

Culture and Change for Iñupiat and Yupiks of Alaska

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Cultural Heritage of the Alaskan Inuit

The forces of nature determined the life-style of the forebears of the Iñupiat and the Yupiks, i.e. the Inuit (Eskimo) people of Northern and Western Alaska. Their ancestors lived along the coast of the Arctic Ocean and the Bering Sea in some of the most severe environmental conditions known to humankind. They survived and flourished by harvesting their food and fuel and the raw materials from which they made clothing and housing and the implements of culture on land and sea. The resourcefulness of those forebears and the cultural legacy that they have left are a source of pride to their descendants. The latter are determined that the culture that they bequeathed will not disappear from the earth.

According to Iñupiaq legend, Inuit migrated from Siberia to Alaska to escape from other warring groups. It is said that a large group of Inuit settled in a place called Utuqqaq, along a river which they also called Utuqqaq (located near Wainwright, in northern Alaska). Warring groups descended upon them periodically and some of the Utuqqaq people, wanting to live in a more peaceful environment, uprooted themselves once more and went further east. They settled in a place called Pijuksragruk (the exact location is unknown to the author. The translation of the Iñupiaq name indicates an area containing protuberances from the ground; there are areas with many pingos, large mounds formed over the frozen cores of former lakes, such as in the Tuktoyaktuk region of the Mackenzie River Delta in Western Canada.) No one knows how long the early Inuit remained in Pijuksragruk. Each time a warring society reached their domain they moved, eventually populating the Arctic sea coast. It is said that this is how the Inuit people reached Greenland (Ahmaogak and Webster, 1968). Modern Greenlanders say that they are descendants of people of Utuqqaq. So they are told by their tradition bearers, the elders.

The Inuit who migrated northwards and eastwards developed a culture based primarily on whaling, hunting seals and walrus in the coastal areas, and hunting for caribou and fishing in the interior. The wealth of the sea enabled them to establish fairly large, permanent communities centered around Point Barrow (Nuvuk) and Point Hope (Tikiraq) on the North Slope, and at Cape

Prince of Wales (Kinjigin) on the east coast of Seward Peninsula.

Activities within the whaling communities were centered in the whaling captains' traditional communal organization called the *qargi* in Iñupiaq. *Uqaluktuat* 'life experience stories' and *unipkaat* 'legends' were told in the *qargit* (plural form of *qargi*). Here people learned their oral history, songs and chants. Young boys and men learned to make tools and weapons while they listened to the traditions of their forefathers.

The lives of the Inuit revolved around the seasons and the abundance and availability of resources that changed with them. During the dark period from November to January, when the sun does not rise above the horizon, the Iñupiaq people had fun dancing and feasting in the *qargit*. After the joyful activities, the men worked on their hunting weapons and the women sewed new clothing while waiting for the two-star constellation *Aagruuk* (the Morning Star) to appear on the horizon in late December. The appearance of *Aagruuk* indicates that the daylight hours will soon grow longer. After *Aagruuk* had firmly established itself in the skies, the men began going to their winter hunting areas where they hunted polar bears and seals. In early January the Iñupiaq people cleaned their homes and ice cellars and put new wicks in their seal oil lamps.

In late January and February, when the days had become longer and homes and ice cellars had been cleaned, they donned their new clothing and held competitive games outside. They played games of skill and endurance. There was a keen sense of competition for excellence among men in each *qargit*. Groups went from house to house shouting "Hii! Hii!" It was a celebration of the renewal of light and of life.

In March the whaling captains and their crews began preparing their whaling implements and boats. The old skin of the whaling boat was removed and put outside to dry and be bleached by the sun. The boat frame was prepared to receive a new covering the following month.

Ice cellars are cleaned in early April. In a whaling community the ice cellars must be cleaned to ensure that the whale which the captain will receive has a clean place to put its *atigi* (parka). The meat and the *maktak* (skin with blubber) of the whale is referred to as the *atigi* which is given to the whaling captain by the whale. Out on the ice, when the whale is being butchered, the head is removed and returned to the ocean. This allows the soul or spirit of the whale to return to its home and don a new parka. Much respect is given to the whale, as it is to all of the animals that give themselves to the Inuit people.

During the month of April, too, the whaling captain's wife is busy supervising other women while they sew on a new skin cover of at least five *ugruk* (bearded seal) skins for the whaling-boat frame.

In April smaller Arctic seals give birth to their young out on the Arctic ice. The female polar bears have already left their winter dens with their cubs the previous month. In the interior it is time to hunt the caribou that migrate north for the summer. The land is awakening. In late April, the whaling crews go out on the ice and put up camp to wait for migrating whales.

