

Yup'ik Dance: Old and New

In the following pages, I will describe some features of early and contemporary Yup'ik Eskimo culture as recorded by outside investigators and as told to me by elders. Briefly, I will describe some linguistic, environmental and historical details of Yup'ik life, but mainly, I will concentrate on the role of dancing in earlier spiritual practices, discussing the effects of social changes that came about in the late 19th century as a result of fur trade, epidemics, and missionary activity. Finally, I will look at the contemporary resurgence of dancing in Yup'ik communities and the importance of it as it relates to ancestry and ongoing cultural identity.

Introduction: Some Personal Anthropology

I imagine that many people can relate to my experience involving personal growth and knowledge related to my traditional heritage. I am part Yup'ik Eskimo. I was born and reared in Alaska, but for most of my life, knowledge of the ancestry from my father's side reached back only as far as knowing my great-grandmother's name.

Looking back, I see that certain cultural ties were always present in my family. For example, we ate some foods that my childhood friends looked at questioningly. Fish head soup, salmon eggs, *agutuk* (a mixture of Crisco, sugar and berries), and prepared moose tongue were never my favorite foods, nor are they necessarily exclusively 'cultural', but they did mark a certain uniqueness I have always felt present in my family.

For years, I simply took my heritage for granted. I never probed my elders for stories or lessons and I never made an effort to become involved in my culture. I suppose many young people are that way. It was not until after I left Alaska to attend college in Minnesota that an acute awareness of my heritage began to emerge and take precedence in my life.

Alaska is a unique place to come from and when people find out that I grew up there, they begin to ask questions. Mostly I hear questions about the weather and wildlife, but some people have jokingly asked; "Oh, are you an Eskimo?" Not expecting an affirmative response, they are sometimes shocked, perhaps even afraid they have offended me. Sometimes they continue with questions about whether I live in an igloo, wear fur, or hunt for my food. Such questions, which stem from stereotypical ideas about Eskimos are usually asked tentatively, and I can easily answer them with a quick laugh.

These short question and answer sessions occur frequently and I am always glad to clear up simple misconceptions people have about Eskimos. These seemingly simple misconceptions made me realize that they only scratched the surface of people's ignorance of my traditional culture. Further, they made me realize that I did not have a full understanding of it. Before I left Alaska I had taken it all for granted. Now, through interest and learning, I am proud of my heritage and this paper is about what I have discovered so far.

Ancestry

The ancestors of contemporary central Alaskan Yup'ik-speaking Eskimos lived in southwestern Alaska, in the delta region of the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers. The land that stretched across the hundreds of miles of this territory was the environment that sustained their lives. The territory ranged from heavily forested areas to flat, treeless tundra. Lakes, inlets, islands, mud flats, coastal banks, and river beaches marked the land in identifying beauty. The emptying Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers created a large marshy plain that teemed with natural resources including migrating waterfowl, small and large land animals, fish and seals from down-river, and drifting wood. This landscape helped to create certain elements of pre-contact Yup'ik life and continues to shape present-day Yup'ik culture.

Descendants of these original inhabitants continue to live in this area in towns and villages that would surprise many outsiders. Western technology has entered the lives of those who dwell in the delta and Yup'ik Eskimo culture has undergone much change, but the environment, including the rivers and much of the former traditional life remains.

Yup'ik culture has always been spiritual and it is through the contemporary resurgence of ceremonies that many Yup'ik people now keep in touch with their ancestry. Centered around the beliefs of the people, ceremonies consisting of story-telling, songs, masks and dances now fulfill the task of creating a connection with the past. In this connection lies the strength of the tradition and the hope for the future.

Stereotypes and Languages

In the minds of many people, the word, 'Eskimo' conjures stereotypical images of igloos, ice fishing and fur-clad people, but, only five percent of Eskimo peoples actually used igloos (Fienup-Riordan 1990: 1). As is often the case, such stereotypical notions stem from misinformation and a tendency toward over-generalization -- many people think of "The Eskimos" (like "The Africans" or "The Aborigines") as *one* people. That this is not the case, is clearly illustrated by a great number of varying languages and cultures of the people.

The actual name 'Eskimo' has many English and French spellings and definitional variations. The earliest known form of the word, i.e. 'Esquimawes' was first used in an English treatise of 1584 (Damas 1984: 5 - citing Benveniste 1953: 244 - and Hakluyt [Vol. 2] 1935: 269). Another former common spelling was 'Esquimaux'. Evidence shows that the word may have been received by early English and French explorers from Spanish-speaking whalers, who in turn, may have taken the word from the Montagnais groups of people from the central North shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence (Damas 1984: 6).

Confusion about origins and different definitions prompted the 1970s tendency to change the word 'Eskimo' to 'Inuit' with reference to the people, regardless of local usages. Canadian Eskimos have adopted the term 'Inuit' (meaning 'people') as their correct ethnic title, but Aleut and Yup'ik speakers do not use this term for self-reference. The word, 'Eskimo' continues to be their choice of title (Damas 1984: 4).

