

ANCHORAGE, ALASKA: CITY OF HOPE FOR INTERNATIONAL REFUGEES

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ABSTRACT

Over the last thirty years, international refugees have fled their home countries and arrived in Anchorage, where they have made new homes and often thrived. Although the federal government provides an infrastructure for refugee resettlement, there are still formidable challenges to be met by both the host community and the families themselves, particularly for those who do not speak English or possess marketable skills. The significant role of religious and nonprofit organizations and community volunteers in easing the transition from the status of refugee to that of an American citizen is discussed in this paper.

KEYWORDS: refugees, nonprofit organizations, Hmong, Sudanese, acculturation

INTRODUCTION

The Municipality of Anchorage is Alaska's largest urban area, extending along Cook Inlet from Eklutna to Girdwood and numbering over 290,000 people (State of Alaska 2010). While Anchorage has had a tremendous rate of population growth since it began as a tent city in 1915, its overall numbers have not spiked recently as they did during the 1970s and 1980s. However, the cultural and ethnic diversity of its residents has skyrocketed in the last two decades. At present, at least one in every ten people in Anchorage is foreign-born (Ohlemacher 2008), with Mexico, Samoa, the Philippines, and Korea best represented in its immigrant population (Goldsmith et al. 2005:9). One gauge of the diversity of the municipality can be found in the statistics kept by the Anchorage School District, which touts the fact that ninety-four different languages are spoken at home by its students. After English, the most commonly spoken languages are Spanish, Hmong, Tagalog, Samoan, and Korean (Anchorage School District 2010).

Anchorage has also opened its doors to a subgroup of immigrants, refugees from places such as Kosovo, Sudan, Somalia, and Laos who have been displaced from their own countries from fear of political, religious, or ethnic

persecution. While many immigrants voluntarily move to Alaska for economic or family reasons, refugees are resettled in the state through a complex process involving international agreements along with national policies and regulations. Some of the languages added to the Anchorage School District list by the children of refugee families are Bosnian, Serbo-Croatian, Nuer, Somali, Ukrainian, Wolof, and Yoruba. The largest wave of refugees in the last few years has been from Sudan, and for them and the thousands of other refugees who preceded them, "Anchorage has become a city of hope" (Bluemink 2008).

I first became aware of the immigrant and refugee population in Anchorage a few years ago when volunteering as an English teacher at the Alaska Literacy Program. There were immigrant and refugee students from Thailand, Laos, the Ukraine, Kazakhstan, the Dominican Republic, and Gambia in my classes. In some cases, they had lived in the United States for many years and only recently had come to Alaska, but in other cases, they were "fresh off the ship" from their home country. Many had children, jobs, and cars and appeared to be doing quite well despite the fact that they were still struggling to learn English. I

marveled at their resiliency and wondered how they ended up in Alaska. This paper is the result of my attempt to better understand the resettlement process as well as the refugees' process of adaptation. It is based on an examination of some of the voluminous literature related to refugees worldwide, nationally, and locally; interviews with key individuals who manage nonprofit organizations or support groups for refugees in Anchorage; and personal communications with a family of Somali refugees with whom I worked as an English teacher. Recently in this journal, Feldman (2009:6) pointed out, "the emerging global village has a local face," and we as Alaska anthropologists cannot ignore the significant human processes that are reshaping our largest urban area.

REFUGEES WORLDWIDE

Refugees have a distinct legal status that sets them apart from other immigrants, according to the 1951 Refugee Convention of the United Nations. They are defined as people who have left their own country and cannot return or do not want to return because of credible fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in social or ethnic groups (UNHCR 2010). After fleeing and crossing an international boundary, refugees congregate in camps or in segregated settlements, where they are often deprived of their freedom of movement and livelihood. Host countries where refugee populations initially resettle are located throughout Africa and Asia, with large numbers in Kenya, Tanzania, Pakistan, and Thailand, among other countries (USCRI 2008). Refugees are often forced to reside in these camps for a number of months or years until they are interviewed for potential permanent resettlement by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Less than 1% of the refugees worldwide are ever resettled in a third country (U.S. Department of State 2010).

