

To Be or Not To Be Thrust Into Antiquity

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Alaska Native languages and cultures have been carefully crafted by our ancestors for millennia. They are nature-mediated through very carefully borrowed sounds from the natural world, to insert the speaker into the powers of place. The power of speech is such that the words have to be chosen carefully, because words that come from nature can be understood by nature. Thus, Alaska Native people become a part of nature, and the language they have spoken for millennia has helped to craft their reality.

Until recently, Alaska Native languages have been oral and have provided a powerful means of communication. Throughout traditional time Native children were immersed in the language from conception to death through song, storytelling, conversation, which conveyed respect for all things and a connection with the universe. The Native children learned their language first from their mother, then family, peers, Elders and by participating in activities with members of the community. Their play as children imitated the activities of the villagers. As they grew older, they participated in hunting, trapping, singing, dancing, drumming and other everyday activities that conveyed unequivocally their connection to everything in the universe. The symbolism in the arts and crafts of the people were very profound, artistic, beautiful, and instilled within the people the potential for power to make change.

We have been losing the Alaska Native languages and thus, our cultures, as the English language has become the dominant means of communication. "Once we were shape-shifters" writes Calvin Luther Martin (1992), through words engineered by our ancestors. We have become linguistically poor as we have lost the use of the ancient words that have power. Instead, we resort to profanity as we lose our ability to articulate our feelings about the things around us, and we rely on the languages of the computer, mathematics and the sciences as being the primary conveyors of truth. In so doing, we reduce our ability to be connected to our place and we divorce ourselves from nature, which has traditionally been our encyclopedia.

Why is it that, as Alaska Native people, we have so often fallen prey to the interests of the outsiders who have been imposing their own ways on us for the last one hundred plus years? We graciously allow strangers to come to our villagers to write, videotape, research and participate in our most spiritual activities. We explain over and over again what, how and why we do the things we do. How many times do we have to explain what subsistence means to us and other fundamentals of Alaska Native life? They in turn write books, articles, produce videos, become lecturers and experts known for the knowledge shared with them by Alaska Native people. Some even make a few dollars from information we have shared with them. This is not to say that all outsiders have an ulterior motive when they seek to learn from us, because there are many who understand and want to relearn how to live kindly and softly with nature.

We are told that if Alaska Natives do not get our knowledge written down and archived, it will be lost. Is this really true? Do we have ancient memories? Are we in essence helping to write our own epitaphs by separating what we know from the context in which it is known and used? If Native people believe that our languages and our technologies come from nature, then their origin remains with us and we can continue to draw on it. There are several small tribes in other parts of the world that almost lost their languages but have regained them in a short period of time. Some have done it without the language being written down, but by making it once again the language of the family and community. This was always the custom of Alaska Native people.

I offer these reflections to provoke our thinking about what we should be doing to maintain our identities and nurture our well-being as Alaska Native people. As we go about writing, videotaping, telling stories, researching and recording our innermost thoughts using the modern technological marvels, let us pause and reflect on what we are doing. Our physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual needs must be brought into balance through the proper use of the nature-mediated languages of our ancestors. After all, "In the beginning was the spoken WORD!"

References:

Martin, C. L., 1992, *In the Spirit of the Earth: Rethinking history and time*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.