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# “They Talked of the Land with Respect”

## Interethnic Communication in the Documentation of Historical Places and Cemetery Sites

Robert M. Drozda

*If it is difficult to hear the voices of oral tradition in a classroom, where the educational system turns meaning making into lesson learning, it is perhaps even harder to hear them in the goal-directed confines of an agency. Bureaucrats may cast tradition bearers as information givers, people from whom one can get answers to predetermined questions in a recognizable form. In such a situation, tradition bearers may assert what is important to them in ways that go unacknowledged by their interlocutors.*

*In this essay, Robert Drozda discusses the communication which evolved between anthropologists and Yup'ik elders in the course of fulfilling a federal mandate to document historical places and cemetery sites. Working with Yup'ik people in their traditional lands, the federally employed researchers encountered beliefs and cultural insights that differed dramatically from their own. Distinct cultural differences and contrasting ideologies about the relationship between human beings and the landscape became apparent. Yup'ik elders characterized federal site documentation as a system of “laws which are written down and . . . have numbers,” bounding parcels of land “like floor tile.” They contrasted this with a Yup'ik's (a genuine person's) sense that land had always been used “without saying something about it.”*

*In fact, some elders had a lot to say about it, often through stories associated with places. Over time, they also demonstrated an understanding of site investigators' perspectives, while continuing to answer in ways that communicated something of their worldview. The site investigators, on their part, began to rework their approach and learned to listen in different ways to what they were being told. The inseparability of form and content made this a delicate process. (Does the question, “What does this place name*

*mean?" presuppose an English translation of the word or a story about the place?) Both Barker's and Drozda's essays force us to confront the difficulty of passing traditions on to strangers through negotiated encounters.*

Under the provisions of section 14(h)(1) of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) of 1971 (Public Law 92-203), the secretary of the interior was authorized to withdraw eligible lands as Native historical places and cemetery sites. Most Alaska Native regional corporations established under the act filed applications for the properties, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs created an office in 1978 to investigate these sites.<sup>1</sup>

Although the land entitlement under this section of the act is relatively small—less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the entire forty-million-acre land settlement (Bureau of Indian Affairs ANCSA Office n.d.)—historic and cemetery sites hold great significance for the Native people of Alaska beyond their specific acreage. As historical and cultural resources, the lands are (or should be) important to non-Native Americans as well. However, the degree and scope of their significance to the two groups are in contrast and reflect dissimilarities in cultural views and basic assumptions toward the land and its historical resources. The development and implementation of this section of the settlement act has been a complicated process. The very nature of the act, with its involvement with ethnic societies on the periphery of mainstream American culture, immediately created problems of cultural misunderstanding, including, but not limited to, difficulties of interethnic communication.

In this essay, I will discuss some of the complications encountered by federally employed, non-Native researchers of historical and cemetery sites in predominantly Yup'ik-speaking southwestern Alaska (see the map, "Native Languages of Alaska and Yukon Territory," p. x). Contrasting cultural definitions will be identified and accented with specific examples excerpted from tape transcripts and recordings made with Natives from Yup'ik villages in the Calista corporate region.<sup>2</sup>

Cooperation between site investigators and Yup'ik villagers was absolutely essential for the documentation of the historical properties applied for by Calista. Since the overwhelming majority of applications involved sites from the historic or late prehistoric periods (Pratt 1992), Native elders were crucial, not only to provide historical information about places but also to assist investigators in locating

sites. The majority of elders we employed for this purpose were monolingual Yup'ik speakers. This certainly complicated matters for researchers (none of whom were Yup'ik speakers) and required us to employ competent bilingual interpreters.

Throughout the course of the documentation project, the obstacles encountered by Native and non-Native participants served as experiential lessons to both groups. Many of these problems resulted from vast differences in language, communication styles, worldviews, and individual personalities. The lessons that were learned form the basis of this essay. In addition, I will suggest some solutions to basic interethnic communication problems based on the mutual growth and understanding that has occurred over the span of this project.

Although some of the problems and remedies discussed may seem apparent, surely others remain to be discovered. They are perhaps less conspicuous due to the complexities and multifaceted nature of language (including the bureaucratic and legal language of the act), culture, personality, and intercultural communication. These are factors that we often respond to beneath the conscious level of individual awareness. Lastly, one must understand that this essay is not a collaboration and therefore reflects a particular perspective, based on the experience of its non-Native, English-language author.

## ANCSA 14(h)(1): History and Assumptions

Before I discuss specific interethnic communication situations encountered during the documentation of these historical places and cemetery sites, it is necessary to give a brief background into the history and assumptions which led to this section of the settlement act. These initial assumptions form a framework or context for later communication difficulties and misunderstandings. This background represents only a general overview and is by no means complete.

In the process of negotiating Alaska Native land claims, many groups met in order to reach a compromise settlement. The primary parties involved were representatives from the federal government and Alaska Native groups. Commonly, when people from divergent cultural backgrounds come together to reach a compromise, the view of the dominant culture takes precedence over any others (Morrow and Hensel 1992). This appears to have been the case with ANCSA, a system of law grounded in the cultural assumptions of the dominant American society, which has now been superimposed onto the Yupiit

and other Alaska Natives, whose history and current cultural viability rest on distinctly different ethical rules and concepts of law.