While refugees are resettled in many countries around the globe, the United States is the leader in the terms of total number of people assisted. In 2008, the U.S. resettled over 48,000 refugees, more than twice as many as those resettled in Australia and Canada combined (USCRI 2008:27). According to the Refugee Act of 1980, there is a standardized resettlement process for all refugees to this country. One year after their arrival they are eligible to become permanent residents, and five years after arrival they can petition for naturalization. In passing this legislation, the U.S. government intended that refugee resettlement

be as dispersed as possible in order to facilitate assimilation and that resettlement should ultimately result in self-sufficiency for the refugee families (E. Lee 2006). The president determines the priority of each nationality as well as the total number who can be admitted annually. It has been argued that although our country's generosity is authentic, foreign policy agendas also enter into decisions on the quotas and countries each year (Bixler 2005:xiv; Loescher and Scanlan 1986).

The Refugee Act is administered by bureaus within the departments of State, Health and Human Services, and Homeland Security. The Office of Refugee Resettlement, within the Department of Health and Human Services, is responsible for distributing the funds for resettlement. There are ten U.S. Refugee Resettlement Agencies currently assisting newly arrived refugees to settle into local communities. These agencies include Church World Service, Ethiopian Community Development Council, Episcopal Migration Ministries, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, Iowa Department of Human Services, International Rescue Committee, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and World Relief (Refugee Council USA 2009). These agencies review the list and ascertain whether the person or family already has relatives in the U.S. If so, they must be placed with that relative; if not, they are matched to a resettlement site. In other words, there must be an available sponsor for each refugee. Essentially, refugees come to Alaska either because they have relatives here or because they have been assigned to Anchorage as a "free case," which means they have no family or friends to assist them in resettlement (Ferguson 2009a).

While the U.S. provides the legal framework and funding for refugees to enter the country, there are a host of other issues that merit the attention of social scientists in general and anthropologists in particular. For example, how do those who arrive as free cases survive without a family safety net? How do they learn English and communicate? Navigate local public transport? Enroll children in school? Seek and receive medical attention? Adjust to new kinds of foods? Do they thrive in their new environment or become marginalized, and what factors contribute to each? The anthropological literature on refugee populations around the world addresses some of these questions, and others that relate to traditional versus Western medicine and ways that refugees establish a sense of community and identity in their new homes (Chernela et al. 2009;

Gozdziak 2004; Jessen 2009; McMichael and Manderson 2004; Turton and Wheat 2006).

REFUGEES MAKE NEW HOMES IN ALASKA

International refugees began arriving in Alaska in the early 1980s, but the actual number is difficult to pin down because there are discrepancies in available records and census records are not clear about refugee or immigrant status. Another factor that complicates the picture is that a person can start out as a refugee in one state, become a permanent resident or a U.S. citizen, and then relocate to Alaska. These secondary immigrants from other U.S. cities consider Anchorage to be a highly desirable destination, primarily because it is perceived to have clean air and to be a safe place for children, so there is hardly any out-migration once they arrive (Ferguson 2009a; Smith 2008). One source estimates that between 1983 and 2002, over 700 refugees came to Alaska, ending up mostly in Anchorage but also Delta Junction, Kodiak, Juneau, and Sitka (Tsong 2002). During the 1990s, refugees from countries such as Bosnia were assisted by the Alaska Refugee Outreach, which operated out of St. Mary's Episcopal Church (McDaniel 1995).

The best data for the last six years come from the Catholic Social Services' Refugee Assistance and Immigration Service (RAIS), which is now the only state and federally funded resettlement program in Alaska. RAIS serves as a bridge for refugees from their former lives to new skills required for success in the U.S. and tracks each person assisted by the program. At the end of 2008, about 1,100 people (300 families) were included in their databases. Some of these families were secondary refugees who migrated from the Lower Forty-eight after they had been in the country for a few years (Ferguson 2009a). Karen Ferguson, RAIS director, started helping the refugees from Kosovo and Albania in 1999 while she was still a volunteer with Catholic Social Services. In 2004, she assisted Hmong from Laos and Thai refugee camps. As the program developed she has seen more people from Africa—Sudan, Congo, and Togo—as well as some from the Middle East and South America. In 2009, refugees came to Anchorage from Somalia, Sudan, the Congo, Burma, and Bhutan; in 2010, they are also expected from Iraq, Iran, Russia, and Eritrea (Ferguson 2009b).