Some Relevant Linguistic Facts

Linguistically, there are two branches of the Eskimo-Aleut language family; Eskimo and Aleut. The Aleut branch consists of one language with two different dialects spoken by people who live on the Aleutian islands. The Eskimo branch consists of two separate subgroups; Yup'ik and Inuit-Inupiaq. The latter is spoken in a continuous zone of closely related dialects in the area north from the Norton Sound of Alaska and east across the state into Canada, continuing to the coasts of Labrador and Greenland. The Yup'ik subgroup consists of five separate languages, i.e. Sireniki, Central Siberian and Navkanski which are all spoken in Siberia, and Pacific and Central Alaskan Yup'ik, which are the two languages spoken in Alaska. Elders in my family speak Central Alaskan Yup'ik.

Pacific Yup'ik is very different from Central Alaskan Yup'ik, which is the most common, but Central Alaskan Yup'ik is itself divided into five dialects: [1] the Unaliq dialect (spoken on the coast of Norton Sound from the village of St. Michael, north to Golovnin Bay); [2] General-Central Yup'ik is used among the coastal villages of Hooper Bay and Chevak; [3] Nunivak Central Yup'ik is spoken on Nunivak Island; [4] the Aglemiut dialect is used on coastal Bristol Bay, and [5] General Central Yup'ik is further divided into three sub-dialects, one of which is spoken along the Kuskokwim River below Aniak and south to Bristol Bay. The second is used among the people who live above Aniak. The third, which is a mixture of the two, is spoken on Nelson Island and the Nushagak River (Damas 1984: 52).

There are many theories about the development and separation of these languages and dialects. There is, for example, linguistic evidence of a previous, continuous Yup'ik-speaking region in Alaska: rhythmic accents and common linguistic innovations support this claim. Each Yup'ik language relates more closely to its nearest neighboring Yup'ik language, which further supports the idea that a former Yup'ik-speaking region was divided at some point by the Inuit-Inupiaq-speaking peoples, thus developing separately from there (Damas 1984: 53).

Language is a characteristic self-defining property of the people who own it. The word, 'Yup'ik' is a designating expression meaning "real or genuine person" (i.e. *yuk* = 'person', and *pik* = 'genuine or real' (Fienup-Riordan 1990d: 5 and Damas 1984b: 7). The name provides a clear statement about how Yup'ik people view themselves -- a view that is present in their everyday

lives, expressed in daily activities and in the special ceremonies that constitute Yup'ik life.

As residence and language are synonymous with the naming of the different Eskimo groups, therefore, in speaking of Yup'ik *people*, one has an idea of the language they speak and where they dwell. Here, I focus on the General central Alaskan Yup'ik-speaking peoples of the Yukon/Kuskokwim delta.

Environment

Language is one among many cultural characteristics they developed which distinguish the Yup'ik from other Alaskan Natives. One important factor was the specific natural environment which both fostered and protected the culture. For example, in the 1800s, as many as fifteen thousand people lived in the Yukon/Kuskokwim delta (Kawagley 1995: 12, citing Fienup-Riordan 1990). They were divided into twelve societal and territorial groups with further divisions into blood or marriage-related village clusters (not groups). The rich availability of resources in the area allowed for a relatively settled, rather than nomadic, life. Fixed subsistence ranges that included one main place of settlement surrounded by temporary seasonal sites were the hunting and dwelling grounds of the community. From the point of view of subsistence, travel between the territories of different village peoples was, for the most part unnecessary, except when fluctuations in the availability of annual resources called for a cooperative hunting effort between related extended family-members in neighboring villages. Reliable mutual aid, as well as further exchanges of food, names, feasts and other visits provided occasions that unified the people across this region, giving them a sense of identity as a people.

The rivers provided resources for the people in ways that allowed them the time to create dances, feasts and celebrations to share with each other. Good will exchanged at these times created strong relationships between separate communities, bound by a sense of mutual responsibility. The delta's rivers tended to unify the people, fostering the development of traditions.

Geographical location played an important part in the history of the Yup'ik, in contrast to the interior region of Alaska, which was opened to fur trade in the early 19th century as representatives of the Russian-American company traveled and scouted the numerous, accessible waterways.

Trading stations were set up at various points along the Kuskokwim River and river ways in the interior became heavily traveled by barges full of supplies heading upriver and furs heading back down. The delta region, however, was not so easily accessible. Its trade development remained relatively uninterrupted because the far reaches of Western Alaska, with its low coastal waters, tricky, shifting shoreline and unstable river banks prevented large trading and hunting ships from reaching the area by sea, keeping foreigners at bay, therefore delaying contact with Europeans as the exploration of this area was only possible from the interior region outward. Further delay is at-

tributed to the fact that the delta region, compared with the interior, was lacking in sought-after commercial resources such as furs and minerals. This meant that traders were not genuinely interested in getting there.

These contributing environmental factors kept white trappers, traders, prospectors and missionaries out of the delta region until the end of the 19th century.

When Edward W. Nelson, an American naturalist and collector of ethnographic materials for the Smithsonian Institution visited Hooper Bay in December of 1898 he noted that the people appeared to have seen few, if any, White men (Damas 1984: 237, citing Nelson 1899: 249-250).

Although contact was delayed, it was not avoided. Certain traditions have undergone changes since contact with white people, but it is reasonable to suggest that the existing cultural ties between past and present would not be as strong as they are had the natural environment and geographical location not played a role in delaying integration.

Oddly, two negative results of the delayed contact arose: [1] anthropological research about other native people gave rise to preconceived notions about Yup'ik, thus leading to the kinds of stereotyping mentioned earlier and [2] by the time sources were being documented describing Yup'ik life, changes had already occurred as the Yup'ik people had already been drawn into fur trading.