In May, the whaling season is at its peak. Many whales migrate along the open leads and under the ice. There is great anticipation and waiting; when a whale is caught, there is joy and excitement. The whole community is one in spirit and there is jubilation. The seals, with their young, sun themselves on the ice. Eider ducks begin their migration eastward along the arctic ice. Everything is alive. The ice on the rivers loosens and begins to break up. There is no darkness, for the sun never dips below the horizon.

The whaling season ends in the first week of June, as the sea ice begins to grow soft and unsafe. Many families go goose-hunting in late May and June to gather the newly-laid eggs but hurry back to be part of the whaling celebration called *Nalukataq*, which is still a central part of Iñupiaq culture. Each successful *umialik* (whaling captain) prepares and offers a feast for the entire village, sharing the meat and *maktak* of the whale with all the people. To be a successful *umialik* and to offer a *Nalukataq* to the village is to occupy the most prestigious position in Iñupiaq society.

In Point Hope the *Nalukataq* feasting and dancing usually last for three days. In Barrow each feast lasts a day. The celebration takes its name from the traditional activity of tossing people into the air on a blanket made of four bearded seal skins sewn together. Men and women hold the blanket which has loop handles all around the circumference. A jumper gets on the blanket and allows the people to stretch the blanket tightly and then forcefully propel the person into the air. The people admire the acrobatic feats of the jumpers and laugh good-naturedly at their failures. During this activity and throughout the whole day of feasting, men and women sing songs for the *Nalukataq*. During *Nalukataq* everyone receives new boots and parka covers.

After the whaling celebrations in late June, many families go camping. They harvest fish, caribou and ducks. In Point Hope, it is time to gather eggs from the sea bird colonies on cliffs along the coast. The tundra is dotted with families living in tents, enjoying life and harvesting the bounty of the land and sea which is so freely given during the summer season.

August is the time to dry meat and fish and fill the ice cellars in preparation for the winter to come. Walrus-hunting, which began in July, is still in season. At this time the walrus hide and blubber is set aside to ferment into *urraq*, a delicacy which is an acquired taste. The sun begins to dip below the horizon each evening. At this time the caribou shed the velvet from their antlers. The ocean fog rolls in and out. And there is mist in the air. It is all very beautiful.

Frost comes in late August and early September. The young eider ducks and other birds begin their migration south. It is the time for fall whaling. The shore ice has long since drifted away, so the whaling boats leave from the shore and wait for the returning bowhead whales to pass. Now people make nets and snowshoes for use later on in the fall.

The ground, lakes, rivers, and lagoons freeze over and are covered with snow in October. Many people go ice fishing. The caribou are rutting, and it is getting darker. The people who spent summer in tents scattered along the Arctic coast have returned to the villages. Winter is settling in.

After the separation of the summer months the villagers begin socializing with other village groups. During the latter part of December and early January a social and economic gathering may be held in one of the villages. This gathering is called *Kivgiqsuat*, the Messenger Feast. The *umialit* (whaling captains) and their crews host these gatherings. An *umialik* and his crew usually spend a few years preparing for *Kivgiqsuat*. Food is gathered and stored, gifts are made or hunted for, new clothing and numerous other preparations are made for the gathering. During *Kivgiqsuat* partners from different villages exchange gifts. The *umialgit* show the extent of their wealth and power through *Kivgiqsuat*, the celebration which brings Iñupiat from different villages together and strengthens their social ties (Spencer, 1959).

The last Messenger Feast on the North Slope of Alaska was held in Wainwright (Alaska) in 1914. Presently the people of arctic Alaska are revitalizing the tradition of the Messenger Feast. January 1988 saw the first celebration of the Messenger Feast in Barrow in eighty years. True to the spirit of *Kivgiqsuat* several pledges were made that were directly related to social and political alliances. Additionally, one village vowed to use the memories of their elders to enhance the celebration for the following year. This cultural revitalization can only add to the richness of the lives of contemporary Iñupiat.

Oral Literature Through Legends, Accounts of Life Experiences and Songs

Our languages are reflections of our world views which are shaped by the natural and supernatural environment in which we live. Oral literature reflects what is important to us. In the absence of a written record, oral literature contains the history and transfers the wisdom of society.

Much of Iñupiaq and Yupik oral literature focuses on the interaction between the natural and supernatural. Iñupiaq oral literature falls into two categories. The *unipkaat* (legends) are accounts of the travels and lives of people at a time when humans could become animals and vice versa, and such transformations are a recurring theme of the *unipkaat*. The main characters of the legends usually have shamanistic powers. *Unipkaat* may contain

episodes of *anatkut* (shamans) changing themselves into animals or birds, thus acquiring the attributes (e.g. strength, flight and even appetite) associated with each animal.

