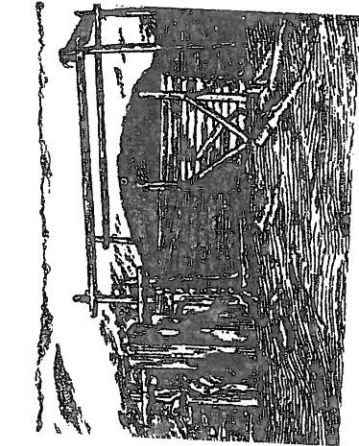


Yupit

Bering Sea Eskimos



Kashim at St. Michael, about 1880

The term Yupit refers to the speakers of languages in the Yup'ik group of the Eskimo-Aleut language family. Included in this group are the Siberian Yup'ik speakers of St. Lawrence Island (and several communities on the Chukchi Peninsula across the Bering Strait), the Central Yup'ik speakers of the Bering Sea coast from Norton Sound south to the Alaska Peninsula and up the Yukon (Kwipak), Kuskokwim and Nushagak Rivers. There are four distinguishable dialects of Central Yup'ik; on Nunivak Island, local people refer to themselves as Cup'ik to highlight their cultural and linguistic distinctiveness. Alutiq, the third Yup'ik language in Alaska, is spoken almost solely by people living on the Pacific Ocean (Gulf of Alaska) coast and are discussed in the previous chapter.

Taken together, the Yupit are the most culturally-diverse group of Alaskan Natives based on the variety of distinct environments to which they have adapted. Siberian Yup'ik living in the middle of the Bering Sea developed cultural practices that were influenced both by their focus on large sea-mammal hunting for food and materials and by their interaction with the Asiatic reindeer-herding people known as the Chukchi.

Social units known as societies or nations among the Yupit consist of a named group of closely related and intermarrying extended families comprising several communities with a common territory. This grouping was designated with the suffix *miut* attached to a stem indicating a location or distinctive cultural practice. For example, the Sivuqaqmiut are the Siberian Yup'ik residents of St. Lawrence Island while the Galuyarmiut (people of the net) are the Central Yup'ik residents of Nelson Island whose expertise in making small nets to capture herring was well-known to surrounding societies. The suffix *miut* is flexible and can be applied to residents of a single village or a seasonal camp so its primary meaning, "residents of," can be used in a three-tier terminology from camp, to village, to regional group.

There were approximately 20 Central Yup'ik regional groups at the time of contact. Prior to depopulation in the mid-19th century, Central Yup'ik groups occupied the entire southern and eastern shores of Norton Sound southward to the vicinity of Naknek in Bristol Bay. The Siberian Yup'ik of St. Lawrence Island had approximately 15 winter villages organized into several local groups at the time of contact.

Archaeological evidence

The oldest sites in the region presently are found on the north side of the Alaska Peninsula along the Brooks and Naknek rivers dating back to approximately 9,000 ya (years ago). Arctic Small Tool Tradition materials including the oldest identifiable houses in the region date to 4,200 ya in Norton Sound but are puzzlingly absent to the south except on the northern Alaska Peninsula. Very few sites have been identified in the Yukon-Kuskokwim valleys or delta region until around 3,000-2,500 ya when Norton Tradition tools and artifacts, including pottery begin to appear in sheltered locations with abundant local resources. Gradually residents appeared to have developed expertise in the diverse array of resources necessary to survive in the wet tundra lowlands of the delta where archaeological evidence indicates occupation began only in the last 2,000 years.

The archaeological traditions on St. Lawrence Island are distinctive from those on the Alaska mainland. Early occupants apparently migrated to the island from Asia about 2,000 ya based on Old Bering Sea tradition artifacts found in both areas. These objects indicate a cultural pattern already heavily oriented toward sea mammals with wonderfully-incised art forms on a variety of ivory objects such as toggle harpoon heads, needles, needle cases, throwing board, weights, and small amulets of animals. The technologies and institutions needed to capture large sea-mammals appear to date from this time period.

