

Yupik Dancing

by Ann Fienup-Riordan

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Two men came down to the water and entered the open water in their kayaks with only a drum and a spear. They approached the village at night, waiting until the 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* [communal men's house]." And they did, and took council there. And now they only fight with dancing. And the men who came went home to their old village and said, "No more war." (from *The Origin of Dancing* by Cyril Chanar)

Half a hundred tiny villages, each populated by between 100 and 500 Yupik Eskimo, lie spread along the coast of western Alaska between the mouths of the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers. First appearances convey isolation and austerity, with man pitted against a cold and inhospitable environment. However, the Yupik area is actually the home of a people committed to harvesting a tremendous natural bounty, including sea and land mammals, birds, and a variety of fish. Thanks to relatively late contact with outsiders and infrequent economic intrusions, it remains one of the most culturally vital areas in Alaska, where English is still the second language of the majority of the residents and Yupik Eskimo the first. As the traditional subsistence activities and language continue to flourish, so do many of the traditional cultural activities, including the lively and rich display we know as Yupik dance.

As in the story above, Yupik dancing is said to have begun where warfare left off. Conversely, one of the more covert battles that western society first waged against the Yupik was the suppression of their dance tradition. During the late 1800s in the delta region, Moravian and Catholic missionaries alike viewed with grave misgiving the *agayuluteng* (masked dances) along with other embodiments of traditional Yupik cosmology. Overwhelmed by the pagan implications of these traditional representations and the ceremonial cycle in which they were a part, the missionaries did their best to discourage their performance. Informal "recreational" dancing survived in the areas missionized by the Catholics, but along the coast south of Nelson Island and along the Kuskokwim River, where Moravian influence prevailed, dance performances were completely suppressed.

Today, in the Catholic communities of the region, dancing in a religious context no longer exists. However, the contemporary Yupik have retained several annual formal dance distributions. The winter season, with all its ceremonial activities, is still referred to as *cauyaq* (drum), an essential and central element in the dance. Along with these major annual events, informal dancing occurs throughout the year. Although more common on stormy winter evenings than during light summer nights when the fish are running, informal dancing is a vital part of village life whenever time permits or an occasion presents itself.

Between one and two dozen participants, including the drummers, are



Alukanuk drummers at Mountain Village Dance Festival in February 1984.
Photo by Jim Barker



Chevak dancers (l to r) Teresa Tommy, Mary Nash, David Boy Scout, Natalia Nayamin and Agnes Boy Scout perform during the festival in the village of St. Mary's in the fall of 1982.

enough to start off the evening, although the group often grows to ten times its original size as the evening progresses. The older men and women of the community are the chief dancers, along with a group of promising youngsters who have been given some of the simpler dances by their grandparents. Early in the evening, as the group begins to assemble in the community hall, several of the middle-aged men take the drums from the closet where they are kept and begin to play softly, waiting.

The drums are made of a rim of bent wood, approximately two feet in diameter, over which a single piece of plastic (formerly walrus stomach) is tightly stretched. The only instruments to accompany the dancing, they are struck with a thin willow wand. Two to six drums are used, the drummers rotating during the evening as their voices weary and arms grow tired.

Each dance has its own song, which the drummers, accompanied by up to a dozen singers, perform to the beat of the music. Each song consists of two parts: a verse sung in duple time to the increasingly rapid drum beat, and a chorus which is accompanied by an irregular drum beat. Both chorus and verse elicit highly stylized dance gestures, but whereas the verse gestures tend to be more abstract and are danced according to a formal pattern, those of the chorus are often realistic imitations of animal and human behavior, and follow no set pattern. Each verse is danced through twice between choruses. The sequence is repeated again and again, becoming faster, louder and more exaggerated with each repetition, until by the end of the dance the precise syncopation between the drum beats and the movements of the dancers makes it seem as though the dancers themselves were making the sound.