The second category of oral literature consists of stories and life experiences in a more recent setting, called *quliaqtuat* (those that are told). They may also contain episodes of humans becoming animals, but their characters can be identified through genealogies of modern Iñupiat.

The themes of grandparent and grandchild, of the young woman who refuses to marry, of the orphan and of successful hunters are found throughout Iñupiaq and Yupik stories. Legends and life experience stories tell of preferred modes of behaviour, the consequences of misbehaviour or non-adherence to taboos, and also entertain. The legends are the oral history of the Iñupiat and the Yupiks. Many of the stories contain songs which were used by the shamans when performing their feats. Shamans were active well into the twentieth century. The following account was given by an old Iñupiaq man in the early 1960s. He observed the activities of at least four shamans in Barrow while a young boy.

“Then in one of the nights Masapiluk and Atuqtuaq, two of the more powerful ones (shamans), with Kuutchiuraq as their third, all went out. We did not know why they went out, leaving Igalaq behind. They were gone for quite a while; then they began returning one by one. When Kuutchiuraq and Atuqtuaq emerged through the *katak* (inner trapdoor in subterranean sod houses leading into the living area), Igalaq would call them by name and touch them on the crown of the head. Masapiluk did not return with the two.”

“Finally Igalaq said, “Let him do as he pleases.” Then he left the *katak* ‘trapdoor’ area and came to sit on the sleeping platform. As we waited expecting him (Masapiluk), all of a sudden from the entrance hallway a polar bear began entering! It was growling! It stayed in the entrance hallway for a while then began coming towards the *katak*. I watched the *katak* intently. As I was watching it, a person’s head began emerging. When it surfaced it was carrying pieces of blubber in its mouth! It was also carrying blubber in its arms. It was growling. Igalaq just watched him. He did not do anything. Finally it entered. After sitting down in the middle of the floor with its legs spread out, it placed all of the blubber it was carrying between its legs and began eating. As I recall, it ate a lot of blubber. Oil was dripping out through the man’s labret holes. When he finished he went out. When he began entering again carrying blubber, Igalaq went down to the *katak* and gave him a good slap on the crown of the head. He disappeared into the entrance hallway and then emerged later without the blubber.” (Ahnatook, circa 1961, from Suvlu Tape collection of Iñupiaq stories, currently being transcribed and translated by the author.)

Some times the shamans used their powers to entertain themselves and others.

“One night, they tied Kuutchiuraq up with his head touching his feet and with his hands behind his back. He asked them to tie twine to him. When the lights were turned out we heard a loon rustling about making its characteristic call, but it was not leaving the house this time! It stayed in the house. We could hear it flying about. After some time had passed, we finally heard it landing. When the lights were lit, lo and behold! all the holes in the house were connected with the twine!” (Ahnatook, c. 1961, from Suvlu Tape collection of Iñupiaq stories currently being transcribed and translated by the author.)

Drum singing and dancing are popular with the Iñupiat and Yupiks. In the old days there were songs to appease the spirits of nature, call the animals and heal or do harm to others. Songs which told of individual experiences or group happenings were composed, choreographed and then sung in front of an audience. This tradition continues. Songs have been composed which tell of someone’s first airplane ride, using an outboard motor for the first time or of someone’s visit to another village. More recently, an Iñupiaq dance group from the village of Wainwright, Alaska, travelled to California. A song and dance routine has been created telling of their trip.

Language as a Reflection of the Environment

The concept of interdependence stands out in the structure of the Iñupiaq and Yupik languages. Each word has a marker which identifies its relation to the other words in the sentence. There is no set order of words in a sentence just as there is no way of determining what will happen next in nature. Man cannot control nature. But as each event happens, a causal effect occurs which creates special relationships between the components of the happening. The following Iñupiaq statement *aġnam aitchuġaa aġun suppunmik* - ‘the woman is giving the man a gun’ — can be said in an additional eleven ways without changing the meaning.

1. Aġnam aġun suppunmik aitchuġaa.
2. Aġnam suppunmik aitchuguu aġun .
3. Suppunmik aġun aitchuġaa aġnam.
4. Suppunmik aitchuġaa aġnam aġun.
5. Suppunmik aġnam aġun aitchuġaa.

6. Aitchuḡaa aḡnam aḡun suppunmik.
7. Aitchuḡaa aḡun aḡnam suppunmik.
8. Aitchuḡaa suppunmik aḡnam aḡun.
9. Aḡun aḡnam aitchuḡaa suppunmik.
10. Aḡun aitchuḡaa aḡnam suppunmik.
11. Aḡun suppunmik aitchuḡaa aḡnam.

