

Editorial

The Importance of Heritage

The cultural heritage of a people sustains their spirit rising from the fact that the establishment of traditions were designed through the centuries to benefit the greatest number of inhabitants in a given area. When it is taken away, it leaves a void in their lives—an emptiness of soul where once a care-free spirit and well-being dwelt as attributes to a happier life. This situation has gone on in Alaska caused by driving forces of acculturation creating spiritual hardships among the Eskimos, Indians and Aleuts. Their cultures are methodically being rent asunder to change

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their ways of life without thought that many of their traditions might also be of great value.

There has always been a continuing opinion within the two most influential acculturation agents, their counterparts and branches, namely, the educational systems and many of the religious organizations, that any culture that is alien to the great Western Culture is not as desirable. This idea is being relentlessly driven forward without any efforts in trying to evaluate what a certain culture in a given area might have done for the good of its inhabitants. Some of the fine cultures developed through the ages were no accidents for having been molded for the greatest benefits possible for the greatest number of people. To destroy a culture in a century that has been in existence for thousands of years can only result in profound injury to the spirit of a people whose culture is being torn asunder and which had been a shortest link for them to live in harmony among themselves and the land on which they lived.

In the State of Alaska that is drastically different in climate and cultural backgrounds, especially in the Arctic, the Eskimo, Indian and Aleut children are being taught from textbooks designed to educate the children of Boston, Washington, D.C., New York City, Los Angeles and other cities. Almost all textbooks are suitable, of course, but those that deal with cultures of the Western World do some harm to the Native children of Alaska.

They are being taught the cultures of the Lower 48 states through some textbooks that tend to degrade the cultural aspects of the Alaska Native people. As a result, many of our young people who go away to school, come back to their villages with feelings of inferiority of their former values and those of their parents. They come back ashamed of anything native to themselves, even to the point of revulsion. The same situation is true even with local tutoring.

It is a common knowledge now that where close family kinship has always prevailed, strained relations between the parents and their children have come to be quite a common occurrence. There must be something wrong in the educational system to create this problem. To people who think, this depressing situation should be of great concern. It might not be a bad idea to also think that what suffices to a highest degree in Boston may not necessarily suffice to the fullest extent in the Arctic.

We are not, of course, advocating that no cultural changes take place among the Native people of Alaska, but changes should progress with some thought given to the well-being of the Alaska Native people during the trying period of transition. One of the important needs is recognition of some of their cultural aspects of which they need not be ashamed. Our ancestors accomplished some truly great things in which they solved some of the most formidable obstacles that ever faced man on earth. They were not solved by people lacking in intelligence but by people of great insight and ingenuity. This is ample basis for our young Native people that they, as well, be taught to revere their forefathers and having been taught thus, they will develop dignity and well-being that is native to themselves. In acquiring this facet of their culture, we have no fear that they will have less reverence for great personages in history—such men as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy and other renowned and distinguished Americans who made our country great.