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CULTURAL DIFFERENCES¹

SUMMARY

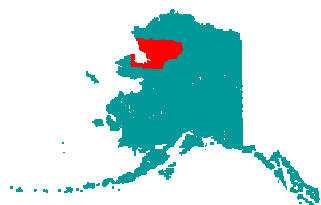
An examination of cultural influences and how they impact the incidence of alcohol abuse among the Inupiat peoples of Alaska.

ARTICLE

The region of Northwest Arctic Alaska is one of the oldest in terms of inhabitants of indigenous peoples in North America. Anthropological records show some areas in Northwest Arctic Alaska as being inhabited 600 years or more. The modern exploration of Northwest Arctic Alaska, starting in the early 1700's, began with the white or European race from Russia. To understand what has happened to the Inupiat peoples of this region, we will examine the introduction and history of alcohol in Alaska, and the role it has played in defining major disorders in the indigenous peoples of this region.

Alaska Geography

The State of Alaska encompasses 570,373.6 square miles of land.² It is 1,400 miles long and 2,700 miles wide, with over 47,000 miles of coastline. The state is divided into 16 Boroughs, which are legal forms of government equivalent to counties in other states. Of the 16 Boroughs, it is the Northwest Arctic Borough upon which this material will focus.



The Northwest Arctic Borough (pictured here, in red) has a landmass of 35,898 square miles, and a population of 7,654. This single Borough is larger than the entire State of Maine (30,862 square miles), yet has less than 1% of Maine's 1,286,670 total population.

The residents of the Borough live in 12 villages. These villages trace back to pre-historic occupation among the Inupiat Eskimos; however, most were "founded" by early European exploration in the early nineteenth and twentieth century. The villages within the Northwest Arctic Borough along with their Inupiat name, when "founded" and population levels³ are as follows:

¹ This copyrighted material may be copied in whole or in part, provided that the material used is properly referenced, and that the following citation is used in full: Dakai, S.H. (2002). Cultural Differences. *Journal of Addictive Disorders*. Retrieved from <http://www.breining.edu>

² State of Alaska Department of Labor, fact sheets, 2002.

³ Alaska Department of Community and Economic Development, Census 2000.

Village	Inupiat name	Date “founded”	Population
Ambler	Inisaapaat	1881	309
Buckland	Kaniq	pre-historic occupation	406
Deering	Ipnaitchiaq	1901	136
Kiana	Katykaa	1909	388
Kivilina	Kivalinaiq	1847	377
Kotzebue	Qitiqtag-ruk	1402	3,082
Kobuk	Laugvik	1899	109
Noatak	Nuataaq	1880	428
Noorvik	Nuurkik	1900	634
Point Hope	Tikig-aq	2,500 years old	757
Selawik	Sulivik	1840	772
Shungnak	Nuurviuraq	1899	256

With this population base, the average is 4.69 people per square mile within the Northwest Arctic Borough boundaries.

Climate and Seasonal Changes

Northwest Arctic Alaska experiences extreme temperature changes, varying from -117°F degrees below zero to over 100°F degrees above zero. This region has the largest desert in Alaska. Average temperatures in winter range from -35°F to -65°F degrees; from 40°F to 78°F degrees in spring and summer; and fall averages 20°F to 40°F degree temperatures.

Starting with the summer solstice (longest day of the year) the sun begins to trace an arc over the southern horizon, and the peoples of Northwest Alaska begin losing an average of eight minutes of daylight per day. This loss continues until the Northwest Region of Alaska plunges into darkness. The wild fluctuation of daylight – 23 hours of *sunlight* at summer solstice (around June 22) contrasted with 22 hours of *darkness* at winter solstice (around December 22) – can have dramatic affects upon the human brain.

Humans have biological rhythms that correspond to the amount of light that reaches the brain. Scientists say a lack of daylight such as that experienced in Alaska affects the production of the hormone melatonin, which has been labeled the “hormone of darkness” because it is generally secreted at night. Research shows that a surplus supply of melatonin, can affect a person in several ways. Symptoms can include irritability, a desire to sleep longer, a craving for carbohydrates, and weight gain. Other symptoms include an increase in motor vehicle accidents, fights at home, increased use of alcohol and cocaine.