Population distribution and settlement systems

Community size varied dramatically between Yupit groups. Central Yup'ik communities located along the salmon-rich Yukon, Kuskokwim and Nushagak Rivers might consist of as many as 200-300 members. Central Yup'ik groups located in the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta region stretching between the two great rivers were generally smaller, reflecting the poorer resource base of the area, and rarely exceeded 100 residents. On St. Lawrence Island, the ancient village located at the northwestern corner of the island where access to whales, walrus and Asia were high, housed perhaps 500-600 residents while villages elsewhere on the island had considerably fewer residents.

Settlement systems varied according to the location of the group. In

Yup'ik Groups and Estimated Population at Contact

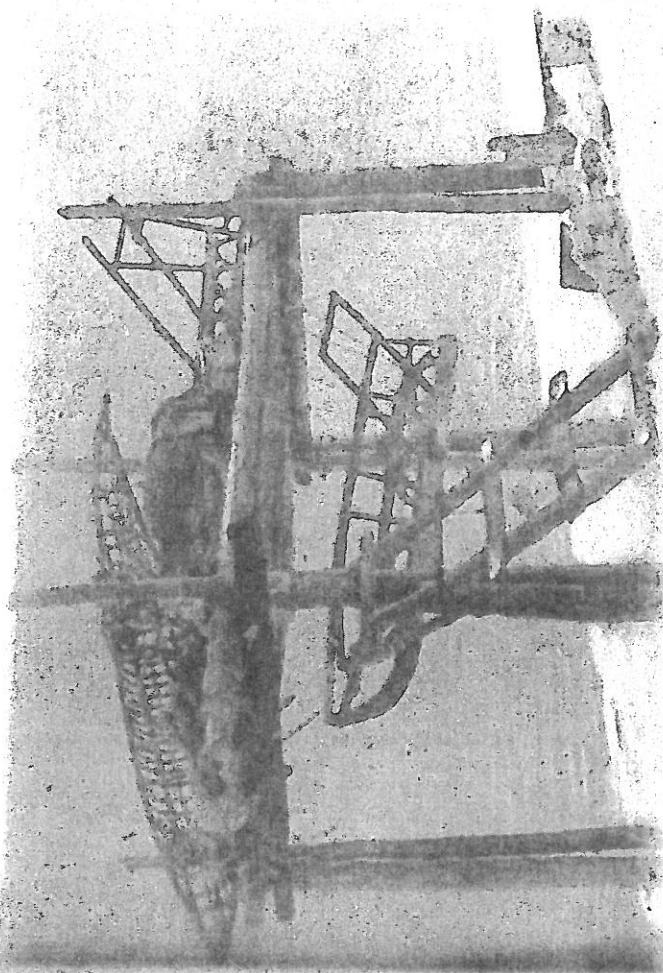
St. Lawrence Island	1,500
Norton Sound	1,500
Numivak Island	500
Yukon-Kuskokwim Rivers and Delta	13,000
Bristol Bay	3,000
Total	19,500

the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region, several moves during the course of the year to acquire smaller resources were required. Spring seal hunting at the edge of the shore-fast ice was followed by herring fishing in a number of coastal locations, followed by moves to salmon or whitefish areas, berry picking areas and ground squirrel trapping areas. In certain areas, caribou were nearby and could be hunted in the fall. St. Lawrence Island villages moved to the ice-edge in the spring to engage in ocean hunting of large sea-mammals first, and fish second. Perhaps only one seasonal movement was required of Central Yup'ik residing along the salmon-rich rivers; they could commute to their summer fish camps but went to muskrat hunting camps in the spring. Usually only males made the trip to hunt caribou in the foothills behind the villages in the fall.

Housing

The Yup'ik constructed a variety of dwellings, some of which reflect their contact with neighboring groups. Among the Central Yup'ik, the common house design was a rectangular, partially dugout structure about 10 by 12 feet. Most had the "arctic entryway" tunnel which trapped the cold below the living surface in the house. Where wood was abundant, plank walls and floors were used in addition to the four house posts and beams. Lack of wood may have limited Central Yup'ik settlement in the reaches of delta away from the rivers and ocean. Woven grass and bark or sod was used to cover the exterior of the house. The inside had a small, open work and cooking area with a central hearth at one end and a raised sleeping platform either built of earth or blanks embedded in the earthen wall of the house. Oil lamps were used for heating and cooking where wood was scarce. Furs covered the walls and sleeping platform. Floors were generally of earth unless wood was available nearby.