Although Yup'ik and other Alaska Native leaders were actively involved in the development of the settlement act and in fact pushed for it, many Yup'ik villagers remain critical of this participation. They cite the lack of consideration of their law as their reason and a basic concern. Paul John, a Yup'ik elder from Toksook Bay, addressed this issue during a 1984 interview (translated from Yup'ik):

The Kass'aqs [white people] seem to feel that what they call "the law," the law that they made, is a powerful aspect. The Kass'aqs used to think that we don't have laws. They didn't seem to try to understand our culture first; they seemed to just say, "Here's your land." Our ancestors had laws. It's not that they didn't have any laws. The Kass'aqs' laws are written down and they usually have numbers relating to specific laws. The sites shown on the map (the ones the surveyors are doing now) are not the only ones; there are many rivers with names, many lakes with names, and many hills with names. Everything seems to bear some name that was passed on down, generation to generation, from our ancestors. And then when they tell us about things we should follow, like if we were to go out to the wilderness or to a place that has a name, they'd tell us that the place is a place for so and so, like for hunting, fishing, or trapping. In telling us so, they are telling us about their law. They do have laws.

The Natives as a group seemed to treat the land as one allotment. They used to at one time use the land without saying something about it. Where anyone went to be, he never heard or was to hear someone speaking of a land that belongs to him alone. The whole land to the north or wherever has no measurement. A person went wherever he wished to go, however far he can go; even if he went as far as a bullet can reach, he would have no limitations. That is how they seem to use the land.

It happens that who and what they [Bureau of Indian Affairs surveyors] work for did not tell us more [instruct us more], although they should have. But their workers were all or mostly Kass'aqs; they hardly had Native workers. Because of that, they couldn't tell us more, communications were poor. If they had Yup'ik workers, we'd have a better understanding. I'm speaking of what I myself know and understand. I've found that sometimes,

when it's too late, I begin to understand the situation. I also come up with solutions when it's too late, it seems. (John 1984)

Mr. John added this telling narrative at the end of a taped interview conducted to gather information about places specifically applied for as historical or cemetery sites. The interviewer asked John if he had any general comments he would like to make on a topic of his choice. John's decision to speak about basic differences between Yup'ik and Western law demonstrates a frustrated acceptance of the dominant foreign set of laws and an understanding of both systems. Also, by the very act of speaking out on this issue, he was exercising an important aspect of traditional Yup'ik law.<sup>3</sup>

Those of us who were raised in Western society may find it difficult to understand the depth of the difference between oral and written law. We must realize that Alaska Native languages have been written down for only a relatively short period of time, yet rules and laws have always been observed and respected by the Yupiit. What the Yupiit are saying, it seems, is that Western laws cannot be trusted because written laws can and often do change, whereas oral law, as presented by the Yupiit, contains the history of the people and reflects the integrity of the orator. One's word does not change. When the law can only cross a person's lips by way of a written document, a basic trust in fellow humans is sacrificed.

In his narrative, John repeatedly makes reference to the oral—to names, to telling, to hearing and speaking—as a means of codifying Yup'ik law. Yupiit used the land "without saying something about it," as compared to the white people's laws, which "are written down and . . . have numbers." Words—especially in writing—have been used to change relationships with the land as well as between inhabitants of the land (see Morrow 1990).

Several other points made by John are worth summarizing: First, the Yupiit had laws which were superseded by the law of the federal government. Second, the Yup'ik laws and principles of land use contained a different concept of ownership and no arbitrary idea of boundary. In fact, according to traditional Yup'ik ethics, discussing the land or boundaries (in the Western sense) could even be viewed as disrespectful and potentially harmful. Third, non-Natives did not try to understand the Yup'ik ways ("communications were poor"). Fourth, the Yupiit regret that they did not understand all of the implications of the settlement act until it was too late.

## Rules and Regulations

The development of section 14(h)(1) definitions and rules and regulations (43CFR2653.5) closely followed those established under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA). Under this act, the establishment of a National Register of Historic Places allowed for the evaluation of sites according to a set of criteria which addressed issues of significance (Tainter and Lucas 1983). Although the eligibility criteria in this case were modified to address Alaska Native rather than national significance (Utley 1980), the determinants are heavily couched in Western concepts. *Historical site* is defined as

a distinguishable tract of land or area upon which occurred a significant Native historical event, which is importantly associated with Native historical or cultural events or persons, or which was subject to sustained historical Native activity, but sustained Native historical activity shall not include hunting, fishing, berry-picking, wood gathering, or reindeer husbandry. (43CFR2653.0-5)

Two key terms in this definition which immediately jump out are *significant* and *importantly associated*. The cultural relativity and ambiguity of these terms becomes apparent when one considers Yup'ik testimony such as that from Mr. John. He includes rivers, lakes, hills, and named places as "importantly associated" sites, worthy of documentation and preservation. The law does not allow for these. John is by no means alone in this feeling. There are, in fact, thousands of named places which serve not only as physical markers in the landscape but also comprise an inseparable aspect of a larger, cohesive, interrelated matrix of Yup'ik law, land, culture, and livelihood.