Inupiat: Yesterday and Today

Prior to first contact by the non-indigenous explorers, the Inupiat (which means “real people” in the Inupiaq language) were divided into four main units:⁴ Bering Straits people, Kotzebue Sound people, Interior North Alaska people, and North Alaska Coast people. These regional groupings were based on patterns of social interaction between groups that arose out of proximity, inter-marriage, and kinships.

For transportation, the coastal people used the umiak, a large open skin boat that was approximately 20 feet in length, and covered with the skins of six to eight bearded seals, which

⁴ Alaska History of Chemical Dependency A Cultural Perspective, Alaska Division of Alcohol, 1998.

were stitched together and then stretched over a birch frame. The umiaks were used for whale and walrus hunting, and for travel and trading voyages. For land travel, the traditional dog sled or snowshoes were used during the winter months. Today's Inupiat uses modern boats made of fiberglass and metal, with outboard motors, along with snow machines in winter.

The main foods for the Inupiat 600 years ago were seal, bowhead whale, caribou, and fish. Many of today's Inupiat still utilize these traditional foods; however, western style foods greatly supplement the Inupiat diet.

Men and women's clothing was and is designed for use in the severe weather. This clothing consisted of inner and outer pullover tops, pants, socks, and boots. The outer top is called a parka or kuspak. Tops and pants are made of caribou skin with the fur facing inward on the inner garments and outward on the outer garments. Today, gortex, down wear, Sorrel and rubber boots have taken the place of these time-honored clothes.

Houses in the Inupiat area were generally dome-shaped and covered with sod. They had an underground tunnel entrance constructed below the level of the living area within the house itself. This passage served as a cold trap insuring that cold air did not enter the living area. In most homes, a seal oil lamp using a moss wick was used for light and warmth. Most of today's Inupiat, despite the geographical isolation, live in modern style dwellings, with electricity and running water. However, even as we have moved into the 21st Century, there are still many homes that use the "honey bucket" system for the removal of human waste.⁵

Prior to first contact by Europeans, trade was an important aspect of Inupiat life. It brought interior and coastal peoples together for the exchange of products. Seal oil and muktuk (whale blubber) were prized by the interior people who provided caribou and other fur skins in exchange for these delicacies. In today's world, many of the villages have designated hunters that will provide subsistence foods for those unable to secure them for themselves.

The isolation of the Inupiat made them one of the last groups of Alaska Natives to encounter Europeans and Americans. Several voyages of exploration made incidental contact in the early nineteenth century, but it was not until the Yankee whalers following the bowhead whales through the Bering Straits in the 1850's that the era of sustained and substantial interaction with whites began for the Inupiat.

History of Alcohol in Alaska

The history of Western Development has been heavily influenced by the availability and use of alcohol.⁶ The Puritans set sail for the New World with 14 tons of water, 42 tons of beer, and 10,000 gallons of wine. The gradual movement south along the eastern United States coast and into West Indies was motivated to some degree by a search for better beverage alcohol "production" environments. From historic documents connected with the landing of the Mayflower at Plymouth Rock, the motivation for exploration was largely due to the need to find fresh water and grasses in which the Pilgrims could brew ale, because the supplies of alcoholic beverages were becoming depleted.

⁵ Environmental Report to Kotzebue City Council, 2001, Maniilaq Association Environmental Compliance Division. A "honey bucket" is literally a hand-carried bucket that is used to transport waste.

⁶ Matthew Felix, 1988 Director of Alaska Office of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse.

The relationship between alcohol and the development of Alaska, actually influenced Alaskan History.⁷ The trafficking and importance of alcoholic beverages especially influenced the establishment of trade, systems of government, and the relationships with the Native People.

The history of alcohol in Alaska can be traced from the earliest arrival of sailors from foreign lands in 1741. The first people to introduce alcohol to the indigenous natives of Alaska were the Russians who sailed to Alaska from Siberia. From Russian reports and ship manifests, all indications are that Alaska Natives did not use alcohol as a valued beverage before the Russians arrived.

The Russians used alcohol as trade goods for the valuable native Alaska animal furs. Additionally, alcohol was routinely provided in excessive amounts to native leaders during trade and treaty negotiations. In the absence of Russian traders with their alcohol and an already dependent inclination, some native tribes began to make a concoction called hoochinoo.⁸

Putting some starch fermentable material such as dried fruit, berries, flour, or sourdough starter into a large container with yeast and a sufficient amount of sugar and letting it ferment makes Hoochinoo. After fermenting, the material is brought to a boil, with the vapor being condensed through tubing of some kind. It is thought that this process was developed by indigenous people of Alaska, because neither historians nor researchers are able to give credit to the Russian traders or other white traders for the development of the hoochinoo still process.

