

Inuit [Eskimo]

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Inuit dancers performing at the Alaska Native Heritage Center, Anchorage.

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The inhabitants of the circumpolar region; around 50,000 live in Alaska, and this article refers specifically to the music of the Alaskan people. The traditional reliance of the coastal Inuit on sea mammals as a source of food, clothing, and other materials, and of the inland Inuit on caribou hunting, have been the principal determinants of their ceremonialism. Although there are considerable differences in culture and race between the Inuit and Native Americans, the music of the two groups is stylistically related.

1. Genres and functions.



Inuit men with wolf dancers.

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Most indigenous explanations of songs, dances, and drumming distinguish between social, secular, and religious functions. St. Lawrence Islanders refer to *ilaegaek* as “nighttime singing” or shamanistic song, and to *aetok* as “daytime singing” or secular song used for entertainment (Hughes, 1960, p.304). A similar distinction is reported for the Northwest; of the four generic categories of song recognized there, three are secular and the fourth is literally translated as “songs of group of things done in a trance”: (1) *qitkutim atuutaa*, game songs; (2) *unipkaa q atuutilik*, songs in stories; (3) *uamipiaq*, dance songs; (4) *angaiyutikun atuutit*, ceremonial dance songs (Johnston, “The Eskimo Songs of Northwestern Alaska,” p.8). By the 1970s the last category had been subdivided into six subgenres: (i) *kiapsaq*, whalers’ spinning-top dance songs; (ii) *tohoyaqhuuqaun*, puppet ceremony dance songs; (iii) *nalukataun*, whalers’ skin-toss dances; (iv) *uingarung*, whalers’ masquerade dance songs; (v) *kigugiyataun*, northern lights dance songs; (vi) *kalukhaq*, box-drum dance songs. Most of these are modified fragments of such larger ceremonials as the Messenger Feast (*kalukhaq*) or whaling rituals (first four categories), which flourished in the 19th century.

In coastal communities of the Northwest, communal religious festivals were related to whaling and centered around the hunting-group leader (*ümealiq*) and his crew or lodge. In the interior similar lodges were traditionally associated with the annual caribou drive. A large cycle of songs was sung by the *ümealiq*, the *kaakliq* (an older, more experienced whaler who was also often a shaman), and the crew to accompany each stage of the whaling operation (Spencer, 1959). Songs thought to ensure the efficacy of the harpoon, lances, lines, and floats, to control the weather, and to attract the whale were

also sung. The season ended with a spring whaling feast. Special dances performed in recent decades in Point Hope on New Year's Eve and at the June Whaling Feast derive from these practices. Traditional festivals involved social dancing, distribution of whale meat, ceremonial masked dances, and, at their culmination, the *nalukataq* or blanket toss, in which an individual was thrown into the air from a walrus skin to the accompaniment of a song.

The second important ceremonial of the Northwest was the social Messenger Feast, last held at Wainwright in 1914-15. This event, which has some features in common with the Northwest Coast Indian potlatch, demanded a long period of preparation to amass food and gifts, prepare songs, dances, and costumes, build a *karigi* (dance house), and train participants. Songs of invitation bearing a symbolically marked staff were sent by messenger from one village to another. The festival included the formal announcing and greeting of guests, pretended insults between the messengers and the chief host, footraces between the guest and host camps, stomping dances accompanied by a box drum, distribution of gifts, dances by hosts and guests either separately or together, a soccer game, and social dances. A contemporary box-drum dance cycle at Wainwright has evolved from this feast.

In the Southwest whaling rituals culminated in the annual Bladder Festival. For approximately one month the spirits of animals taken during the year's hunt were honored, and through the action of returning the bladders to the sea the rebirth of the spirits in new creatures was requested. Rival groups practiced new songs in darkness until correct performance was assured; wild parsnip was burned to the accompaniment of a special song as a purification rite. Modified parts of this festival continued into the 1970s in some communities (for example, the April Walrus Carnival and June Whaling Feast in Savoonga).

An ancient Feast for the Dead shared some characteristics with the Bladder Festival: the careful preparation of ceremonial songs in the darkness of the dance house, and the singing of songs to honor the spirits of the dead and encourage their return. Ghost songs unassociated with dance continue to constitute a special repertory in this area, but their relationship to earlier ritual is unclear.

