Accommodating Cultural Diversity in the Alaska Seafood Processing Industry: the Transformation to a More "Welcoming Workplace"

The Alaska seafood processing industry brings together a unique assemblage of people from all over the world to live and work together in some very remote locations near the highly productive fishing grounds of the North Pacific. Cultural diversity has been a characteristic of the seafood processing workforce for more than a century, with migrant workers of diverse national origins supplying labor to the industry since the early days of industrial seafood production in Alaska. Processing companies have a large influence on the social conditions in which the workers operate because of the companies' role providing food and housing for the workforce in remote locations where alternative options for food and housing are few if any.

As part of the Alaska Fisheries Science Center's (AFSC) socioeconomic research in Alaska fisheries, anthropologist Dr. Jennifer Sepez with the AFSC's Economic and Social Sciences Research Program noticed that the working and living conditions of today's multicultural workforce seemed markedly different from what is described in the historical literature. In response to changes towards integration and multiculturalism within the North Pacific seafood processing industry, Dr. Sepez with the assistance of Clarito Aradanas initiated a study in 2008 to study the contemporary social conditions in the Bering Sea – Aleutian Islands (BSAI) processing workforce using ethnographic field methods in situ in BSAI processing plants. The objective of the study has been to understand the changes that have occurred in the management of cultural diversity in the workforce. These changes appear to have positively affected the morale and productivity of the workforce and the retention of experienced workers, representing a significant new social impact in what the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) calls the "human environment."

Thus far over the course of 8 months, Dr. Sepez and Mr. Aradanas have interviewed more than 80 seafood processor personnel in the BSAI region, including processing staff, support staff, and managers, and have observed social practices in four different plants in three BSAI communities. Their research has focused on culture and ethnicity issues within the workplace in the context of globalization. They found that food-related practices are some of the most observable and potent markers of ethnic and cultural identity in the workplace and that the role of the processing companies in providing meals to the workforce makes the company cafeteria a valuable prism through which to view the dynamics of ethnic identity. Preliminary results of their investigations show that there appears to be a trend towards greater recognition of the productivity benefits of incorporating the fundamental cultural needs of a diverse workforce within the workplace and that these needs include not only food-related practices but also other aspects of culture, such as religion, language, social identity, and the intergenerational transmission of traditional ecological knowledge.

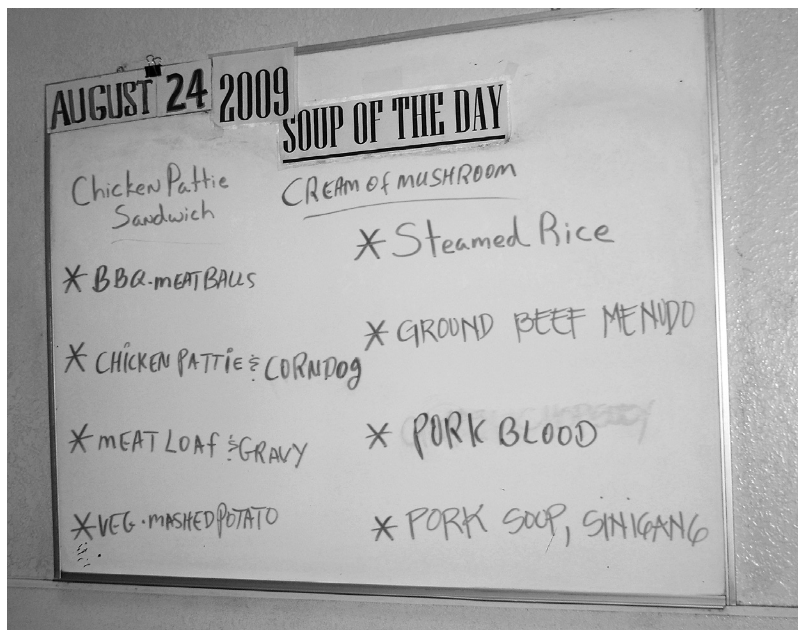
This sign indicates the multicultural and multilingual nature of this plant's fish processing workforce. The name of the plant, which follows the words "welcome to" on the sign, has been cropped out of the picture to obscure the identity of the specific plant to maintain the confidentiality of their participation in this research.

Managing cultural diversity in the workforce is not a new challenge for Alaska's seafood processing plant managers; however, a substantial transformation has taken place in the approach of processing companies to the diversity of the workforce. In order to understand the significance of this transformation, it is first necessary to understand the social conditions that prevailed in the workforce for much of the previous century.

