

Cultural clash leads to pride in lifestyle

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(Editor's Note: We have had many requests to publish the talk given by the editor of this newspaper at the FESTIVAL OF ARTS panel discussion on CULTURES IN CONFLICT IN ALASKA held at the University of Alaska on April 11.)

CULTURES IN CONFLICT IN ALASKA — To some of you here, Cultures in Conflict in Alaska may seem to be something ethereal — something that is rather hard to pinpoint because you have been firmly established in your culture. You have been in the mainstream of it all through your lives. Your culture is a great one and it is powerful. Being powerful, it tends to engulf other cultures.

Cultures in Conflict has been more personal as far as I'm concerned because I have been caught in the middle of it. I have been embroiled in it all through my life and it has not been easy. What made it difficult was that I was born into a culture very different from yours at a time when the two cultures were joined in conflict.

I think many facets of my culture were good. They were good because they enabled my people to survive through some of the most hazardous obstacles. My culture was carefully planned and it sufficed amazingly well because it was attuned to some of the most severe surroundings existing anywhere in the world. It was also based on nerve and guts—on exhaustive thinking and

planning in ways to cheat the ever-threatening ways of the Arctic.

Under the severe surroundings, one would think that life in the Arctic would have been beset with a brooding sort of an existence but this was far from being so. Instead, my people developed a philosophy of lightheartedness in the face of the ever-present dangers. I have seen them dance under foreboding circumstances, like the impending periods of hunger due to unfavorable hunting conditions.

Eskimo dance performed in its true setting and intent is uplifting to the spirit. Subtle humor is intricately woven into it and no matter how dire circumstances might have been, it was designed to give a needed shot in the arm to the people.

Eskimo dances, of course, were not confined to be performed in times of stress but were, and are, held during festivities honoring occasions such as the end of a successful whaling season. These were times of exuberance and the dance aptly expressed the happiness and deeds of the whalers.

As I've said earlier, our culture in the Arctic was developed to be in tune with our surroundings enabling our people to get the fullest out of life. It was aimed to wrest a fullest measure of happiness and harmony out of the otherwise foreboding conditions of the Arctic. And as a result, my people were some of the happiest people on earth. They had learned to laugh in the face of

danger while giving it a great deal of respect. As you know, the Eskimos did not have the means of writing down on paper, the facts and values of our culture. They developed it by utilizing the extraordinary use of memory so keen that some traditions today were probably exactly the same a thousand years ago. I have seen old people coaching younger ones when they strayed in the wording of a legend.

What I have told so far is just a glimpse into our culture. Although it was brief, I hope I have given you some idea how it was, and is, in some areas of the Arctic. Our culture was vital to our way of life. It was developed through thousands of years of battling of wits with the treachery of the North. It was an achievement designed to get most out of life in one of the most inhospitable areas of the world.

How has this culture fared under the onslaught of the great Western Culture; what forces were put to play in making inroads into it, and what effects did these have on the people?

Based mostly on my own experiences, I have no other recourse except to say that our culture has suffered a great deal beginning sometime around the latter part of 1800. The inroads into it were made without any consideration that it might have some fine values. At the outset, teachers in the early days in the Arctic began methodically to expound the

superiority of the Western Culture. It was done with such fervor that in a short time, I began to feel ashamed of the sod igloo in which I lived, without knowing how it really happened. My ways of life to which I was accustomed became things of doubtful value. My world, as I knew it, literally tumbled down around me and I felt subservient to the great Western Culture. Our Culture that had sustained my people for thousands of years had been belittled. I had been injured spiritually and, not altogether perhaps, I had been robbed of my dignity.

I can say with certainty that this injury to my wellbeing was profound. I had recurring moments of depression for many years thereafter until one night, in bed, I reflected on the achievements of my people—my ancestors. Before I was through, they emerged in my mind as a brave people who had the guts—the stamina—to survive the conditions under which they had to live. In the process, they solved some of the most formidable problems the Arctic had to offer and out of this, they established a happy society. This was quite an achievement considering some of the sternest conditions in the world. Thinking of my people in this vein, starting that one night many years ago, I have come to be very proud of them. My admiration of them and their culture made me think that many of their customs and traditions should also have the

respect of the world because they were molded from one of man's great efforts to achieve harmony and a way of life within his surroundings.

In achieving harmony in the present conflict, it might be well if the Native today could preserve those parts of the old culture which he highly values while at the same time choosing those parts of the Western Culture which he has found to be of value. One of the more pressing conflicts arise when he is forced to give up old values while not being able to acquire desirable facets of the new culture. This is due to lack of preparation in education and training to achieve materialistic aspects of this new culture. While being embroiled in the difficult transition period, the Native finds it hard to adapt the aesthetic values of either culture.

I hope I haven't given you the idea that the culture into which I was born should be preserved in its entirety. That would be quite impossible under the present scheme of things, I want to point out, however, that one of the glaring discrepancies in dealing with Native cultures has been an almost total lack of respect for them by the people of the Western Civilization. This lack has created disturbing problems among the Natives. They need to have pride in the considerable achievements of their ancestors. Having pride in this would help to sustain their dignity. This could help them a great deal in becoming useful citizens of our state.