

A Personal Struggle to Preserve Sugpiaq Language and Culture in the 21st Century

Sally Ash, Native Village of Nanwalek¹, Alaska

Quyanakcak gguani illart'tsluci. Ggui atqa Kukuu. Aataka Sargi Kvasnikoff. Aanaqa Kukuuneq, Juanita Melshiemer. Piurt'llrranga Nawalegmi. Nangluta nupuggllalrrakut Sugt'stun tuami 1958mi, sungama puskit skuulurpet. Awa sugt'stun nart'slluki nupugnermek uciiniini. Awa ggui cali skuuluryarngama, litkualrranga miliikansat'stun. Tagua, nangluta kayaggniulrakut.

Thank you very much for having me here with you. My name is Sally. My father's name is Sargus Kvasnikoff. My mother's, Juanita Melshiemer. I grew up in Nanwalek, and we all spoke in Nanwalek, Sugt'stun, and then in nineteen-fifty-eight [1958], the year I was born, the BIA school was built. Now, Sugt'stun couldn't be spoken anymore by the students, and when I went to school, I had to learn to speak English. That was hard for a lot of us...for all of us anyway.

My personal struggles began with my Sugt'stun when I entered school at 5 years old. The first few years were really tough on everyone. We got hit with rulers, pinched, had our hair or ears pulled. I learned quickly to try to do my best to learn to read and speak English. I was afraid of being sent out like in a snow storm to hold the flagpole for speaking sugt'stun like my cousin did. I didn't want to get into that kind of a situation. When the school got better teachers we buried our pain, and went on to being good students.

In high school, we had to be sent away because we had no high school in Nanwalek. It was stressful being in a new town where being Native was made fun of. My peers there in the new school would make fun of us in school and pretend to talk, or you know to be like us.

I worked after school in a crab cannery and I was always teased by this certain man. He used to tease me a lot about being Native, and once on my way home, he circled around on his bike...bicycle, circling me, and asking me to have sex with him, saying that, "We all know how you Native girls are. You are easy,". I had to be tough and not cry ever. It made me feel tougher, but this incident was not unique to me. It happened to all of us, native women and men...boys, and the ones that were sent out to school to have higher education.

Then, years later, in 1989, the Exxon Valdez spilled oil into our waters. It created a lot of chaos, anger and grief and worry in the village of Nanwalek. My niece Emilie Swening got interviewed and she cried in her interview because all she could think of was the damage to our sea-life and the environment. She was also very worried about our children losing our way of life because of the damage done to by the oil. I, myself, started to sink into fear, hopelessness, sadness, and even, myself, began to worry what chemicals could be in the first fish of the year being served at my Mother's table. We were a bit doubtful about eating it, but our Mom assured us it was okay, and that

¹ Nanwalek is a Chugach Native community on the lower Kenai Peninsula in Alaska. Nanwalek was a party to the Eyak vs. Gutierrez lawsuit against the US Federal government (see Miraglia, this volume), and was also one of the communities in the path of the oil spilled by the M/V Exxon Valdez in 1989.

God sent this food to us. God did send us the fish, but man has polluted it with the chemicals. Besides the oil spill, there have been studies showing of mercury and PCB's found in the seafood we eat. Not only is it killing them and the ocean itself, what is it doing to us? I know it is harmful, but it is something we need in our bodies, in order to live each day.

Other Native people were sending us foods from Tyonek, and the Copper River—sending us king salmon, and any fish that they could send us, and seals, too. It was because they knew how much we value our food from the ocean. It was very generous of them, and the people in our village were very grateful for that. It was hard to imagine if all the seafood becomes poisonous, how could we live in the future?

In the year of 1999-2000 the village got together, and we had a meeting to start our own village immersion school for our children before they started in the big school. My sister Ataaka and I, as speakers of the Language, and my niece Emilie Swening—with the help of my husband Marlon, we worked together to get a small grant to get the program up and going. Our cook and janitor was Keith Seville III. That was after my sister Ataaka and I had gone to workshops being lead by Loddie Jones and Roy Mitchell, for teaching us immersion school basics and how to get started. We got a network of organizations and people who joined in to help us, like Chugachmiut, Chugach Alaska Corporation, and our village Corporation², Dr. Jeff Leer, and Teri Schenider. The parents helped so much by bringing in our Native foods and bringing in whatever they could from home. Some men even build desks, step stools, etc.. We wanted no English spoken in there. So, whoever wanted to visit had to speak the Sugt'stun only, or be quiet. All foods we ate were Native. We invited speakers and families to come in for lunch at least once a week. A year or two later, two more Elders, Natalie Kvasnikoff and Kathy Brewster, joined us in the program as our language experts.

Our school has been closed for about three years now, because of a lack of a decent school building. I keep speaking Sugt'stun to little ones, or to people in the village, and encourage others to speak too. It is good for every Sugpiaq to know who they are, and their way of living and beliefs, and our faith. In Nanwalek, you should be able to learn Sugt'stun, just as if you wanted to learn or experience any other language or culture. The French or Germans in our country are lucky to have their homelands to go back to, where there are many native speakers. There is only a few speakers of the Alutiiq Sugt'stun language in Nanwalek and Taatillraaq, Caniigaaq, Qutalliq and Paluwik and the Qikertraq³. We don't want to have to fight to be heard, but we need support from our School District. We want to heal and better ourselves, and we have to start now for our future Sugt'stun speakers. It is so hard to work with speakers. You can tell they have been hurt so much, and are still in fear and shame to speak it, or some have even forgot how to speak it. But lots of people are being proactive, and doing things that are helping the Alutiiq Sugt'stun culture and language bearers, including John Johnson, Sven Haakanson Jr., Diane Selanoff, Diana Rhodes, Patty Brown-Schwalenberg, Nick Tanape, Kathy Brewster, Pete Kompkoff, Don and Gail Kompkoff, Andy Selanoff, Herman Moonin Jr., Sheri Buretta, Virginia Moonin, Mary Haakanson, Feona Sawden, John Boone, Wally Kvasnikoff,

² English Bay Corporation

³ These are other Alaska Native communities in the Alutiiq region; Tatitlek, Chenega Bay, Seward, Port Graham, and Kodiak, respectively.

James Kvasnikoff, and many others, who I have not mentioned, who are just as important. These people are being proactive. They are realizing, “Hey, this is it! We have to give it all that we can”. All these people are important components to the big picture. This is all good work! We must not ever forget the *juliallit*—the ancestors. They were very strong people too, and smart, otherwise we wouldn’t be here today, if it was not for them and God.

Why does Exxon say we have no culture left? Any person who comes to our village would have to admit it is very different than the rest of our country. Yes, I have seen pictures of other indigenous tribes all around the world, with modern homes, and TVs. In fact, watching the presidential elections [in 2008], we seen even the poorest countries following and watching the elections on TV. For goodness sake, I listened the other day on NPR to an interview of a person who sounded like an American, working for the Monks from Tibet, talking about what a very hard life they had. I don’t doubt that at all. He was trying to better their lives and you know, fighting the good fight for them. If it is an American doing the good fight, that is good, but what about the real people of Alaska? They really have not finished the work here, to help in preserving our language, and our culture, etc.. It will be interesting to see if the President Obama lives up to his word about helping the Natives in America. They have McDonalds in many countries, so does that mean they don’t have cultures either?

Exxon Valdez owes us an apology for even saying we have no culture at our hardest time, as we were working on passing on our culture and language to our kids.