RAIS provides a safety net for refugee families, beginning when they first arrive at the airport and lasting for the next five years if necessary. The staff begins planning

when they are given notice by the Department of State that a new group of refugees will be arriving, sometimes with only a two-week notice. They must first find these new Alaskans an apartment and furnish it according to a standard list of essential items, such as furniture, radios, cleaning and laundry supplies, kitchen cookware, utensils, warm clothes, and wallets. Each refugee gets \$425 when they first arrive, but once rent and security deposits are taken out, there is little left. They also begin to receive state-administered public assistance, which amounts to \$821 per month for a family of three, in addition to food stamps. Among the RAIS staff who ease the transition of the refugees are interpreters who speak fluent French, Russian, Hmong, Spanish, Arabic, Nuer, Urdu, and Somali (Ferguson 2009a, 2009b). RAIS volunteers, particularly the family mentors, are also crucial during the refugee families' first year or more in Anchorage.

This initial government-sponsored assistance offered to each refugee family starts them on the road to self-reliance, but it is only one step in the journey. Day-to-day assistance comes not only from RAIS, but from ethnic and religious organizations, schools, nonprofit organizations, and a cadre of volunteers (Table 1). Anthropologist Lacy Hamner (pers. comm. April 6, 2009), who is a member of the Islamic Community Center, believes that there are about 3,000 Muslims in Anchorage, with 500 to 600 attending worship services at the *masjid* (mosque). She observes that when refugees first arrive, their most important network revolves around people who speak their language, which in many cases is Arabic, French, or one of the tribal languages. Her community of fellow Muslims mobilized to assist the wave of refugees from Sudan and Somalia who arrived in 2008 and 2009.

A large number of state and nonprofit agencies have also stepped up to offer services, ranging from community gardening to legal and immigration issues to English and naturalization classes. The University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) Cooperative Extension Service has partnered with RAIS to implement a community garden program in Mountain View, an Anchorage neighborhood with many refugee families. Horticulturalist Julie Riley leads the program aimed at teaching refugees small business skills by helping them grow and sell Alaska vegetables at farmers markets (UAF Cooperative Extension Service 2007), which are popular during the summer (Fig. 1). A community group whose volunteers have assisted the most recent wave of refugees is Save Darfur Anchorage, a local advocacy group begun to spotlight the genocide in Sudan

*Table 1: Organizations and individuals providing assistance to refugees in Anchorage**

International
United Nations High Commission on Refugees
United States
Department of Health and Social Services (Office of Refugee Resettlement)
U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (nonprofit)
Alaska
UAF Cooperative Extension Service
Municipality of Anchorage
Anchorage School District—English Language Learners program
Anchorage Neighborhood Health Center
Anchorage Community Health
Nonprofit organizations
RAIS (affiliated with Catholic Social Services)
Alaska Literacy Program
Bridge Builders
Habitat for Humanity
Immigrant Rights Coalition
Salvation Army
Religious organizations
Islamic Community Center
Mormon Church
First Presbyterian
St. Mary’s Episcopal
Central Lutheran Church
First Hmong Baptist Church
St. Anthony’s Church
Anchorage Universal Unitarian Fellowship
Cultural and Community Support Groups
Hmong Alaska Community Inc.
Southern Sudanese American Community Association
Save Darfur
Refugee Youth Choir in Mountain View
Private and Private Employers
Providence Alaska Medical Center
Target
Hotel Captain Cook
Municipality of Anchorage—airport and bus station
Marriott Hotel
Volunteers
Alaska Bar Association
UAA nursing students
volunteers with all the nonprofits listed above

* only represents a partial list of agencies and individuals who provide assistance



Figure 1: Oliver and Pascaline, brother and sister from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, sell their produce at the University Center Farmer’s Market in Anchorage, 2009.