In 1867 the Territory of Alaska was under the jurisdiction of the United States War Department.⁹ The prohibition of bringing alcohol into Alaska was in effect at that time, yet it was generally ignored by the Army. Many attempts to control, limit, or remove alcohol from Alaska continue even up to the present time. In 1986 the Alaska Legislature amended the alcohol beverage laws to allow communities to prohibit possession, importation, and use by local option elections. In 1995, Barrow, Alaska became the largest city in Alaska to ban the possession of alcoholic beverages.

Of the 12 villages that make up the Northwest Arctic Borough, 11 villages have enacted “dry” laws. In these villages it is illegal to possess, import, or use alcohol based beverages. Kotzebue is the only community that allows for the personal use of alcohol-based beverages for its residents. Several attempts by community leaders –the elders council – to ban the complete possession, importation, and use of alcohol based beverages have failed at the polls, despite the large number of alcohol related deaths, injuries, and mental health disorders. With the “dry” ban in effect in the other 11 villages, importation, possession, and use of alcohol continue on a daily basis. Just as the issues that surrounded Prohibition in the late 1920’s in degree of “bootlegging,” that occurred in the lower 48 states, still continues in these villages today. Prices of bootlegged alcohol can range, depending on availability and quantity, to a low of \$75.00 per fifth to a high of \$250.00 per fifth.

⁷ Alaska Hooch, 1988, History of Alcohol in Early Alaska, Thayne Anderson.

⁸ Alaska Hooch, 1988, History of Alcohol in Early Alaska, Thayne Anderson.

⁹ Alaska Department of Revenue, 2002.

Current Alcohol and Drug Use in Alaska

Alcohol is Alaska's problem substance of choice.¹⁰ Alaska is among the states with the nation's most severe rates of alcohol problems. Alaska experiences the fifth most severe rate of alcohol problems in the nation, based on death, arrest, and treatment data. Alaska holds the ranking of first in deaths with an explicit mention of alcohol, and thirteenth for deaths due to alcoholic cirrhosis. It can be documented that 9.7% of all Alaska adults are having a lifetime alcohol dependency, with another 4.1% identified as alcohol abusers. Alcohol dependency and abuse rates are found to be twice as high among men as among women, and lifetime dependency is estimated 50% higher among Alaska Natives than among whites.

In the arena of controlled drugs, the marijuana problem is most pronounced. It is estimated that 4.2% of Alaska residents can be classified as dependent and 1.0% abusers. Alaska Native dependency levels are double that of whites (1.9% vs. 1.0%).

Wellness of the Northwest Arctic Borough

On May 23, 2002, the first ever Wellness Conference was held in Kotzebue, Alaska. Participants from all 12 villages were invited to attend this conference to begin planning on how to "get well" again. Retired Army National Guard General and village Elder, John Schaeffer spoke these words:¹¹

"All of the 12 nations are more than 1,000 years old. America is 200-250 years old...how long was our culture in existence? The population of the 12 nations was no different than today...today our Native population is the same as it was 150 years ago. The difference is that today we are not the same. Back then we were pretty healthy, we took care of ourselves; we were in charge of our own destiny.

"Our number one crime here is assault, hurting people. Over 95% of our people who come through the regional jail do so under the influence of alcohol and or other drugs. The number two crime is DUI, and there is only one paved road in the entire region. The number three crime – and this will break your hearts – is the sexual abuse of minors. The number fourth highest crime in the Region is sexual assaults on adults. We are not in charge of our own destiny we have lost control of our culture, identity, and our lives."

At this point it should be noted that other factors have contributed to loss of destiny, culture, and identity of the Inupiat peoples in Northwest Alaska. Along with the alcohol, the Russians and other explorers brought disease with them that the Native Tribes had no defense against (an example being the great smallpox epidemic of 1838). This continued even up into the early 1900's with the great flu epidemic that plagued all of America, and in the 1930's tuberculosis was responsible for many more deaths of Native Alaskans.