Likewise, for historical places and cemetery sites, as defined by the settlement act, significance criteria are culturally ambiguous and have generally been interpreted in Western terms. Native historical significance is described as present

in places that possess integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association, and:

- (1) That are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the history of Alaskan Indians, Eskimos or Aleuts, or
- (2) That are associated with the lives of persons significant in the past of Alaskan Indians, Eskimos or Aleuts, or

(3) That possess outstanding and demonstrably enduring symbolic value in the traditions and cultural beliefs and practices of Alaskan Indians, Eskimos or Aleuts, or

(4) That embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or

(5) That have yielded, or are demonstrably likely to yield information important in prehistory or history. (43CFR2653.5[d])

The Yupiit traditionally had their own rules and regulations regarding land use (Fienup-Riordan 1988: 20). In a 1988 interview printed in the Bethel newspaper *Tundra Drums*, Yup'ik educator Cecilia Martz described some of the basic differences between Native and Western rules and regulations:

Through thousands of years of living here, native people developed all these rules and regulations to maintain that harmony. You could see this in how we view the land. Animals are important, plants are important, old gravesites, old hunting grounds. All these things are important and are imbued with spiritual quality. In the Kass'aq [white] culture . . . there are little compartments, and you have time for each of them, but it's not whole, holistic. These native people, even when they're fishing, there is spirituality involved. When you're eating. When you're doing anything, there's a spiritual connection. [The compartmentalizing aspect of white culture] was uncomfortable because it made things less meaningful and less attached to each other. (1988: 25)

A great rift exists between the Native perspective and the federal rules for determining significance. In the traditional Yup'ik order, nurturing harmony is essential in keeping places significant. That is, places are significant in relation to other places and to the individual and collective Yup'ik psyche and worldview. In the Western way of thinking, places are reduced to separate things which "possess" qualities that can be observed and rated in terms of significance. This Western land tenet serves to sever Yup'ik harmonizing ties, thus removing places from their greater context of reflection and association.

The idea of "feeling and association" contained in the Code of Federal Regulations fails to take into account the varied ways in



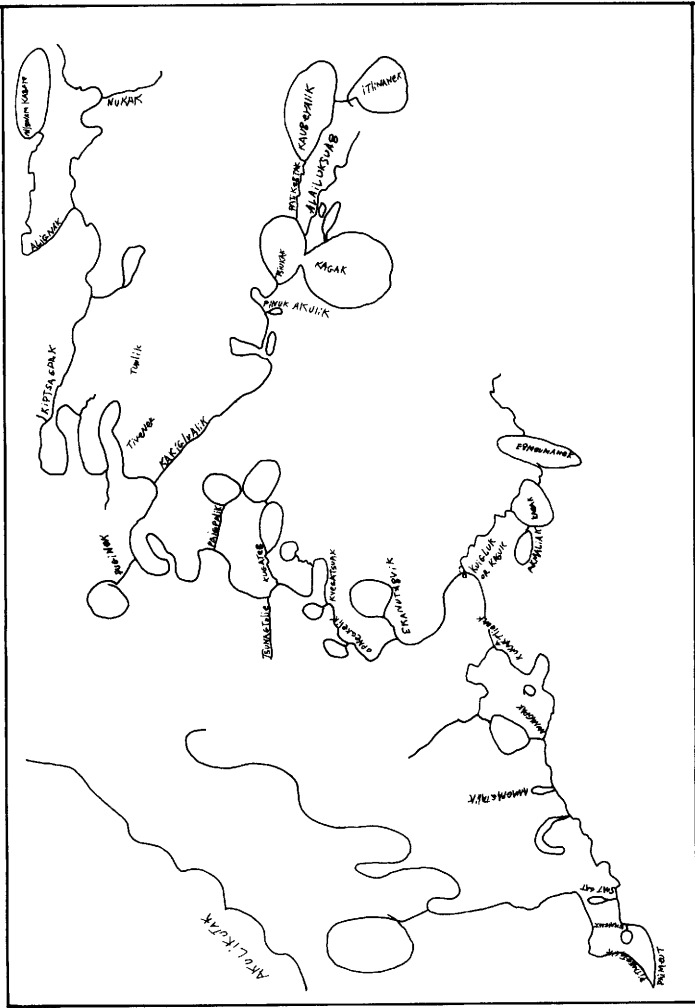
which other cultures, in this case the Alaska Natives, view their environment. The Yup'ik assertion is that all lands may be considered historically significant, that they do not contain qualities in and of themselves but are reflections of personal feelings and associations. This view leads to their frustration with the compartmentalization inherent in the Western mechanistic, reductionist, scientific paradigm. Yup'ik elder Joshua Phillip of Tuluksak compared the two views (translated from Yup'ik):

When I went to the Lower 48, I saw that the land there was like floor tile. We have nothing like that here in Alaska. Since the time of our ancestors there have been names for rivers, ponds, lakes, hills and trees. In my area, I know the names of the mountains and waters. By naming everything those who came before us marked the land . . . it would be beneficial to us if we could implant markers for our rivers, hills and trees. . . . The markers will also show the people from outside that this land has always been ours. (Alexie and Morris 1985: 7)

Here Mr. Phillip demonstrates again the importance of indigenous place names. Names are not applied to places arbitrarily. The very fact that a place is named often establishes or reveals its significance. Furthermore, Yup'ik place names are enduring—passed down from generation to generation. Here, too, the contrast between the verbal and the written is emphasized. In order to legitimize Yup'ik land claims to non-Yup'ik, Phillip suggests physical markers to augment the well-known mental markers (names) which have long been in place.