Russian fur traders created an emphasis on beaver pelts in exchange for glass beads, copper bracelets, metal tools, clothing and foods. A desire for these new goods led the Eskimos to focus on hunting for the purposes of trade rather than subsistence. In this way, the Russians changed the subsistence cycle of the Yup'ik and as a result, they became gradually dependent on the trading posts set up and run by the fur-traders, hence, there is no certain record of pre-contact Yup'ik life in existence (Damas 1984: 229-237).

Yup'ik Social and Spiritual Spaces

The beliefs that stem from Yup'ik spirituality pervaded all aspects of life. In Yup'ik villages many years ago, families did not live together in the kind of nuclear families common in Western societies. There was a distinct separation of the lives, labor and residences of men and women. Men lived together in the *qasgiq*, which was located in the middle of the community. It served as sleeping quarters, sweat-house, workshop, medicine lodge and dance hall. Women and children lived in separate houses that created a circle around the *qasgiq*. Boys moved into the *qasgiq* when they were old enough to leave their mothers' sides. Womanly duties, including sewing, preparation of meals and birthing took place in the *enet* (woman's house).

The distinct placement of the houses and their separate functions provides some understanding of the physical and social separation of men and women that is a constant feature of Yup'ik culture. The *enet*, as a place where women

performed their daily activities was off-limits to men. This was largely due to important symbolic associations between the *enet* and a woman's womb. Like a woman's womb, the *enet* was a sacred space. Pregnant women, on entering and exiting the house were instructed to do so speedily, as a delay in the entrance way was believed to cause delay and complications at the time of birth. In some ceremonies, gifts were literally thrown out of the opening of the doors and windows of the *enet*.

The men's house also carried significant symbolic and ceremonial weight. In addition to those concerned with subsistence, many activities were conducted in the *qasgiq*, including sweat baths, storytelling, ceremonies and the carving of weapons, tools and masks. Unlike the women's houses from which men were excluded, everyone in the community gathered in the *qasgiq* during times of important ceremony to participate in and witness the events. This reinforced the social position of the men's space as the physical, spiritual and social center of the village.

Social status was evident in the seating arrangements surrounding the center smoke hole of the *qasgiq*. Elders took the most desired places of honor in the house while children lined the ledges that ran along the walls. Age was one determining factor of high social prestige; another was that of *nukalpiaq* (good hunter). Being a successful hunter meant that the *nukalpiaq* gave the best care to animals, for it was believed that animals chose to give themselves to a hunter based upon the treatment they received, therefore, the *nukalpiaq* was given a place of authority and power because of his close relationship to the spirits of animals. He was further rewarded, both socially and materially, as he was always a prominent receiver of gifts in gift-giving ceremonies (Fienup-Riordan 1994b: 36).

The Smoke-Hole

Placement around the central smoke hole of the *qasgiq* was important spiritually because the human *qasgiq* was viewed as a representation of an underwater *qasgiq* belonging to animal spirits. People believed that the spirits could look through the hole to observe the behavior of the humans and treat them accordingly, therefore, the central smoke-hole of the *qasgiq* was an 'eye' and a passageway between human and spirit worlds.

The smoke-hole was a passage way for those who died to travel into the next world. A deceased person was never taken out of the *qasgiq* through the ordinary entrance, rather, he or she was always lifted out through the smoke hole so the spirit could make an easier passage to the next world. This readiness to help the passage of the deceased's spirit corresponds with the Yup'ik belief of procreation as substitution. That is, a loved one's spirit will come back to earth in a newborn baby. Death after a life of spiritually fulfilling endeavors is not seen as an end, but part of the cyclical nature of the universe. The belief is that spiritual life and physical life are not opposed, nor even separate from each other, but follow an ever-present cycle.

Yup'ik belief treats all separation as momentary, whether social, physical or metaphysical. There is no finality in death. Rather, it is a re-cycling of life; an exchange involving rebirth. This belief gave rise to the tradition of namesakes and gift-giving. A child bearing the name of the deceased marks the rebirth of the spirit and keeps alive the traditional connection between spiritual and physical worlds. Dances are a part of this because the main purpose of dance performances in ceremonies is to honor ancestors, spirits and namesakes.

The circling nature of spirits directed the beliefs and values by which early Yup'ik Eskimos lived. Circles appeared in the structure of the village, in dance performances and in masks. The cyclical spiritual beliefs are in this way transformed into an ever-present, tactile physical reality. The circle is an integral part of the spiritual understanding Yup'iks have of the world. Examples of Yup'ik art -- the connection between circles, dots, ringed centers and the spiritual vision of the universe abound in ethnographic accounts. The iconography of Yup'ik art (e.g. masks and dance fans) is beyond the scope of this essay, yet mention of it is necessary in order to show how the all-encompassing view of the universe is illustrated by art, then related to life.

In some contexts the encircling ring has been interpreted as signifying completeness and imparting spiritual wholeness. the implication is that the completed circle stabilizes and establishes the spiritual integrity of the artifact to which it is attached. More accurately for the Yup'ik Eskimos ... the circle and dot is a concrete metaphor for and means to achieve a dynamic movement between worlds, be it spiritual cycling, supernatural vision, or social transformation (Fienup-Riordan 1990: 55).

