

Commentary: Frameworks for Difference—North Slope Iñupiaq Women in Anchorage

A widely shared view within the academy and more broadly in Western societies is that we now live in “one world” or the “global village.” The speed and ubiquity of electronic communication is pointed to as a major force in creating cultural homogeneity in this modern era. Present and future are “modern”—a condition set in opposition to the cultural heterogeneity of a naturalized premodern or “traditional” world. This provides a framework for sorting out non-Western societies and peoples on a continuum in keeping with modern political, economic, and social organizational characteristics according to their similarities to or differences from Western standards. Such a polarizing approach is a social construction. It is sustained by a unilinear view of change which assumes that various cultural traits can be ranked in an evolutionary manner and that absorption into Western society is the measure of success.

For example, the above model rates the move from village to city as a major step toward assimilation and, hence, modernity. The expectation is that manifestations of traditional culture will be erased through the experience of living in an urban environment. My research among North Slope Iñupiaq women living in Anchorage in the 1980s and early 1990s found that this Euro-American view of assimilation is negated by their expressed desire to “live in both worlds.” This is a notably divergent framework for adjusting to modern life.

A representative group of 25 North Slope women participated in the study. Their decision to move to Anchorage some time within the preceding decade situates them in Alaska’s most modern sector. However, it would be a mistake to categorize the choices they have made in adjusting to urban life according to an assimilationist model. Even though some aspects of Iñupiaq culture are often placed in “the traditional,” choices they make to live in both worlds are carefully considered responses to contemporary conditions—not part traditional holdover and part modern. Behaviors found among them that Westerners might categorize at the backward, irrational, and traditional end of the continuum are rooted in a purposeful set of strategies that selectively incorporate aspects of Iñupiaq culture into their lives. Although my comments are particular to this Alaska Native group, they have implications for others as well.

It should be emphasized that North Slope Iñupiaq women are not part of an urban underclass. The majority have stable incomes from employment or craft production and are homeowners. As the most recent migrants from Alaskan Native communities to the city, they came in response to the opportunities that grew out of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971 and the flow of oil monies into the state. Eight of the women were employed in organizations created by North Slope governmental services or private village and regional corporations that had offices in Anchorage. Others worked in a variety of administrative support and social services or earned money in craft production. The focus of the research was on households and everyday life to illuminate issues related to gender and culture.

One rich and complex aspect of urban Iñupiaq life is sharing. It is founded on a distinctive concept of the self and social relations which is fundamental to definitions of being Iñupiat. The statement “we are a sharing people,” is a measure of what it means to be a human being in relation to others. Women are more involved in sharing or mutual aid networks in the city. Those who have children or are older are most active, with households being the center. However, a few men are included in mutual aid for child care and various repair skills (a 1986 survey for the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation reported that seventy percent of North Slope Iñupiat in the city were women). Women in professional and managerial positions are less likely to sustain active networks than those in craft, administrative support and social service occupations.

A network is too small if it has three people, since the intensity can be burdensome with so few. It is usually too large if there are a dozen. Mutual aid is based on sociability, as frequent face-to-face visiting is integral to it. Hence, it is difficult to maintain close ties with so many. Also, Iñupiat are scattered throughout the city and getting about is time-consuming. Usually those involved in a network are of approximately the same age, although elders hold a unique place in urban Native life because they are a valued source of knowledge and advice. Also, it is good to have diversity. Hence, competency and specialization are important qualities to incorporate. This includes transportation, child care, food, an occasional loan, some practical skill, and wisdom.

Networks are not established in any automatic way, nor are they unproblematic. They involve judicious decision making. Usually sharing takes place between kin or, sometimes, fictive kin who may be friends from school or the workplace. The process is very selective. For example, just being kin is not sufficient to claim a place. Inclusion in mutual aid is an achieved, not an ascribed, status. Common experiences, similar perspectives on life, and insights as to how a person handles the complexities of her life are aids in deciding who is a likely candidate for sharing. Upon joining a network there is no formal agreement. Women just begin to help each other out and the relationship is cemented over time. Networks change as people move away, or one person is eliminated for not being dependable or for taking advantage of another.

“We just do what is needed,” said one woman. However, a direct request for assistance would be improper. People are not always able to provide help. It is a serious breach of etiquette to put someone in the position of having to say

“no.” Thus, making a need known is usually done indirectly. Additionally, reciprocity is a long-term matter. Although everyone is aware that “what goes around comes around,” it is rude for someone to reciprocate immediately in order to remove their burden of indebtedness. It is the *incompleteness* and *dependency* in the relationship which sustains it.