### Subsistence: A Significant Activity?

Rules and regulations for determining historical place and cemetery site significance do not consider subsistence, in and of itself, to be a valid activity for determining site eligibility. Yet it is difficult for one to imagine what could be more important, as it is impossible to separate Alaska Native historical places and cemetery sites from hunting and gathering ones. The location of one was and is completely dependent upon the other. Here again, the Western concept seems to isolate and categorize living areas as somehow distinct from livelihood, whereas to the Yup'ik, such a division is entirely illogical.



Sketch map of the Elaaiq River drainage, a tributary of the Kuskokwim River, drawn from memory by Joshua Phillip in 1982. It includes names of historical villages and campsites written in an old Yup'ik orthography. Mr. Phillip provided this map to assist in locating historical places and cemetery sites. It covers roughly four hundred square miles. USGS maps of the same area record seven names; six are incorrect. Mr. Phillip recorded thirty-three place names and numerous hydrological features not shown on official maps. During a more in depth survey in 1988 elders recorded over one hundred place names in the same area. North is to the left of the map.

Oral-history interviews conducted specifically to gain information and understanding about historical use of sites are replete with indirect references which illustrate the significance of place to sustenance. Indeed, as village elders have become more familiar with Western concepts of division and separation, their testimonies begin to address the problem directly, again combining understanding of the opposing view with their frustration with basic Kass'aq assumptions. Joshua Phillip provided the following information about the significance of the historical place named Qemirrluar (translated from Yup'ik):

Those guys can also tell about the uses of that area, Qemirrluar, since they have been using it during the fall and spring. They are brothers from the village of Akiacuaq [Akiachak]; they are the last ones to have built a house there. They have even wintered there. They also know the streams in the surrounding area that have fish, and also in the spring they hunt in the area. They had it as their hunting area just like one would do in the [other] hunting areas; that is how they hunted in these fall camping areas. They'd hunt in the whole area surrounding a place. They didn't just go to one place; they'd hunt in the whole area, and even though they'd encounter other people, they never said anything; they'd just choose any area of land and hunt in the area. They'd have it as their harvesting area. That is how those ancestors were; they'd hunt in the whole area surrounding a settlement. And they never said that it belonged to someone else elsewhere, and they never said that it had a boundary; there were no boundaries, no lines; they just used the whole area surrounding them as a harvesting area, as hunting area, and there were no lines whatsoever! That is how Qemirrluar was used. And that is the *meaning* behind Qemirrluar [emphasis added]. (Phillip 1988)

When Mr. Phillip tells the "meaning behind Qemirrluar," it is like a story—a history in itself. The meaning does not rest in the literal translation of the Yup'ik name but rather in the knowledge and memory of events that people have about their ancestors, who have used the same area for hundreds of years or longer. Notwithstanding the fact that Qemirrluar and other places can be specifically delineated as sites, their meaning extends beyond any precise boundary to include all lands necessary to support the population.

Although researchers contend that the Yupiit of southwestern

Alaska did indeed have "boundaries" (Fienup-Riordan 1983, 1984; Pratt 1984)—that is, specific areas which individuals or groups traditionally identified as theirs—here I believe Phillip is speaking of boundaries in the Western sense, where (to the Yupiit) culturally meaningless and insignificant lines and boxes ("like floor tile") are marked out around pieces of land and transferred to paper. In a parallel to the Yup'ik attitude toward written laws, here the authenticity of the land is detached from the landscape and conveyed to paper, where it can be further divided and legally manipulated.

Along with the delineation of boundaries comes the concept of land ownership, and with this the Western notion of trespass, which is foreign to the basic Yup'ik ethic of sharing the land and its resources. Once again, in the Yup'ik cosmology, everything is connected. More than once when I attempted through questioning to determine probable boundaries for sites, comments such as "the whole river is a historical site!" were evoked from Natives. Some sense of inherent right to land use probably did exist among Yupiit; however, it was ownership of a different sort, part of an unspoken agreement which Phillip describes as using the land without saying anything about it.

## Site Investigations

Based on the rules and regulations contained in the Code of Federal Regulations, teams of federally employed researchers (generally archaeologists and anthropologists) were responsible for investigating sites applied for by Alaska Native regional corporations. Following the investigators' completion of individual site reports, Bureau of Indian Affairs claims examiners evaluated the research findings and made site eligibility determinations. Claims examiners were "never archaeologists, historians or the like" (Pratt and Slaughter 1989); thus, the determination of significant Native historical places was left to individuals far removed both from site investigation and Yup'ik views about the land.

Researchers conducted site investigations in the Calista region each year from 1981 through 1991. More than 80 percent were concentrated in the Yukon-Kuskokwim area. Investigations typically involved locating sites, identifying surface features (structural remains, artifacts, graves), describing and mapping cultural features, determining the extent of sites, and surveying boundaries. Archaeologists

sometimes performed limited subsurface testing, in which case organic samples may have been prepared for analysis.