The idea of successive circles and their centers develops the theme of circularity:

Yup'ik cosmology can be schematically depicted as successive circles, each one simultaneously encompassing and encompassed. In fact, this cosmological circle is a recurrent theme in both social and ceremonial activity and paraphernalia. The circle-and-dot motif so common in Yup'ik iconography is designated *ellam linga* which literally means 'the eye of awareness' (Fienup-Riordan 1991: 65).

Important to understanding the philosophy and life-ways of the Yup'ik is knowledge about the word, *ella* and its variations. *Ella* basically means 'awareness', but variations can allow it to refer to weather, the world, creative force, God, universe and sky. Awareness of each of these created the basic values that developed the world view of the Yup'ik (Kawagley 1995: 15). *Ellam linga* could see human activity. This idea created the awareness by which the people lived.

The physical spaces in which the Yup'ik lived were simultaneously spiritual spaces because the spiritual and the secular were not separated. It is easy to see how successive circles moved outward from the central smoke hole to the encircling rings of people in the *qasgiq*, to the surrounding *enet* dwellings. Here were large physical circles making the spatial arrangements of everyday

life analogous to the spiritual circles a ceremony strove to complete. The circular spatial organization of the village and its center; the symbolic and spiritual dimensions of the men's and women's houses, the cyclicity of birth and death customs and in animal and human relations all appeared in ceremonial observances. The traditional ceremonial cycle brought all of these elements together.

Ceremonies

One purpose of the ceremonies was to transform relationships that, in turn, were meant to transform the world. There were separate worlds for humans and spirits, yet these worlds could be transcended. There were also separate daily activities for men and women, yet at important ceremonies and in ordinary life as a whole, both men and women were vital, respected members of the community. Special ceremonies recreated the world by creating passageways between the worlds.

Although the Yup'ik universe was considered to be in continual change, the cycles themselves provided a constant framework in which the universe remained. Ceremonies followed tradition in their occurrence, yet each performance was unique. The ability and willingness to change while keeping the original purpose of life in mind was the key. In this way, Yup'ik culture has always been able to survive. Images seen in ceremonies were images seen in life. Maintaining sight and passageway between worlds was an ever-present goal.

Dancing was (and still is) a major component of Yup'ik ceremonies, translating images and story into visible form. Dancing also incorporated symbolic reversals of social norms -- an important aspect of ceremony.

Ritualized movement in the ceremonies reversed the rules and rigorous separation between domains that daily life required. In so doing they powerfully recreated passages between world as well as the power to see into and in some measure control them. ... If successful, ritual activity had the power to recreate the world anew. To perform this creative transformation, the ceremonies reversed the normal relationships between men and women, and between the human and spirit worlds (Fienup-Riordan 1991: 65).

Winter Ceremonies

In earlier times, after the summer and fall months of harvest, villagers moved from seasonal camps to a permanent winter camp. It was here that the winter ceremonial season (the peak of the cycle) began. Small local observances included the Bladder Festival, the Asking Festival and the (annual) Feast for the Dead, among others. Larger, more elaborate ceremonies included the Great Feast for the Dead and the Messenger Festival.

The Bladder Festival marked the opening of the winter ceremonial season, and it was, perhaps, the most important festival. People believed that the *yua* or spirits of animals were located in their bladders. The festival was held to

ensure the rebirth of the animal spirits. The bladders of each animal killed throughout the year were saved for this occasion, and to prepare for it, *quariitaag* was observed.

In *quariitaag*, men and boys traveled from *enet* to *enet* receiving food from the women. The boys' bodies were painted to represent spirits. A few days later, *aaniq* occurred. Again, men and boys traveled through the village receiving special foods from the women. This was a reversal, as the women usually brought food to the men.

In the *qasgiq*, the men were first purified by a sweat bath. Then, the accumulation of bladders were inflated and hung around the walls in order to draw out the spirits so they could make their presence known. Many days were spent appeasing the animal spirits in forms of athletic sport, song, dancing and feasting. On the last day, the shaman¹ exited the *qasgiq* through the center smoke hole to visit the animals of the underwater *qasgiq* and request their return.

Shamans in the villages provided access to the supernatural world and gave guidance as to how the people were to negotiate their relationships with the natural world (Barker 1993: 17).

That night, community members exchanged gifts in the names of loved ones. Involvement of every community member was required to ensure the return of the animals. The last act and final appeasement of the spirits was to plunge the bladders into a hole in the ice and literally send them back so that the animal spirits could be reunited with their bodies. Since the people's *qasgiq* mirrored the structure of an underwater animal *qasgiq*, the ceremony tied the two worlds together.

The Asking Festival, sometimes referred to as *Petugtaq*, was based on the generosity of community members. Through gift exchange, it fulfilled the sense of good spirited fun that was needed to ensure a peaceful year. Beginning with the men and boys of the village proceeding from house to house with empty food bowls to be filled by women, as in the Bladder Festival, this act began the symbolic reversal needed in the ceremony by counteracting the everyday custom in which women brought food to the men's houses.

In the *qasgiq*, asking sticks were carved and men made models of gifts they wished to receive. Hung from the stick, the models were presented to the women who chose, made, and offered the gift. Men were then obliged to return a gift to the woman who answered their request. After the exchange, the women danced and the community continued to celebrate in feast and song. *Petugtaq* symbolized important aspects of social sharing that led to the development of relationships and tightly knit communities.

