

## Winter Traditions and Celebrations: Past and Present

There are many traditions and celebrations that occur during our long winter months here in Alaska. This information provides a great opportunity to introduce Alaska Native cultures into your classroom in one way or another.

### The Bladder Festival By Grace Arai

In mid-winter Eskimos from Kodiak to Point Hope celebrated various forms of the Bladder Festival to honor those animals killed the preceding year. The bladders of all the seals killed during the year were inflated and hung up on a line across the front of the *gasgiq* (the men's house, used as a community gathering place for ceremonies) or attached to spears hung horizontally in the *gasgiq*. The animals' spirits were thought to reside in the inflated bladders and the villagers carried out ceremonies, performed songs and dances, and told stories to entertain and pay respect to these animal spirits. Pleasing the spirits of the animals would mean that the animals would reciprocate by allowing themselves to be caught in the future. The Eskimos thus hoped to insure hunting success in a world in which survival was uncertain.

Celebrated as an important and elaborate event through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Bladder Festival evoked the communal feeling of dependence on the environment and the need to work together to gain the favor of the animals. The feast also recognized new hunters as mothers displayed the skins of smaller animals their sons had killed during the year. Presents were given to them and to the daughters who had put away their dolls the preceding year. Though the specific ceremonies are no longer practiced, the relationships celebrated between hunter and hunted, the hunter and the family, and the families in the community still persist.

Of the animals honored, the seal was the most common, though other sea mammals like the walrus, beluga whale, and sea lions were also included. For the festival the bladders of these animals were inflated, painted, and hung in the *gasgiq*.

Other objects used symbolically during the ceremonies included harpoons, wooden masks and wooden hunting hats. Under bunches of wild celery stalks and beneath the spears and bladders were piled the wooden hunting hats. On Nelson Island each family decorated its paddle with a hunting hat, grass, and feathers and planted it outside the *gasgiq*, blade down, in a row with those from other families.

Dancing, accompanied by singing and drumming, was an important way to amuse the spirits of the animals. In the great game dance planned by the shaman, masked performers filled the room, dancing like birds pecking for food, beavers cutting down trees and making dams, a bear growling fiercely while imitations of bird and animal cries emanated from all sides.

On the last day the hunters attached their bladders to their spear shafts and gathered at a hole in the ice. Ripping open the bladders, the hunters thrust the bladders below the waters. The animal spirit's return to the sea meant it would be reborn, tell other animals of the respectful treatment it had received, and willingly be killed in the future to serve the needs of the hunter.

## **Eskimo Masks**

Two types of masks were used:

1. Animals spirit masks carved by the shaman or at his direction.
2. Secular masks used to entertain.

Materials used to make masks:

1. Driftwood carved to represent an animal, bird, or natural elements.
2. Feathers, furs, animal teeth, quills, willow roots, sinew.

Representation on masks:

1. Spirit animals, fish, birds, inanimate objects, moon, the shaman's helping spirit.
2. Sometimes masks incorporated a small face representing the spirit of the animal.

Function of spirit masks:

To please the animal spirits; therefore, the masks had to be well made; to reveal the spirit world and impress the audience; therefore, the masks had to have a fantastic quality, or strangeness.

Characteristics;

1. Size varied from small masks held with thongs and mouth grip to heavy masks suspended from the ceiling with the dancer performing behind them.
2. Feathers were used for a "halo" effect; fur for the ruff.
3. Facial features were often exaggerated or unrealistic to create a fantastic, other-worldly effect.
4. Concentric rings around the mask, thought to represent the universe, often held arms, legs, wings, or flippers.
5. Wooden carved appendages like the thumbless four-fingered hand, fish, flippers were sometimes attached directly to the mask.
6. The masks were notable for their creativity and diversity.

## **Bibliography**

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