After disease, the next eliminator of identity was the Religious movement starting in the 1890's. Cultural ways of interacting with the land, spiritual beliefs, tribal dances, all were discouraged, and in some instances outright banned.¹²

¹⁰ Recent Findings Regarding Substance Abuse in Alaska, Division of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, 1999.

¹¹ Proceedings from 1st Wellness Conference, Northwest Arctic Region, 2002.

¹² Letter of Apology to Peoples of the Northwest Arctic Region, Friends/Quaker Church.

With the notable exception of alcohol, the single greatest affect on a culture began three generations past, with the involvement of the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs (“BIA”) Boarding schools. Inupiat children were uprooted from their villages and homes and sent hundreds of miles away to a new climate, new foods, and new peoples to interact with. These Inupiat children were “taught” to be civilized and speak English. In interviews with Elders about BIA Boarding Schools, these comments were offered: “If I got caught speaking my language, I would get tape placed across my mouth and made to sit in the corner where everyone could look at me.”¹³ “One time I got mad at somebody and yelled at them in Inupiaq and a teacher heard me, she gathered all the kids around and gave me a whipping, then I had to go inside and sit in the corner for three hours.”¹⁴

To get a better perspective about the feelings of the people in this region, several questions were posed to a number of individuals residing in this region.¹⁵ The questions posed, and the various responses, are as follows:

Question:

“What does it feel like to be a Native...today in the Northwest Arctic Borough?”

Responses:

WOMEN

These responses generally resulted in the sense that they “felt insecure and inadequate” and “living in two worlds” due to the following factors:

- Loss of Language
- Loss of domestic and cultural skills
- Given little respect and taken for granted as mother or a wife
- We are abused emotionally and physically
- We feel shame when our family or children get into trouble
- We feel our culture should have priority over western influences
- We feel too over-worked and over-whelmed with
- Responsibility, we become the disciplinarian to set and enforce the rules at home
- Expectations are sometimes too high, we feel blamed when things go wrong with our family
- People in our villages look to us women first for strength, when they should first look to the men
- Roles are reversed from women being home to men
- Feels like burden falls on us to make change
- Too much expectation

MEN

- Powerless in today’s world
- Afraid to express our true feelings
- Confusion in two worlds

YOUTH

- Confused
- Depressed from being confused and from not getting the necessary help that we need

¹³ Mary Schaeffer, village Elder.

¹⁴ Raymond Coppock, village Elder.

¹⁵ This does not purport to be a scientific study, but does represent the responses of a number of individuals for the purpose of identifying a sense of the people in the region.

- ❑ Mixed emotions, neglected by parents, community, happy because we are young, sad with so many choices, lack of involvement

Question:

“How do you know your village is suffering?”

Responses:

WOMEN

- ❑ Loss of cultural dignity
- ❑ Too much teenage pregnancy
- ❑ Lack of domestic and parenting skills
- ❑ Lack of respect for Elders
- ❑ Lack of discipline
- ❑ Lack of employment skills
- ❑ Unorganized government
- ❑ Lack of local jobs
- ❑ Lack of leadership
- ❑ Parenting denial
- ❑ Conflict
- ❑ Pride, not admitting when wrong
- ❑ Jealousy (jobs)
- ❑ Racism
- ❑ Envy
- ❑ Children out of control
- ❑ Lack of self-discipline
- ❑ Put down, looked down on

MEN

- ❑ Confusion due to rapid change
- ❑ Low self-esteem
- ❑ Loss of homes
- ❑ Too many family members going to jail
- ❑ Grandparents raising children
- ❑ Change in lifestyle/attitude
- ❑ Lack of Inupiaq knowledge, language, and culture
- ❑ Elder abuse
- ❑ Domestic violence
- ❑ Anger
- ❑ Denial
- ❑ Gossip
- ❑ Loss of Spirituality
- ❑ Stress
- ❑ Disease Suicide
- ❑ Alcohol and drugs
- ❑ Fetal Alcohol Syndrome
- ❑ Bootlegging
- ❑ People dying
- ❑ Teen pregnancy

YOUTH

- Depression
- Boredom
- Confused
- Shame
- Scared
- Suicide
- Isolation
- Ignored
- Don't have a voice at home
- Want to be free
- Gossip
- Lack of culture
- Ignoring signs of suicide
- Crime
- Bringing alcohol into our villages
- Sexual abuse
- Neglect of children
- No time for Elders

Question:

Finally, of these indicators, each group was then ask to identify the top three problems each felt needed the most and immediate attention. (There is no order or ranking in the method of listing the three problems.)