Figure 2: A Hmong musician demonstrates his skills at a Meet in the World in Anchorage event, sponsored by Bridge Builders in 2009.

even before the first refugees from Darfur actually arrived in Anchorage (Deborah Bock pers. comm. Sept. 28, 2009). At one recent event, Save Darfur Anchorage volunteers, directed by Sudanese women, prepared an authentic Sudanese feast at St. Mary's Episcopal Church as a fundraiser for the Darfur Stoves Project, which provides super-efficient stoves for women in refugee camps in Africa. Yet another example of a committed nonprofit organization is Bridge Builders of Anchorage, the sponsor of many community events such as Meet the World in Anchorage during the annual Fur Rendezvous in February. Hundreds of residents of all ethnic backgrounds, including refugees from several different countries, join together for cultural activities at this event (Fig. 2). With each new helping hand, with each new friend, the network of support grows.

While most Anchorage residents are well aware of the Mexican, Korean, Samoan, and Filipino immigrants in the city, I would guess that many do not realize the true extent and diversity of the refugee population. Fortunately, newscasters and reporters for the *Anchorage Daily News* have enlightened the public with television broadcasts and articles about the changing face of the city (e.g., Baeza 2006; Blanchard 2008a, 2008b; Bluemink 2008; Bronen 2004; Demer 2000; Dunham 2008; KTVA 2010; McDaniel 1995; McKinney 2007; Ohlemacher 2008; O'Malley 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Senkowsky 1999; Tsong 2004, 2005). Two refugee groups that have gained national and local recognition—the Hmong and the Sudanese—are well represented in Anchorage and provide good examples of the social and medical challenges facing all refugees to the state.

THE HMONG IN ANCHORAGE

The Hmong are the most numerous of the refugee groups residing in Anchorage. While 150 came directly to Anchorage from the Wat Tham Krabok camp in Thailand in 2004 and 2005, the majority of the 4,000 now living in Anchorage migrated northward from the large Hmong communities in California, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, looking for better schools and new opportunities (P. Lee 2009; Tsong 2004). In the group of arrivals from the Thai camp were Hmong elders, parents, and school children, all of whom began attending classes in English as a second language at Tyson Elementary and were helped by Gershon Lee, a Hmong bilingual tutor at the school (Tsong 2004, 2005).

Pasert Lee is prominent in the Hmong community in Anchorage (Fig. 3). He moved from California in 1998 because he believed Alaska would provide a better environment for his family, which now includes twenty-six members. Lee is president of Hmong Alaska Community, which provides interpreters, translators, culture counselors, and event planners for its members. During



Figure 3: Pasert Lee, president of the Hmong Alaska Community, Inc. (courtesy of Pasert Lee).

our interview, Lee stressed the importance of education for the Hmong youth and proudly listed several men and women attending the University of Alaska Anchorage (Pasert Lee 2009). Nancy Xiong is one of these students; she wrote about her ancestral culture in an anthropology class, saying that students are now learning about “everything that was lost... [they] are learning dances, folk songs, flute songs” (Xiong 2009).

Pasert Lee wears many hats in the Hmong community. Among them is shaman and traditional healer, on-call twenty-four hours a day. He presides over Hmong New Year celebrations by blessing chickens and communicating with spirits. While traditional beliefs retain importance within the community, some Hmong are converting to Christian denominations. Converts do not include Thai Lee, Pasert Lee's son, who says that converting would be a dishonor to his father (O'Malley 2006a). However, the influence of the Mormon Church is strongly felt by Hmong families in need because of the support it offers in terms of donated clothes, furniture, food, employment assistance, spiritual guidance, and friendship (O'Malley 2006b). *Anchorage Daily News* journalist Julia O'Malley interviewed Hmong who converted to Mormonism and stated that “for the young and converted, taking on Mormon beliefs is often bound up with a desire to fit into American society, and to succeed” (O'Malley 2006b). In 2009, Reverend Priestly Lee, the founder of the First Hmong Baptist Church of Alaska, estimates that there were ten to fifteen Hmong Mormon families in the greater Anchorage area, and some fifty

families who belong to his own church (Priestly Lee, pers. comm. Dec. 11, 2009). Several Hmong families also attend Central Lutheran Church in Anchorage. Their pastor contends that her church does not have an evangelical mission to convert the Hmong but simply to preach a mission of acceptance and try to help them preserve their culture (O'Malley 2006b).

