

# *NORTHERN ATHABASCAN SURVIVAL, WOMEN, COMMUNITY AND THE FUTURE.*

BY PHYLLIS FAST. (LINCOLN: UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS, 2002). HARDCOVER, ISBN 0803220170, \$55.00. 288PP. WINNER OF OUTSTANDING NATIVE AMERICAN BOOK AWARD FOR 2000 FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS.

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As anthropologists strive to develop new forms of analysis and presentation of ethnographic materials, the balancing of data, analysis, reflexivity and relevance poses an enormous challenge. In *Northern Athabascan Survival, Women, Community and the Future*, Phyllis Ann Fast has met these challenges in a path breaking and illuminating volume. The book is a thematic, powerful account of the lives of the contemporary Gwich'in of north-eastern Alaska that flows from three years of fieldwork by Fast in the region. Fast, of mixed northern Athabascan (Koyukon) heritage raised in an urban Alaskan environment, set out to understand the political and social dimensions of Gwich'in politics in their villages but moved beyond this goal to a fuller engagement with the nature and process of existence in the communities.

The three themes that Fast explores in detail are the nature of the economic system in the Gwich'in communities, the nature of leadership and action, and the position and role of women in the society. As foundation for her discussion, Fast establishes core Gwich'in values that are demonstrated in oral traditions, myths and legends whose behavioral impacts she discerns in the lives of those with whom she lived. Particularly influential are the promotion of self-reliance and the respect for autonomy that are merged with an expectation that nonvoiced, but shared understandings about and commitment to respectful interpersonal engagement will promote social harmony. She establishes the key features of kinship, warfare, trading and cosmological connectedness that were the center of Gwich'in existence. She then tracks the progressive transformation of Gwich'in life over the past 150 years as new material, demographic, social, economic and religious elements affected Gwich'in existence. Sustained down to the present and especially evident in the last 50 years are behaviors designed to maintain as much control as possible over resources and activities in Gwich'in country despite critical alterations to practices in all these domains.

Fast's thematic exploration of the "economic" domain is constructed around the concept of addictiveness. She treats the entire cash apparatus of the modern economy as promoting forms of material addictive behavior to things but saves the core of her analysis for the intersection of the classic addictions (alcohol, drugs, gambling) with the bureaucratic institutions that have sprouted up to "cure" them. Her critique notes that it is mostly non-Gwich'in that benefit from both expenditures on the addictions themselves as well as on the provision of services to the addicted. This insures that the definitions of such behavior and the solutions for it are externally controlled. Fast explores the incompatibility between the internal, Gwich'in grounded system of open-ended, ambiguous reciprocity in which need is addressed indirectly and nonjudgmentally and the external, market grounded system of closed, precise calibration of all such exchanges. She sees the latter as eroding the trust and mutual support of the former through the penetration of personal addictions that consume resources and minimize extended relationships.

Leadership and action are a second thematic development of the book. Here Fast most powerfully grounds her discussion in the Gwich'in language and its development of intersecting notions of metaphysical power, personal power (mental and interactional) and demonstrated power (through accomplishment). She traces traditional male leadership modes in terms of antecedent patterns of trader, warrior, and spiritual leader. While these models for leader behavior are seen by Fast as limiting and difficult to attain, she also articulates the contradiction between the core value of nobody being in charge with the expectation that behavior will flow according to the previously noted notion of being of the same mind. Fast demonstrates the problematic inherent in this design for living and advances the concept of consensus to account for how the Gwich'in accomplish familial ends through forms of implicit and explicit violence to expel non-Gwich'in threats and violators from their communities. She documents the role of administrators in institutions

such as the school, city, and police accommodating and deferring to expressed and acted wishes of the Gwich'in violated. The consensus is then that those violated have the right to redress directly through their actions. She sees this as emergent behavior from a traditional basis that has become more evident and acted upon due to the increasing stress in the communities as greater frequency of contact with nonlocal persons occurs. An especially sensitive node in this pattern is the school that drops unsophisticated and uncaring outsiders into the community on a continuous basis.

Gender is the final thematic development of the book. Here Fast demonstrates sensitivity for nuance and specificity in her relationships with and observations of various Gwich'in women with whom she interacts. Her reflexivity about the learning obtained and the contexts of these encounters are important demonstrators of Fast's connectedness with the intimate decisions and events occurring around her. Her main contention is that women, since the basis and form of their leadership is traditionally underdetermined, are now molding and shaping the manner in which leadership takes place and moving into fields of influence outside the bounds of traditional behavior. She sees them as central in addressing the welfare of the community as nodes of redistribution to those with needs. Women are also developing strategies to protect themselves and children from the dangers presented by Gwich'in men who are recognized as having difficulties managing the addictive forces they encounter. Fast here explores various theories and cases of colonial impacts on indigenous women concluding that what she observed among Gwich'in women were periodic waves of anger, depression and assertiveness that could occur in any order and never reached levels of resolution. She found that the search for the numinous (Christian, tradition or both) was often the route to addressing a variety of problems.

An important element in Fast's critique of the addictive society that envelopes the Gwich'in is her deconstruction of statistics developed by state institutions that demonstrate high rates of destructive violence among Gwich'in villagers. She exposes the hidden assumptions about what constitutes violence and demonstrates that census data, when these assumptions are reasonably altered, indicate that Gwich'in rates actually fell from 1970 to 1990. She sees the development of such stigmatizing data as an artifact of segments of the health industry addicted to the maintenance of addiction in the client population. She concludes that the Gwich'in neither define nor act in the world on the basis of the definitions and assumptions of the statistics.

In the final two chapters, Fast looks to the future and recapitulates the central claims of her book highlighting the relevance of certain key findings for the future. Here the relevance of her findings to specific areas of action is presented. While she clearly intends this section for a Gwich'in readership, it is unlikely that any Gwich'in will be drawn to the discussion. Nevertheless she asserts her belief that they will find Athabascan solutions to their problems. Unfortunately Fast does not address how the external institutional structures might be reconstructed to better meet the needs of the Gwich'in. She starkly asserts that the Gwich'in villages are threatened by a myriad of forces for destruction but concludes that through the search for the identification of the problems, the Gwich'in will persevere. They will do so from a self-definition that as a people, "We suffer, we endure, but we continue on" (Fast: 255)

Through the preceding review I have attempted to indicate the value and power of Fast's moderately experimental ethnographic construction and its worthiness for the American Ethnological Society's Junior Scholar Book Award. The tapestry that is woven does not claim to be exhaustively coherent, which indeed if it were so claimed would not be honest, for ultimately *Northern Athabascan Survival* is a statement of personal engagement not distanced measurement