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Journal

American Anthropologist, 57(1)

Author

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Publication Date

1955-02-01

Peer reviewed

Inquiry into Community Integration in an Aleutian Village¹

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COMMUNITY studies, particularly of non-European communities, have traditionally been primarily descriptive with no consistent effort directed toward "the development of a coherent body of theory about the community" (Hollingshead 1948:146). Description is essential to the derivation of theory, but only when it is organized relative to some general problem. This paper is based upon a community study which was undertaken with a view to obtaining insight into the relatively neglected area of community integration and disintegration. The research constituted a field study of the small and isolated village of Nikolski, on Umnak Island in the Aleutian Islands, during the summer of 1952.² The limitations of such a specific study have been kept in mind, and generalization is therefore minimized. However, certain lines of inquiry, their results, and their apparent significance are presented.

Nikolski is the only surviving one of the twenty-two Aleut villages which occupied Umnak Island in 1759 when exploitation by Russian fur-seekers commenced, eighteen years after discovery of the island by the explorer, Chirikov. According to the archeological record, the site at Nikolski (Chaluka) has been occupied continuously for well over three thousand years (Laughlin and Marsh 1951:81). It was apparently inhabited first by a group of long-headed Mongoloids of Eskimo stock, the Paleo-Aleuts, who left the mainland of Alaska over four thousand years ago and populated the entire Aleutian chain. A second wave of Eskimoid people, these broad-headed "Neo-Aleuts," emigrated from the mainland of Alaska within the last thousand years and arrived in Nikolski relatively recently. The eastern dialect, possibly carried by them, never extended farther westward than the Fox Island group of which Umnak is a member. The arrival of the newcomers is inconspicuous in the archeological record, so apparently their culture was very similar to that of their Paleo-Aleut predecessors.

Life in Nikolski throughout the pre-white-contact period was based upon the marine economy common to many Aleut-Eskimo groups. Sea lions, seals, and salmon were primary food sources, although a variety of other products of the sea, as well as birds and land plants, were utilized. Community and small-group co-operative effort, in addition to individual effort, in the gathering of food was accompanied by community-wide sharing of the economically most important animals. Emphasis upon self-sufficiency supplemented co-operation, reciprocal aid, and mutual responsibility, to provide a maximum of economic security.

Social organization was informal, with structuring largely implicit and controls internalized in individuals. This was made possible by carefully planned and executed childhood tutoring by elders. Prestige was based upon individual

skill and success in all activities. Emphasis upon individualism facilitated a remarkably stable social situation encompassing considerable diversity of thought and action. These traits remain prominent today, especially among the elders, though in altered context when compared to their existence in legends and reports of earlier days.

The conjugal family was the primary social and economic unit. It was the basis for the share, still used in dividing goods for community consumption. Ten to fifteen families (often related) constituted a household and occupied a large semisubterranean "barabara." The village was the largest recognized population unit, although certain other villages were traditionally hostile or friendly. Political structure was limited to the presence of a headman (or headmen) who acted as co-ordinator and organizer, by popular consent, in hunting, war, and village affairs. He had no absolute powers. Division of the sexes was well defined in social life, as evidenced by separate men's and women's ceremonies, as well as in economic activities. There were apparently no other formal, village-wide social arrangements, but there were formal alliances of small groups or pairs of individuals involving reciprocity of friendship, confidence, and economic aid. Techniques of adjustment to social situations included especially withdrawal, without severing communication within the village, in cases of stress. Camping trips, boat rides, drinking sprees, and simply not talking are often cited by villagers as means of escaping unpleasant situations, but these do not result in complete isolation of the individual. Most stress was avoided then, as today, by social conventions such as politeness, hospitality, respect for privacy, and toleration of individual variations in behavior.

A practical attitude predisposed these people to investigate and accept many demonstrably useful traits and to reject inferior or useless ones. Practical experiments and innovations are prominent in stories of honored men and notable events. The supernatural was significant in all activities of importance to the people, but not to the detriment of practical methods. Thus shamans were also practical "doctors." The human body had inherent supernatural powers—a fact determining treatment of the dead, and utilized in preparation of hunting charms. Spirits of the dead took part in affairs of the living, and various spirits occupied places and things. A specific deity was important with regard to the sea, and offerings of stones were made in strategic spots for success and safety on land.