These small structures were typically occupied by a woman, her young male children and her unmarried female children. Husbands, male relatives and older male children would visit their female relatives.



875.103.15

Platforms provided a place for storing food and supplies throughout the year. Note the two sleds and kayak frame. (ANCHORAGE MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND ART)

All Central Yup'ik communities had an additional larger structure, perhaps up to 30 by 30 feet, known as the *qasigih*. This structure has been variously labeled as the men's house, the community house or the ceremonial house. It was first and foremost the home of a related group of males who worked, slept, ate, socialized and trained their heirs together. A large open area with a planked floor served as the workshop and living area where food and water were taken. One or two levels of benches were attached to the side walls where the men and boys slept. Tools, equipment and ceremonial paraphernalia hung from the ceilings. The central hearth area was covered with planks when the structure was used for community ceremonies, the only time women were allowed into the *qasigih*. The structure was also used as a steambath for the adult men.

Summer fish camps along the major rivers had substantial wood and sod structures similar to those in the winter village. Less permanent structures such as tents were used for more short-term camp living.

Other structures were found around the outside of these dwellings including platform caches for storing food and equipment, racks for drying fish, storage pits, and frameworks for storing kayak and umiak frames.

Storyknife (yaaruin)



Elsie was excited. In a little while she and her grandmother were going down to the river. Besides fetching water the trip to the river meant that grandmother would tell her a story accompanied by pictures which grandmother would draw in the mud bank.

This unique form of teaching culture to the young, called *storyknife*, was practiced by mainland Yup'ik grandmothers with their granddaughters. A small (4 to 10 inch), scimitar-shaped dull knife was used to draw pictures on a muddy, flat surface such as the bank of a river. These illustrations accompanied stories through which the grandmother entertained and taught the child. The knives were usually carved by a young girl's father and given to the daughter at a community ceremony. Standardized symbols were developed in different villages to represent houses, adult males and females, infants, and activities such as walking, eating and sewing.

Elderly Yup'ik women recount that the stories they were told in their youth had important information about domestic activities (sewing, cooking, weaving) and appropriate behaviors (respect for elders, quiet, avoidance of dangerous areas) and about what would happen if they engaged in inappropriate behavior. A common theme was the grandmother telling the young girl what not to do, the young girl doing it and then something dreadful (usually death) happening to the grandmother. This training emphasized obedience, the interdependence of people and the responsibility of a person for his actions.

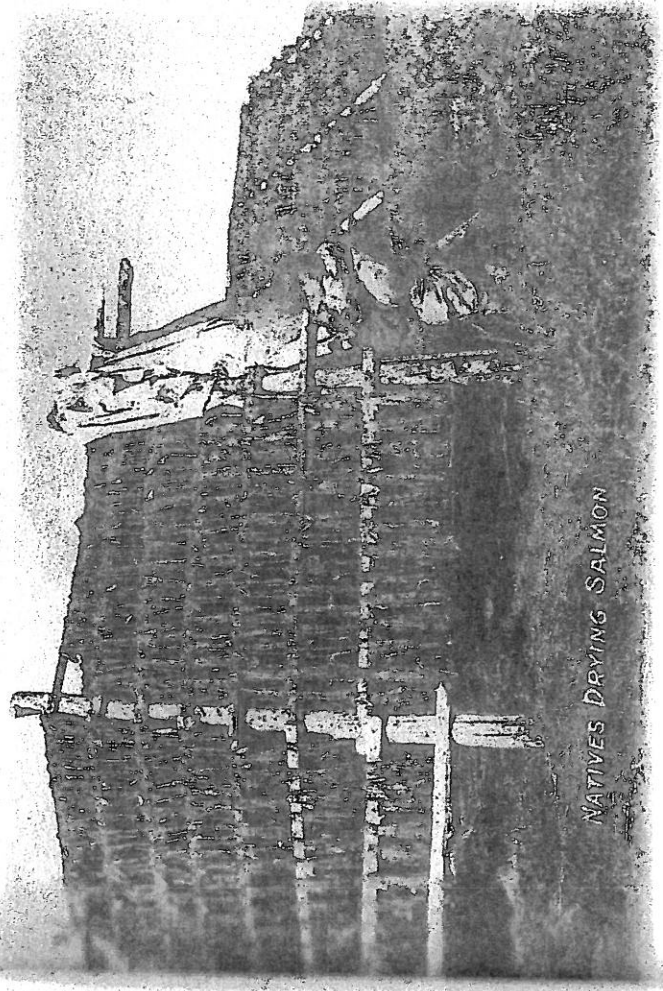
As missionaries and schools in western Alaska assumed the role of educator, the activity shifted to creative storytelling between young girls rather than teaching from grandmother to granddaughter. Although some of the older stories and themes about behaviors and values continued, new stories of make-believe kind and scary stories concerning monsters entered the repertoires.