Another dilemma and source of conflict for the Hmong is choosing between traditional and modern forms of medicine. Two recent anthropological studies on the Hmong in Alaska (e.g., Hickman 2007; Jessen 2009, this volume) have addressed the topic and reached similar conclusions. They contend that the Hmong do not prefer one belief system over the other but utilize elements of both depending on what they perceive to be the most effective in addressing a given health problem. For example, they may eventually go to a health care provider but first seek help from a shaman to achieve the best outcome (Jessen 2009:94). Such was the case of a young boy diagnosed with leukemia in 2006. His mother first consulted with Pasert Lee and other elders in the Hmong Anchorage community but finally decided to take him for treatment to an oncology center in Seattle. The boy recovered. According to Pasert Lee, as quoted in the *Anchorage Daily News*, the recovery was “70 percent doctor, 30 percent shaman” (O'Malley 2008a).

THE SUDANESE

The second Sudanese war (1983–2005) created an estimated two million internally displaced people and another 500,000 who took asylum in neighboring African countries. The first group of refugees from the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya made their way to several U.S. cities in 2000–2001 (Chrostowsky 2010:39). Among the new arrivals were 3,800 men in their late teens and early twenties, known as the “Lost Boys of Sudan” (Bixler 2005) because they were driven from their homes and families when they were just children. In February 2003, violence again erupted in Sudan, this time in the western region of Darfur where the Sudanese government armed nomadic Arab militia in a brutal campaign against African farmers, killing hundreds of thousands and displacing at least 2.5 million people (Bixler 2005:xi, 231; Wax 2006).

Thousands of southern Sudanese refugees began settling in the U.S. in the 1990s, mainly in the Midwest. In the last few years, they have built a community in Anchorage. Bajek Deng arrived in Alaska in 2005 and

went immediately to Dutch Harbor to work in the seafood industry. Now living in Anchorage, Deng and fellow Sudanese Tor Gach organized the Southern Sudanese American Community Association to help incoming families. Some of the Southern Sudanese families, now estimated to number about 600 people in Anchorage, worship at the First Presbyterian Church, where a service is conducted in Nuer (Blanchard 2008a; Bluemink 2008).

The first refugee family from Darfur arrived in Anchorage in early 2008 from a refugee camp in western Ghana. The father, Attahir Karief, speaking in Arabic, told reporters through an interpreter that their flight from Sudan began with ten days walking through the desert to Chad, after which the family made their way to Cameroon, Nigeria, Benin, Togo, and finally Ghana. After three years in tents, the UN granted the family refugee status and they headed to Anchorage, where they have been assisted by the RAIS program. Both Attahir Karief and his wife have found work (Blanchard 2008b). Another refugee from Darfur, Safi Ali, works as a houseman at the Hotel Captain Cook. He traveled through Africa and the



Figure 4: Halima Bakhit, a refugee from Sudan, attended the Save Darfur fundraiser held at St. Mary's Church in Anchorage on November 15, 2009.

Middle East, searching for work and his family. When his plane landed in Anchorage in April, he encountered a landscape so alien and forbidding that he joked that he thought he would be dead within two weeks (Deborah Bock pers. comm. March 3, 2010; O'Malley 2008b).

When interviewed in 2008, Kariief said that the two Sudanese groups would not necessarily associate in Sudan because of religious and ethnic differences, but in Anchorage, their relations were friendly at the beginning. Darfurians attended meetings hosted by the Southern Sudanese at St. Anthony's Church (Blanchard 2008b; Bluemink 2008), as well as fundraising events sponsored by Save Darfur Anchorage (Fig. 4). However, the situation between the two Sudanese groups has become strained since more Darfurians began arriving in Anchorage, and their interactions are now more typical of their attitudes toward each other in Sudan. By early 2010, there were thirty-three Darfurians living in the city (Deborah Bock pers. comm. March 3, 2010).