White contacts with the Aleuts fall into two main periods: Russian, from 1759 to 1867; and American, thereafter. Early contacts with Russians were violent and destructive. The population of Umnak Island was immediately reduced by massacre and disease to less than one third of its total at contact, and within seventy years, to one twentieth of that early number. Many villages were eliminated, but a few remained, usually as bases for Russian fur operations. The period of violence had ceased by 1824 when Bishop Ivan Veniaminov, a Russian Orthodox priest, came to live for ten years at Unalaska, and to formally Christianize the Aleuts. He succeeded well in his task, despite some opposition, largely because of his kindness and his wisdom in providing

the Aleuts with an alphabet and in adapting the church to fit the Aleut cultural situation. His name is revered today for this activity. After Veniaminov, Aleut-Russian relations were relatively congenial, although the Aleuts continued to perform enforced labor for the fur companies, hunting sea otter far from home.

Though the Russians killed, plundered, removed, and Christianized the Aleuts, Nikolski survived. Due partly to chance and to its excellent ecological location, Nikolski was chosen as one of the communities to be spared complete devastation in the early years of contact. That it continued to exist as a community is attributable, in large part, to Russian policies and practices relative to the local culture.

The Russians participated in the Aleut culture and so had an opportunity to demonstrate their ways in a context familiar to the villagers. They took Aleut wives, lived in Aleut homes, and engaged in the Aleut economy. They forcibly restricted Aleuts in some ways (e.g., only one firearm per village) which prevented the Aleuts from attaining Russian wants, practices, and dependency that might have encouraged dissatisfaction with the village situation. The Russians did not try to make the Aleuts over into Russians. Socialization of children was left in the hands of villagers. The Russians provided the Aleuts with means to further community integration without specifying how these should be used. Thus the alphabet which they taught provided a means for intracultural communication over the barriers of both time and space.

After 1820 when the Orthodox Church became active in the Aleutians, efforts toward Russianization were limited to matters of direct concern to the church. There was conscious alteration in religious matters to allow the Aleuts to assimilate to the Aleut context the Russian ways they were expected to adopt. Veniaminov's changes in church procedure to make it comprehensible and compatible to the Aleuts' ways of thinking, the provision of an Aleut alphabet, and translation of the Bible illustrate this, as does Russian toleration of Aleut innovations making the village church functional in the absence of a priest. So successful were these policies that the church was completely integrated into the community and remains today an important consolidating force. Now everyone attends; there is wide agreement on church matters and no religious factionalization. No competing church has ever been introduced. The church is the most impressive structure in the village; it is maintained and improved by all of the villagers in co-operation; and they are justly proud of it. Its Russian origin is well known, but it is considered by villagers to be part of the "Aleut" ways.

Nondisruptive, selective assimilation of the new traits was thus effectively facilitated by the Russians. Furthermore, Russian contacts decreased in intensity, with time. As a result, although hardship and conflict were prominent, and in spite of the acquisition of a good many Russian tools, techniques, and foods, as well as religion, Aleut ways were to a remarkable extent preserved. Interests and goals remained attainable within the village, and in time adjustments were made to the Russian influences.

The Americans took over jurisdiction of the Aleutians with the purchase

of Alaska in 1867. Changes affecting the Aleuts were slow to come about. The Aleuts continued for many years to hunt sea otter and, later, foxes, now for the American furriers. Their way of life did not change appreciably until after 1900, when the many American traits which characterize the present situation began to be rapidly acquired. Although the Americans did not massacre the Aleuts, their policies since the turn of the century have resulted in disintegrative trends in community life in Nikolski, more severe than any in the latter half of the Russian administration. This is apparently due to differences in the type rather than the intensity of contact.

In 1902 a general store was established at Nikolski, which offered the villagers their first chance to effectively utilize a meager cash income. It also paved the way for dependence upon outside economic sources, and loss of traditional village self-sufficiency. A more consistent cash income, at the expense of traditional activities, was made available when the government established a sealing station in the Pribilof Islands in 1911 (though others had existed there and utilized some Aleut labor since Russian times) and solicited summer and fall labor from many Aleutian villages. This took men away from the community during the season when they were most important to maintenance of the old economic patterns.

