

Joys and Conflicts of Being a Native Anthropologist

MIRANDA WRIGHT

The excitement of incorporating indigenous knowledge into a social science perspective provides the stimulation for my research. Each time an elder shares a seemingly trivial bit of information that opens another window onto his or her past, I am reminded of the years of silence my people maintained. Tired of being compared to other societies, tired of being treated as oddities, tired of having their lifestyles criticized, tired of western domination, these people learned that silence was the only way of preserving their culture. As changes occurred rapidly around them, their deepest beliefs were expressed only within the safety of their Native communities. Rather than explaining or interpreting their culture to the dominant society, many simply said, "that's our way."

As our ancestors anticipated the struggle we would undergo to maintain self-determination, they encouraged young people to "learn both ways"—those of western society as well as our traditional ways. This struggle generated a paradox. At home, it was acceptable to be a Native person, but in Euro-American society it was very painful to function as a Native person. In pondering this, I have come to realize that learning "both ways" no longer simply means learning to read and to speak English. Learning "both ways" means being able to control our future through higher levels of education, both western and indigenous.

By entering the field of anthropology I have accepted the personal challenge of trying to incorporate the knowledge of our elders into the framework of social science. This creates further contradictions. It is important to me to be able to assure people in my community that I can represent them fairly in the academic arena; in fact, gaining this acceptance by my people is what underlies my determination to pursue a degree in anthropology. At the same time, I must gain acceptance as a scholar by my academic colleagues.

Even entering anthropology was a real challenge when you consider how thoroughly the customary laws in our community discourage participation in disciplines like archaeology and physical anthropology.

As a child, I learned that physical remains, cultural objects, and sites of our ancestors must not be disturbed. After people are laid to rest, their physical presence returns to nature while their spiritual essence and power remain with the living. Consequently special burial structures were erected for a Deyenenh.¹ In addition to the obvious memorial, the structure provided a warning to unsuspecting travellers that they were approaching sacred ground. Disturbing such sites brought dire consequences. The structures were eventually allowed to return to nature, their locations retained in oral tradition.

My enculturation in these laws was so deeply rooted that when I elected to study anthropology, the disciplines of archaeology and physical anthropology never even crossed my mind. Rather, it was contemporary cultural issues that stimulated my interest. Consequently, I was startled when I finally came to understand the meaning of a story told to me on four separate occasions after I announced my plans to my family and community. Because of its relevance to this collection's topic, I will share this story with you. When I first told my family about my plans, Eetaa (Father) related the following story:

There was a young man in the community who had been educated in a Christian school and claimed he no longer believed in the ways of our people. Against the advice of the community elders, he led a group of researchers to the sites of our ancestors. Our people believe that these sites should be left undisturbed. The work of the spiritual realm and the cause of death must remain a mystery. At any rate, the young 'educated' Denaa² made his decision and carried it out. The following year, he lost five members of his immediate family in a variety of tragic deaths.

The elders nodded in accord as the story was told: the young man had made his decision fully aware of the beliefs held by our people.