SUCCESS STORIES

Measuring success is often subjective, but certain factors, such as employment, housing, and level of education are considered to be common indicators of how well an individual or a group of people are doing. RAIS can be proud of its 78% success rate in obtaining full-time employment for refugees in their first six months in country, thus enabling these families to be dropped from the roles of public assistance (Ferguson 2009a). Although many qualify only for unskilled jobs, particularly if they do not speak English well, there are some who were professionals in their home countries. For example, Claude Mabudu works loading cargo at the airport despite the fact that he was a high school librarian and teacher in Togo for over twenty years before he was forced to leave the country and finally brought his family to Anchorage in 2008 (Deborah Bock pers. comm. March 3, 2010; Catholic Social Services 2008). One former Bosnian doctor initially found employment as a sales clerk, and a college professor was hired as a receptionist (McDaniel 1995). In other cases, highly skilled refugees from the former Soviet bloc countries have had unrealistic expectations and believe they will find the same professional employment once they arrive in Anchorage. The most successful refugees are those who are willing to take jobs outside their comfort zones (Ferguson 2009a).

Economic success can also come from putting in long years at low-paying jobs and building up enough savings to open a small business. Such is the case for William Lo, a former refugee now living in Anchorage. He arrived in California from Laos many years ago and after working as a farm laborer in California and later as a kitchen assistant at a Thai restaurant, he was finally able to purchase an Asian grocery store in the Mountain View neighborhood of Anchorage (Baeza 2006). Some families, such as the Mabudu family from Togo, achieve a dream shared by many Americans of owning their own home. They were selected to help build their own Habitat for Humanity house and now make monthly mortgage payments on a spacious home rather than paying rent for a cramped apartment (Deborah Bock pers. comm. March 3, 2010; Habitat for Humanity 2009).

When interviewing RAIS director Karen Ferguson, a clinical psychologist by profession, I asked her if she thought there were any cultural differences in the ability to adapt successfully to life in Anchorage. Her response was that the ones who succeed have individual characteristics, such as education, resiliency to trauma, or personality traits that far outweigh any ethnic or cultural factors. In other words, some people just have a better ability to cope. As examples, she referred to three families—from Togo, Uzbekistan, and Darfur—with different religions and different levels of education. All of these families adapted readily and were able to quickly make it on their own. The majority of the refugees rise very fast, but the ones who get stuck are the ones who become dependent on relatives. The groups from rural areas who practiced subsistence lifestyles, like the Hmong, face the biggest challenges because they have few skills marketable in a modern society (Ferguson 2009a).

On the flip side of the success stories is the reality that arriving in a new country can be a daunting experience, particularly when many are struggling for housing and employment and possibly falling short of becoming self-sufficient. Ethnic and racial tensions can also take a toll on individuals striving to succeed in a new environment. Hate crimes do exist in Alaska (Trostle 1996), but refugee groups do not seem to be the target of defamation as they are in other states. Another factor to consider is that assimilation into mainstream society may not be a goal of certain individuals and families, and in these cases success is difficult to gauge and quantify. There is great potential for anthropologists to better understand how refugee populations in



Figure 5: International Refugee Day, an event sponsored by RAIS at Mountain View Lions Park in Anchorage on June 19, 2009.

Anchorage gain success, and how the nonprofit agencies, the municipality, and the state can better help them reach their goals.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

My original intention was to explore how family and social networks kept refugees afloat during their transition period in a new country and new culture. I greatly underestimated the complexity of these networks. Although there is a framework provided by the federal government to begin the resettlement process, the gaps in the framework must be filled by programs offered by schools, church groups, and nonprofit organizations. These gaps are also filled by volunteers who interpret, provide legal expertise, provide transportation, help fill out applications and teach English; employers willing to fill jobs with someone who has only marginal abilities in English; and property managers willing to hold apartments for the arrival of the next wave of refugees. Alaskans have not always been ac-

cepting of people from other parts of the world or ethnic backgrounds (Carey 1999), but fortunately we Alaskans seem to be for the most part open and welcoming to new residents of the state and city. It is not a one-way street. Anchorage is enriched by the new faces, voices, strengths, and cultures of the growing international community for whom it is now home (Fig. 5).

Cornelia Jessen (2009, this volume) has taken a leap into almost uncharted territory in terms of anthropological research in Alaska by completing a master's thesis on cross-cultural medical encounters between healthcare providers and a sample of Anchorage refugees. In addition to medical issues, the Anchorage refugee population provides tremendous opportunities for the study of a range of other social, economic, and religious topics for both academic and applied purposes. In an era of dwindling resources for foreign travel and research, it is heartening to know that a world of international studies exists right here in Alaska.

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