



Bashful No Longer: An Alaskan Eskimo Ethnohistory, 1778–1988 (The Civilization of the American Indian Series)

Wendell H. Oswalt

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Traditionally the Kuskokwim Eskimos of southwestern Alaska valued restraint, modesty, and deference—traits for which they adopted the English word *bashful*. However, since their first encounter with Western culture two hundred years have passed, and people are no longer willing to defer to Westerners.

Bashful No Longer, based on Russian-American Company records, writings of traders, missionaries, and explorers, newspaper accounts, and fieldwork conducted by the author, documents and describes culture change among the Kuskokwim Eskimos as first the Russians and then the Americans settled among them.

Fur traders and missionaries were the exclusive agents of change during the years of early historical contact. The authoritarian and assertive means by which these invaders typically achieved their goals diminished the vitality of Kuskokwim Eskimo culture.

In the first half of the twentieth century Eskimo life was increasingly disrupted and Americanized, first by the arrival of prospectors, then by the devastating effects of influenza and measles epidemics, the ravages of tuberculosis, and the social-welfare programs introduced at the end of World War II.

In the 1960s, however, the Kuskokwim people reassessed their position and gradually became far more assertive. In the early 1980s they organized the Native Alaskan sovereignty movement, not only to reaffirm their identity as Eskimos but in the hope of regaining their earlier autonomy. The future of this cultural renaissance is difficult to predict, but one thing is certain: when intercultural conflict reached a critical level in their lives, the Kuskokwim Eskimos, in a far reaching collective response, became bashful no longer.

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