Storyknife continues down to the present day as a form of play and teaching values in some villages but the competition from television and school may ultimately result in the disappearance of this colorful and useful activity.

At the time of contact, Siberian Yup'ik housing differed from Central Yup'ik. A yurt-like reindeer skin structure with six or eight sides had replaced the partially subterranean houses previously used. These houses, termed *mangyteaq*, were home, work-place and ceremonial centers for a group of patrilineally related families. Men who worked together as a crew under the leadership of an *angyaleq* in the walrus, bowhead whale, and bearded seal hunts, their wives and children comprised the membership of Siberian Yup'ik houses. Again, the familiar platforms and racks for storing equipment were found around the dwellings.

Food and diet

Local resources dictated some significant differences in the diets of Bering Sea Yup'it. On St. Lawrence Island, the focus was on large sea-mammals with walrus being the primary source of food, skins and other materials. The Bering Sea herd with an upper estimated limit of 200,000 animals passed the island on the floes of the ice front in the spring and again in the fall. Bowhead whales preceded the walrus while bearded



NATIVES DRYING SALMON

The Yup'it enjoyed the bounty of some of the world's richest salmon fisheries. Large quantities of fish were harvested and processed through relentless hours of work in order to sustain families and their dogs throughout the long winters.



Hunting at leads (openings between ice sheets) was crucial to survival. Patience, stamina, strength and skill were necessary for success. (LOMEN FAMILY COLLECTION, ARCHIVES ALASKA AND POLAR REGIONS DEPARTMENT, UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA-FAIRBANKS)

seals and other seals were also harvested and fish such as tom cod contributed to the overall diet. The organization of large sea-mammal hunting, similar to that found among the northern coastal Inupiat discussed in the next chapter, included formal shares of walrus and whale sections to the harvesting group and further redistribution of those portions to kin and in ceremonial contexts.

Food and diet among the Central Yup'ik was obtained from a multitude of less-massive resources. The astonishing range of organisms used for food and materials used by groups in the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta is indeed impressive. Several different subsistence strategies are evident. In the lower reaches of the major salmon-producing rivers, intensive salmon fishing was dominant and was combined with seals, marine fishing, and where available, beluga whales. Up the rivers, among the more riverine-oriented groups, a development of the last thousand years or so, terrestrial hunting of caribou and moose and snaring of fur bearers (such as the important ground squirrel) supplanted most, but not all, of the coastal seal hunting activities. Only in Bristol Bay and on Nunivak Island where walrus were predictably available did Central Yup'ik pursue these large marine mammals.

On the outer coast of the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta, seal and beluga whale hunting were primary. Seals were generally hunted from kayaks in the spring and fall but they could also be caught in nets placed in the ice in the fall as well. The small sea mammals were combined with fishing for a variety of freshwater and saltwater species (herring, whitefish, blackfish, sheefish, burbot, pike, and needlefish) plus hunting and snaring small terrestrial mammals. An annual run of eels was eagerly awaited by riverine villagers as schools rapidly moved up the rivers to spawn. Migratory waterfowl and their eggs were a critical resource in the delta following their arrival in the spring when food resources were scarce. Throughout the Central Yup'ik area, a variety of green, roots, berries and "mouse food" were collected and stored for winter use.

