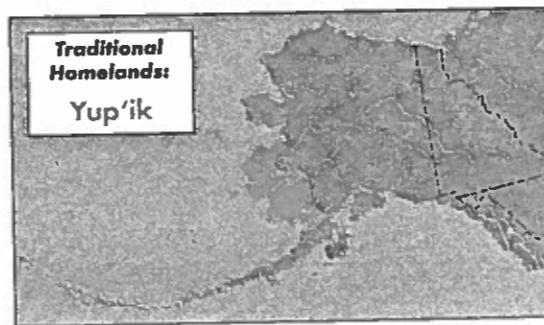


# Yup'ik

Every March, hundreds of people arrive for Camai Dance Festival in Bethel, a Yup'ik regional hub near the mouth of the Kuskokwim River. They come from villages throughout the region, toting fancy parkas and headdresses trimmed in wolf and wolverine fur, dance fans ruffed with tufts of caribou hair, seal-gut drums, and maybe a few newly carved wooden masks. Most come by airplane and snow machine, but at least a few hook up their dog teams for brisk journeys across the delta's frozen rivers and sloughs. At night, the sounds of howling sled dogs echo through town, an ethereal chorus to the beating of dance drums and Yup'ik words raised in song.

Gatherings such as this occur in towns and villages throughout Alaska's Yup'ik region, often in wintertime when people are generally less busy with fishing, hunting and gathering activities and have only jobs and school to plan around. Community potlatches and dance festivals bring people together, providing



important cultural links spanning generations.

Of all of Alaska's Native people, the Yup'ik are the most populous, with a booming birth rate, and have the largest number of individuals who still speak the language. About 20,000 Yup'ik people live in Alaska today, most in small villages along the Bering Sea coast and the lower Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers. Outside the regional centers of Bethel (population 4,600) and Dillingham (population 2,000), Hooper Bay is the largest Yup'ik village — and one of the fastest growing villages in Alaska —

with about 900 people. Most Yup'ik villages are considerably smaller and tend to be made up of extended, interconnected families.

The Yup'ik traditional homelands extend south from Unalakleet River through the fan-shaped deltas of the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers and down along Bristol Bay, where Yup'ik culture eventually mingles with the Alutiiq and Aleut. In the Yup'ik stronghold of the Yukon and Kuskokwim deltas, many children still grow up speaking Yup'ik at home. In perhaps 17 of the 60 Yup'ik villages, children learn Central Yup'ik as their first language. This is the most widely spoken Yup'ik language with about 10,500 Native speakers. Local radio stations broadcast in the language, school children read Yup'ik texts, and in some places

*FACING PAGE: Yup'ik women cut salmon to hang on drying racks at Hooper Bay. (Roy Corral)*



*Villagers celebrate Russian Christmas at St. Seraphim Chapel in Lower Kalskag. The three days of services held in January were led by Father Peter Askoar, a traveling Russian Orthodox priest out of Russian Mission. (Roy Corral)*

elders can still converse in Yup'ik with their grandchildren. There are numerous dialects of Central Yup'ik, and although subtle variations exist between villages, sometimes giving slightly different meanings to the same word, most of the dialects are mutually intelligible.

Just as their ancestors were hunter-gatherers, so are the modern Yup'ik people. Seasonal activities vary somewhat depending on location, but may include hunting sea mammals such as seal, walrus, and whales; river fishing in summer for salmon and trout, in winter for whitefish and tomcod; gathering wild vegetables, berries and eggs; going into the

uplands and mountains for ground squirrels, moose and caribou; and harvesting ducks, geese and other waterfowl that migrate by the millions each year into the Central Yup'ik region's rich wetlands, part of the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge.

Still, Alaska's Yup'ik villages are hundreds of miles away from paved highways and urban centers, and while they are connected to the outside world by telephones, computers and daily airplane flights, they remain largely self-contained bastions of Yup'ik culture. The region's many waterways are the Yup'ik road system, traveled by boats in summer and snow

machines or vehicles, mostly taxis, in winter.