Responses:

WOMEN

- Individual self-commitment
- Divided community, no unity
- Suicide

MEN

- Alcohol and drugs
- Loss of language and culture
- Suicide

YOUTH

- Alcohol and drugs
- Domestic violence/sexual abuse
- Suicide

Suicide in Alaska

There is cause for alarm, when Alaska Natives have the highest rate of suicide of any group in the United States, (5 times higher than the national average).¹⁶ Alcohol is involved in 60% of all suicides in Alaska, and alcohol is involved in 72% of suicides by Alaska males, ages 15-24.

¹⁶ Scott Prinz, Program Manager, Alaska Mental Health Trust and Consortium, 1998.

Suicide in the Northwest Arctic Borough

In pre-contact Alaska, the Inupiaq people saw suicide as a part of their fundamental cultural values, which were also shared by Inuit people from Siberia to Greenland. These motives for suicide included, physical and emotional suffering, inability to contribute to family unit, and to avoid anticipated revenge for a crime.

In referring back to the three groups who identified the three most pressing problems that needed immediate attention, suicide was found in all three groups. Suicide is identified as a major life issue in the Inupiat way of life.

In this region, people between the ages of 15-19 attempt suicide more than other age groups.¹⁷ In this age group, more females than males attempt suicide. Just over half of the suicide attempts are alcohol related. In a study completed in 2000, there were 173 attempts of suicide that were reported in the 12 villages over a 10 year time period.

In suicide completions, it is the 15-19 age group at the highest category again. Information gathered suggests that alcohol is the main factor in completed suicides. In the same study noted above, in this same time period for the 12 villages, there were 43 suicide completions. Suicide in the Northwest Arctic Borough is the leading cause of all injury deaths (35%). While other types of injuries have decreased since 1990, suicide has remained the same.

Conclusion

Alcohol, along with self-destruction, is at epidemic proportions in the Northwest Arctic Borough. There has been no discussion in these pages concerning FAS/FAE, or the high rate of HIV/AIDS among the Native villages in this region, all of which are contributing factors to the death knell of these people. The loss of values, cultural activities, and language is quickly eliminating the Inupiat people and absorbing them into Western culture.

Steps are being taken to try and slow this process down through the placement of an alcohol/substance abuse counselor in each village, identified prevention practices, and a greater role in family wellness camps. However, without solid Native leadership and a total commitment by each village the Inupiat people that we know today will cease to exist in the next 50 years.

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

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- ❑ State of Alaska Department of Labor, fact sheets, 2002
 - ❑ Alaska Department of Community and Economic Development, Census 2000
 - ❑ Alaska History of Chemical Dependency A Cultural Perspective, Alaska Division of Alcohol, 1998
 - ❑ Environmental Report to Kotzebue City Council, 2001, Maniilaq Association Environmental Compliance Division
 - ❑ Matthew Felix, 1988 Director of Alaska Office of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse
 - ❑ Alaska Hooch, 1988, History of Alcohol in Early Alaska, Thayne Anderson
 - ❑ Alaska Hooch, 1988, History of Alcohol in Early Alaska, Thayne Anderson
 - ❑ Alaska Department of Revenue, 2002
 - ❑ Recent Findings Regarding Substance Abuse in Alaska, Division of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, 1999
 - ❑ Proceedings from 1st Wellness Conference, Northwest Arctic Region, 2002

¹⁷ Lisa Wexler, Project Hope/Suicide Prevention Coordinator, Maniilaq Association, 2002.

- Letter of Apology to Peoples of the Northwest Arctic Region, Friends/Quaker Church
- Mary Schaeffer, village Elder
- Raymond Coppock, village Elder
- Scott Prinz, Program Manager, Alaska Mental Health Trust and Consortium, 1998
- Lisa Wexler, Project Hope/Suicide Prevention Coordinator, Maniilaq Association, 2002

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND NOTICES

This article was prepared by Steven H. Dakai, a graduate student and candidate for the Master of Arts in Addictive Disorders degree from Breining Institute. Mr. Dakai resides in and provides addiction counseling services for the residents of Kotzebue, Alaska, the largest village within the Northwest Arctic Borough.

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