In order to locate sites and supplement knowledge gained from physical investigations, researchers necessarily relied on the cultural, geographical, and historical knowledge of Yup'ik elders. As a result, approximately twelve hundred oral-history tape recordings were made with over four hundred Calista region elders. The recordings comprise a detailed record which treats many diverse aspects of Yup'ik history and culture, including subsistence resources and activities, land use, technology, traditional arts, social organization, religious and ceremonial life, language, and culture change.

## Oral-History Recording

The remainder of this essay concentrates on basic interethnic exchanges between site investigators and Yup'ik elders in the documentation of specific sites applied for by the Calista Corporation. Most of these exchanges were made through an interpreter. Adaptations were made as each group (non-Native site investigators, Yup'ik elders, and interpreters) increased its understanding of the others' communication patterns. This process advanced Bureau of Indian Affairs field methodologies and interviewing techniques because researchers needed to respond to a variety of problems relating specifically to differences in communication styles, languages, concepts of land use, ideas of land ownership, and worldviews.

In order to put this process in its proper perspective, one must first consider that no project of this type or scope had ever been undertaken by the federal government. Therefore, virtually no amount of expertise or training could have adequately prepared researchers for the realities of the field. Arguably, anthropological or archaeological training or "book knowledge" could even have acted as a hindrance, especially since very little contemporary work existed on culturally appropriate methods for communicating with Yupiit.

Certainly, training in sociolinguistics and cross-cultural studies would have been beneficial by making researchers more aware of cultural differences. However, sources of information for improving interethnic communication between Alaska Natives and non-Natives were largely unknown.

Another complication worth mentioning involves the antagonistic and distrustful relationship between the two organizations which initially shared site investigation responsibilities: the Bureau of Indian Affairs ANCSA Office and a former division of the National Park Service known as the Anthropology and Historic Preservation/Cooperative Park Studies Unit (AHP/CPSU). The term *shared* is used here in its loosest sense, since the relationship between the two organizations was adversarial from the beginning. They "rarely worked together to fulfill their respective obligations on [the] project" (Pratt and Slaughter 1989), to the extent that field researchers often received conflicting information regarding the scope of their duties.<sup>4</sup>

The important point is that the conflicts at project management levels between the National Park Service AHP/CPSU and the Bureau of Indian Affairs ANCSA Office often translated to a lack of cooperation and confusion about the roles and responsibilities of members of field crews. This in turn resulted in, among other things, low morale among field researchers, a lack of consistency in fieldwork, an inability to develop a reasonable strategy for entering villages, and a lack of organization when conducting oral-history interviews. After the Bureau of Indian Affairs gained full control of the project in 1983, problems associated with logistics and lack of focus substantially lessened. This marked a turning point when field researchers and supervisors were able to concentrate on the task at hand, redefine their research objectives, and work toward improving field methodologies.

In spite of the transition, tensions remained between expectations set by project management at the Bureau of Indian Affairs and realities in the field experienced by researchers.<sup>5</sup> Fortunately, by this time veteran researchers could fall back on several seasons of practical field experience to supplement their own professional ethics. They realized that it was up to those directly involved in fieldwork to learn the most efficient methods for completing their tasks. Much of this learning was to take place through trial and error.

The realities of fieldwork involving Native villagers increased researchers' knowledge and led to alterations in information-gathering techniques. However, Bureau of Indian Affairs project management was frequently slow in responding to the needs of both Natives and researchers. This ongoing tension between management's constraints and fieldworkers' needs continued to affect the interaction between researchers and villagers. The researcher was in the awkward

position of trying to function within unrealistic but powerful bureaucratic restrictions while at the same time striving to understand and adjust to the reality of Yup'ik daily life and communicate with people from a vastly different culture.

Through time, experience, and numerous personnel changes, the ethnographic process improved at the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Much of this improvement can be seen by analyzing their oral-history collection. Probably the most extreme example of how not to do things involves an interview which was conducted at a historical site during the first season of field investigations in the Calista region. The tape recording registers, in addition to a Yup'ik elder and an interpreter, no less than six non-Native interviewers, including representatives from three federal agencies and a helicopter pilot, all of whom are asking the elder questions (Akelerea 1981). As might be expected, the recording contains only bits and pieces of useful information, interspersed with interviewers vying for the floor (or in this case, tundra).

Here priority was clearly not given to proper consideration for the interviewee and his potential to provide pertinent information about the site. It is doubtful that any of the questioners intended to offend, but rather disrespectful behavior resulted from both their lack of understanding and lack of control. In any case, the situation was grounded in a ridiculous field policy which required a member of each agency (the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the National Park Service) to be present during an interview.<sup>6</sup> In retrospect, this mauling of the interviewee seems inexcusable; however, it is representative of situations that arose due to the mutual distrust which existed between managements at the two agencies.

