

# Introduction



Alaska has long provided Americans in the Lower 48 states, as well as peoples around the world, with a multitude of romantic ideas and images. To many, this is a land of wide-open spaces teeming with abundant wildlife. Bears, wolves, caribou, moose, and sheep roam below a midnight sun that never sets or in the shadows of the northern lights perpetually dancing overhead.

In recent years, a spate of reality television programs that have sprung up on cable networks reinforces these views. A “Jack London” lifestyle prevails in such shows; there are few roads (and those that exist are quite treacherous), and survival for both “man and beast” is precarious and hardscrabble. Life in America’s “Last Frontier” is one of outdoorsy strength, independence, fortitude, and take-no-prisoners gutsiness not found elsewhere. Reinforced by the media coverage of former Alaskan Governor Sarah “Mama Grizzly” Palin’s 2008 vice presidential bid, such fancies about the state, its people, and its culture have become increasingly common throughout the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In short, Alaska sparks the postmodern imagination; it is one of the few places left on the planet that is seemingly “untouched” and “primitive”—a so-called frontier teeming with possibility and potential.

Moreover, of course, residing throughout this vast land are the “Es-kimos,” or at least some vestige of Native peoples who, according to popular stereotypes, ride swiftly across the tundra by dogsled, dressed in oversized parkas and skin mukluks. Very few Americans in the Lower 48 have ever interacted with actual Alaska Natives, who remain the stuff of high school English class reading assignments. Even visitors of the state are unlikely to venture out into the Native bush; rather, a more likely scenario includes a chance encounter along Two Street in Fairbanks or Fourth Avenue in Anchorage during a search for souvenir trinkets on a cruise side trip. The romantic image of the benign Native hunting seals in the Arctic with a primitive spear—the winter sun just

barely peaking over the horizon—in total peace and harmony with the natural environment and essentially frozen in time alongside the sea ice begins to fade, only to be replaced with other equally destructive images of the Native as lazy, an alcoholic, or, worse, an obsolete anachronism in the modern era.

The Disneyesque visions of Alaska and its Native peoples are all well known. In an age of rapid change spawned by globalization, Orientalist ideas and images about Alaska, especially her Native peoples, often do a disservice rather than make a true contribution to a more accurate perception of what is in fact happening in Alaska today. The purpose of this study is to contribute toward a better understanding of one tribe,<sup>1</sup> the Nets'aii Gwich'in of Arctic Village, and to correct many of the misleading beliefs now perpetuated about this land and her people.

To be sure, I do not claim to offer a complete picture of every aspect of Alaska Native life in the early twenty-first century. Rather, I seek to provide an important window into the rapidly changing world of an Alaska Native community emblematic of such indigenous communities not only in North America but indeed across the globe. I have no interest in romanticizing the past or writing about “noble savages” now passing from “tradition” to “modernity.” I strive neither to nostalgize nor to present the Gwich'in as static beings who belong on a museum shelf. Rather, I believe the following pages will reveal that theirs is a culture that continues to grow and evolve; the narrative presented here tells the story of who the Gwich'in once were, who they are now, and, most importantly, who they are becoming.

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I begin the first section by introducing the Nets'aii Gwich'in, who they are and how they came to live in Arctic Village in the early decades of the twentieth century. While their story is similar to other Alaska Native tribes that began to settle throughout the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—to be sure, such a narrative has befallen many indigenous communities through North America and indeed the globe—it is particularly filled with interesting and charismatic individuals who played significant roles in the settlement and development process. Moreover, I seek to show in this and succeeding chapters of this first section that the colonial impact on the Nets'aii Gwich'in, though certainly considerable, was not in and of itself an avenue to “cultural destruction.” Rather, only in the latter part of the twentieth century, several decades after initial European contact, did the Nets'aii Gwich'in community of Arctic Village begin to show signs

of wear and decline currently viewed as “typical” of postcolonial indigenous environments.

In chapter 2, I delve into this issue, namely the initial impact of contact with the White, non-indigenous world, in greater detail. I show that Episcopalian Christianity was pivotal in facilitating the community’s concentration and eventual settlement and that this highly aggressive aspect of colonialism has a complex history in the Arctic. The role it played in erasing indigenous, land-based spirituality and other social values is undeniable. Yet, I argue too that the Episcopal Church served well to bridge Nets’*aii* Gwich’in and “White” cultures in creative and distinctive ways. Here I rely on materials such as archival sources concerning and written by the Church’s Native and non-Native “founding fathers,” as well as data I personally gathered via participant observation while working in the village on a church reconstruction and historic preservation initiative (2002–2005). My task in this chapter is to suggest that in truth the introduction of Christianity was a unifying force in the early years of Nets’*aii* Gwich’in settlement; just as communal cohesion began to unravel in the final third of the twentieth century, so too did religious activities, behaviors, and affiliations.

I then turn in chapter 3 to the role that schools and education also play in facilitating settlement and social change within the Nets’*aii* Gwich’in community. Using data from the 1960s to the present, including data gathered from several household surveys over the past fifteen years (six in total), I address formal education as a tool of assimilation, acculturation, and, in effect, attempted “de-nativization” of the Nets’*aii* Gwich’in community. I introduce a theoretical framework at this point that in essence suggests that the narratives of “civilization” and “cleanliness” or “hygiene” may be seen as similar if not identical objectives when pursued within the context of colonization. Yet here again I show that formal education arrived late in the village environment, taking form only midcentury. Again, I seek to argue that such efforts dovetailed well with other social and economic changes then occurring both within the community and indeed through the United States at that time.