The pressures of the white men's culture increased progressively thereafter. The most significant events in this recent period of contact in Nikolski include: (1) residence of employees of American fur and trading companies in the village; (2) the establishment of a compulsory school with white teacher, 1922; (3) establishment of a sheep ranch with white manager, land rights to the whole island, and money to hire Aleut labor, in 1926; (4) village fox-fur contracts with commercial companies, resulting in an increasingly great cash income and village prosperity, in the late 1920's; (5) a sudden drop in value of fox furs in the early 1930's; (6) loss of eight village crew members in 1933 in the wreck of the "Umnak Native," a small village-owned steamship, which had facilitated trapping, trade, and outside contacts; (7) the incorporation of the "Native Village of Nikolski" in 1939, under the Alaska Native Service, in accordance with the Indian Reorganization Act; (8) the establishment at that time, by the direction of the ANS, of the village-council government; (9) setting up of the store as a community enterprise under the council; (10) a three-year wartime removal (1942-45) to Wards Lake near Ketchikan, in southeastern Alaska, where depopulation was accelerated and Nikolski villagers lived with members of three other eastern Aleutian villages, in close proximity to, and total dependence upon, the white men's culture; (11) the postwar return of villagers to Nikolski to find the village a shambles as a result of plundering by occupants of a nearby Army base; (12) slow and inadequate restitution of these losses; (13) proximity of a Coast Guard station for two years after the return to Nikolski; (14) establishment of a free government high school, Mt. Edgecumbe School, in Sitka after World War II; (15) continued outside work in the Pribilofs and in various canneries and sheep ranches in the Aleutians; (16) general postwar frustration of the wants acquired during removal; (17)

postwar increase in radios and magazines, and arrival of an extremely adamant school teacher who encouraged rejection of traditional culture and acceptance of white ways of life; (18) postwar emigration and planned emigration to high school by nearly all children after completion of the local eighth grade.

Each of these has had profound effects upon the community. The village council, for example, has been a source of conflict and stress since its inception. It was instituted by the Alaska Native Service, upon incorporation of the village, without reference to existing governmental arrangements, to facilitate administration and perhaps as an instrument of democracy. It conflicts with the long-established chieftainship as well as with basic patterns of individualism. It bypasses traditional lines of communication. It tends to put in the hands of a few the authority to make decisions which would traditionally have been made individually by all and, if agreed upon, implemented through the chief. It has been taken over by young adults well versed in the ways of whites, whose ability to lead in community affairs is not conceded by their elders nor by many of their contemporaries. Consequently it has become restricted, in most of its activity, to dealings with the outside world. There are some people, however, who take the wording of the documents of incorporation seriously, and think the council should replace the chief. Personal animosities have been direct results, and two planned departures from the village have been indirect results, of this conflict.

Money matters create conflict with the traditions of co-operation, community responsibility, and local economic independence. Money has been used since earliest contacts, but dependence upon it for livelihood is recent. Today everyone in the village depends for survival upon both a cash income and the products of the sea. There are not means available with which to achieve full reliance upon either. This situation has brought about decline in community enterprise, co-operation, and interdependence. In this respect it has decreased security within the village. According to informants, there has been a marked increase in selfishness, disregard for others, and shirking of community responsibility, accompanying the changed economy. A specific result has been that the "catch" from the community seine is no longer shared throughout the village. It is now shared only among those who participate in the seining operation. As the seine-keeper remarked, "Now that is the only way we could get them down to help."

The increasing importance of money is a basis for disagreement in many phases of village life. It has contributed to serious conflict concerning operation of the store and even of the council. The effect of money is exemplified in the church-affiliated village women's and men's organizations: the Sisterhood and Brotherhood. Both organizations require dues. The Sisterhood demands regular and prompt payment, while the Brotherhood permits unrestricted credit. Apparently as a result, the Brotherhood functions congenially, if insolvently, while the Sisterhood keeps a full treasury but is split with disension and threats of resignation by those wishing credit.