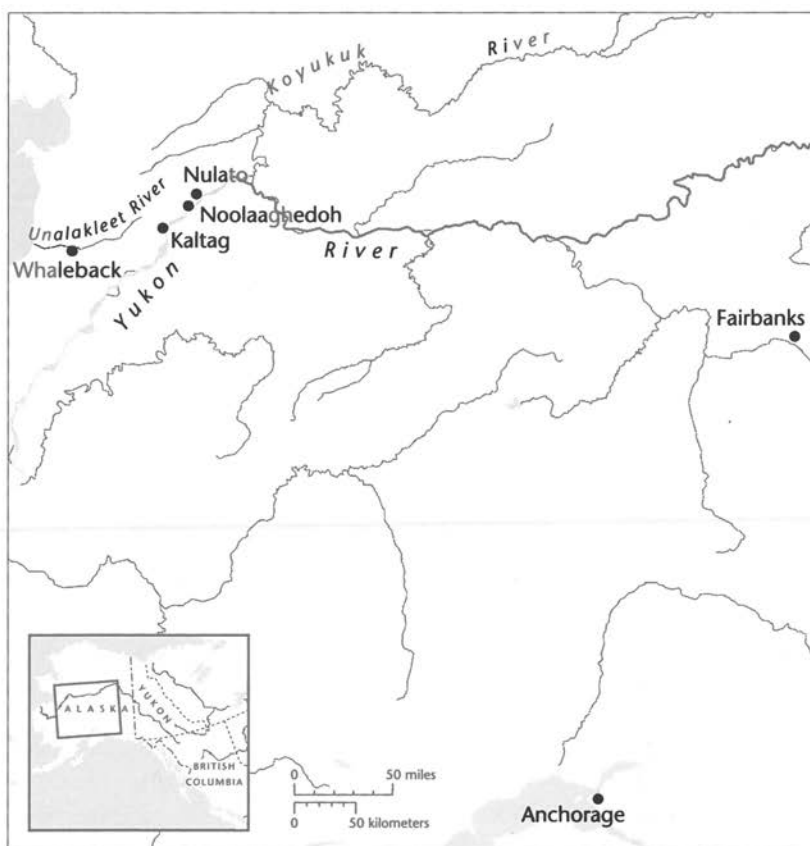
The first time Eetaa told me this story, I was naive enough to be elated that he was sharing cultural knowledge with me. The second time I was told it, I listened closely, attentive to each word, preparing to retell the story when called upon. The third time, chills ran down my spine as the full meaning of Eetaa's narration began to register. He was waving a red flag in my face! Was he suggesting that I did not understand the ideology of my own people? The obvious purpose for Eetaa telling this story was initially hidden by my own assumption that he understood that I was aware of its cultural significance. However, when Eetaa actually tested my cultural knowledge and sensitivity, it came as a shock, and required a careful response. The fourth time Eetaa told me this story I listened attentively, then assured him that I was not going to disturb the ancient sites of our people. I am positive the story would have been repeated to me until I gave Eetaa these assurances.

Once this hurdle was overcome and the people of my community were satisfied with my progress in understanding such critical ideological issues, I was ready to face the second challenge—academic colleagues—one most students face, regardless of ethnicity. However, there are subtle reminders for some of us: suggestions that one tends to romanticize one's heritage, references to 'lack of objectivity' when discussing cultural issues, being patronized as a 'Native student.' These were constant reminders of the challenges before me.

For example, as a Native anthropologist I am sometimes called on to interpret the cultures or protocols of other Native societies. It is assumed that as a Native, I am either naturally endowed with this knowledge, or that as Natives we all share the same forms of expression. Cultural identity is sometimes limited to a broad category summed up as 'Native.' It has occurred to me that such experiences must surely parallel those experienced by my own ancestors at the time of first contact with western society. The humiliation and degradation they endured as they attempted to continue their traditional ways led to their decision to remain silent about cultural practices when addressing outsiders. Yet even as they encouraged younger people to "learn both ways," they continued their cultural practices at home. As the numbers of speakers of our language shrank, many elders chose to leave a record of oral traditions, songs, and narratives for future generations. It was my commitment to participating in the work of cultural documentation that led me to enter the field of cultural anthropology. However the challenge of achieving this still leaves me with all the contradictory problems of living in two cultures.

As my academic career progresses, I have found acceptance by academic colleagues is both stimulating and rewarding. Their level of acceptance has encouraged me to conduct research on the 1851 conflict known in written records as the "Nulato Massacre." By combining eye witness reports, oral accounts and written records from the Russian American Company and the Russian Orthodox Church, I plan to write a Master's thesis exploring the economic and political pressures that resulted in intensive conflicts among various Denaa of western Alaska during this period, conflicts that culminated in the Nulato Massacre.