Mutual aid is a complex and dynamic process. Anchorage Iñupiat engaged in reciprocal relations need to protect each other’s privacy from unwelcome outsiders. At the same time, they preserve a comfortable informality in sharing relationships. This latter inclusiveness denies Western conventions about households as privatized, self-sufficient domains. To a busy Euro-American, mutual support can seem inefficient. The sociability involved requires substantial blocks of time. Additionally, sharing does not offer a means of getting ahead, nor is it a way of redistributing scarce goods. In small ways it makes a material difference. Mostly it wards off the atomization of urban Western life by affirming a sense of Iñupiat-ness. Occasionally women explicitly counterpose sharing to Euro-American values encapsulated in the concept of individualism, expressed as self-interest, self-sufficiency, independence from others, and detachment from entangling obligations to community. In this sense sharing not only symbolizes what it means to be a proper Iñupiat, but also is expressed as an oppositional culture. While Iñupiat highly value responsibility and competency, they want to place these qualities within the context of their own social values.

There is an unexamined, but important, issue regarding gender and culture which merits more study. Why is it that Iñupiaq women are more likely than Iñupiaq men to have more schooling, work year-round, have steadier employment histories, and live in an urban setting? Some obvious answers come to mind, such as women’s socialization for more supportive roles in family life. This emphasis on women’s subordinate status often has been reinforced by educational and religious institutions. Such environments prepare them to accept subordinate status at work. On the other hand, socialization for masculine roles related to subsistence (a set of expectations which apply regardless of whether or not a particular man hunts) prepares males for greater independence and autonomy in hunting animals. These are not qualities considered desirable in jobs open to most Native men in Anchorage. It is hoped that more research on internal and external factors influencing this difference will be forthcoming.

Depending on others and being dependable not only are prominent characteristics of urban Iñupiat, but conjoin those living in the city with kin on the North Slope. Long phone calls home, a steady flow of visitors to Anchorage households, and regular exchanges between households in the two regions mark the significance of this link. Goods that are cheaper and more accessible in the city travel north, and subsistence foods and parkas are sent to urban households. These exchanges are carried out primarily on an intergenerational basis or with brothers and sisters as well as close cousins on the North Slope. Whaling season stirs great excitement and pride among Anchorage Iñupiat. Recollection of other whaling seasons and anticipation of this and future ones add to the level of enthusiasm. Shortly after a whale is captured, airlines are carrying maktak to relatives in city households. Cultural affirmation, rather than nutritional resource, is by far the more important aspect of subsistence foods consumed in Anchorage. Finally, it should be noted that moving to the city is not an end point in migration for Iñupiaq women. Over one-third of those in the study moved back to take jobs in their village or the regional center of Barrow during the years between 1986 and 1993.

Currently in the United States, traditional Western family values (and their implied roles) are being praised anew in public discourse to distinguish successful from failed families. Conformity to their precepts promises a return to stability and security in American society. There is a clear homogenizing intent in the politicians’ praise of traditional family values and structure—that is, the modern Western nuclear family living in a privatized, self-reliant household. These statements tell us nothing about the *quality* of family relationships. In contrast, a focus on content rather than form opens up possibilities and gives equal place to sharing and interhousehold dependency as vital components in enhancing life for Iñupiat and their families.

Findings in my Anchorage research indicate that Western views presuming that assimilation of non-Westerners is the proper outcome regarding the question of difference have little explanatory power. The success of Iñupiaq women’s adjustment to urban living resides not in rejecting one way of life for another, but in combining both worlds. These women have resisted being “melted” into the larger and dominant society through flexible, strategic choices based on heterogeneity. There is nothing natural or inevitable in beliefs or practices related to mutual aid. Sharing is not a cultural trait carried forward unchanged from a fixed past, but something that is continually forged and reconstituted in response to current needs and circumstances. One way of countering external pressures that threaten to extinguish North Slope Iñupiaq culture is found in the loose solidarity fostered by sharing. It is a modern “take” on a cultural practice with historic significance. As such, contemporary urban sharing networks are modern pathways calling upon the traditional to define and maintain Iñupiaq culture. In this sense, the modern world generates difference rather than erases it.

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