



Yup'ik Dancing Is Like *Akutaq*: A Rich Mixture

Since the yup'ik mask exhibit *Agayuliyararput/ Our Way of Making Prayer* opened at the Anchorage Museum in 1996, I have often been asked whether I think the exhibit might encourage a revival of mask making and masked dancing in southwest Alaska. My answer is no. Although masks and the stories they tell continue to be admired, their existence depends on the role they play in the vital and always changing tradition of Yup'ik dance.

Some village dance groups perform with masks, especially humorous ones, and a half-dozen masks were used at the Yupiit Yuraryarait dance festival that opened *Agayuliyararput* in Toksook Bay in 1996. More groups brought masks to the regional dance festival in St. Marys in November 1999. On the festival's first night, St. Marys mayor Andy Paukan presented a replica of a century-old Kuskokwim mask that had been brought from Germany as part of the mask exhibit. Groups also presented masks on the festival's closing night. In between, save for brief naps and hurried meals, were forty-eight hours of nonstop dancing.

More than six hundred people gathered in the St. Marys high school gym for the three-day dance festival. Lights blazed over the basketball courts, and the bleachers were pulled out to accommodate the crowds. Tarps had been draped over one corner of the gym to muffle the echoing sound of drums, which can overwhelm the singers in such a big hall. The darkened space recalled the *qasgi* (communal men's house) of times past. The enormous banner heralding the Yup'ik mask exhibit in New York City covered half the back wall. Next to it a revolving neon sign displayed the schedule of the weekend events, including a potluck feast and an *akutaq* contest.

Dancing on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta today is, I think, a lot like the *akutaq* that festival participants feasted on all weekend long. *Akutaq* is served on all

OPPOSITE Apalaq (James Ayuluk) of Chevak performs at the Yupiit Yuraryarait at Toksook Bay, 1996.



Anna Polty of Pilot Station dancing at Mountain Village festival, 1984.

OPPOSITE Kiicaq (Robert Greene) of Pilot Station and Rita Nick dance during Cama-i, 2004.



Pilot Station's dancers with John Minock performing at Bethel's Cama-i Dance Festival, 1993.



special occasions, and people sometimes refer to it as “Eskimo ice cream.” *Akutaq* is, literally, “a mixture” of fat, sugar, berries, fish, and other tasty ingredients the creative cook finds at hand. Like dance, *akutaq* is not an everyday dish. It is a special treat, an honor to receive and a responsibility to give. Like hosting a dance, people must work hard to gather its ingredients during summer and fall. Unlike a *kass’aq* (non-Native) dessert, it is something that can sustain you. It is savored and enjoyed when available, and long remembered when it is gone.

Christian missionaries had suppressed dance in many parts of the delta. Even today some villages still hesitate to reclaim this part of their heritage. In lower Yukon and coastal communities, however, dance once again flourishes. Johnny Thompson of St. Marys remarked, “Back when dance just started again, it was just a few of us. Today these young people are beginning to be eager to dance.” Another fine dancer, Neva Rivers of Hooper Bay, added, “I really love to dance. When I hear a drum, I want to dance. Dancing stopped in my area in 1927. Then in 1946 we started dancing in Hooper Bay, inviting villagers from Chevak. And since then we’ve been holding on to that dance.”

If you watch a dance with Yup’ik friends, they will gladly explain its basic form. Like enjoying *akutaq*, however, only experience can teach you all the many ways these ingredients can be mixed. Yup’ik song and dance have definite rules, but all are made to be bent. The result is great art and literature rolled into one—poetry, elegance, power, comedy, and drama. A contemporary dance festival is more like a nonstop opera than what one might think of when someone says, “I’m going to a dance.”

Most dances are performed to a song with two or more verses and a single repeated chorus. One or more men usually kneel in front, while several women stand behind. Sometimes, however, a woman may kneel and

dance in place of her husband or close relative who has passed away, and a man may dance standing for the same reason. Performing with downcast eyes, women move gracefully in marked contrast to the staccato movements of the men. This, too, is often turned around as younger women build to a vigorous finale or older men move with the precision and elegance of swans.

The motions of the dance enact the words of the songs, which two to twelve men sing to the beat of large, tambourine-shaped drums. Today, however, younger men are also learning to drum, even leading their own groups, and women can be seen singing and drumming along with them. In the past these drums were carefully covered with dried walrus stomach. The covering of choice today is airplane fabric. I asked Bob Charles of Bethel where he got the material he used to cover his drums. “Why I hunt airplanes, of course, although they’re not easy to catch,” was his teasing reply.

Potentially more confusing to the newcomer, the dance group itself never has a set number. Although it may start with a half-dozen dancers, it often grows to fill the dance floor. People join a dance for many reasons. They may dance because they see a young performer who is so cute and lovable that they yearn to give their support. Or a woman may kneel facing her *uicungaq* (teasing cousin, lit., “cute little husband”) to “get him” (embarrass him) in a way that makes everyone laugh. Dancers may join just because they love to dance, especially when a group is performing a popular, well-known song. Small children congregate on the sidelines, imitating their elders. Some dances continue for half an hour with dozens of dancers moving in unison with power and grace.

OPPOSITE Anartevkaq (Charlie Steve) of Stebbins performs a comic dance in woman’s attire at the Yupiit Yuraryarit dance festival at Toksook Bay, 1996.