During the annual Feast for the Dead, spirits were invited to receive honor, food and gifts. Beginning with the invitation of spirits, carved stakes were placed at the graves of the people who had died the past year. This was meant to bring the spirits back to the life of the *qasgiq* by letting them know

the village was open and ready to receive them. In remembrance of the deceased, singing and dancing went on for days, and was performed to please them. *Elriq*, or the Great Feast for the Dead was basically the same ceremony, but done on a more grand scale. It was not done every year, but intermittently, when neighboring villages had gathered enough resources to ensure a hearty feast that would rightly appease the spirits. There was singing, dancing and offerings of food, both to guests and to the spirits. Gifts were given to those present in the name and honor of a deceased loved one. On the last day, the namesakes of the deceased were clothed in the finest assortment of goods gathered and the spirits were sent away pleased, as the relations between living and dead were strengthened. The dance done at this festival began with a song of invitation during which

Suddenly the drummers cease and rap sharply on the *inglak* with their drumsticks. The dancers stop in the midst of their movement and stamp on the floor, first with one foot, then with the other, placing their hands on their shoulders, bringing them down over their bodies as though wiping off some unseen thing. Then they slap their thighs and sit down. I am informed that this is to 'wipe off' any uncleanness that might offend the shades of the dead (Hawkes 1917: 28).

A festival that brought members of neighboring communities together was the Messenger feast (*Kevgiq*), for villages supplied one another with lavish gifts. This redistribution of wealth sparked a competition of generosity and the villages came together to dance and further exchange goods. *Kevgiq* honored the spirits who could see how people treated each other. At this festival, trained dancers representing animals and group dances illustrating stories provided the main form of entertainment.

The dancing wasn't only for entertainment: it formed the spiritual elements of the ceremony. Masked dances called *kelek* (from *keleg* - 'to invite to one's house') were especially powerful (Fienup-Riordan 1994: 304). Masks could represent animal spirits, aspects of nature, or even other people. They created powerful images and helped the dancer to enact stories. The people dancing behind the masks were the 'road' by which the shaman traveled to other worlds.

Kalek embodied yet another instance of the cyclical nature of Yup'ik cosmology whereby the past might be reborn in the future through appropriate action in the present (Fienup-Riordan 1991: 71).

The masks were spiritual representations, therefore, the masks could promote a spiritual vision. The dancing was meant to promote connections between, but not complete, the union of the two worlds. By shutting or keeping their eyes downcast, the dancers remained present in the physical world but separate from the spirit world.

Rather than being a contradiction, this practice suggests a continued tension between restricted sight and disguise as protection for the novice and full sight as a

prerogative of the spiritually knowledgeable and, in fact, a necessity for spiritual knowledge and transformation (Fienup-Riordan 1990: 65).

The mask (*kegginaquq* - literally 'thing that is like a face') was a central element in Yup'ik ceremonial dancing. Created as representations of animals or spirits, they were used to animate the story-telling involved in the dances. Creating the masks was done in a series of processes. The image of a mask was first seen in a shaman's dream which was related to a mask-carver who created the image with the help of the shaman's description, but relied mostly on his own interpretation and the natural shape of the wood. The most prominent design for a mask included a central face surrounded by rings called *ellanguat* ('pretend or model cosmos'). Attached to the rings were representational carved objects or feathers (Fienup-Riordan 1990: 59). With its ringed center, the mask created a pictorial definition of the universe. The eyes were seen as doors giving its wearer the ability to see and travel between human and spirit worlds. The circle and dot motif, so common to Yup'ik iconography came into play again:

Circles and dots placed at the joints thus recall the ability to pass from one world to another, perhaps representing the holes through which the passage was effected. The ability to see into other worlds was also characteristic of the shaman. Thus, it is particularly appropriate that the circle and dot, both an eye and a hole, equated physical and spiritual movement between worlds (Fienup-Riordan 1990: 53).

Unlike a Christian view where the meaning of life makes itself known after death on earth, the meaning of life to Yup'iks was known and immediately present. Following correct behavior and participating in ceremonies was the way to maintain that knowledge and the balance that existed between the physical and spiritual worlds.

Yup'ik Dancing

Rhythmic dances combined distinct gestures, story-telling, songs and the use of drums and masks. There were six styles of *yurat* (sing. *yuraq*- the Yup'ik term for dancing): [1] *arula* dances consisting of *yuraq*, verse and chorus; [2] *yurapiat* (storytelling dances); [3] *ingula* dances, which were slow, old-style dances performed by women following berry harvests; [4] *pualla* dances, primarily performed by men; [5] *yurat* done to *taitnauq* songs; and [6] *tek-igata'arcutet*, or proper entrance dances.

Fienup-Riordan documents a story told by Cyril Chanar of Toksook Bay which correlates the end of war and the origins of Yup'ik dancing:

Two men entered the open water in their kayaks with only a drum and a spear. They approached the village at night, waiting until morning to come close. Then they raised their paddles to make their presence visible. they approached slowly, saying, 'We fight. Some are afraid of death, but still we fight. But spears are meant for killing animals'. And they began to beat the drum, and the women came down to the river dancing. Then they said, 'we want to come into the *qasgiq*'. And they did, and took

council there. And now they fight only with dancing. And the men who came went home to their old village and said, 'No more war'. (1996: 197).