Transportation

The Yupiit used several different methods of transportation because the severity of winter cold produced frozen lakes, rivers, nearshore oceanic areas and tundra for roughly half the year. During the unfrozen times of the year, the Siberian Yupiit used open skin boats (*angyeg*) up to 20 feet long for hunting large marine mammals, and up to 40 feet long for travel to trade, visit or go to war. Hughes (1984) suggests that the kayak was rare and perhaps absent among St. Lawrence Islanders.

Among the Central Yup'ik, by contrast, the kayak was the central vessel used in hunting activities and also for transport activities in open

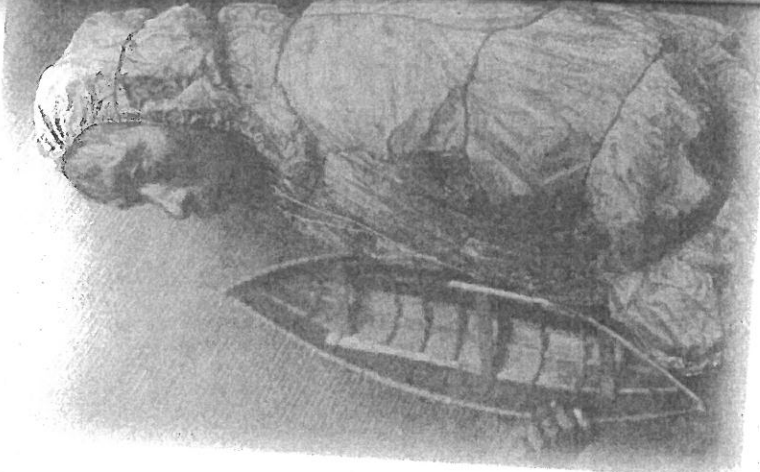
water conditions. Smaller umiaks of 15-20 feet long were also found among most groups with Nunivak Island Yupit using them for hunting walrus and travel. Kayaks were used for sealing and beluga hunting but also for tending drift and set nets used for catching migrating salmon. The nets were made from caribou sinew or willows with the size of the mesh varying based on the species of fish sought.

During the frozen periods, Central Yup'ik used small toboggans to transport kayaks and other gear. Snowshoes, likely adopted from Athabaskan neighbors, were also made in areas where deep drifts were common. Dog sleds did not appear in Central Yup'ik communities until after contact but several dogs would be maintained for security and assistance in locating breathing holes of seals.

Clothing and adornment

Clothing varied depending on the environment. St. Lawrence Islanders wore distinctive dark, reindeer-skin, hooded parkas similar in style to coastal north Alaskan Inupiat. Waterproof, walrus-gut outer garments were used when in open water while sealskins provided materials for boots, soles and mittens. Central Yup'ik wore a wide variety of garments depending on available resources and weather conditions. Seal, bird, ground squirrel, beaver and caribou provided the materials for pants, pull-over kuspuks and boots. Salmon-skin soled boots were a Central Yup'ik type in certain areas. The overgarments were generally longer and looser fitting than Inupiat garments. The cut of male and female garments was also distinct.

Generally speaking, Yupit exhibited less personal adornment than their northern and southern neighbors. St. Lawrence Island men wore unshorn hair styles in which the top portion of the head was shaved bald while the hair around the bottom of the head was retained. Women on St. Lawrence Island wore their hair long,



This waterproof jacket was made from walrus or sea lion intestines. The model is that of an open, skin boat. (HUNT COLLECTION, ALASKA STATE LIBRARY)

either braided or down. Three parallel straight tattoo lines down the lower lip were common among women. Central Yup'ik adornment was typically expressed through distinguishing objects or patterns woven onto clothing. Nunivak men wore ivory labrets through pierced holes below both ends of the lower lip. Distinctive hats were also worn by Nunivak men. Nunivak women would wear small labrets on ceremonial occasions when a septal pin and earrings might also appear. Some limited forms of linear tattoos are also found among the Central Yup'ik with the perpendicular lines from below the lip down the chin among the women being most common.

