.

For example, a Native corporation can be motivated more by profit than by tradition, a more likely basis for a tribal government.

\\"It's not that the corporations are making good or bad decisions,\" Cornell said. \\"They are making decisions based on other criteria.\\"

ANCSA has also made it more difficult for Natives to control their communities, according to Rob Williams, a law professor at the University of Arizona and an expert on federal Indian law.

Since ANCSA, Congress has passed laws that have given tribes more local control. But the claims act may have undermined the impact of those policies on Alaska Native groups. Recently, the U.S. Supreme Court decided Indian country doesn't exist in Alaska because of ANCSA. Indian country is a legal status enjoyed by Indians living on reservations that grants a large degree of sovereignty to tribal governments.

ANCSA may have effectively removed a tool that Alaska Natives could have used to help preserve their culture, Williams said.

\\"The door is open for complete assimilation,\" he said. \\"ANCSA essentially says 'you have sacrificed any federal protection you may have had.'\\"