An integral part of all ceremonies, the gestures of the dancers told stories, and researchers could see how Eskimo economic subsistence was utilized in the use of furs, beads, feathers (for dance fans), *nasqurrun* (head-dresses), boots, drums, parkas, necklaces and *qaspeqs* (knee-length, hooded dresses worn by women, often highly decorated with beads and fur). Anthropologist Margaret Lantis described some women's dances thus:

The women did not move their feet; they either stood or sat quietly, moving their arms or the whole upper body in curving gestures. The use of finger masks and feather wands added to the pleasing effect. That these dances were rehearsed and memorized is certain, since several women would perform them in perfect unison ... some dancers portrayed the stalking of an animal, berry picking or other human activity. Others mimicked the dances of the opposite sex or any aspect of human behavior which seemed ludicrous, and still others imitated animal behavior. Both the contortion dances and the narrative dances were intentionally comic and highly appreciated (Lantis, quoted in Johnston 1990: 148).

Leaders call out dance songs, starting with a low chant. Large, flat drums (*inglaks*) made with seal or walrus gut stretched across a wide, circular hoop are held up by the seated drummers, who strike the drums with sticks, creating a base tempo and sound for the songs. At the peak of the song, the dancing begins, starting with simple, stretching moves which progressively grow more intense. The men often wear masks, and they kneel in front, making quick, staccato motions. The women stand behind using graceful, swinging motions and holding fans.

Through this spatial arrangement, the performers make an *ellanguat*, with a center of dancers and an outer ring of drummers.

Thus, both male and female dancers, holding dance fans and with their arms extended in the motions of the dance, are like gigantic transformation masks, complete with animal-spirit faces to which the wooden pierced hands are appended (Fienup-Riorden 1990: 65).

The fans she speaks of follow the design of masks and repeat the significance of *ellam linga*. The middle circle is woven and it is outlined, most often with beautiful fur or feathers. The fans vary in size and add to the eloquence of the dancers' movements.

Further discussions of Yup'ik ceremonial dances were written by Kawagley (1995: vii) a Yup'ik man "trying to come at things from a different perspective" and Johnston (1990). Kawagley says,

Visualization implies a delicate awareness of things perceived visually, through the mind's eye, including visions of the supernatural. Art may be thought of as a process, an idea, or a symbol to bring to an intelligible level an idea shared by a group of people. The making of masks is an expression of what one has experienced through one of the many levels of thinking. It is bringing into a tangible level the experience

one has seen or had in the world beyond. Art is the essence of this. Take for a moment a story of a man's seal-hunting trip as expressed in a Yup'ik dance. It will tell of his preparation, his expending of energy to get there, the behavior of his prey, his pride and joy in being successfully given a catch, and the reciprocation of making the seal welcome and using all of it for clothing and sustenance for the family and community members. The rhythmical drumming, chanting, and singing will help him to re-enact his feelings, help him to become the prey, by behaving and being like it. The traditional chanters and dancers possessed the ability to enter into the spirit of the hunter and prey. Visualization, and possibly the trance-like state of the person then seems to say that man, animal, and spirit become one. It means that as we imagine, we cannot separate ourselves from whatever we are picturing (Kawagley 1995: 34).

Dances always served to create connections to other worlds. Johnston puts it this way:

As a sensory-motor sign, Yup'ik dance may indicate the spirit's presence or the shaman's legitimacy; as a signal, it may be a marker for propitiatory action; as a metonym, Yup'ik dance may present a brief sequence from life or from supernatural existence; and as a metaphor, it may refer to human self-extension or projection (1990: 146).

Masked dances especially have served as a strong reminder of the connection to the worlds of animals and spirits. Dances embody the Yup'ik conception of the world. The beliefs that stem from this conception are the models by which Yup'iks live. Today, a dance festival, both in preparation and the actual event, consumes an entire village with its significance, just as it did in pre-contact times.

Change and Continuity

The Yukon/Kuskokwim delta was heavily populated prior to Russian contact in the early nineteenth century, but smallpox and influenza epidemics introduced by fur-trade networks devastated many communities. "As many as 60 percent of the Yup'ik people with whom the Russians were familiar in Bristol Bay and along the Kuskokwim were dead by the middle of June 1838" (Fienup-Riordan 1991: 46). 1838-1839 was the year of a smallpox epidemic, followed in 1852, 1853 and 1861 by influenza. The diseases hit some villages full force, while others were missed, but the overall drastic change in population led to a change of the traditional social groups because shifting village and family structures became necessary for survival. Disease was not the only thing that contact with Europeans brought to Alaska, eventually, Christian missionaries came as well.

Russian Orthodox priests first established a church north of the Alaskan Peninsula in 1841. From there, they soon penetrated the interior regions where they taught Christianity and tried to gain converts. "Missionaries were, by definition, intent on changing, improving or even eradicating all or part of the 'primitive' native culture with which they came into contact" (Fienup-Riordan 1991: 4). New versions of creation, of space, person-hood

and morality were forced onto indigenous communities by missionaries thus radically altering the beliefs of the entire culture. The encounter with Christianity disrupted the continuity of Yup'ik culture. It is always traditional concepts that are upset and destroyed by foreign concepts.

It is an old, familiar colonizing story: the establishment of schools and churches, teaching English instead of native languages (in some cases, banning native languages), and removing indigenous celebrations and festivals because of their strong connection to traditional beliefs.

Dancing became forbidden. Masked dances and the *Kelek* (masquerade) dances were among the first to be removed from Yup'ik practice. Because of their highly spiritual content, dances were considered dangerous by missionaries who called them "heathen idol worship, devil's frolic and black art" (Fienup-Riordan 1996: 140, citing Drebert 1959: 42 and the Society for Propagating the Gospel 1916: 41).