A third ceremonial in the Southwest and on St. Lawrence Island is the Inviting-in Feast, which relates to some extent to the northern Messenger Feast. Originally involving elaborate wooden masks that represent animal protectors (Nelson, 1899, p.358), these dances are now intercommunity events at which dance teams display story dancing.

Central to ceremonial and recreational life in the 19th century was the *karigi* (also called *kashgee*, *kashim*, *kudyigi*, or *kazigi*), a large house built either temporarily for the winter season or remaining permanently in the community (as at Point Hope). In southern areas the semi-subterranean building was a men's house for hunt-related chores, meetings, socializing, bathing, and sleeping, while in the north women were more freely admitted. Shamanistic performances and ritual and recreational dancing occurred there.

In addition to the role that music played in these festivals, songs could be used for many non-secular purposes to extend personal power. Power songs were sung to attempt control of the weather, to encourage game, to seek protection in conjunction with amulets, or to facilitate shamanistic actions. There were songs designed to prevent conception, to ease the birth of a child, to raise a boat or house, to cure illness, to find objects, and to effect love magic. Such songs were personal property, not always the shaman's, and could be sold. The power of such songs was feared; children were told not to learn the songs sung by the shaman lest they themselves become imbued with shamanistic power.

Secular, recreational, non-ceremonial songs and dances are either composed or, in some instances, improvised. In northwestern communities dances for which the choreography is fixed, taught, and rehearsed by dance teams are called *sayuun*. This category includes specific items such as the women's bench dance, often with paddling motions (*taliq* in Point Hope, *paagurraqtuq* in Wainwright). The permanently assigned motions that accompany the drum rhythms and musical motives of a song are often devised by the composer's male hunting partner or trading associate. The *atuutipiaq* dances, on the other hand, have freely improvised motions, often including jumping or stomping for men and knee-bending or arm-curving for women. Both dance categories frequently imitate hunting or other subsistence activities. The southwest region does not recognize a division between fixed-motion and freely improvised dances, but rather classes dance styles according to the body position of the dancers. The men's *arula* is done in a kneeling position; during an *arula* performance women do a gentler style known as *putuluteng*, standing behind and to the side of the men with eyes downcast. The *pualla* is a men's stomping dance; the *talirluteng* (like the Inupiaq *taliq*) is a seated bench dance with arm motions executed both by men and women.

In the game-song category juggling songs are the most widespread. These are characterized by texts containing sexual allusions and indelicate references, features shared by juggling songs in northern Canada. In a hopping game called *mitqulikrsraq*, in which opposing lines of boys and girls hop towards each other and try to break through the linked arms of the other team, the hopping is timed to the asymmetrical rhythm of the song's words (Johnston, *Eskimo Music*, 1976, p.57). A song also accompanies *annami-analuuraq*, a chasing game. Short chants accompany string games, in which cat's-cradle figures represent segments from stories. Songs associated with stories range from short, half-spoken dialogues between animals to longer, dramatic performances with masked dance (for example, the Beautiful Woman and the Three Suitors dance, performed in Point Hope on New Year's Eve).

Thus fragments of traditional festivals continue, usually in conjunction with recreational dances by community dance teams. Ritual items are now often associated with US holidays (Christmas, New Year's Day, Independence Day), or with special community events (the Point Hope Northern Lights Dance, the Barrow Eskimo games, the Dillingham Beaver Round-up).

2. Instruments.

The Alaskan Inuit use a wider variety of traditional instruments than do the Inuit of Canada and Greenland, where the single-headed frame drum is often the only indigenous instrument. In Alaska this type of drum—called *tchayuk* (by Koranda) or *cauyuk* (by Johnston) in Yupik, and *keylowtik* (Koranda) or *gilaun* (Johnston) in Inupiaq—has a thin, wooden, circular frame covered with a natural membrane that is wetted and stretched tight in preparation for playing.