The sheep rancher and teacher have operated, as have most Americans

(such as representatives of the Alaska Commercial Company who formerly lived in the village), to usurp authority and to undermine traditional controls. The sheep rancher's power as "owner" of all of the island and as a white man with money, has contributed heavily toward loss of village self-determination. Although he is generally resented, his wishes are not controverted because the money and meat he dispenses, in return for labor, are necessary to the present village economy. His influence has broken down local systems of control so that even the chief bows to his will.

The school has been one of the greatest sources of stress in the village to date. The teacher's influence and the decreasing influence of old people have contributed to children's progressive divergence from the traditional culture toward that of the whites. Children are given much preparation for life outside, and relatively little for village life. Until thirty years ago, all of a child's training was under the careful tutelage of an elder villager, who necessarily transmitted the traditional Aleut culture to him. This culture, having been derived in situations leading to that of the present village and having been altered gradually in the village context, served to satisfy the villagers' wants and to meet all of the exigencies that might conceivably arise within the community. But when, in 1922, a white school teacher came and began to teach the children her own way of life daily for nine months a year for eight years (more or less) apiece, the socialization process was abruptly changed. School attendance was required during the period when children would traditionally have been undergoing intensive Aleut tutoring, so it replaced much of this training. It conflicted directly with much of Aleut culture. Schooling included ridicule and suppression of Aleut activities, attitudes, and values, substituting those of the teacher. It was not appropriate to the village situation. At the same time, the money economy was gaining a permanent foothold, and the need for training in traditional skills was obviated. With the end of much specific training by Aleut adults, incidental training in traditional integrative social behavior, attitudes, and values, was lost. Still, however, the children lived in Aleut homes, and were under the supervision of strictly Aleut-oriented parents. Most children had never seen the "outside," and there was no opportunity for them to leave the village. As a result, much of the old culture remained in spite of the heavy veneer of white men's ways and thoughts.

Recently the situation has been altered even further. Children still go to school, where they are taught to reject things Aleut and accept white men's ways, and to want things that the poor and isolated village cannot supply. These wants are now made urgent, not only by enthusiastic teaching, but by the facts that all have seen the outside during the wartime removal and all partake of the fruits of the outside culture as much as possible, particularly through the radio and magazines. Moreover, all are offered an opportunity (subject to the teacher's recommendation) to go out to the free government high school in Sitka. This is emphasized by examples set by successful older children of the village who have made their way to the outside world, to Alaska, and to "the States," to stay. A clinching factor is that now, with the

second generation of formally schooled children, the effects of the white man's culture have been compounded. Parents themselves have had a white teacher's instruction and have tasted the advantages of the outside, so that children live in partially "outside-oriented" households wherein parents reinforce many of the school's teachings. Parents encourage their children to enter the white man's culture, to go out to high school, and in some cases not to return to the village. The result is that youngsters want to live in Alaska or the United States; want to be doctors, radiomen, and nurses; want to live as the schoolteacher and radio have depicted American life; and want to escape the evils and inadequacies of village life, as seen by the teacher. Within the village, economic and social means are not available to achieve these wants. To do so, the children must leave. Six youngsters have emigrated to high school in the four years 1948-52. Only one plans to return, and none are expected, by their elders, to do so. Every child over ten years of age wants to live "outside" when he or she grows up.

Some of the old ways of the village have not been abandoned, but now it is largely the old people who are interested in preserving them. As late as 1948 a girl's puberty rite was given, under supervision of the old women of the village, but even this was considerably modified over the more nearly traditional one given in 1943, and it may well have been the last one that will be given (see Shade 1951). The community steam bath, camping expeditions, tea parties, and drinking sprees remain as sources of diversion and relaxation, but they are now supplemented by bingo, pool, the radio, and comic books. Patterns of social interaction retain much of their aboriginal flavor, but in matters associated with the outside many foreign patterns have been adopted. Prestige is still based upon success and possession of demonstrably good articles, but these have come to be largely the successes and possessions associated with money rather than with traditional skills. The Aleut language has been replaced by English as the means of communication among children, while all but a few of the oldest villagers speak English occasionally. All men over twenty-five years of age are literate in Aleut, but only one boy under twenty-five is being taught to be so.

