

Aleut, Indian, Eskimo Languages—

Preservation of Dying Alaska Native Languages at UA

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(Second of four parts)

During a century of American rule, Alaskan educators have succeeded in accomplishing one outstanding crime against the people in the Aleutian Islands. They have nearly succeeded in wiping out a language in which many of the people who spoke it were literate.

Under Russian rule, Russian missionaries and trading companies developed a written Aleut language. It was used for religious writings, in company schools run by the major trading companies to train Aleut help and by native people for some original work.

By the time of the American takeover of Alaska, the Aleut people were the most Europeanized native people in Alaska. Many of them were literate in their own language.

Thus, one of the accomplishments of American education was the eradication of this literacy, which persisted for many years after it was no longer taught in the schools-part of the culture and religion of the people.

"The Aleut people was once perhaps 20,000 strong. It has been reduced less than one tenth that by the white man's civilizing influence. The Aleut language is now largely abandoned, perhaps beyond the point of no return," according to an unpublished article by Michael Krauss.

In the eighteenth century, people spoke Aleut on the tip of the Alaska peninsula and on the Aleutian Archipelago. Today, it is still spoken by rapidly dwindling numbers of people on parts of the peninsula, parts of the Aleutian Chain and also on the Pribilof Islands and the Siberian Komandorskie Ostrova (Commander Islands).

Both pairs of islands were colonized under the Russian occupation. The Russians transported Aleut people to these islands to harvest the highly valued sea otters, till the otters were nearly exterminated.

Of the Aleutian Islands, only on Atka and Ummak do the children speak their language.

"In every other village," explained Dr. Krauss, "the village teachers would tell me sometimes sadly but sometimes proudly that no children speak Aleut. In all of Alaska no more than about 100 children speak Aleut."

"The number of Aleuts in Alaska has been greatly inflated in census figures by the classification of many of the Southern Eskimo peoples as Aleuts. This includes the native people on Kodiak, Prince Williams Sound, Cook Inlet, and the Alaskan Peninsula.

"Most of them still have Russian names and the Russian Orthodox religion - and call themselves Aleut because the Russians called them this. Actually, the people of these areas speak Yupik Eskimo, very similar to the language spoken in the Kuskokwim."

"With enough support, perhaps Atka could be preserved as a shrine for speakers of Aleut," suggested Dr. Krauss.

A similar project, he explained, has been carried out in Ireland where only a few poor western communities speak their native Gaelic. Literature, movies, radio and industry for these people has been subsidized to preserve this area as a place where Gaelic is spoken - for the pride of Ireland.

If this possibility were pursued, Atka, Ummak, or both

could become places where young people come to learn Aleut, study their tradition and perhaps derive a sense of the proud people who were their ancestors.

In the Pribilof and Commander Islands, where the Russians transplanted Aleut settlers, the language is also dying, according to Dr. Krauss.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many non-Aleut Russian and Siberian peoples migrated to the Commander Islands. By 1930, when the Soviet government instituted its bilingual language programs and began work on textbooks in Aleut, not enough children on the islands spoke the language. According to Soviet sources,

the textbook in Aleut was prepared but never reached the presses. The language had died through intermixture and attrition.

In the Pribilof Islands, as in most American owned territories, Aleut is dying from neglect and extermination.

NEXT: Indian languages in Alaska.

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