Social and political organization

The Yupit organized their social and political relations in a variety of ways. On St. Lawrence Island, patrilineal descent groups, termed "clans" by Hughes (1984), were the central kinship institutions. Clan leaders organized subsistence, trading, warfare, and ceremonial activities. Patrilineally-related crews conducted rituals prior to whaling and walrus hunting and called on shamans for assistance. Their wives carefully split walrus skin hides and sewed them on to the wooden frames of the open boats. A man usually married a woman from another clan following a formal gift exchange and a period of brideservice during which the groom worked for his in-laws for a period of time. At the conclusion of the brideservice, the couple took up residence in the husband's house. Marriages were alliances among clan groups in addition to being personal relationships between an adult man and woman. Among more powerful clan leaders, polygyny might be found.

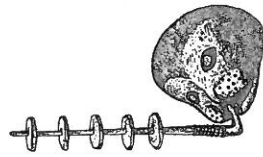
The situation was dramatically different among the mainland Central Yup'ik. While descent had a matrilineal tendency in terms of marital residence and groupings, relatives on either side were potentially significant. Flexible bilateral principles of identifying those with whom one worked best on a daily basis were central to the formation of groups among the Central Yup'ik. A pair of men often bonded as partners for life as work partners and their wives would stand in a similar relation. The Central Yup'ik used the concept of *elagyaq* to describe those who were "of the same stomach," both sharing food regularly and being biologically related.

While social status differences in wealth and authority were clearly evidence among St. Lawrence Islanders, such distinctions were played down on the mainland. Among the Central Yup'ik there existed a strong ethos of egalitarian, community-focused ideology in which elders as a collective were seen as a critical resource for the welfare of all. No slaves or social recognized wealthy, powerful persons were found in Central Yup'ik societies. While leaders coordinated the construction and use of the *qasigh*, accumulated and distributed wealth, those activities did not

result in hereditary statuses.

Warfare was intense among St. Lawrence Islanders and between St. Lawrence Islanders and the Asiatic Chukchi. Special armor was developed to protect warriors during battle. Although not unknown, warfare among the Central Yup'ik appears to have been reduced prior to the coming of Europeans by the practice of ceremonial competition through dance, a central feature of the Messenger Feast (see below).

Beliefs



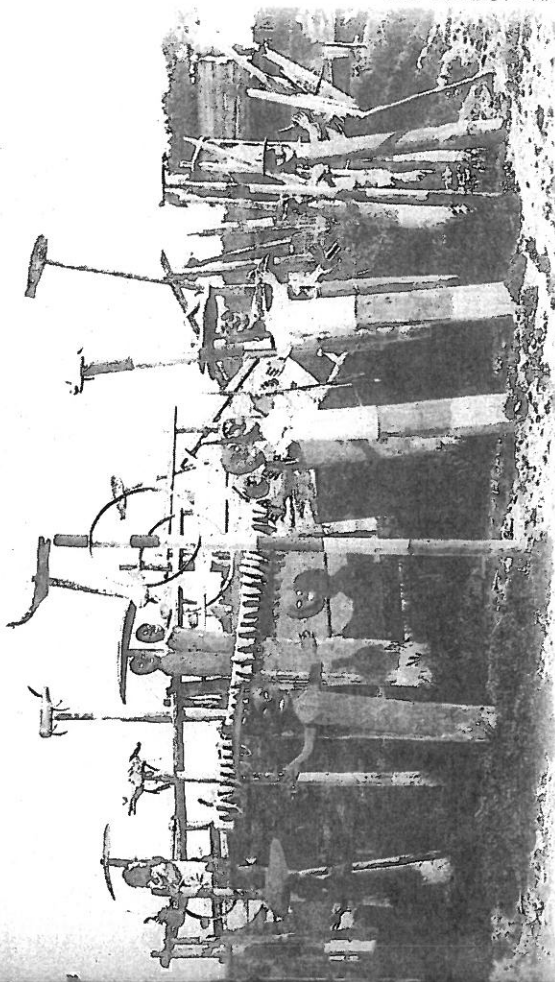
Maskoid representing seal head with rising air bubbles

Among the Central Yup'ik, *ellam yua* was a universal cosmic presence who coordinated existence and established a basic ordering framework. Two additional notions were key to Yupit beliefs. The first of these is that all living beings have a *yua* or spiritual essence that is sentient and volitional and human beings must maintain respectful relations with the animal and organisms on which they depend. The second principle is that of reincarnation or "cosmological cycling" (Fienup-Riordan 1994) of the spiritual essence, the "person" of life. Human *yua* were recycled into life through birth and names expressed the spiritual essence of that rebirth. Powerful spiritual beings called *tunghit* controlled the recycling of different animal, fish and bird forms and determined where they would go to give themselves to worthy people.

