

White rule doesn't allow sharing, love

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When William Lomack travels the bumpy, gravelled lanes of Akiachak or ventures out onto the Kuskokwim River to fish through a hole in the ice these days, he is more likely to be straddling a modern "four-wheeler" than to be yelling commands at a team of dogs.

Yet the old days remain strong in the Yup'ik Elder's mind; he especially recalls how the government of his village worked before the missionaries and the other outsiders moved into the country and changed things to fit their own ways.

Lomack has been involved in different forms of government in his village. He was a member of the city council which resigned in order to recognize the Indian Reorganization Act tribal government as the sole voice of his people. In fact, he heartily recommended the action to his fellow villagers.

Now, he sits on the tribal council.

"Before the IRA comes around, our village was following the old form of government," Lomack speaks in his Native tongue with young Fritz George, land planner of the tribal government, interpreting. "There was a very old man who used to be chief."

"With the chief, the whole

"Our Elders told us that money wasn't the issue. The survival of our culture, what would be left for our children; these were the issues." — Willie Kasayulie

community gets together and decides on what law they are passing," Lomack says. "The people in those days, they make good laws. The laws weren't written down, but everyone knew what they were."

Lomack says that because of the closeness of the community, everyone knew where they fit in and the laws of the community were seldom broken.

From the instant children were taken from their mother's breast, Lomack said, they were brought into the meeting place where the men or the women got together, and were taught what was expected of them.

"Whenever some particular person isn't following the laws the community has passed, the people in the council get together with the person and talk to him about the problem. Usually, at that time, he stops doing it. That's how powerful those people were!"

Good behavior was emphasized for the young, Lomack says. It was stressed to them if they did wrong, the people in

other villages would talk about their village and they did not want this; they would rather keep things quiet.

"As long as the young people behave," says Lomack, "the village will be out of the other villages' mouths."

The laws were made to fit the needs of a subsistence culture. One encouraged the villagers to accept guests coming into Akiachak into their homes and to feed them well. "This way, when it is time for them to leave, they will go with a good thought of our community," Lomack explains.

This law still holds, Lomack says. "Using our form, our IRA, we welcome white, red, yellow, or black; we'll welcome anyone as guests. We will welcome them to our homes and we will feed them."

Other laws pertained to the handling of food; making certain that it was well preserved so that maggots would not grow on it, and that it was not scattered about and wasted.

Famine would sometimes move into the land. "During that time, the person who is

loving everybody is noticed by the food he's providing the community with," Lomack recalls the laws on sharing. "If a particular family has a shortage of food and if another person has enough food to last until the fish arrive, he provides food to that family."

"He does not mention money, nor ask to be paid back; that is one of the laws."

"This is how he expresses that he is loving everybody; that I love you, you're my brother and what's mine is yours."

Lomack is upset by current state laws on fish and game which he says interfere with the Yup'ik concept of sharing. "Who are they to tell us what to do? Not to share?" he asks. "We can't let these people starve! If you are hungry, and you are out of food, I am going to provide you with food and not listen to the state law which says you cannot share whatever you have!"

Lomack joins other village leaders in saying that the different voices around the state describing the Akiachak leadership as "radicals" are wrong. The village people are merely trying to live by their own government as they have in the past. When people understand federal Indian law, Lomack says, they will see that Akiachak is acting within its rights.

"It seems like the state thinks we are trying to put an iron curtain around our town, to discriminate against other people, but we are not! But

the federal government recognizes us as a unique people with a culture and lifestyle worth preserving!"

That lifestyle can not be preserved if everyone living in the United States is given the same rights as the Natives to come in and exploit the fish and game, and to take the resources from the land, Lomack points out. The fish and game will dwindle and the land will be scarred — the culture will die.

Lomack says his people have chosen the IRA government because it is founded on the traditional government which his people have followed for thousands of years. They can make it what they desire, he says. The city council government, however, was founded under provisions of a state which is not yet 25 years old, and which does not attach any special status to the aboriginal inhabitants of the land.

"We old people do not understand this type of government," he says. "It cannot work for us."

Lomack is upset with much that has happened since the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Act in 1971. He notes that he never voted for or signed the act, and describes it as illegal.

Although people speak of the 44 million acres of Alaska left to the Native people under the act as if it were a lot, Lomack says the 115,000 acres of this going to the village of Akiachak "is just like a yard to us,

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a back yard, compared to what our ancestors used to make their living."

He feels ANCSA should be amended to include more land.

Although Akiachak tribal leaders all agree with Lomack that ANCSA was passed illegally without the broad consent of the village people, tribal chairman Willie Kasayulie says it is something the people must live with.

Kasayulie believes that by exercising their tribal governmental authorities, they can see that the corporations work in the interests of the people.

He expresses pleasure with a statement of Calista Corp. president Alex Raider that the regional corporation would seek to separate its business and land interests and would seek to find a way to turn the land back to the tribes.

Kasayulie also notes with satisfaction a decision by member villages of the non-profit Association of Village Council Presidents to form a regional tribal government of Yup'ik-speaking people.

Lomack has something to say about the young people of the village, those born after 1971. Under ANCSA, they

were given no interests in the lands or in the shares of the corporations.

"We hear that these children are not Natives under the law," Lomack says. "But we will accept them as members under our law. As soon as they are born, at first glance, we will find out who is a Native child!"

Jackson Lomack, William's nephew, is waiting for his wife to give birth to one of the new Yup'iks. "If he's a boy," the young Lomack smiles, "I'm going to name him Sovereignty!"

— Bill Hess