In most of the previous century and in some locations through the 1970s, ethnic and cultural diversity in the workforce was managed mainly by segregating the members of different ethnic groups into separate lodging and dining facilities, where each group could mix only with their ethnic compatriots and the company could provide different types of meals to different groups. These segregated social conditions were apparently intended to be a response to the different cultural needs of each group based on the paradigm of "separate but equal" as an approach to handling diversity. However, as has historically been the case in the "separate but equal" approach, the conditions often were not perceived as equal, as asserted by plaintiffs in the landmark civil rights case concerning the Alaska seafood processing industry, *Wards Cove v. Atonio.* The separate dining hall and bunkhousing placements at the Wards Cove plant were based on cannery or non-cannery job assignments. However, because the cannery workforce was predominantly non-white and the non-cannery jobs were held predominantly by white people, the housing and messing were perceived by many in the workforce as race-based segregation.

As a legal matter, the defendants in *Wards Cove v. Atonio* ultimately prevailed, and the plaintiffs failed to establish their case for unlawful discrimination. Supreme Court Justice Blackmun noted in his dissenting opinion, however, that the conditions described by plaintiffs in the case were not unique to the Wards Cove facility: "The salmon industry as described in this record takes us back to a kind of overt and institutionalized discrimination that we have not dealt with in years: a total residential and work environment organized on principles of racial stratification, which, as Justice Stevens points out, resembles a 'plantation economy.'"

Today the fish processing workforce in the BSAI region hails from an increasing number of national origins never before represented significantly in the industry (such as nations in Northeastern Africa, Southeastern Asia, Central America, and Eastern Europe). The following article examines ways in which the industry has significantly changed towards integration and multiculturalism regarding eating and lodging since the 1970s and the marked extent of cultural sensitivity observed at four BSAI seafood processing plants that acknowledge their ethnically diverse fish processors not strictly as workers but as cultural beings. These examples represent both symbolic and materially significant moves away from what Justice Stevens characterized as "a plantation economy."



The existence of multicultural fare and of a multicultural workforce is evident from these photos, taken in the galleys of two different plants in the Aleutian Islands. On the left, this sign regularly displays different "American" menu items and Mexican and Filipino/Asian fare, as people of Mexican and Filipino national origin are by far the largest ethnic groups in the fish processing workforce here. "Pork" is clearly designated for all relevant dishes, out of consideration for devout Muslim workers averse to pork. The sign above reads "pig" or "pork" in five different languages: English, Spanish, Somali Arabic, Filipino, and Vietnamese. For the sake of absolute clarity an image is included, again out of consideration for Muslims. Photos by Clarito Aradanas.

Historical Race-Based Conflict in Seafood Processing

The 1860s witnessed the abolition of slavery in America, as well as the U.S. purchase of Alaska—and subsequent assumption of authority over its indigenous inhabitants—from Russia. American businessmen soon traveled to China to recruit large numbers of uneducated single men from poor rural regions to perform low paying physical labor in the building of the American West —in the agriculture, timber, fish processing, and railroad construction industries. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chinese numerically predominated in Alaska's fish processing workforce, laboring alongside U.S.-born African-American, Euro-American, Hawaiian, Mexican, Native Alaskan, and Puerto Rican coworkers. According to Donald Guimary's study of the industry, at this time "Most of the (fish) canners began to provide separate living quarters for each group. Very soon this practice became institutionalized at all Alaskan canneries."

Fish processors of Japanese and Korean national origin grew in numbers after the U.S. passed laws excluding new Chinese immigrants (1882, 1892, 1904) on the grounds of their being racially "unassimilable," responding to Whites' increasing anti-Chinese hostility. Subsequent race-specific laws excluded new Japanese and Korean immigrants (1908, 1917, 1924) on the same grounds of racial "unassimilability." Following U.S. military conquest of the Philippines (1899-1913), uneducated single Filipino men recruited by American businessmen from poor rural regions of the colony began representing an ethnic plurality in the Alaska fish processing workforce by the 1930s, followed by an increase in the numbers of people of Mexican national origin following the legal exclusion of new Filipino immigrants in 1934.

Guimary writes that up through the 1970s, "There were separate quarters, eating facilities and work duties for White and non-White employees." In the Wards Cove case the Supreme Court ruled in 2001 that these practices do not violate civil rights laws if the employer has a "legitimate business justification." The U.S. Congress' Civil Rights Act of 1991 was not relevant, in general because it was not to be applied retroactively, and specifically because it stipulated that it would apply to all Americans *except* in the case of *Wards Cove v. Atonio*.