In 1885, the Moravian Church was established in Bethel, Alaska and the drive to eliminate dancing had a powerful headquarters. Two missionaries who had a great impact were John and Edith Kilbuck. In 1882, John Kilbuck wrote, "You remember the masquerades ... we know that they are no more than heathen rites, the one grand religious ceremony of the year. We have condemned them, and seek to suppress them" (quoted in Johnston 1990: 142). Edith Kilbuck wrote,

I would like to see anyone come into this village and suggest a return to the former way of living, to the wasteful potlatch, the simple, ridiculous dances and plays. Our people have too much else to think of and do. They are ... too busy bettering their condition to think of the past. ...

The children of today ask their parents "What is a Shaman? What did they do that they were criticized so?" And when they are told, they laugh and wish they could see the ridiculous performance "just for fun" (quoted in Fienup-Riordan 1991: 228).

Such recorded statements show the severity with which Christian missionaries took control of many aspects of Yup'ik culture. The ethnocentric beliefs of missionaries created their goals, and their goals had a deleterious effect:

On their arrival the Kilbucks both overestimated and underestimated the Yup'ik people. While they admired Yup'ik simplicity, the view of them as 'pure' arose less from respect for their culture than the romantic view of them as overgrown children with the missionaries as their parents. Ambiguously, this childlikeness implied both irrationality and unspoiled innocence. Thus, while the missionaries valued Yup'ik spiritual potential, they deprecated their actual state. Moravian policies in the field were based on a contradictory evaluation -- the Yup'ik people were equal in God's eyes and worthy of salvation, but Yup'ik beliefs were inferior. Eskimos merited respect as individual people but not as a 'race'. The Kilbucks were impelled to missionize among them not only to communicate the word of God but to alleviate the presumed poverty of Yup'ik culture (Fienup-Riordan 1991: 75).

The impact that Christian missionaries had on Yup'ik tradition and culture in the nineteenth century is still in effect. The rapid, forced change created dual cultural traditions which are still present in much of Yup'ik society today. People may outwardly give up the belief-structures that support their social identity, but what this usually means is that the traditional culture is driven 'underground'.

This confusing duality has caused high rates of suicide, violence and alcoholism. Not only that, stereotypical images of Eskimos have had detrimental impacts. Accompanying the images of simple, peaceful, igloo-dwelling, conservationist victims of western society (one set of stereotypes) are images of the drunken, impoverished, 'Native' (another set of stereotypes).

The loss of indigenous traditions and heritage is evident in less culturally knowledgeable youth -- such as myself. My grandmother, Hannah Stormo, remembers going to see dances. She tells me of the wonderful drums the men would pound, and of seeing the ladies dancing, looking up in the sky, telling stories about fishing and hunting. "We used to love to go over and watch them dance," she says, but even she was not allowed by her mother to participate (From a telephone interview, 5 March, 1966).

It is remarkable that the changes brought about by new technology, laws, economics, structural re-organization and the prohibition of belief and ceremonies have not caused complete destruction, for, as I have tried to show, Yup'ik perspectives on what life is all about were quite different from western perspectives brought about by contact with 'whites'. The world view that expressed itself in the ceremonies, songs, dances, feasts and social organization, was hard for non-Yup'iks ('non-natives') to understand, but to this day, the reality of those beliefs strive to take shape in the changed context of Yup'ik society.

The weakening or loss of certain traditions is one thing. Fortunately, the assumption and implementation of halting the cultural destruction now lies chiefly with Native peoples themselves. Over the past few years, there has emerged a growing interest in cultural heritage and in the passing on of traditional knowledge to youth. In that growing interest lies a genuine renaissance. Schools now introduce dancing to their students and dance ceremonies are annual events in which much pride is taken. In re-discovery lies new life and a new understanding among Yup'ik people.

The functions of the dances as they relate to Yup'ik society have changed: no longer performed as part of a strictly religious cycles, the ceremonies are now an explicit part of cultural preservation, teaching and enjoyment. The settings for dance ceremonies have changed as well as the dances, which are now viewed by audiences packed into school gyms and city hall buildings. Although some aspects of Yup'ik dances have changed, much is still congruent with the dances of the past. The forms, movements and contents of the dances seen and performed today are similar to those of dances performed in the past.

The Present

There are now many dance groups who perform Eskimo dances in Alaska. The Bethel Native Dancers, the King Island Dance group, the Kicaput Dancers, Nunamta Yup'ik Dancers and the Ahnavuk Point Hope Dancers are but a few. During the summer months, short performances are held almost daily in anchorage, mostly for the enjoyment and benefit of tourists. There are many performances and festivals, however, that are more traditional in their role.

The *Yuplit Yuraryarait*, for example, is a dance festival that is now held every three or four years. It began in the small town of Andrefsky in rural Alaska in 1981 as entertainment during the low points of a sled dog race. The next year, the festival grew to include members from nine villages. The following year, it grew even more. Since then, three more festivals of this kind have been held in various villages around Alaska. The latest was held in 1996 in Toksook Bay (Dunham 1996: F1).

The *Yupiit Yuraryarait* festival is not held in the city as a tourist attraction, but held in the winter months of traditional ceremonies in the far reaches of 'the bush'. It is organized by the Mayors of delta villages for the members of surrounding communities. It strongly resembles the Messenger Festivals held long ago in the same area. There is no need for commercial advertisement or admission charges and the entire ceremony is conducted in the Yup'ik language. Feasting and dancing of this kind unites the communities in spirit.