Young people were taught to pay close attention to their thoughts, as the mind controlled behavior and could have deleterious affects for others. *Alerquetet* were taught to boys and girls as procriptions for appropriate behavior while *inerquetet* were the prescriptions against inappropriate behavior. Central Yup'ik thought emphasized the communal interdependence of behavior by showing how inappropriate behaviors negatively impacted the entire group, and especially those who are loved the most.

Ceremonies

The ceremonial systems of the St. Lawrence Island and Central Yupit were elaborated in substantially different ways. Both groups had various forms of social celebrations to highlight significant achievements or changes in social status. Spiritual or religious ceremonies, however, had different foci. Among the St. Lawrence Island groups, virtually all spiritual rituals were oriented to insuring that large sea mammals were properly and respectfully treated so they would return and give themselves to the people upon their renewal. At the conclusion



Weiland Collection 5863

The Yupit cosmos was inhabited by many spirits including those of the deceased. Spirit poles were erected by graves to keep the spirits of the dead who wished to be reborn from disrupting the world of the living.

(MEMORIALS TO THE DEAD, KUSKOKWIM RIVER," FROM THE WEINLAND COLLECTION, HENRY E. HUNTINGTON LIBRARY)

of the whaling season, a large community-wide celebration was held involving distribution of portions to fellow villagers. This ceremony clearly demonstrates the themes of sharing and reciprocity evident in Alaska Native life.

Among the Central Yup'ik a wide variety of both social and spiritual ceremonies have been documented by Central Yup'ik scholars working with elders. The ceremonial season was named *cauyaq* after the circular drum made by stretching seal gut over a wooden frame. Through the drum, the heartbeat of *ellam yua* was felt and it joined the heartbeats of all participant in the ceremonies through song and dance. The rich ceremonial cycle that might consist of as many as eight separate events, was conducted from the late fall to early spring. One of the most important practices was the bringing out of elaborate masks that embodied the *tunghit yua* who were honored by such representation. The song and dance accompanying these mask performances have been termed *agayitluraput* ("our way of making prayer") to underscore their nature of supplication and honor (Meade 1996).

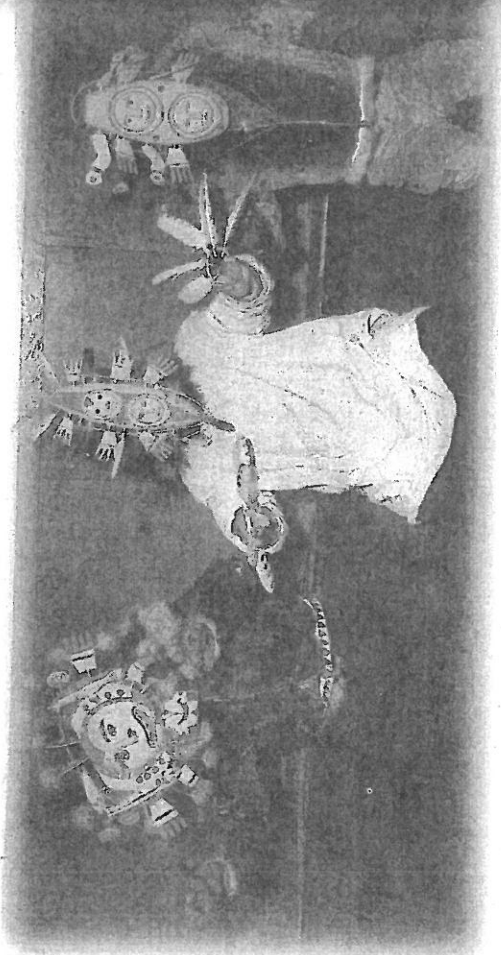
One major ceremony found virtually everywhere was the so-called *Kevgiq* (Messenger's Feast) in which two villages of closely-related people took turns in hosting a large celebration of feasting, dancing, and gift distribution. The name came from the practice of sending a formal messenger to a village to present the invitation and indicate what special products the invitees should bring. These events were conducted at the village level (as opposed to the *kargi* level as among the Inupiat) and with an aura of friendly competition.