The word *aḡnam* ‘woman’ has the marker *m* which identifies it as the subject of the sentence. The word *aitchuḡaa* ‘she/he/it gives her/him/it’ has the ending *aa* which indicates that it is the verb and that the number and person of the subject is singular and is in the third person, and that the number and person of the object is also singular and is in the third person. The word *aḡun* ‘man’ has no marker and, since the verb is transitive, is identified as the direct object. The word *suppunmik* ‘a gun’ has a marker *mik* which identifies it as the indirect object.

The Iñupiaq and Yupik cultures of today’s citizens are very different from those of their grandparents and great-grandparents. They lived in sod and snow houses and their main means of transport were the *umiaq* ‘skin boat’, *qayaq* ‘skin-covered kayak’ and *qimmit* ‘dog teams’. Today people live in wooden frame-houses and travel in snow machines, cars and airplanes. Their great-grandparents depended wholly on the animals of the land and the mammals and fish of the sea for sustenance. Today, although they still use traditional natural resources, they rely heavily on the products and technology of Western culture. The Iñupiaq and Yupik cultures have changed drastically and are still changing as more and more non-Iñupiaq or non-Yupik tools and materials are used. Instead of bows and arrows or bolas, guns are now used. But although a seal may be killed with a rifle, it is still retrieved with a traditional tool known as a *manaq*.

The vocabularies of the Iñupiaq and Yupik languages are constantly changing, reflecting changes in lifestyles. As activities change, so do languages. The Iñupiat have developed new words such as *suppun* which means ‘gun’. *Suppun* is based on the stem *supi-* which means ‘to gush out, flow out’. Thus the literal translation of *suppun* is ‘means of gushing out, of flowing out’. The gun releases compressed air, whence its Iñupiaq name. The word *suppun* has been added to the language whereas the word *qilamitaun* ‘bola’ will soon be forgotten through misuse. On the other hand, the meaning of the word *kayjut*, which traditionally means ‘a herd of animals or a large assemblage of people’, has been extended to include the concept of a corporation. A subsidiary of a corporation is then called a *kayjuuraq*. The suffix *uraq*, which means ‘small’, is added to create a new word meaning subsidiary. It was necessary to expand the meaning of the word *kayjuq* to

include the concept of a corporation following the establishment of thirteen regional and more than 200 village corporations under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971. The Iñupiaq and Yupik languages are flexible and can easily adapt to encompass new concepts.

Since much of the Iñupiaq and Yupik world is covered with snow and ice for long periods of time, and accurate, detailed knowledge of snow and ice is essential to the success and survival of a hunter, the language is rich in terms for different types of snow and ice. A sample is given below (a more complete list may be found in the forthcoming comprehensive dictionary being prepared by the Alaska Native Language Center, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Alaska, U.S.A.)

ICE

aayuḡaq

ice ridging, or crack across a shallow lagoon or bay

agiuppak

a smooth wall of ice along the edge of landfast ice formed by other moving ice

aisitaq

cracked ice made by force of moving ice

alliviniq

ice that was under another piece of ice which resurfaces smooth and dirty

aluksraq

young ice punched by seals forming a seal blowhole

anaḡlu

black ice

arguqtaḡniq

newly formed thin ice collecting on the downwind side of a polynya or lead

ataiḡvik

shore ice patch on coastline

ataitchuaq

shore ice uct close to the coast

atiḡniq

new ice forming a smooth apron around pre-existing ice

augafaruaq

ice thrust up at an angle (approximately 45 degrees)

SNOW TERMS

aluktinniq snow cliff

aniu

packed snow

aniuvak

snow bank; snow patch

apiqqaḡun

first snow

apun

snow

aqilluq
 light snow, deep for walking
aqilluqqaq
 soft snow
auksalaq
 melting snow
auksiqlaq
 snow that melts almost instantly
iksiaksraq
 snow to be melted for drinking water
kaataq
 block of snow which will be used in construction of a snow house
kaniq
 frost which collects indoors
mapsa or mavsa
 cornice, overhanging snow, an overhanging snowdrift that is ready to fall

People use language to organize their reality. Iñupiaq and Yupik cultures are based on dependence on the land and sea. Hunting, and therefore a nomadic way of life, have persisted. The sea and land that people depend on for their sustenance are almost totally devoid of landmarks. These languages have therefore developed an elaborate set of demonstrative pronouns and adverbs which are used to direct the listener's attention quickly to the nature and location of a particular object. In place of landmarks, words serve as indicators for the location of an object. Each stem gives information about proximity, visibility or vertical position and implies whether the object is inside or outside, moving or not moving, long or short. For example, Iñupiaq has at least twenty-two stems which are used to form demonstrative pronouns in eight different cases and demonstrative adverbs in four cases. American English has two demonstrative pronouns, *this* and *that* (plural forms *these* and *those*) with their respective adverbs *here* and *there*. As an illustration of the richness of demonstratives in the Eskimo languages, here are a demonstrative pronoun and an adverb and the various cases in which they can be used. All of the following forms derive from a single stem.