Still, mistakes and misunderstandings cannot be blamed wholly on management. Individual researchers were inexperienced and often naive. Even after the project was taken over by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, a common mistake was to have two or more researchers interviewing one elder. This may have resulted from the insecurity of being a conspicuous minority in any Yup'ik village. In addition, at both AHP/CPSU and the ANCSA office, there seemed to be an attitude among some researchers (primarily trained in archaeology) that the collection of oral history was everyone's right and "the fun part of the job" (Kenneth L. Pratt, conversation with the author). It meant "visiting with the Natives" and perhaps reflected a belief that oral history should not be taken seriously since the information could not be verified or relied upon for accuracy. Around this time in the early 1980s, Arctic anthropologist Ernest S. Burch observed,

Most of my colleagues still do not believe what Natives have to say about their own histories. "Narrative history," "oral history," "memory culture"—these phrases commonly are used as pejoratives by representatives of the social science disciplines in Alaska. Archaeologists refuse to believe anything that is not manifested in stone tools or middens. Historians will not believe anything that was not recorded on paper. And cultural anthropologists will not believe anything that they have not seen with their own eyes. Some anthropologists have actually boasted to me that they do not believe what Alaska Native historians have told them. They are blinded by a combination of cultural arrogance, personal bias and the limitations of their professional specialties. (1981: 16–17)

Surely this bias and skepticism existed among some project investigators. Further, some also assumed interviewing Native elders did not require any special skills beyond those of normal conversation.

Despite researchers' inexperience in communicating with Yupiit and poor interview techniques, some very high-quality information emerged from interviews in the early years of the project. These instances occurred, however, as a result of the cooperation and understanding between the individuals involved and had little to do with project management. The other side of this, of course, is that all the experience and training in the world cannot prevent a bad interview. However, learning some basic communication rules with the other culture cut down the chances.

In addition to demonstrating cultural insensitivity, this fortunately isolated, worst-case example of six interviewers brings up several problems which are compounded by having too many people involved in an interview:

(1) There is no real way for the interviewer to develop rapport with the elder or interpreter. In more recent years, the general policy has been to assign one interviewer to each elder and ideally, to each village as well. When the communication is direct and personal, an interview becomes less formal and the interviewer, interviewee, and interpreter can become accustomed to one another (see Scollon and Scollon 1980).

(2) The desire for information (or perhaps entertainment) overlooks the proper way to request and obtain it in the other culture. A serious problem for field researchers is that direct questioning is considered disrespectful in Yup'ik society, especially toward elders. The following excerpt from a 1988 interview records the words



of a translator who, anticipating a problem, explains the Yup'ik questioning ethic to the Bureau of Indian Affairs anthropologist:

In their time, we weren't allowed to ask our parents or we weren't allowed to ask our elders. That's how they were. They [didn't] bother to ask them. Even to this day, I cannot ask him [the interviewee] what existed. Once in a great while I might if I get real curious. But a general practice for the male members [is] not to ask anybody.<sup>7</sup> If they want to let you know, they'll tell you. 'Cause some of the things we do are rather awkward, entirely different from your way of doing things. But it is [an] accepted way of life; it's acceptable in our way. It may not be acceptable in other societies. (Andrew 1988)

This practice of not questioning is basic to the traditional Yup'ik method of informal instruction, which is characterized by watching, listening, paying attention, and learning from mistakes. Interestingly, it was predominantly through this experiential method (however unconsciously it may have operated) that field researchers managed to obtain oral histories without offending people.<sup>8</sup>

(3) Researchers' complete unfamiliarity with the Yup'ik language created a problem, particularly when interpreters were difficult to find, as when summer fieldwork conflicted with fishing or berry picking. This led to many problems. For instance, interviewers often relied on phonetic English spellings of Yup'ik place names written by previous researchers or on official government topographic maps. Invariably, attempts by non-Natives to pronounce names were either met with amusement or more often simply added another layer to the confusion.

During later years of field research in the Calista region, Bureau of Indian Affairs investigators spent a great deal more time lining up translators who could work consistently, demonstrated personal interest in their history, and had training in the current standardized Yup'ik writing system. Some researchers also enrolled in Yup'ik language classes.

In 1986, the Alaska Native Language Center (ANLC) at the University of Alaska Fairbanks was contracted to provide professional translation and transcription of oral-history tapes. Previously, researchers had essentially relied on direct oral translations, which could vary widely, depending on circumstances and the skill of the interpreter. ANLC involvement in the project allowed researchers to

focus on conducting more interviews entirely in the Yup'ik language. The most positive benefit of this approach is that an elder's narrative can continue uninterrupted without breaks to accommodate English translation.

In some cases, especially when rapport had been established between researcher, interpreter, and elder, questions were translated prior to the start of the interview. In effect, the interview was really conducted by the interpreter, who would write down translated responses as they were given by the elder. This method afforded the researcher the opportunity to relax a bit, listen closely to the rhythms and nuances of the Native language, and concentrate on making sure the equipment was functioning properly. This approach, however, requires a very skilled interpreter/translator and a commitment by the researcher to devote time to developing a sound working relationship.

## Communication Strategies

Many of the interethnic differences that outside researchers need to be aware of when working with Yupiit, especially elders, relate to basic rules of courtesy. Some of them have been learned by project researchers and may prove beneficial to others in their interactions with Yupiit and perhaps other Native Americans. Although these differences can be itemized individually, they all interrelate in a variety of ways. Many were reemphasized to the author by staff members (especially Sophie Barnes and Gerald Domnick) of the Yupik Language Center, Kuskokwim College, in Bethel during the spring of 1988.<sup>9</sup>

(1) What may appear to non-Natives as "wandering" narrative is an integral part of Yup'ik conversational style. Especially with elders, one should let their train of thought continue so as not to lose anything. Sometimes an interviewer may become confused and think the question is not being answered. Be patient and do not interrupt.