Among certain groups, social control mechanisms were built into Messenger Feasts by collecting embarrassing instances of social transgressions by members of the invited village and poking fun at them through dances. This indicated to all present what the norms of the group were and the shame that could befall those who violated them.

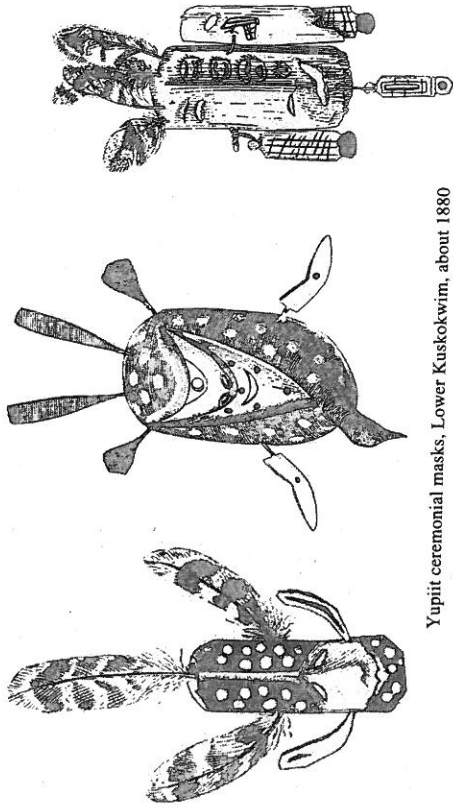
Another important feast was the *Nakactuiq* (Bladder Feast) through which the mainland Central Yup'ik demonstrated their respect for the seal and sought to insure that seal populations would be abundant.

During the course of a year, bladders from all the seals taken were saved, dried out and hung up in the kashgee. In the winter, after new clothes and equipment for the coming season were manufactured, bladders were made for the five-day bladder festival. The seal bladders were taken down and inflated. Since it was believed that the seal spirits would return at that time to the vicinity of the *qasigh* to witness the ceremony, noise was kept at a minimum in order not to disturb the seal spirits.

The key element of the ritual was the belief that the seal spirit or life force was housed in the bladder. By killing the seal when it was awake,



Masks representing animal and other spirits were an important part of religious ceremonies and dances among the Central Yup'ik. (ANCHORAGE MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND ART)



Yup'ik ceremonial masks, Lower Kuskokwim, about 1880

the seal's spirit would be able to return in another body if the bladder was returned to the seal's home under the sea. After five days of dancing, the people took down the inflated bladders, marched to the nearby river, cut a hole through the ice and returned the bladders to the sea. The spirits of the seals could then return to their home underneath the sea and be reborn.

The *angulcaq* (shaman) had a special role for he was to leave the festival and travel to the home of the seals to see if they had been satisfied with the human efforts. After several days, the *angulcaq* returned with the good news. The seals were happy and would be returning in abundance. Through this ceremony the central Yup'ik demonstrated the mutual dependence of men upon seals and seals upon men for the recreation of life.

Contact with Europeans

For the Yup'ik, contact with Europeans and Americans occurred at a much later time than for Alaska Natives living on the coast of the Gulf of Alaska. While more northerly penetration into Central Yup'ik territory by Russians did not occur until the 19th century, the lack of abundant developable resources such as gold, salmon, and minerals kept American presence to a minimum as well. The one area for which this is not true is Bristol Bay where the development of the sockeye salmon canning industry in the 1890s brought major social impacts and diseases. North of Bristol Bay, Central Yup'ik peoples have been able to maintain their culture, language and communities to a greater extent than other Alaskan Native groups. The isolation of St. Lawrence Island in the middle of the Bering Sea has also shielded Siberian Yup'ik from major impacts of American cultural practices until the second half of the 20th century.