In 1851, Alaska was still under Russian rule. Nulato was a Russian trading post on the Lower Yukon River in western Alaska, approximately one half mile from the Native settlement of Noolaaghedoh (see map). The events occurring at Nulato that year were described by early explorers as an attack by Denaa on the Russian-American Company. During the attack, Lieutenant John Barnard, a British officer and participant in the search for the Franklin expedition, was mortally wounded and the Russian manager of the post, Vasilli Deriabin, was



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instantly killed. Other personnel at the post were successful in warding off the Denaa. However, most of the Natives who had assembled for trading and winter feasting at Noolaaghedoh were killed. References to this conflict are most often based on the report of William H. Dall, a naturalist with the Smithsonian Institution and author of *Alaska and its Resources* (1870) or Hubert Bancroft's *History of Alaska 1730-1885* (1886). Both accounts are secondary, based largely on hearsay. Nevertheless Dall's statement that the hostilities were sparked by Lt. Barnard's disregard for protocol in summoning a local chief has been repeated in the majority of accounts since then.

Other observations come from Julius Jette, a Roman Catholic priest in the area for more than twenty years, from 1904 to 1924. Jette was fluent in the local language and recorded two accounts of the event—one from a man who escaped the massacre and another from an indi-

vidual whose *mil'aa* (mothers's brother) participated as a warrior. He also had access to an account recorded by a Roman Catholic priest in 1872. A few articles based on Jette's work have appeared in *The Collegian* and *The Alaska Journal*.

One primary account comes from the journal of Dr. Edward Adams, a British surgeon who, like Bernard, was part of the Collingson Expedition searching for Franklin. His narrative provides an analysis of the eye-witness reports about the hostilities at Nulato in 1851. Adam's journal offers a wealth of detail that corresponds to the Native oral traditions. With the information from Jette and from Adams, I have been able to review a number of audio tapes recorded in the Denaa language and housed in the University of Alaska's Rasmusson Library oral history collection. According to these oral accounts, the attack at Noolaaghedoh was part of a 'shaman war' that involved three Deyenenh (Indian doctors or shamans). One was from Kaltag on the Yukon River; another was from Whaleback on the Unalkeet River; a third came from the Kateel, a tributary of the Koyukuk River. Adam's journal substantiates the Native contention that the Native village of Noolaaghedoh was attacked before the attack on the Russian post at Nulato. Adam's description of the ritualistic killing of the Kaltag Deyenenh and his autopsy reports also confirm oral accounts. My inquiries of elders from Kaltag and Nulato have produced the name of the Kaltag Deyenenh or shaman, the location of his burial place and insights into beliefs associated with his spiritual strength.

The tapes and testimonies I have recorded seem to indicate that significant changes were occurring in the area north and west of Noolaaghedoh during the mid-nineteenth century. Inter-marriages were occurring between the Inupiat of northwestern Alaska and the Denaa of western Alaska and this meant that new alliances were being built between groups who had formerly considered themselves traditional enemies. At the same time, whalers, Russian explorers and fur traders were introducing imports into the indigenous trade system. Zagoskin, for example, reported, after his 1842-44 expedition to the Koyukuk and Upper Yukon Rivers, that there was a large demand in interior Alaska for deer skins from Chukotka Peninsula and he recommended that the Russian-American Company increase their stock of deer skins at Makhailoski Redoubt in order to redirect the indigenous trade (Michael 1967). Because of the European demand for felted beaver hats, the Russian-American Company saw an opportunity to acquire more of the pelts by making beaver the medium of exchange for deer skins. Such examples suggest that there was growing potential for indigenous conflict during this period based on economic and political pressures.

The economic and political role of the Deyenenh in Denaa society will be a further subject of my investigations.

As my anthropological career progresses, many opportunities arise to share the knowledge of my ancestors in academic fora and to act as a liaison between academic and tribal perspectives. The ability to preserve the heritage of my people while furthering a deeper understanding of our culture, society and social organization far outweigh the conflicts encountered along the way.

Notes

1. The term "Deyenenh" refers to an Indian doctor or shaman. The Native terms in this paper are in the Lower Koyukon dialect. I am grateful to Eliza Jones for assistance in transcription.
2. 'Human', 'person', 'man' or individual of male gender in the Lower Koyukon dialect.

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