Absolute pronoun: *igña*, dual *ikkuak*, pl. *ikkua* 'that one over there, visible, and not moving, lengthy nor expansive'
 Relative pronoun: *iktuma*, dual *ikkuak*, pl. *ikkua* 'of that one over there, visible, and not moving, lengthy nor expansive'
 Pronoun in locative: *iktumani*, dual *ikkuṅaṅni*, pl. *ikkunani* 'located with/in/at that one over there, visible, and not moving, lengthy nor expansive'
 Pronoun in ablative: *iktumaṅṅa*, dual *ikkuṅnaṅṅa*, pl. *ikkunaṅṅa* 'from that one over there, visible, and not moving, lengthy nor expansive'
 Pronoun in terminalis: *iktumuṅa*, dual *ikkuṅnuṅa*, pl. *ikkunuṅa* 'to that one over there, visible, and not moving, lengthy nor expansive'
 Pronoun in modalis: *iktumiṅa*, dual *ikkuṅniṅa*, pl. *ikkuniṅa* 'with/of that one over there, visible, and not moving, lengthy nor expansive'

Pronoun in vialis: *iktumuuna*, dual *ikkunnuḡna*, pl. *ikkunuuna* ‘via that one over there, visible, and not moving, lengthy nor expansive’
Pronoun in similaris: *iktumatun*, dual *ikkunaktun*, pl. *ikkunatitun* ‘like that one over there, visible, and not moving, lengthy nor expansive’
Adverb: *ikka* ‘over there, visible and restricted in area’
Adverb in locative: *ikani* ‘located over there, visible and restricted area’
Adverb in ablative: *ikaḡḡa* ‘from over there, visible and restricted in area’
Adverb in terminalis: *ikuḡa*. ‘to over there, visible and restricted in area’
Adverb in vialis: *ikuuna* ‘via over there, visible and restricted in area’

Language as a Reflection of Perceptions and Intellectual History

An attribute of Iñupiaq culture evident in the language and literature is the fact that the roles of women and men were not stratified. The type of role undertaken depended on a person’s ability and capability. One of the legends told by an outstanding historian, Uqumailaq, runs as follows:

“Once there lived a large number of people and their chief along a river in the interior. Their chief had a daughter. She did not mature slowly. She had a bow and arrow as she grew up. She hunted like a man using the bow and arrow. When she saw a wolf she would stalk it and would eventually kill it with her bow and arrow. She did likewise with wolverine. Although she was a woman she was a skillful hunter.” (Uqumailaq, *circa* 1961, from Suvlu Tape collection of Iñupiaq stories currently being transcribed and translated by the author.)

Woman as hunter is not a common theme in the oral literature, but the presence of such themes indicate that the society of the ancestors was an egalitarian one. In fact, one cheerful little Iñupiaq elder-woman told the author of the present paper that she had belonged to a whaling crew, and that the only reason she had never struck a whale was because she was so tiny. She laughed and said that she did not have the strength to strike the whale with sufficient force. From the legends and more recent accounts, we learn that men and women had equal status and that a person was limited only by his or her abilities.

The equality of roles for men and women is reflected in the Iñupiaq and Yupik languages. The words for woman *aḡnaq* and for man *aḡun* cannot be used to designate humanity. The Iñupiaq and Yupik languages have a word *iñuk* or *yuk*, respectively, which refers to a human being without specifying gender, and the same word refers to humanity.

The concept of focusing on the whole situation with one or many participants is reflected in the Iñupiaq language. Take for instance the English sentence,

‘there are squirrels’, and the Iñupiaq sentence *siksriqaqtuq*. One is a translation of the other. In English the focus is on the individual squirrels, whereas in Iñupiaq the focus is on the one situation. This focus is clearly shown by the number of the verb. ‘Are’ in English is plural while *tuq* in Iñupiaq is singular. The interdependence of actors regardless of number in a given situation is emphasized. An individual does not stand alone.

The Christian religion has been embraced strongly by many Iñupiat and Yupiks. This is not difficult to understand because the Iñupiat and Yupiks are very spiritual people. Secondly, the Christian concepts of resurrection and a person’s ability to perform ‘miracles’, and the story of creation pertaining to a period of darkness and then of light, were already part of the spiritual beliefs and realities of the traditional system of beliefs.