Unlike the smaller scale dances that can be seen in cities, the dancing done at the *Yupiit Yuraryarait* is on a much more grand, elaborate scale. For example, on stage in Anchorage, one may see three or four drummers and a few more dancers, but in the dark of a winter night in a village of the Yukon/Kuskokwim delta, one can see at least twice that many participants. Thirty or more dancers performing at once with as many or more drummers create an intense atmosphere that celebrates cultural expression. The dances of *Yupiit Yuraryarait* last well into the night during the festival. Old dances that relate stories of hunting now mix with new dances relating stories of snow machines and basketball. The vibrancy of the celebration that correlates old and new tradition brings new meaning to Yup'ik culture (Dunham 1996: F1).

Despite the efforts of the Kilbucks and other missionaries, dance festivals have been held annually in Bethel, Alaska, for years. In 1984, a new name was given to this festival: The Camai Dance Festival. My great-uncle, Elias Venus has attended for many years. He tells me they are interesting to go to and watch. He relates how the dances express deep feelings and tell stories about some kind of particular thing or belief as the dancers stand and make motions and sing.

My uncle speaks Yup'ik, but said that when people sing this language it is very hard to understand the words. "When it is sung," he explained, "it sounds different from when it is spoken because it is being expressed so

differently." He said the festival lasts for days and days and things around town get very busy for awhile as hundreds and hundreds of people come to see and participate.

I asked him if the dances had changed much over the years, and he said that they have not. "Look, see, what is happening is that the older people are teaching the younger ones, so the old dances are being revived. There's not a lot of new stuff or moves. It's a lot about daily life, maybe what they believe, or animals they might see: hunting, or birds they might be throwing spears at. It is always so interesting to see" (From a telephone interview, 9 March, 1996).

Susan Charles, a member of the planning committee for the Camai Dance Festival related her thoughts to me:

In the past, song and dance were a critical part of Yup'ik life and spirituality. We were very spiritual, you know. Well, today things don't always have those same qualities. Masks don't have the same significance [now] as then, because of acculturation with westerners and religion and everything, but it's still very important. [The dancing] helps us understand why we are the way we are today. It's stories and animals, birds, and fields that are reflected in the dancing (From a telephone interview, March 11, 1996).

When asked where the dances came from, she said, "they are old -- passed down from ancestors. Now there are new groups, too, who dance new things. There are many very creative composers." She continued:

There is a growth in our high schools and a greater interest in our culture. This year we will even have a mask exhibit. It has really helped to revitalize the culture since it brings people and art together. Also, it creates a positive Yup'ik identity for people to relate to (Ibid.).

She stressed cultural exchange and the awareness of each other that the festival promotes. During the festival there are Indian and Eskimo seminars about the meanings of costumes, songs, dances and masks. This helps to create an awareness of Yup'ik culture.

Dancing thus continues to be an important element of Yup'ik life. It not only relates meaning, but it brings meanings from the past to the present.

Since the elders used to tell us stories about our way of life and what Eskimo songs and dances were, I'd think to myself, 'There's my ancestors singing to me'. It felt like these elders are telling me messages from our ancestors, that's how I really felt: 'Here are my ancestors' and you express them by motion and song (Peter Tuluk, from Chevak, quoted by Barker 1993: 131).

I think the movements in contemporary Yup'ik dancing remain largely unchanged because the elders have been the teachers in this resurgence of interest in dancing. Movement memory has kept the tradition alive, even through years of change. This idea is expressed through the words of Chuna McIntyre, an artist and dancer from Eek: "Movements we feel can transcend time and space within families because we believe in this cycle, this whole

cycle of life" (quoted in Barker 1993: 131). Just as namesakes in Yup'ik belief held the spirit of a loved one, so too did patterns of movement.

As two world views grew alongside each other in the Yup'ik villages of Alaska over the past century and a half, ceremonies took a back seat to "progress." Confusion emerged. Instead of the stories, teachings and spiritual views reflected in the old ceremonies, emphasis was placed on the material and technological aspects of Euro-centered culture, and confusion reigned, evident in the problems of suicide and alcoholism that have made headline news.

The more serious problem was lack of indigenous cultural knowledge, and, I think this is the main cause of the suicides and alcoholism. It is the problem of lack of cultural knowledge that I have faced. Knowing very little about the traditions of my culture is something I have only recently begun to change. As I read and learn about past ceremonies and beliefs, there is a certain sadness I feel that is connected to the passing of traditions. Mixed with the sadness, however, is an excitement -- the excitement generated at contemporary Yup'ik ceremonies.

Through the dances that are now emerging as a celebrated part of life, I and other Yup'iks can keep in touch with our ancestors and their way of life as well as create a strong future through new traditions. As dancers dance and singers sing, a connection between the past and the present paves the way for a strong future. Through the changed ceremonies and dances, Yup'ik culture again demonstrates its strong ability to survive. By connecting an acceptance of change with past traditions, we can move forward with new clarity, vision and strength in our beliefs and culture.

Emily Johnson

Note

¹ Eskimo shamans were powerful people, men or women, who were known for their powerful connection to the spirit world. They were called upon in times of crisis, sickness and ceremony to provide insights and knowledge from their spiritual visions.

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