On the northwest coast the Inuit frame drum is cylindrical, around 60 cm in diameter and 4 cm deep, with a membrane usually made from the stomach or liver of a whale, walrus, or (inland) caribou. The beater, a thin, slightly curved stick, is used to strike the instrument from below. The player strikes the rim either in one or two places, or strikes both the rim and membrane. The southwestern frame drum differs in that the diameter of the head may vary from 55 to 65 cm; plastic membranes have sometimes been used since the 1970s. The beater strikes the instrument from above or on the edge, the

membrane, or both. On St. Lawrence Island a pyriform frame drum, with a membrane made from walrus tissue, is used. The beater, a sharply curved stick with a paddle carved at each end, strikes the membrane from above.

Another important type of “drum” is the *kalukhaq* (also spelled *kalluraq*, *kaylukuk*, or *kotlookuk*), an idiophonic box drum associated originally with the Messenger Feast. In the myth that explains the feast’s origin the drum is said to represent an eagle’s heartbeat. The instrument consists of a wooden, rectangular case of variable size with a decorative, zigzag top edge and eagle feathers. A fur-padded rail along one side is struck with a short stick. The drum is suspended from the roof and played by a seated drummer.

Other instruments include rattles made of bone, bird beaks, animal teeth, or cartridge shells, which are attached to the northwest-coast dance mittens worn in deference to whaling spirits. Arm gauntlets with puffin-beak rattles are worn on King Island. Rattles are sometimes attached to other items of apparel; an interesting historical example is the tall, conical cap covered with rows of mountain-sheep teeth (Murdoch, 1892, p.365). Bullroarers are found chiefly as children’s toys. Rare instances of chordophones have been observed, one a one-string fiddle (*kelutviaq*) tapped with a small wand or quill (Johnston, *Eskimo Music*, 1976, p.107).

3. Style.

Dance songs vary from one region to another, but most are pentatonic. Certain scale notes (especially the note below the tonal center) may be microtonally inflected according to context. A tonal center, defined by its reiteration and position at the end of a phrase, is often the second lowest scale tone. The range of dance songs is usually around an octave but may be as great as a 12th; intervals differ according to region but large, ascending leaps are rather common. An exception to this is the style of the riverine communities of the southwest (such as Pilot Station and St. Mary’s), where narrow-ranged, tetratonic melodies with many ascending 4ths and descending minor 3rds were analyzed by Johnston (*ibid.*, p.109).

Text settings are generally syllabic; there is some melismatic prolongation of certain vowels in large, downward melodic leaps, but only in specific positions within words. Dance songs are generally single strophes (except in some inland communities of the southwest, such as Pilot Station), but many are performed twice, first with vocables and light drumming on the rim, then slightly faster with lexical text and heavier drumming involving membrane strokes. More vigorous dancing parallels the appearance of song words in the second part.

The most common meter is 5/8, but heterometric sections, often parallel to the rhythms of the text, are frequent. Some areas have distinctive meters; for example, 7/8, related to Siberian styles, is characteristic of St. Lawrence Island (*ibid.*, p.16. Song and drum pulses (as well as dance motions) generally coincide, but the metric grouping of vocal and drum rhythms often diverges, producing polyrhythms and syncopation.

Game songs, such as those for juggling, usually have a range exceeding an octave and a modular, motivic structure that might be represented *AA’ ... BB’ ... CC’ ...* (ellipses denote a variable number of repetitions of the same motive). Some motives are iterated at a later point in the song. Although

pebble-juggling implies a regular, duple rhythm (many transcriptions are written in 2/4 meter), not all musical motives are consistently duple, and the resulting cross-rhythms add a dimension of complexity to the juggling performance.

Songs-in-stories and string figure songs are generally narrow-ranged and sometimes use speech-song in which relative, rather than exact, pitch levels are important; animal calls are sometimes interspersed. The most wide-ranging melodic motion occurs at the beginning of the song, and tone reiterations increase toward the end.

Acculturation in musical style ranges from the parodying of Euro-American song features to the complete imitation of new styles (for example, four-part hymns, pop songs accompanied by guitar). The continuity of traditional music varies widely, depending on such factors as the relative tolerance of religious authorities and the influence of the mass media. Inuit music features in two documentary films by Sarah Elder and Leonard Kamerling, *Tununeremiut: the People of Tununak* (1972) and *The Drums of Winter: Uksuum Cauyai* (1988).

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