In Christianity, resurrection occurred in three days, whereas in the Iñupiaq religion resurrection had to occur within four or five days of death, depending on the sex of the person involved.

Although some concepts such as resurrection and the focus on an individual figure who performs miracles are common to both religions, there are some differences with respect to the creation of man.

According to the Iñupiat, “Long before day and night had been created, or the first man made his appearance, there lived an old woman, indeed very old, for the tradition of her having had a beginning, if there ever was such a one, had been lost. We must bear in mind that during the first stage of the world everything remained young and fresh; nothing grew old. The old woman was like a young girl in her appearance and feelings, and being the only inhabitant of the earth, naturally felt very lonesome and wished for a companion. She was one time chewing ‘pooya’ (burnt seal oil residue) when the thought arose in her mind that it would be pleasant to have an image to play with, so, taking her ‘pooya’, she fashioned a man, then by way of ornamentation placed a raven’s beak on his forehead. She was delighted with her success in making such a lovely image and on lying down to sleep placed it near her side. On awakening her joy was great, for the image had come to life and there before her was the first man” (Driggs, 1905).

Iñupiaq legend tells of the *Tuluñikraq*, the Raven-Spirit who is also a man. He is credited with having secured land and light for humanity. According to Iñupiaq legend there was a period of darkness before there was light. This was the time when humans did not age. The Raven-Spirit *Tuluñikraq* secured the land and the source of light from an old man and his wife and daughter. Light appeared only after the Raven-Spirit stole the source of light from them. As he was fleeing, the Raven-Spirit dropped the source of light which then exploded and dispersed units of light throughout existence.

This concept is reinforced by the analysis of the Iñupiaq word for sun *siquñiq*. The stem of *siquñiq* is *siqu* which means ‘to splatter, to splash

outwards', and the ending of the word *niq* indicates the result or end-product of an activity. So, the Iñupiaq word for sun *siqiñiq* and the legend of the Raven-Spirit accidentally dropping the source of light which then exploded supports the concept of the big-bang theory of the origin of the universe in which the sun is only one of many.

The Iñupiaq word for 'star' *uvluḡiaq* indicates that light travels from the 'star', that there is a path that the light from the star takes to arrive on earth. The stem of the Iñupiaq word *uvluḡiaq* is *uvluq* which means 'daylight'. The suffix *iaq* indicates 'a pathway or trajectory' that permits movement from one point to another.

The language and culture of a people are a source of pride and identity, and the oral literature of the ancestors sends messages based on their experiences and their interpretations of these.

Contact with Other Cultures

The first white men that the Inuit encountered were explorers and whalers who did not always seek to change the lifestyles of the indigenous peoples that they met in their travels. Those explorers who spent lengthy periods of time with the Iñupiat or Yupiks learned their language in order to communicate with them.

However, they introduced diseases such as German measles, syphilis, chicken pox and influenza which killed many Iñupiat and Yupiks. The death toll was particularly high among the Iñupiat because the people lived close to each other along the coast. The Yupiks were widely scattered along the rivers and were therefore less accessible to the explorers and their diseases (Vanstone, 1984).

The Russian explorers traded with the Yupiks who, in turn, traded with the Iñupiat. From the Yupiks, the Iñupiat obtained iron buckets, knives and tobacco. One bucket traded for two wolverine skins (Ahmaogak and Webster, 1968).

The second wave of white men to reach the Yupiks and Iñupiat were Christian missionaries. They were different. They were relentless in their self-righteousness, and considered it their divinely-inspired obligation to disrupt the social, educational and religious activities of the Yupiks and the Iñupiat. The first missionaries in northern Alaska were often medical doctors or school teachers or both and had to contend with the shamans.

Many early missionaries learned the Iñupiaq or Yupik languages in order to translate Christian hymns, scriptures and the catechism into them. Iñupiaq and Yupik could be spoken in churches but not in schools. The language

policy for the schools at the turn of the century under the direction of a Presbyterian missionary, Sheldon Jackson, the first Commissioner of Education for Alaska from 1885 to 1908 (Krauss, 1980), is summed up in this quotation from the *North Star*, Sitka 1888:

“The Board of Home Missions has informed us that government contracts for educating Indian pupils provide for the ordinary branches of an English education to be taught, and that no books in any Indian language shall be used, or instruction given in that language to Indian pupils. The letter states that this rule will be strictly enforced in all government Indian schools. The Commissioner of Indian Affairs urges, and very forcibly too, that instruction in their vernacular is not only of no use to them but is detrimental to their speedy education and civilization. It is now two years and more since the use of the Indian dialects was first prohibited in the training school here. All instruction is given in English. Pupils are required to speak and write English exclusively; and the results are tenfold more satisfactory than when they were permitted to converse in unknown tongues.”