Ethnicity in the Workplace Since Wards Cove

The Integrated Multicultural Paradigm as the New Management Policy

Our research on ethnicity in the seafood processing industry in the BSAI has highlighted food-related issues because one of the most persistent markers of ethnic identity is food preferences, and cultural anthropologists consider ethnicity to be one of the most meaningful elements of human self-identity along with gender and age. Company cafeterias are one place in which the paradigm shift that has taken place in the industry is most clearly manifested. The post-*Wards Cove* era has witnessed the system-wide standardization of serving multicultural fare in new racially integrated dining halls, contributing to what one plant manager calls a more "welcoming workplace." In the integrated multicultural dining halls, companies make the effort to cater to the tastes of many of the ethnic pluralities of their respective workforces.

At one remote Aleutian Island plant, management specifically sought a head cook who could prepare American, Filipino, and Mexican dishes. The majority of processors here were Filipino, and rice at this plant was served at every meal, including breakfast. The following are a sampling of Filipinos' feelings toward the constant supply of rice at the galley: "I'm Filipino, I need rice every time. When they serve no rice, you don't have any power." "I'm Asian! Rice first!" We observed a manifestation of these sentiments when a volcanic eruption grounded air traffic, including resupply flights, in the Aleutian Islands just at a time when the rice supply ran out at one processing plant. The absence of rice caused observable distress and demoralization among many of the Filipino and other Asian workers.

A Mexican processor at the same plant offered the following comment, translated: "It's very gratifying to see your own food (in the galley), it fills you with energy. It's familiar because it's something we've lived

with since childhood. Your diet is fundamental, basic. I think the boss should focus on this because a satisfied employee will be more productive."

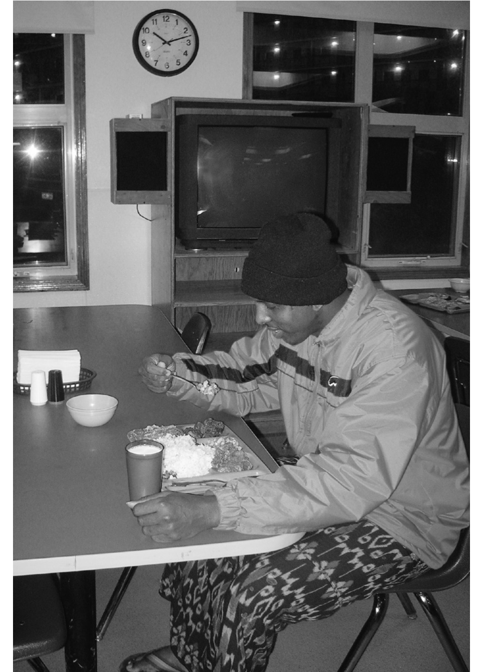
These respondents touch on various themes, such as associating their native foods with identity/roots and energy/productivity. The relationship between food and morale and productivity was widely recognized among our respondents from both labor and management positions.

Other Cultural Accommodations

At a time of war when hostility toward Muslims is unfortunately common in the United States, it may come as a surprise to some that various plants in the BSAI offer paid prayer breaks and specially-timed Ramadan meals to accommodate the growing number of processors of the Muslim faith who hail from countries with whom the United States has friendly relations, such as Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, and Chad. The galley/bunkhouse manager at one Aleutian Island plant even stocks a substantial amount of extra plastic cups to facilitate the ritual washing required before prayer. During the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, devout Muslims eat breakfast before sunrise, fast during daytime hours, and eat again after sundown (which at the time of this research occurred after 10 PM). The processor opens the cafeteria at times when it would normally be closed so that these workers can eat at religiously acceptable times. "They respect the religion," commented one Turkish worker with great appreciation.

During the day shift of the particular fishing season researched, devout Muslims at the above plant took up to three prayer breaks a day, each break lasting about seven minutes. Two Somalis there express their appreciation of paid prayer breaks: "They give us a good chance to pray…We're… comfortable for this situation." "We are very grateful about that."

In contrast to the segregationist policies of the past, numerous BSAI fish processing plants have taken even further steps to accommodate the cultural needs of their ethnically diverse fish processing workforce. These include some relatively inexpensive measures such as facility signs in multiple languages and some measures that add to costs, such as providing extra ablution supplies and paid prayer breaks, and setting aside a galley stove which can never touch pork products so that it can produce *halal* (religiously permissable) foods.



A fish processor from Somalia savors his Ramadan dinner, served shortly after 10 PM, not having eaten since dawn. Photo by Clarito Aradanas.