Although some people in most villages work for the state or village government, schools or local stores, cash jobs are generally scarce. Commercial salmon and herring fisheries give many villagers their only opportunities to earn money, so fishing, hunting and gathering remain an integral part of life. While the subsistence harvest of fish, game, birds, greens and berries is an economic and nutritional necessity, it is also much more: It is a lifestyle central to the Yup'ik culture. Connected to the acts of harvesting and gathering are traditional celebrations and stories, through which the people learn how to live and relate to the world around them.

The Yup'ik live close in many respects to the ways of their ancestors and, at the same time, retain their cultural identity in the context of the larger society. For instance, students from the Yupiit School District near Bethel have a presence on the Internet. Janice George, an 8th grader from Akiachak, incorporates sound in her description of village life so that Internet users hear her language, such as her Yup'ik name *Mikiicag Aqvung'ag*. Here are some of the other things she has to tell people: "In Akiachak there are not highways, no running water except in the teacher's houses and the laundry. People think we live in igloos,

but we stay in regular houses....In fish camps we don't have any electricity. We have steambath houses where we wash. We cut fish all summer from May to August.... We go swimming to my grandma's fish camp or to the sandbars...." And then she includes computerized pictures of her village, her classmates, and a king salmon at fish camp.

Of all of Alaska's Native groups, the Yup'ik were among the last to experience prolonged contact with outsiders and were generally spared foreign intrusion until the early to mid-1800s. The Russians made limited explorations of Yup'ik country, with small expeditions along the Bering Sea coast and occasional forays upriver toward the Interior. The Russian Orthodox Church established a small mission and a few Russian trading posts were opened, including one in Norton Sound at St. Michael. This brought direct access to trade goods, and created a collector's market for Yup'ik-made items such as coiled grass baskets. But, for the most part, the Yup'iks were left alone until after the transfer of Alaska to the United States in 1867.

In the mid-1880s, salmon canneries opened on Bristol Bay and Moravian missionaries arrived on the Kuskokwim River, where they established a church and school across from the Yup'ik village of *Mumtrekhlogamiu*; they called the new settlement "Bethel." The Catholics took the mouth of the Yukon River and later

*Artist Rachel Smart displays some of her basketry and Yup'ik Eskimo dolls at her home in Hooper Bay. (Roy Corral)*

opened a mission at St. Marys. As in many other parts of Alaska, the early missionaries showed little understanding of aboriginal belief systems and stifled many Yup'ik practices, which included making spirit masks to seek bountiful harvests and holding potlatch feasts and dance celebrations to honor the spirits of people and animals.

Generally, however, the inner delta had few resources to attract explorers and even during the early 20th century, when gold discoveries brought droves of newcomers to parts of

western Alaska, most of the Yup'ik territory was basically ignored except for river corridors. It wasn't until the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (1971) and oil development on the North Slope (1970s) that the Yup'ik villages fully felt the grip of modern society. The land claims settlement, combined with the state's windfall of oil revenues, brought rapid change — modern housing, electricity, telephones, daily air service to regional centers, and in some cases, running water and sewage systems.

In recent years, several major religious



denominations have apologized for denouncing the Alaska's Native ways as pagan, and the Yup'ik have embraced their cultural dances and feasting with unbridled enthusiasm. In 1964, when Father Rene Astruc arrived as administrator of the St. Marys mission, he sent out word that he had no objection to potlatches. Within a year, the first was held. Now potlatches and dance festivals draw villages together regularly, occurring almost as