Then in 1890, the following was issued by the Department of the Interior:

“The children shall be taught in the English language, reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, oral history, physiology, and temperance hygiene. No text-books printed in a foreign language shall be allowed. Special efforts shall be put forth to train the pupils in the use of the English language.”

Thus began the destruction of the indigenous languages of Alaska. The Native peoples of Alaska were taught that their languages were not important, their religion was bad and that they should become like the white man as quickly as possible.

The missionaries had a relatively easy task of assembling followers for their churches in northern Alaska. The diseases brought by the explorers and Yankee whalers wrought havoc in many families. The Iñupiat had no immunity to such diseases. Consequently many died, including many heads of households. The father and usually the eldest son, although stricken, had to go out and procure food for the family. Even if they fell ill they could not rest and recuperate. Their state would grow worse and they would die. Consequently, the widows and their children had no one to turn to except the white traders who had established themselves along the Arctic coast. That was the origin of the paternalistic relationship between Alaska's First People and the white man.

Although there was some resistance to the changes imposed on them by missionaries, doctors and teachers, the majority of Iñupiat and Yupiks followed the rules that were being laid down. On the insistence of teachers and school officials, many Iñupiaq and Yupik parents, although not able to

communicate effectively in English, began trying to speak English to their children, so that children spoke English at home as well as in school. Educators persuaded the parents that education was essential for their children to succeed in the changing world. But opportunities for education were limited in traditional villages. It was necessary for children to leave their home communities to attend boarding high schools in distant parts of Alaska or even the southern states. At this crucial time in their lives, adolescents were removed from their homes, culture and the traditions of their people. Often a child would leave the community in the fall; a young adult would return in spring, but without any parental assistance in this most difficult transition of life. At a time when young adults should be learning the skills, tools and traditions of their culture, they were learning to make napkin holders and aprons in distant, government schools.

The late Eben Hopson, the first mayor of the North Slope Borough in northern Alaska, described Alaska's indigenous peoples' experience of the western educational system.

“Eighty-seven years ago, when we were persuaded to send our children to western educational institutions, we began to lose control over the education of our youth. Many of our people believed that formal educational systems would help us acquire the scientific knowledge of the western world. However, it was more than technological knowledge that the educators wished to impart. The educational policy was to attempt to assimilate us into the American mainstream at the expense of our culture. The schools were committed to teaching us to forget our language and Iñupiaq heritage. This outrageous treatment and the exiling of our youth to school in foreign environments were to remain as common practices of the educational system.”

The Iñupiaq and Yupik Situation Today

The pace of development in the Alaskan north is fast. The changes that have occurred in the lifetimes of our elders almost defy belief. Most of the time there is no time to react, no time for comprehensive planning. Because change has occurred so suddenly, there are many things which should have changed that have remained the same under a different name. And there are changes that have been so radical and destructive that we have not begun to emerge from their consequences. Western societal systems and norms, however well-intentioned, have undermined and displaced the traditional societal systems that supported our people for thousands of years. The disruptive effects of rapid social and cultural change have wrought havoc on Alaskan Native families and communities. This is reflected in a depressing array of social problems including a high suicide rate among young Alaskan Natives, a high incidence of alcohol and drug abuse, the fetal alcohol syndrome, the breakdown of the extended family and clan system, loss of

children to the welfare system, loss of language, lack of transmission of cultural knowledge and values, apathy, depression, low academic achievement and high drop-out rate, transitional problems between village and cities and the dilemma of integrating traditional and non-traditional economic systems (subsistence versus cash-based lifestyle).

When Alaska became a State in 1959, it was allowed to select federal lands within Alaska to aid it in its economic development. Alaska Native leaders, seeing that their traditional lands were being claimed by the State of Alaska, began insisting on a settlement of land claims of the Alaska Natives from the United States Government. In 1966, the U.S. Secretary of the Interior froze further State land selections, pending resolution of Alaska Native land claims.

The United States Government had long known that the North Slope of Alaska has large reserves of oil. The Government laid claim to much of northern Alaska as a petroleum reserve, in the name of national defense; however, the shortage of oil in the world market led the U.S. to encourage the oil companies to explore for oil in Alaska. An enormous oilfield was found at Prudhoe Bay in 1968.

The discovery of the Prudhoe Bay oilfield made the North Slope very attractive to the State and Federal Governments and private industry. Development of the oilfield would interfere directly with traditional uses of the land, so resolution of the Native land claims was necessary. The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act became law on 18 December 1971, clearing the way for construction of facilities to extract the oil from the ground and market it. This Act affected all the Native people of Alaska, not just those in the oil-rich lands of the north.