This Somali Muslim invited us to take this picture as he performs the mid-afternoon prayer asr during a short, paid prayer break in a hallway of his company's business offices, a floor above the fish processing operations where he works. This space is conveniently close to a men's washroom, where devout Muslims can perform the ritual washings that precede daily prayers. These accommodations made by management were greatly appreciated by the affected workers. Photo by Clarito Aradanas.

Honoring Indigenous Cultural Traditions

At one remote Community Development Quota (CDQ) plant in southwest Alaska, management employs primarily young people in their teens and 20s from neighboring Alaska Native villages as fish processors. These workers' ancestors have survived off subsistence hunting, fishing, and gathering in the region for thousands of years. The plant permits the youths' parents to bring Native foods to their children at the plant so it can be served to their children in the plant galley. The most common of these dishes are fish head soup and "Eskimo ice cream" (a dessert of fish and wild berries). Management also allows the young fish processors to suspend work for a few days periodically in order to join their families for subsistence harvest activities (as long as they request the time off in advance). This plant also employs elders to captain tender boats in order to respect the oral tradi-

tions of handing down fishing knowledge from generation to generation. One Native Alaskan tender captain explains, "[A working elder now captaining in his 70s] taught me how to…learn the river channels…Now I'm teaching these boys…And that's how it's always been here, teaching it, passing it down."

Recognizing Culture as "Good Business"

Most plant managers in our preliminary research frame their multiculturalism approach in terms of just plain old "good business." Perhaps the following comment by a plant manager on an Aleutian island expresses this perspective most succinctly: "Let me tell you something: We're not doing this out of the goodness of our heart… We don't do it because we're good people. [We do it because] It's good business… When you make people feel more welcome, more comfortable, they're better workers, more productive…If people are happy, they'll stay…loyal." His galley/bunkhouse manager agrees: "Any company with any sense about them wants to retain good employees...It doesn't make sense not to do everything you can to make them more comfortable."

A manager at a CDQ plant is more blunt: "I'm a capitalist…Number One: We are a for-profit…We're not a non-profit…[Native Alaskan] Elders get a lot of respect in the community…So I use this to my advantage, running this company…I hired the elders to drive the big tender boats…and they teach the younger kids [traditional knowledge such as] the way on the river, the short cuts…In turn, what…the company gets out of it is well-trained boat crews…Last year… I never missed an opening, never had a breakdown, never got stuck, never got lost, didn't have any accidents, didn't have any insurance claims. That's remarkable for the fishing business!"

The president at the remote Aleutian Island plant who specifically hired a cook to prepare American, Filipino, and Mexican fare explains this decision: "It has to do with simple performance. If they have food from their own home country, it means a lot to them." His management colleague, a former fishing boat captain, adds, "The one thing that makes or breaks morale is food. In this context food equals morale."

The industry-wide transformation from a segregationist paradigm to a more "welcoming" integrated workplace represents a new trend in the global economy toward what anthropologists have termed "cultural competence," or the delivery of goods and services and employment conditions in culturally appropriate ways. In the ethnically diverse BSAI seafood processing workforce, embracing culture in both symbolic and materially significant ways turns out to be good for business and good for workers' sense of cultural identity. Some BSAI processing plants are in the forefront of implementing socially sustainable practices in the "human environment."

By Clarito Aradanas
and Jennifer Sepez

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Clarito Aradanas is the son of one of the original Alaskeros—Filipino immigrants who worked in Alaska salmon canneries in the 1920s-1940s—and he has spent many hours talking with his father Pedro Aradanas about the old days "catching cans" in Naknek from 1926 to 1929. Clarito holds a Master's Degree in Ethnic Studies from UC San Diego and is a contractor for the AFSC on this project.

Jennifer Sepez (Principal Investigator) is an anthropologist in the AFSC's Economics and Social Sciences Research Program. She developed first-hand knowledge of the Alaska seafood processing industry starting on the night shift slime line at Sea Hawk Seafoods, in Valdez in 1987, eventually working her way up to Dock Foreman over several years. She has a doctorate in Environmental Anthropology from the University of Washington.

Left, a Native Alaskan captains a tender boat for the CDQ plant in his village. His chief mentor is a retirement-age elder who's captaining today while in his 70s and who taught him the traditional ways of navigating the changing conditions of the Yukon River's delta. *Above, a*n example of a Native food dish served at this CDQ fish plant galley in southwest Alaska is "Eskimo ice cream"– a dessert made of fish and berries. Photos by Clarito Aradanas.