

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.

Inviting-In Feast By Cheri Yokum

The Inviting-In Feast was a mid-winter (January) celebration of the Yupik Eskimos of the Yukon and Kuskokwim River areas. Like many other celebrations, this one was aimed at success in hunting, but in a very specific way. Each hunter had a special helping spirit, usually an animal spirit, which interceded on his behalf during the hunt and convinced various animals to be caught or killed by the hunter. The Inviting-In Feast was the time when these helpers were honored and asked for their continuing help.

The feast was not merely communication between humans and spirits, however. It was also a social event in which an entire neighboring village was asked to come for several days of dancing, contests, and feasts. The Inviting-In Feast was sponsored on a rotation basis with alternating villages being hosts. The villages tried to out-do each other. According to E.W. Hawkes, the ceremonies were dramatic:

“The main dances of the Inviting-In Festival are totemic in character, performed by trained actors to appease the totems of the hunters, and insure success for the coming season. These are dances in pantomime and depict the life of the arctic animals, the walrus, raven, bear, ptarmigan and others. Then there are group dances which illustrate hunting scenes, like the Reindeer and Wolf Pack dance, and dances of purely comic character designed for entertainment of the guests. During the latter performances the side that laughs has to pay a forfeit...”
(E.W. Hawkes, 1914:40).

There was an exchange of elaborate presents between villages during the ceremonies, but not between individuals. This festival required full dance costumes of richly decorated skins, masks, and rattles. Men generally wore the face or body masks and the women wore the finger masks. The finger masks were small carved masks which were held in the hands. These finger masks, or fans, as they are now called, were decorated with caribou hairs, feathers, and rocks or shells.