(2) Generally questions are not answered directly in Yup'ik; likewise, researchers should try not to ask direct questions. Yup'ik elders Noel Polty of Pilot Station and Ben Fitka of Marshall (translating) provide an example:

Noel [in Yup'ik]: They say that regarding this tradition of asking favors indirectly, people were reluctant to say things, things such as, "Please give me a bit of sugar." They weren't able to make the

direct request. When they wanted things, they'd ask for favors indirectly.

Ben [in Yup'ik]: Another Yup'ik way of asking for things.

Noel [in Yup'ik]: Yes, it was another way that Yupiit used for asking for things.

Ben [English translation to Bureau of Indian Affairs interviewer]: Okay, like they can't pronounce, they can't say to people when they have potlatch [a traditional gathering], "Give me sugar," like, you know, for instance, even maybe fish or something. They can't ask for it by name from the person, so they have to call on other names so that person whom they asked for will supply it. That's their custom among the old time people. (Polty 1982)

(3) Self-reference should be avoided. One should refrain from putting another person in the position of referring to himself or herself directly, as this violates cultural rules of modesty.

(4) Definitive statements are generally not made about the future. For example, when one is going out hunting, he may state, "I am going out to have a look around." In this instance, a strong definitive statement would be arrogant and likely cause the hunter to suffer some misfortune. Lott Egoak of Akiak illustrates (translated from Yup'ik):

[A man was killed by a brown bear.] They told that man not to go by himself! He said, "Oh, it's okay, I have a gun"; but still he was killed because he was saying that he was ready to defend himself! (1988)

(5) When planning or making appointments, an answer of "maybe" can indicate a positive intention, close to a definite "yes" in English. Yes is a sign of arrogance, as if mortals have control over their destiny. Maybe realistically allows for unforeseen circumstances to alter plans.

(6) One should respect pauses in speech and not interject prematurely:

One big thing a lot of people don't know is the length of the pause. The pause that you have in between is one of the big causes of miscommunication. Kass'aqs have a shorter pause than native people. Native people are taught at a young age that you're not supposed to rush in and answer whatever you're asked, or whatever you're

talked to about. You're supposed to sit there and listen and think about it before you answer. So they develop a longer pause than Kass'aqs do. It's a little thing, but it causes a lot of problems. (Martz 1988: 25)

(7) One should accept silences, which are an integral part of Yup'ik communication. Often it is more effective to sit and "do nothing," to relax and allow time for people to get to know you. It takes more time initially but will pay off later as people become comfortable with you. In time, you will be rewarded with more complete information. Generally Yupiit get to know strangers by watching, whereas Westerners do it by talking.

(8) The concept of time is especially vital to understand. Different concepts of time are a root cause of many communication problems between non-Natives and Yupiit. It is important for non-Natives to relax the time constraints that they may carry with them from their usual daily lives in more urban areas.

(9) Direct eye contact indicates attentiveness in Westerners; to the Yupiit, it may be seen as disrespectful or challenging. This is likely to be truer with elders than with younger people, who are more accustomed to interaction with non-Natives.

(10) To the Yupiit the power of the word, gaze, and thoughts can make things happen.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, thoughtful action is necessary in realizing and maintaining the harmony of the system. Respectful thought and behavior is essential not only toward other humans and animals but also toward the land. George Moses of Akiachak states (translated from Yup'ik):

You know when you're going to use someone's belongings you have to ask first. That is how it is with the land. Let us not drag our minds but use our minds in respect for the land. Don't be empty-headed (1988).

## Concluding Remarks

For all of us, specific places evoke images, thoughts, and feelings which become part of our sense of being. One place can hold many meanings for many individuals. Historical-place and cemetery-site delineation in terms of boundaries and acreage fail to capture the rich Yup'ik essence of the places and simply reflect Western concepts of

land ownership. Through the living memories expressed in actions, words, and songs, places become vibrant, and some essence of that deeper meaning can be shared by those who choose to listen.

Despite the difficulties surrounding section 14(h)(1) of the settlement act and its implementation, the historic and cemetery sites project has had many merits. Chief among them is the vast oral-history collection, which, among other things, is a fairly comprehensive record of the interethnic communication at the heart of this massive federal project, errors and all. The value of this collection to the Native people of Alaska will surely increase with time. Several of the elders quoted in this essay have passed away. Those of us who remain have much to gain from the memories of their lives, the examples they set, and the words they left behind.

Finally, I would not have been able to write this essay if I had not also been guilty of the ignorance and naïveté I discuss in it. Rather than find fault and blame others, I choose to accept my own actions and experience, judge only myself, and be thankful for the patient (and impatient) teachers and lessons that have helped me along the way.

I will close with a long excerpt from a letter written by Marie Meade, a teacher, artist, and friend who has worked as an interpreter, translator, and cultural consultant for both the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Alaska Native Language Center on Yup'ik oral history for ANCSA 14(h)(1) since 1988. The letter was originally addressed to project lead archaeologist Dale Slaughter and submitted as an editorial to the *Tundra Drums* following field investigations in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta area in 1988. It illustrates the value of pursuing this important preservation work in the face of large and small obstacles, some of which have been discussed in this article. Meade expresses feelings and values that those of us who have worked on the project, as members of another culture, cannot completely understand or share. Yet she adds a dimension which extends across cultures and contrasts to the starkness of mere physical description. Perhaps such experiences and values, as expressed by Meade, truly reflect the deeper meaning inherent in Native historical places and cemetery sites and emphasize the importance of oral documentation.

