

REVIEW

ALEUT IDENTITIES: TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN AN INDIGENOUS FISHERY

*By Katherine L. Reedy-Maschner, 2010. McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal
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Katherine L. Reedy-Maschner provides a detailed, thought-provoking ethnography of contemporary Aleut fishing communities in *Aleut Identities: Tradition and Modernity in an Indigenous Fishery*. In this volume she argues against essentialist understandings of ethnic and economic indigeneity. She eloquently describes how the globalized “indigenous commercial economies” of Aleutian communities defy traditional representations of cultural purity and the image of isolated subsistence-based communities in Alaska. Reedy-Maschner seeks to remedy the oversight, misrepresentation, and dehumanization that she asserts typify descriptions of Aleuts in ethnography, policy processes, and popular representations. Reedy-Maschner succeeds in delivering a powerful account of historical and contemporary processes of, and challenges to, livelihood and identity-making for Aleut peoples.

As the title suggests, the chapters in *Aleut Identities* are unified by explorations of identity, both as a theoretical construct and a lived reality. Reedy-Maschner begins by outlining the ways in which she investigates internal and external processes of identity formation and representation for the modern Aleut, twenty-first century fishermen. While acknowledging current theoretical trends viewing identity as inherently unstable, fractured, multiple, and constantly in the process of becoming, Reedy-Maschner argues rather for the fixity of Aleut cultural categories, as these have come to be definitive of identity in this context. She argues that for Aleut peoples, identity is inherently tied to both place and to fishing livelihoods. Within

a commercial fishing milieu comes social categories such as permit owner, boat captain, crew member, fisherman's wife, and fisherman's daughter. Reedy-Maschner argues that these categories define status structures and relationships extending far beyond fishing into the very fabric of contemporary Aleut communities and culture, to the very essence of being Aleut.

Reedy-Maschner situates her investigation of present-day Aleut communities in a historical context, tracing Aleut culture and identity from prehistory through the Russian and American periods, filling in an important gap in the historiography of the Aleutians and the Alaska Peninsula. As we move into the contemporary period, Reedy-Maschner argues that deep commercial fishing engagements in Aleut communities are not evidence of modernity enveloping and homogenizing the practices of indigenous Aleuts, but rather demonstrate the adaptive continuation of Aleut dependence on the resources of the sea for livelihood, identity, and meaning. The richness of her twenty months of ethnographic research is evident in her “limited entry ethnography.” Making use of the language of a restricted-access salmon fishing policy implemented in the 1970s that had dramatic social impacts on small fishing communities throughout Alaska, Reedy-Maschner describes multiple “limited entry systems” that have come to define Aleut lifeways. By linking salmon permits with demographic transitions, social and gender roles, status, subsistence, kinship and family dynamics, and broad processes of disenfranchisement,

Reedy-Maschner's account is singular in its detailed portrayal of the lived realities of fisheries privatization. The book is therefore essential reading for anyone interested in understanding the social, cultural, and economic impacts of restricting and commodifying the right to fish.

Consistent with her desire to explore the local contextual framings of identity, Reedy-Maschner spends an entire chapter investigating a hypothesis popular with her informants—less people fishing because of restricted access and economic downturns means less healthy villages. She draws upon her ethnographic data and crime statistics to conclude that plentiful and poor fishing seasons lead to different kinds of social problems. The restriction on access to fishing, however, has produced a directional shift. Less people able to pursue high-status roles, such as fishing captain, leads many, youth especially, into destructive practices such as alcoholism and violence.

Reedy-Maschner achieves her goal of disrupting commonly perceived dichotomies of indigenous/western, isolated/global, subsistence/commercial in her account of Aleut indigenous commercial economies. One of the most insightful contributions is her analysis of the many ways in which Aleut fishing families meld commercial and subsistence engagements. The importance of participation in the commercial realm is vital not just for subsistence but for cultural status, family-building, and well-being. Reedy-Maschner responds directly to conflicts of representation, both in ethnographic accounts and policy processes, of the Aleut as compared to the Yupiit or the Inupiat, groups often seen to be more “authentically indigenous” (p. 245). From her perspective, commercial fisheries do not detract from the indigeneity of the Aleut—they define it. In this thick description, she provides a welcome contribution to the anthropology of fishing, an activity that ethnographers often bifurcate into large-scale commercial or small-scale artisanal categories. Aleut fishermen and their families seamlessly interweave these realms and view them as inseparable.

Reedy-Maschner masterfully depicts Aleut communities as “entangled” subsistence and commercial cultures and economies and embedded locally and globally. The ethnic and cultural multiplicity and dynamism of individual and collective Aleut identities is also evident in the text, but often we see representations of “the Aleut” as a unified whole. As mentioned above, Reedy-Maschner discusses her deliberate choice of this framing. She provides a good rationale for why constructing unified Aleut identities for political purposes is appropriate and necessary. For

example, we come to understand that Aleut peoples want collective representation at the decision-making table for fisheries policies that have systematically excluded them. But for understanding the social and cultural complexities of contemporary Aleut individuals and communities, we are left at times with unsatisfying generalizations.

Aleut peoples can appear in the text not as individuals, complex in their backgrounds, motivations, and behaviors, but unidimensional in their Aleut identity. Reedy-Maschner leaves the question of Aleut futures open. For example, she writes “for a boy to be a man, he must fish and strive to have a boat, crew, stable marriage, and large family” (p. 241), yet this ideal is available to fewer and fewer Aleut men. How are young Aleuts who are disconnected from the mainstay cultural and economic practices of commercial fishing formulating new understandings of what it is to be Aleut, Alaska Native, and indigenous peoples in globalized world?

At the conclusion of the text, we have gained a sense of the complexity, multiplicity, and contradictions evident in contemporary Aleut lives. By fixing Aleut identity in both place and livelihood, we are left to contemplate another question: how are Aleut futures going to be forged if place and livelihood connections do not remain intact? As Reedy-Maschner tells us in Chapter 7, we may be witnessing the last generation of fishermen in King Cove. If identity is fixed in place and lifestyle, what of those Aleut “adrift?” What becomes of Aleut identities as lived human-environment relationships transform into symbolic ties? Perhaps it is the possibility of the Aleut people losing their maritime homeland and lifeways that prompts Reedy-Maschner's rigid approach to place and identity. For her, that displacement and disconnection are simply not acceptable outcomes. The central place of commercial fishing for collective and individual Aleut identity remains fixed in this account. Reedy-Maschner has given a solid account of why it is; however, she has also given us evidence to question whether this will continue to be the case.

Aleut Identities is thoughtful and engaging, reflexive and gendered, authoritative and straightforward. It leaves us better equipped to contemplate these questions of identity and cultural continuity in context. Reedy-Maschner has brought us to the Aleutian communities, expertly interweaving narrative with explorations of theory and diverse presentations of data, producing an exemplary Alaska ethnography. We come away with a real understanding of what it is to sit in the Harbor House in King Cove sipping

coffee and talking fish politics. We hear in her stories and see in her kinship diagrams, sharing networks, and distribution of catch charts the intimate fabric of commercial fishing in Aleut identities. As she concludes, “part of identity is to have a future” (p. 247) and it is with the hope of renewal, seasonally and generationally, that she concludes her story. *Aleut Identities* enables us to more fully grasp the emergent futures developing within Aleut fishing communities, fisheries policy processes, Alaska and fisheries anthropology, and indigenous political struggles within the state and beyond.