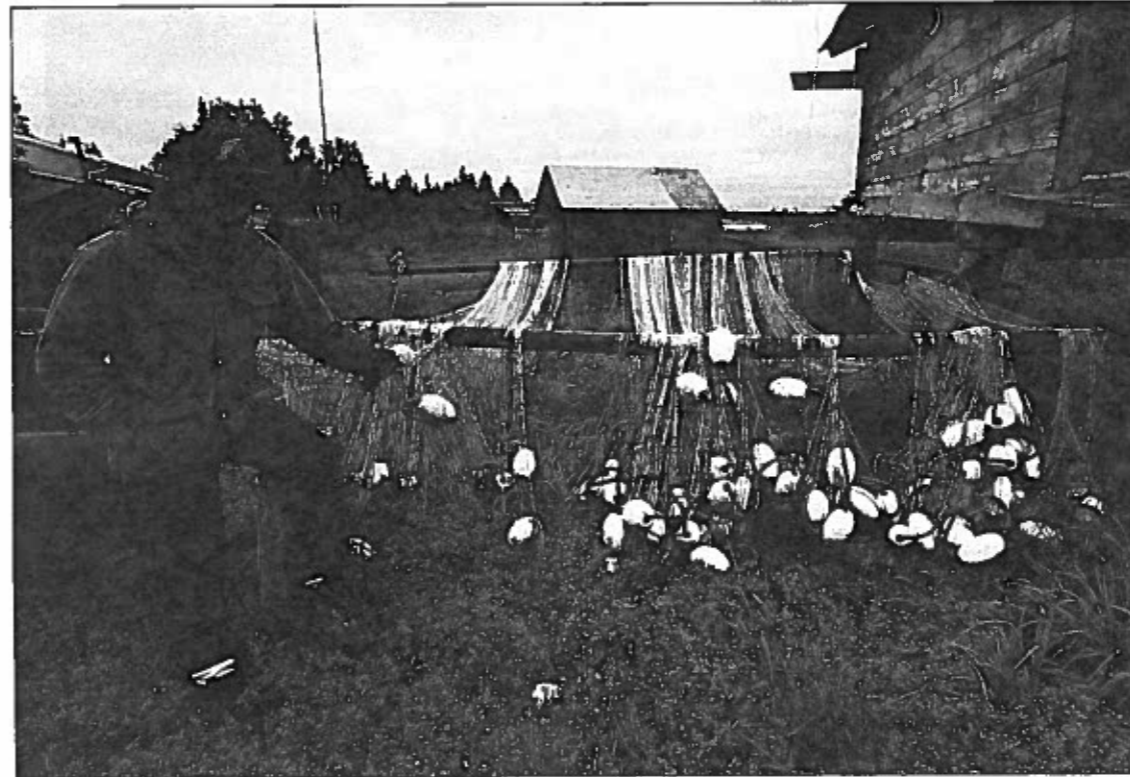


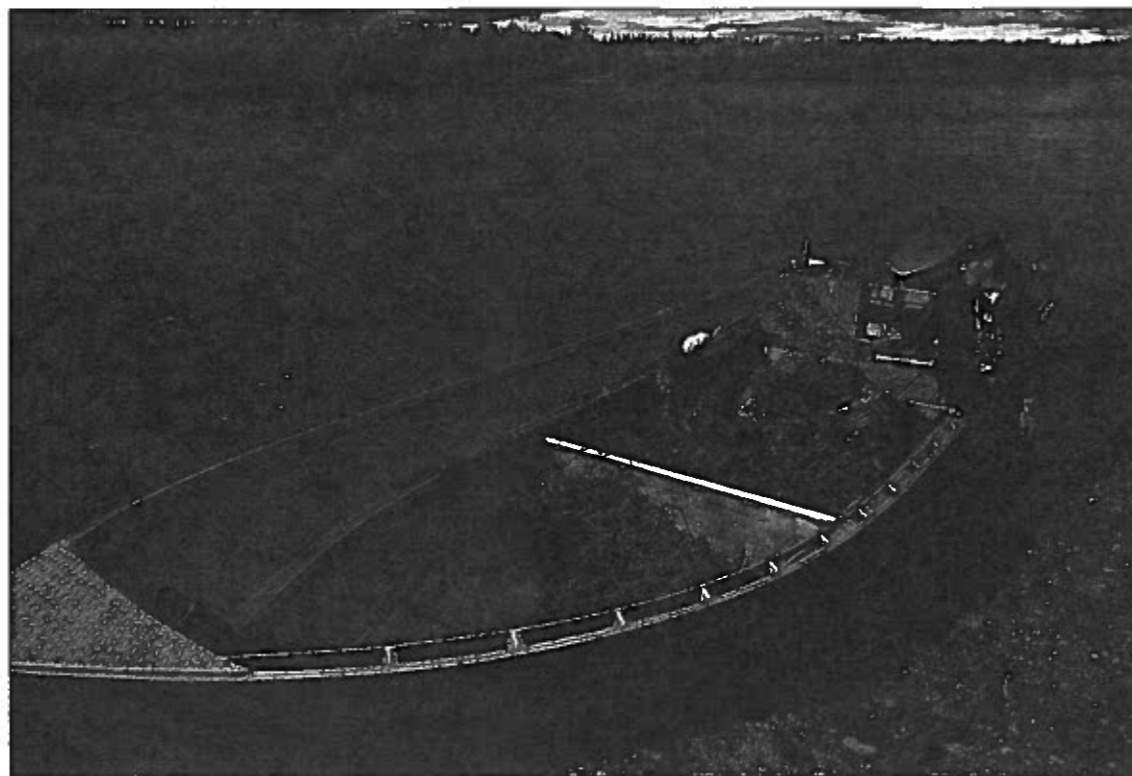
often as, and sometime simultaneously with, community basketball tournaments. "People realized you must have dancing," said Andrew Kelly of Emmonak several years ago. "Sometimes we have dancing every night. The dancing spirit is alive. It's very much alive today."