Throughout the summer I accompanied your staff to several Kuskokwim villages on occasion. We met with elders in groups and on an individual basis studying maps and marking sites and identifying place names for many, many lakes and rivers,

landmarks and sacred places. . . . It gave me an insight and more appreciation for my elders' knowledge and wisdom as I listened to them talk about the land and water. The land that sustained their lives both physically and spiritually. It was refreshing and enlightening for me to become aware and to be provided a reminder of the real connection they have with the land and water as they remembered their past experiences. The spirit was still there and alive. They talked of the land and water with much respect as though they were referring to another human being. We also took some elders flying in the helicopter in locating sites that were identified on the map. I especially will not forget the thrill and joy of my uncle Nickolai Berlin when we took him to his birthplace. It was wonderful to watch as he spoke of his first years of life on that land. I sensed that spark as he traveled back in time and remembered. I will not forget the beautiful words of gratification he expressed as we departed the land.

The time I had with the elders listening to their life experiences and listening to the stories and legends that relate to the land we studied was valuable teaching for me. Sometimes it was overbearing when I think of all the information entering into my head. But the tape recorder was there, fortunately. As they told their stories, they shared with eagerness and willingness. I sensed their love, compassion and longing to pass on their valuable lessons, teachings, stories and songs they learned from their elders. I felt their pain in losing the connection they have with many of the old ways they once knew and lived. I also was very grateful for the opportunity to be there and for them to pass on their knowledge to me. (Meade 1988)

## Notes

1. Thirteen regional corporations were created as a result of the passage of ANCSA. One of these corporations, known as the Thirteenth Corporation, represents Alaska Natives residing outside of the state. This corporation was not eligible to make site selections. Of the remaining twelve corporations, only Arctic Slope Regional Corporation chose not to make any selections. See the map on p. 78.
2. The Calista region encompasses over fifty-six thousand square miles in southwestern Alaska. The majority of the region is made up of the

large coastal floodplain delta created by the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers. Nelson and Nunivak islands in the nearby offshore waters of the delta are included. Bethel, a town with a resident population in 1990 of about 4,700 (of which 3,000 or 64 percent are reported to be Yupiit), is the governmental and commercial center of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. The reported population in 1990 for the entire Calista region is 19,447, of which 16,775 or 86.3 percent are Natives (Calista Corporation 1991).

3. In her essay, "The Yupiit Nation: Eskimo Law and Order," anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan rebukes the commonly reported belief (which Paul John also refers to) that Eskimo peoples traditionally had no formal laws or system of governance. Fienup-Riordan was repeatedly informed by Yup'ik elders that they did have laws, and the most important means of conveying these laws was through speech. She states that "what governed the group must be continually restated." Elders who were especially outspoken about the rules for living were highly regarded as leaders. The written record (on Yup'ik governance) compiled by Fienup-Riordan and presented to Yup'ik elders was criticized by them because it "did not contain enough information on the aspect of Yup'ik governance that they considered most important—its emphasis on speaking out" (1990: 96).
4. This is a complex topic with a convoluted history. The law clearly stated that the National Park Service was to act as a consultant to the Bureau of Indian Affairs on each site investigated. However, exactly what this involvement entailed was open to question. Differences in interpretation of the rules and regulations by the two agencies created an aura of distrust which carried over into the field and affected fieldwork. For more details on this professional relationship, its development, and the eventual withdrawal from the project by AHP/CPSU, consult Pratt and Slaughter (1989) and Pratt (1992).
5. Pratt (1992) makes the point that the Bureau of Indian Affairs ANCSA management viewed the project as "simply one part of a massive land transfer process (that is, a real estate exercise)" (76). With this conviction, they did not seem particularly concerned with the fact that documentation of sites involved sensitive issues within Native villages as well as complicated interethnic communication which warranted special consideration.
6. In this case, the third agency was the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which has management responsibilities for federal lands in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta.
7. This is true for women as well.
8. Due to the circumstances of project research, Yup'ik elders appeared to be understanding and tolerant of non-Natives' continual questioning. Once, after working closely with a young interpreter who had written Yup'ik translations of my questions in preparation for an interview, I

suggested that he might be able to conduct it without me. He assured me that it would not be proper. This man was very interested in the history and traditional tales told by the elders, and he stated that although he was not allowed to ask the questions, it was acceptable for him to translate. He also said that he was grateful that we were there to ask the questions. Despite outside influences such as television and schools, which are changing the ways in which information is transmitted among Yup'ik elders and youth, the interpreter's respect for the elder compelled him to observe the questioning ethic. Later, when I was reviewing transcripts, I saw that my presence allowed him to ask questions by repeatedly prefacing them with phrases like "this one here would like to know" and "now he is curious about. . . ."

9. Further examples of some of these same points are found in "Recommendations for Improved Interethnic Communication" in *Interethnic Communication* (Scollon and Scollon 1980: 43-45).
10. A more in-depth analysis relating specifically to indirect language, self-reference, and the power of words among Yupitit is presented in Morrow (1990).

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