

# **Hunters, Christians and Native Americans in Alaska**

## **An Ethnography of Spirituality in the Upper Kuskokwim Region**

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Northern Athabascans have been known for animistic beliefs and practices associated with subsistence activities, while some researchers have also discussed indigenization of Christianity in Athabascan societies after the contact with the missionaries. Recently, emerging alternative spirituality, including so-called Native American philosophy, has been introduced to various Alaskan Athabascan societies. This dissertation project describes the individual appropriation and socio-political significance of contemporary and historical spirituality among the Upper Kuskokwim Athabascans (also known as *Dichinane*’ *Hwt’ana*) in Nikolai, Alaska. My focus is on the historical processes of incorporating foreign spiritual ideas and practices in regard to the changing social organization and alliance of a formerly nomadic sub-arctic hunting society. That is, I attempt to understand ethnographically how various persons, practices and encounters contributed to the contemporary manifestation of spirituality in an Athabascan village as an adaptation to severe social change. I argue, in agreement with prior studies on the study area, that the relative isolation of the Upper Kuskokwim people, and thus absence of resident missionary, helped them to take an initiative in forming indigenized Russian Orthodox practices and beliefs. I then explore the seemingly individual-oriented practices of alternative spirituality by various people of the Upper Kuskokwim region, each of whom is adapting differently to the contemporary situations in post-modern, multi-ethnic rural Alaska.