Still today, as one villager said, "It would be a pretty funny fellow that didn't divide up his sea lion [and share it throughout the village]." It would also be a pretty funny fellow that didn't depend in part for his livelihood upon wages and canned food purchased at the store, and that didn't use mail-order furniture and clothes, listen to the radio, and send his children out to high school.

The Americans have thus tried to make the Aleuts into white men like themselves. They have educated the Aleut children in the ways of whites. They have rarely demonstrated their culture in any context familiar to the Aleuts. Therefore assimilation of foreign traits to the Aleut context has been replaced by projection into the foreign context.⁸ American contacts have become increasingly intense and demanding, giving the Aleuts progressively less chance for selective acceptance and gradual adjustment. Nikolski villagers

have acquired the wants of white men (higher education, high-paying jobs, commercial recreation, alien foods, expensive material possessions, etc.), but not the means to their satisfaction within the community. Traditional goals and the means to their achievement have, at the same time, been rejected and lost. The resulting dissatisfaction, interpersonal conflict, and depopulation are symptoms of community disintegration.

Examination of the factors which have contributed toward integration and disintegration in Nikolski reveals a relatively consistent demarcation between those factors which villagers associate with the white man and those which they associate with the local village. Those associated with the white man include the store, village council, American school, sheep ranch, and the money economy in its many ramifications. None of these has been assimilated to the Aleut cultural context. All have been disintegrative in that they have contributed to dependence upon outside resources, loss of local controls, and the occurrence of seriously conflicting attitudes. They have been advocated and supported by outsiders and by a clique of young, dissatisfied, "outside-oriented" villagers. Factors associated with the local village are primarily the remaining elements of pre-American culture. These include the Aleut language, church, chieftainship, steam bath, formal interpersonal relationships, household groupings, traditional modes of behavior, and the traditional economy. These have contributed to village integration through providing satisfaction with the village situation, local self-sufficiency, and agreement upon basic issues within the community. They have been consistently practised by the older and more traditional, "village-oriented" people.

There are factors which have tended to prevent disruption of the community by forming barriers to emigration rather than bonds of cohesion. These are primarily the effects of isolation. Geographic distance from the outside world has served in the past to keep villagers from leaving the community. More important today is the cultural and economic distance between Nikolski and the white man's world. The expense of living outside, unfamiliarity and inadequacy in the alien way of life, and frequently expressed self-consciousness and fear of ridicule by whites would keep most Nikolski adults from giving up the village life even should it be unsatisfying to them. Thus only four villagers voluntarily stayed outside after the wartime removal.

A low birth rate and high death rate have contributed to community instability in Nikolski. There has been a decline in population during the American contact period, continued from the more rapid one of the Russian period. The 1900 population of about 120 individuals had dropped to 72 by 1942, to 59 three years later (after the removal), and to 56 at the time of this study. Only two children were born in the five years from 1948 through 1952. It is estimated that, as a result of age distribution and venereal disease acquired during the war, only four women in the village are capable of bearing children. There is a surplus of males (34 compared to 22 females in 1952). The number of potential mates is further decreased by cultural restrictions on marriage of relatives and by decreased intervillage communication. There is a lack of de-

sire for children on the part of some. There is poor nutrition, poor health, and a relatively high death rate.

Part of the population decline is therefore attributable to "physical" factors. (Most of these, however, are ramifications of cultural changes such as the shift from a traditionally adequate livelihood to an inadequate and unreliable money economy.) These physical factors alone could bring about eventual dissolution of the village by reducing the population below the minimum necessary for its existence. This was the prewar trend. However, by itself this decline would probably take a long time, for several Aleut villages operated with less than 20 inhabitants in Russian times. Ten of twenty villages reported by Veniaminov had populations of 35 or under. In 1897 Akutan had 59, and it increased in population thereafter. In 1942 Attu had a population of 42, and Biorka had but 19. Traditionally, if villages reached a minimum critical number of inhabitants (apparently around 20) so that they could no longer exist, their members removed to other villages, there to carry on the accustomed ways of life. This occurred as a reaction to depopulation resulting from primarily physical pressures. Emigration of individuals also took place as a means of escaping an unpleasant social situation or, in the case of women, as a means of getting a husband. This emigration did not bring about depopulation, because it was balanced by immigration from other villages. The current trend in Nikolski differs in that emigration occurs without reciprocal immigration from other villages. It is bringing about population reduction rather than being a reaction thereto. The motive is now different for it is a change in way of life, rather than continuation of it in better circumstances, that is sought.