In chapter 4, I quantify and qualify how the Nets’*aii* community has evolved into its present state. The Nets’*aii* once lived largely independently in geographically dispersed camps. The imposition of the European settlement model in the early twentieth century brought on greater communal organization and with it a new, functional form of community development. And so, as the Nets’*aii* Gwich’in settled at Arctic Village over the past century, they should have also embraced the provision and use of publically planned services. These utilities

include such basic infrastructure as water and electrification, as well as health care services. But is this entirely so? Using village planning theories as my framework for analysis, I assess the degree to which the village operates today as a cohesive whole. In other words, I pose a basic but crucial question as I conclude this section: is Arctic Village truly a “village” in the Western sense of the word, or is it more like the traditional Nets’*aii* Gwich’in hunting camp comprised of a group of families, residing in homes, who, though drawn together by outside forces, no longer see themselves as a single unified community?

The second section begins with chapter 5, in which I problematize the issue of subsistence activity, practice, and behaviors in today’s changing global economy. On the one hand, the Nets’*aii* Gwich’in still practice hunting, fishing, and gathering at exceptionally high rates relative to other twenty-first century indigenous populations. On the other, these practices are in rapid decline in many though not all quarters. In this chapter, I document these changes and analyze both quantitatively and qualitatively what the role of subsistence is among the Nets’*aii* Gwich’in at present and what it might be going forward. As subsistence is the heart and soul of any Native community, this chapter, purposely located in the center of this narrative, is in fact the core of my argument, for without hunting, fishing, and gathering, many would argue, the future of the Nets’*aii* Gwich’in appears to be a bleak one. The Nets’*aii* Gwich’in are the “Caribou People,” but without the caribou, who are they and what sort of future lies ahead?

Of course, changing subsistence behaviors are related to several factors, including a fluctuating climate. I quantify and qualify these changes among the Nets’*aii* Gwich’in in chapter 6, showing that the subarctic boreal forest region provides an ideal environment through which to analyze the impact of warming upon flora, fauna, and, ultimately, those who interact with this natural setting on a daily basis. In effect, the case presented here supplies an ideal study of the issues that the Gwich’in are facing at present, as well as what is likely to come for those of us who live in the urbanized South. The Nets’*aii* Gwich’in community’s experiences provide numerous examples of what the entire global community, indigenous and non-indigenous alike, will face in an era of globalizing technologies and rising political and environmental threat, as well as ways to overcome and adapt to these challenges.

Chapter 7 picks up on the theme of “where do we go from here?” By concentrating on the youth (for the most part, those under 18 years of age) as central to the future of the Nets’*aii* Gwich’in—a thread found throughout all four chapters of the second section—I address the

ways, especially since 1970, younger generations now live in the village community. Indeed, the “vill” may occupy the same geographic location but is sociologically a very different place from only a few short decades ago. Communications and transportation technologies have irreversibly altered the face of Native bush village life. New opportunities, as well as challenges in the form of the “three S’s” (substances, sex, suicide), make village life extremely difficult for today’s youth. Here I highlight material gathered from the general literature, as well as my own interviews, household surveys, and even a survey of the youth themselves, all of which confirm that the Arctic Village of today is a new entity with issues and concerns the likes of which the early founders could never have anticipated.

This leads me to the concluding chapter, chapter 8. Here I speculate about the future of the Nets’*aii* Gwich’in community in general and of Arctic Village in particular. Villagers will often repeat the phrase, “We don’t know *where* we are anymore!” The feeling of disorientation in the new society and global economy of the twenty-first century is truly overwhelming. There is no doubt that the community is under siege from a multitude of social and economic forces: ongoing oil drilling interests in the neighboring Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) that threaten wild food resources, poverty and unemployment, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, outmigration and brain drain, and on and on. Here I turn to an analysis of social media to better understand how today, just as the Nets’*aii* Gwich’in settlement system is beginning to alter and fray, new virtual networks may sustain and support the expression of Nets’*aii* Gwich’in identity and unity well into the future.

I conclude this final chapter by suggesting that reports of the death of Native cultures like the Nets’*aii* Gwich’in of Arctic Village are premature at best. While the Nets’*aii* Gwich’in people of today differ greatly from their ancestors, likely to spend more hours each day watching television or posting on Facebook than hunting caribou or moose, one thing remains consistent: the Nets’*aii* Gwich’in remain a proud community, able and willing to adjust to change over time and to overcome adversity.

Every fall, without exception, the call “*Vadzaih!*” (Caribou!) can be heard across Arctic Village; each year, men, women, and children continue to head up mountain on their four-wheelers to camp, hunt, eat, and sleep. Some then head back and forth (a minimum of ten miles round-trip)—sometimes more than once in a day—to get supplies and to visit those villagers down below who no longer go up mountain to hunt but who support and sustain their friends and relatives, as well as anticipate their success. It is the twenty-first century in North Amer-

ica, and still the hunt goes on. Animals are harvested across the Yukon Flats, and the village freezers are slowly but surely filled. The Caribou People of the Chandalar have lived in this region for some ten thousand years and continue to do so today. We have much to learn from their example.

### **Note**

1. Alaska Natives are divided into tribes not only based on heritage (e.g., Athabascans) but also by community. In short, throughout, I will refer to the Arctic Village “tribe” and the Native Village of Venetie Tribal Government (NVVTG), which includes the Village of Venetie and Arctic Village.