

Alut, Indian, Eskimo Languages—

Dr. Krauss Preserves Dying Alaska Native Languages

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(First of four parts).

After ten years at the University of Alaska, Dr. Michael Krauss finds much of his work as a linguist concerned with preserving for future study of remnants of Indian languages and cultures that have been systematically exterminated by white America.

As a linguist, he spends much of his time corresponding with other linguists and educators from various parts of the world - all concerned with studying and preserving the Athabascan, Tlingit, Eskimo and Aleut languages.

Yet, in Alaska, the people who speak these languages are unaware of their fellows in other countries. In numerous families, parents who speak their native language speak only English to their children. And the language dies.

To what extent the policies of white schools and desires for assimilation have succeeded in killing the native cultures is only now becoming fully apparent. Many of Alaska's once proud languages are moribund - the children of the tribes no longer

speak their native tongue.

What is left will be a few scattered old people, available for linguistic scholars trying to write down their language to preserve for scholars to write long treatise on.

That this extermination is unnecessary is apparent if Alaskans look outside the United States, or outside Alaska, toward Eskimo and Indian groups in other countries.

In Greenland under a century of Danish rule, Greenlanders all speak their native language - an Inupiat Eskimo language similar to that spoken in Barrow.

The population is literate in their own language, with Danish the language of only a tiny elite class and the small percentage of resident Danes. To paraphrase - 42,000 Eskimos can't all be wrong.

Yet, how many Alaskan Eskimos learn in their village schools about the people of Greenland, all of whom speak and read Eskimo in their schools, their daily newspapers, magazines, books and radio.

The very existence of these people is hidden from Eskimo children in the mass of informa-

tion they must learn about their fellow "countrymen" - the people of the lower 48.

While American educators sought throughout the early

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20th century to teach their Eskimo and Indian students English and washed pupils' mouths out with soap for speaking their own language, educators in Russian Siberia pursued another direction.

About 1,000 Eskimo people live in Siberia, a group identical to the 800 Eskimos of U. S. - owned St. Lawrence Island. Since 1932, Soviet educators have published a series of school textbooks, dictionaries and traditional stories for the children of this tiny group of Eskimos.

"The quality of these books has still never been surpassed in the United States (meaning Alaska)," explained Dr. Krauss.

Few of these books are available, even in photostat, to U.S. scholars. Yet, even the photostated copies of the few books available are impressive. They are beautifully illustrated, divided between traditional stories and lessons on Soviet life.

Despite propaganda, they represent a remarkable achievement - representing a country

dedicated to the right of each of its language groups to be educated in their own language - no matter how few spoke the language.

To what extent do Alaska's native languages survive today? By definition, a living language is one which the children of the community speak to each other. It is used by all members of the community in everyday life. In Alaska, the languages vary from the dying Athabascan and Tlingit languages to the strong Eskimo speaking communities around Bethel.

Alaska has traditionally divided its native groups into Aleut, Eskimo and Indian. For a linguist, these are unreasonable distinctions. There are several Indian languages and culture groups in Alaska and at least two main Eskimo languages. Yet for purposes of this article we will divide them into Aleut, Indian and Eskimo.

NEXT: Aleut language in Alaska.