During and since the war, cultural factors have thus become most significant in the prospects for the future of the community. They have greatly accelerated depopulation, and they give promise of bringing about community disintegration far sooner than physical factors could have done.

The basic characteristic which the disintegrative factors in Nikolski have in common is that they are unfamiliar—no one recognizes them or knows what their effects will be. No community member has experienced nor been told about a shift of values to those of an alien culture, of goals to those attainable only outside of the community, or of dependence upon outside resources for livelihood. Therefore there are no means to deal with the current situation. The rapid accumulation of unprecedented factors has apparently been of such quantity and quality that adjustive techniques cannot be adapted quickly enough, in the present context, to preserve the village.

This does not mean that every unprecedented situation is disintegrative in effect, but only that it is potentially so. It has been noted earlier, for example, that the Russian invasion did not disrupt Nikolski. Many unprecedented circumstances arose then, too, but there are critical differences between that and the present situation. The previous description of this event demonstrates that the Aleuts had something to offer the Russians, so cultural interaction was reciprocal. They have nothing to offer the Americans, so it is virtually a one-way relationship. The Russians projected some of their culture into the

Aleut context; the Aleuts selectively assimilated it and were able to maintain goals, and the means to achieve them, within the community. This type of relationship was not disruptive to this village, and perhaps never is to an assimilating culture group. Today the Americans have led the Aleuts to project themselves into the American context, where their traditional culture cannot persist.

Akutan, an Aleutian village one hundred and twenty miles east of Nikolski, provides another example in which an unprecedented situation, similar to that in Nikolski today, has not had disintegrative results. There the traditional culture has been largely replaced, but the village is apparently thriving. This is partly because Akutan is closer than Nikolski to the mainland and, therefore, to a source of supply and of cash income which provide means to satisfy the new wants. The unprecedented situation has brought adjustive mechanisms with it. Other factors which have helped promote community integration in Akutan include these: the village is unincorporated and therefore is not subject to many unpredictable outside administrative controls; it has only the traditional chieftainship and no potentially conflicting council; it has legal rights to its own land and waters; it has had an enlightened schoolteacher who helped procure these rights. Traditional local controls have been maintained to a considerable extent. Projection to the new way of life has been possible within the village, and as a result the community has prospered.

In Nikolski today, effective adjustive techniques are not available, and the projection cannot be accomplished within the village. The newly acquired goals have come from the outside and are achievable only outside. Moreover, the opportunity for such achievement outside has become readily accessible to youngsters through the school. This situation seems to offer no hope for adjustment within the community. Disintegration has commenced and will certainly continue. The trend is as apparent to villagers as it is to the outside observer, but they have no solution. Those leaving seek no solution within the community; they hope to find it outside.

The specific factors bearing on integration and disintegration in Nikolski suggest the hypothesis that persistently attempted projection to an unprecedented, alien context, if it cannot be achieved by community members within their community, is disintegrative to that community. Investigation of influences contributing to the disintegration of many rural communities in our own society, as well as those operative in culture-contact situations, may well verify this generalization.

NOTES

¹ The Graduate School of the University of Oregon and the Arctic Institute of North America made possible the field work upon which this analysis is based. The research is part of the studies in the anthropology of the Aleuts being conducted by W. S. Laughlin and G. H. Marsh. The writer wishes to thank Dr. Laughlin, Dr. H. G. Barnett, and Dr. Margaret Lantis for their helpful suggestions at various stages in the preparation of this paper.

² Cf. Berreman 1953, which contains in more detail historical background, the observations and other evidence upon which this article is based, and an extensive account of contemporary community life in Nikolski.

³ For a discussion of projection and assimilation in this usage, see Barnett (1953:208-15).

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