Here's how Torin Kuiggpak Jacobs, of Bethel, describes Eskimo dancing, lamenting how much he misses it during the school year when he attends Loyola University in Chicago: "I take so much pride in dancing to songs that my grandparents have danced and sang, and their grandparents and their grandparents before them. Not only is it the pride, but the

*BELOW LEFT: Nels Hedlund, a Yup'ik sled builder, mushed the mail between Bethel and Aniak during the early 1930s. He and his wife Rose, an Athabaskan from Nondalton, raised their family at a homestead on Lake Iliamna, where he continued making sleds until his death in 1991. He was 77 when this picture was made, a year before he died. (Roz Goodman)*

*BELOW: Jim Hurley of Ekwok, a Yup'ik village on the Nushagak River, inspects subsistence fishing nets. The former mayor of Ekwok, Hurley also fishes commercially in Bristol Bay and trains sled dogs. (Greg Syverson)*





*ABOVE: John Ivanoff, 21, uses spruce boughs to protect moose and bear meat during a September hunting trip. Ivanoff's older cousin Fritz George led about a half-dozen male relatives on the outing from Akiachak, a two-day journey up the Kuskokwim River to Stony River, where they camped and hunted for more than a week. They took two bull moose, a black bear and a brown bear home to their families. (Chlaus Lotscher)*

*ABOVE RIGHT: Maggie Michaels, a Yup'ik from Bethel, deftly uses an ulu to cut king salmon her husband caught in a drift net at their fish camp on the Kuskokwim River. (Richard Montagna)*

extreme spiritual feeling I receive. At dance festivals when a member of the audience yelled 'pumyad' (bum-e-yaw, meaning encore) I would gladly repeat the dance with all the energy I had left, to please the audience, myself and my people."

Other elements of Yup'ik culture alive and visible today come from the traditional skills of carving, skin sewing and basket making. Yup'ik people still make many cultural items for their own use, such as blackfish traps, spear points, fur boots, parkas and dance fans, as well as making them to sell to collectors of Native art. The Yup'ik have also encouraged



continuation of their language by including bilingual and Yup'ik immersion programs in their schools. The less visible aspects of Yup'ik culture, as for the other Native cultures in Alaska, are the beliefs shaping their view of the world. The missionaries did their work well in rural Alaska, converting people with a passion that has brought generations of devout followers. But at the same time, the Yup'ik, like other Natives, have recognized that their





*Yup'ik children romp with a homemade sled in Bethel, regional hub near the mouth of the Kuskokwim River. In the smaller villages, youngsters curious about visitors may ply them with questions such as: "Who are you and how long are you staying?" (Don Pitcher)*

ancestor's cosmology was not exclusive of Christianity, and that many of the basic values espoused by Christian doctrines were also integral to Native spirituality. Reciprocity, sharing and conscious awareness are such elements of the Yup'ik world view. "Things are

not always what they seem...many possibilities exist and we are not to be indifferent to other people's needs," explains Elsie Mather, Yup'ik linguist and author of *Cauyarnariuq: A Time for Drumming* (1985). "Everything on Earth deserves recognition, care and respect." ■