A dance begins as one old man or woman softly sings the verse, which contains both vocables (lexically meaningless syllables) and words descriptive of the action or events the dance will depict. As the singer finishes, the audience begins to generate the dancers, pushing and calling them forth. The heads of the older matrons turn around, searching for the appropriate dancers—those who in years past have been given particular dances as their prerogative by the older men and women who have written the songs. A man and his wife or two cousins come from different parts of the seated mass and join together in public, as the drummers tighten their drum heads and prepare to begin. From two to a dozen individuals perform in each dance. The women dancers stand in a line towards the back facing the audience and the drummers, while the male dancers kneel in front of them, also facing the drummers.

Both the men and the women hold fans while they dance; if no fans are available, they wear gloves, some say out of respect for what they perform.



Paul Agumiak, Frances Usugan and Martina John (in back) perform a comic dance chorus during the 1982 St. Mary's Yupik Dance Festival.



Francine Chiklak of Mountain Village in typical Yupik dance headdress at the 1984 festival.



Charlie Steve of Stebbins entertains the crowd with a comic dance chorus at the 1982 St. Mary's Dance Festival.

Suggested reading

Fienup-Riordan, Ann. *The Nelson Island Eskimo: Social Structure and Ritual Distribution*. Anchorage: Alaska Pacific University Press, 1983.

_____. *Nick Charles: Worker in Wood*. Fairbanks: Rasmuson Library, 1983.

The men use circular wooden fans decorated with five or six large feathers (mallard or white owl) extending around the rim. In the Nelson Island area, women's fans are made of grass coils along the edges of which are sewn the long and graceful neck hairs of the reindeer. On the Yukon delta, women hold small wooden finger masks by means of two holes carved at their bases. The small masks are bordered with a combination of short full feathers and long thin ones, topped with tufts of down. Both the flowing hairs and the stiff feathers serve to accentuate the arm and hand movements of the dancers, rendering the women's movements more fluid and the men's more staccato.

On special occasions, women may also wear broad strings of beads around their necks, as well as beaded crowns topped with wolverine and caribou hair. The beaded fringe of these headdresses often covers the eyes of the performers, studiously cast down as another stylized mark of respect. Both the encircling crowns and the rounded, perforated dance fans, fringed with both fur and feathers, are reminiscent of the mask worn traditionally by the central dancer. The open-work design of the fans held by the men is explicitly compared to the pierced hand found as an appendage to many traditional dance masks. The hole in the hand's center, like the opening in the dance fan, is a symbolic passage through which the spirits of fish and game came to view their treatment by men; if they found it acceptable, it was believed they would repopulate the world. Although the traditional masked dances have been abandoned, the dancers, with fans and arms extended in the motions of the dance like gigantic transformation masks, call forth many of the traditional meanings, including the continued interrelation between the human and nonhuman environment.

When the singer has completed the verse once and the dancers have assembled, the drummers and chorus begin to play and sing. They are led by an older man or woman, the official dance director, who encourages and teases the dancers during each verse by calling out directions during the chorus/pantomime, such as "Raise the gun!" and "Shoot!" The director's motions may be accompanied by the steady back and forth movement of a dance wand, a three foot long piece of decorated driftwood. From a quiet beginning, the scene grows more and more raucous, with the audience shouting back and forth, pulling people off and on to the dance floor, and calling for the dancers to begin again, as the performers play up to an audience that continues to egg them on.

During the dances, women stand, feet flat, body swaying with an up and down motion, and knees bending to the beat, while the men kneel directly in front of them. The dance songs themselves are about everything from winning at cards or war, to an escape from a ghost. Since all songs deal with daily experiences, a catalogue of the changes that have come to the area in the last 20 years can be read from Yupik dance songs: songs about basketball, guitar playing, playing on swings in the school ground, or going to Anchorage.

Yupik dancing is as vital today as ever in the delta region. Men and women continue to dance to the steady rhythm of the hooped drum, traditionally said to represent the beating heart of the spirits as well as the lively movements of the spirits of men and game over the thin surface of the earth. Although many traditions have changed or vanished, the drum continues a steady and meaningful beat.