Oil development has transformed the lives of Alaskan Inuit in a number of ways. The direct influence is surprisingly small. While some Native people are employed in the oil industry, the great majority of workers are migrants from other parts of Alaska or other States. However, the Native Claims Settlement Act, passed to allow oil development to proceed, has affected the lives of all Alaskan Natives. The Act provides for the establishment of Regional and Local corporations to manage and invest the land and money given to the Native communities in exchange for the subsurface rights to natural resources on traditional native lands. Alaskan Natives are shareholders in their Regional and Local corporations. For the first time Alaskan Natives are a significant economic force. In addition, a local government, the North Slope Borough, was established in Arctic Alaska, with powers of taxation of property in the oilfields. The revenues support the provision of a wide variety of services to the residents of the Borough, who are mainly Iñupiat. As one example, the North Slope Borough has established and funded a Commission on History, Language and Culture to support and encourage activities to preserve, foster and promote the traditional language and culture of the Iñupiat. The Commission was

instrumental in revitalizing the Messenger Feast. The North Slope Borough, in cooperation with the State of Alaska, has constructed regional high schools in all the villages of the North Slope, so that it is no longer necessary for young people to leave their homes to obtain secondary education. Since the school curriculum is, to a significant extent, under the control of a Borough School Board, it is responsive to community desires as never before.

Alaskan Native Languages and Education

For 100 years, Alaska's indigenous languages and cultures have faced a steady onslaught of institutional discrimination which called for their eradication and replacement by the English language and cultural norms. The very core of a young child's identity, the language and culture of the parents, was undermined in the schools. Needless to say, this policy has been extremely detrimental to the indigenous groups in Alaska. Attitudes of rejection or ambivalence about the worth of one's language and culture have developed and are, in varying degrees, still prevalent among the adult population. These attitudes have played an important role in the success of retention or maintenance programs for Alaska Native languages.

The linguistic and cultural heritage of Alaska Native societies is threatened with extinction. This looming loss is distressing to many members of the Alaska Native community. The situation affects the education of the children who need to feel secure and comfortable in a schooling process in order to reach their potential of academic achievement.

Bilingual and bicultural education in Alaska began with the adoption of a Bill in 1972 by the Alaska State Legislature declaring that '... a school which is attended by at least 15 pupils whose primary language is other than English shall have at least one teacher who is fluent in the native language of the area where the school is located. Written and other educational materials, when language is a factor, shall be presented in the language native to the area' (State of Alaska, Seventh Legislature, Second Session, 1972).

At the same session another piece of legislation was passed directing the University of Alaska to establish an Alaska Native Language Center in order to: (i) study native languages of Alaska; (ii) develop literacy materials; (iii) assist in the translation of important documents; (iv) provide for the development and dissemination of Alaska Native literature, and (v) train Alaska Native language speakers to work as teachers and aides in bilingual classrooms.

In 1975, an Alaska State statute was enacted directing all school boards to '... provide a bilingual-bicultural education program for each school . . . which is attended by at least 8 pupils of limited English-speaking ability and whose primary language is other than English.' The new language in the statute addressed all languages other than English, and thus expanded bilingualism

equally to immigrant languages.

The ultimate aim of all bilingual/bicultural program in Alaska is to promote English language proficiency. Iñupiaq and Yupik language and culture program are seen as contributing to the enhancement of academic achievement which is measured in the English language. Depending on the assessment of the schoolchildren's language proficiency, each district designs a language development educational program which best meets its needs. In regions where children still speak their Native language, the language of instruction from Kindergarten to Fourth Grade is usually in that language. After Fourth Grade, instruction in the Native language is usually reduced, for various reasons including shortage of bilingual teachers, lack of curricular materials and, most importantly, lack of commitment by the community and school to promote the growth and enrichment of the Alaska Native language *per se*.

In the 1987-8 school year, the Alaska Department of Education, through the Office of the Commissioner, and in collaboration with members of the Alaska Native community, initiated a process to establish an Alaska Native Language Policy for schools in Alaska. The proposed policy acknowledges that Alaska's indigenous languages are unique and essential elements of Alaska's heritage, and thus distinct from immigrant languages. It recognizes that although some children learn their Native language in the home and community, many Alaska Native children do not have the opportunity to learn their heritage languages in this way. The proposed policy further states that schools have a responsibility to teach and use as the medium of instruction the Alaska Native language of the local community to the extent desired by the parents of that community.

This is the first attempt by the educational system to establish a process whereby Alaskan Natives can make decisions concerning their heritage languages. The revitalization of Alaska Native languages will occur when Alaska Natives celebrate themselves and their heritage, and insist on being active participants in the education of their children in the home, community and schools.

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