

# What is Aleut Culture?

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Most people think of Aleut culture in the past tense. When I talk to people about Aleut history and what the customs and the lifestyle was like in pre-contact days and how it changed from the contact period to the present, the common response is, "What a terrible thing, to lose their culture."

Whenever one reads about how they used to do things like weave baskets or live totally off the land, we think it is so awful that all of it is gone, that present day Aleuts no longer want to live in the old way.

My reaction to this response is mixed. On one hand I feel as they do. How could we Aleuts give up so many great ways of dealing with life — replace them with canned meat, overpriced at the local store, or buying an outboard motor from Sears and Roebuck catalog, paying twice as much as it is worth just in shipping costs. In the past there was no monetary cost for food and our ancestors made a boat that was the most superior, seaworthy craft of its time.

On the other hand, I feel defensive. Present Aleut time is not like historical time. To survive, whether we want to or not, we must change ways. Money has been introduced. Employment has become a means of survival.

In comparison, we can look at the horse and buggy of earlier times, American settler days. This was a part of the culture. The buggy was hand built of material from the land; the horses were fed from the land. There was really no cost in maintaining them. It took hand labor and a long time

to construct one, as it did a bidarka.

Should people go back to the horse and buggy days? Look at the cost of buying an automobile, the cost of fuel, maintenance and the fumes from the exhaust are harmful to all living things. Yet does one ever hear the statement, "It's too bad they don't make horse buggies these days!" Probably not as often as I hear the same statement regarding bidarkas!

Aleut culture has been influenced by outside cultures since 1741, longer than any other Native culture in Alaska. It is true the Aleut culture is not as definable as it once was when the people were totally dependent on the surrounding natural resources for their existence.

Much of the external culture is gone, the material, visible signs. However, the internal culture is very much alive. Most people from the outside do not ever see this part or even consider it as part of culture. They only see the surface of a community. Being from the dominant society which is a material-oriented culture, this is the only thing they look at.

I see the internal facet of the Aleut culture as being the way Aleuts relate to each other and the community. Almost without exception, each person is considerate of every other person in their community as well as to outsiders. When someone is ill or having any kind of difficulty, others will come to their aid. The community still rallies together as a group to hunt and then share the catch with others upon their return.

Selfishness is non-existent in Aleut communities. It is not part of the culture.

The status children have in a community is uncomparable. It

is not uncommon to see a teenager holding somebody else's young child. It is an unconscious act, it seems.

The child is standing in a group of adults and other children, the child is fussing, the teenager or another adult swoops up the child, pays attention to the child and then resumes his or her previous activities while still holding the child. There is no feeling of obligation, embarrassment or irritation. It is just custom. It has been done through the ages.

The internal culture is difficult to explain. It is feelings one can experience while in an Aleut community that you do not feel in the outside world.

Maybe this is not a part of culture unique and reserved just to Aleuts. There may be other cultures that are similarly isolated that this part of culture exists too, but my experience is limited to myself being raised in an Aleut community and then living in the larger outside society. My job gives me the opportunity to travel and return to several Aleut communities. This part of culture is as it was when I was growing up.

Now, that I am an adult living in another culture, I can look at Aleut communities and see that there is an internal culture still there. When I lived in it, I never thought of it as a culture, just as where I live now. I have never looked at it as a culture.

Maybe to keep a culture (a way of dealing with living) alive, first the people living in that society need to realize they have a unique way of living. An awareness has to happen from within the community, not from the outside world. As these communities grow and more people move in, the outside dominant culture will replace the present.

This has happened time and again with every other culture. Exceptions are rare. It is possible for two cultures to co-exist. There has to be a conscious effort by individuals and the community in order to make it happen.

This way of living must be passed on to the young. As it was in the past, mothers and fathers and relatives must teach it to their children. The formal educational systems, the schools, must play a role in keeping a culture alive also.