

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.

Barrow (Inupiaq)

By Amber Thomas, Community Counselor (Begich Middle School)

In Barrow families would go to the church on Thanksgiving Day and also Christmas Day and the whaling crews along with community members would bring food to share.

My family would grab a cardboard box (grub box) and place kitchen utensils in it. We would have paper towels, plates, cups, bowls, Ziploc bags, salt and pepper, ulus, etc. Everything your family needs to eat native food.

People would walk around the church and you would raise your hand if you would like what they are passing out. If caribou soup is going around you put your bowl up and they fill it up. If maktuk is going around you place your Ziploc bag up and they fill it. Young ladies are walking around with hot tea and younger kids with sugar. Yum this is making me so hungry.

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Remembering Russian Orthodox Christmas By Geneva Penetac

On Christmas Eve (January 6) we'd hitch up our dog teams to begin slavick (starring). It was so much fun mushing across the frozen lake to the houses nestled along its sparkling shore. We'd jump off one sled and jump onto another! The sky was clear, the moon shone big and BRIGHT and the stars twinkled so low that I felt I could touch them! It was beautiful! The snowflakes caught the moon's rays and bounced off light beams from their six edges making the night sparkle like diamonds.

As we entered each house one by one, the star-holder would stand under the icon area while we faced him singing in Yupik. After singing the host and hostess would invite us to eat the foods we set out. The men would eat first, then the women and children. It was understood that the host and hostess with their children would join the slavickers onto the next house, if they wanted to. At the first house I received a present of maple syrup! Was I happy!! By the last house there would be lots of dog teams! We'd be so full and tired and ready for bed. What a wonderful, wonderful, night.

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Russian Christmas By Lucy Brown

We couldn't wait for the church bells to ring at 12 midnight signaling that Christmas had started! We'd run to the church and enter quietly! During the three hour church service, we'd kneel and stand, trying to be good and stay awake. The men and boys stood on one side and the women and girls stood on the other side. Finally near the end of the service we'd have to kiss Jesus' picture. I was never sure if I should really kiss the picture or just play kiss it - for fear of getting the picture dirty. So I play kissed the picture!

After church we'd go to the first house and sing in Yupik and Russian while the star holder twirled the star. After caroling, we'd eat and go to the next house.

Now there was my friend's house which I feared greatly to enter! I made my friend promise not to leave me behind in it - that she was to wake me up if I fell asleep. (There was someone who had died in the house and I was scared that a ghost would get me!) I fell asleep and my friend left me behind!! (Some friend.) I got up when someone entered and lit the kerosene lamp. I felt scared and my heart was pounding to think that I had slept in the house all alone. But I finally calmed myself down.

Slavick was going to church, eating, singing, sharing, and visiting friends and family.

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Russian Orthodox Christmas (Starring - Caroling) January 7th **By Mable Brandon**

Starring, an ancient Russian Orthodox Christian custom, originated in the Ukraine. Starting on January 7, (Russian Christmas) a group of people would start off following a person carrying a pole made of wood, with a star on top - an icon in the center of the star - with a candle in the front. When they came to a house they would stop and stand facing the star. The star holder twirled the star while the rest of the group sang the theme song or trotarion.

The religious significance behind the ritual represents the three wise men following the star. The twirling of the star reminded them of eternity.

When the Russian priests came to Alaska they brought the custom to the Native people they converted. The Natives of the Bristol Bay area modified it to suit their needs.

By January 7, excitement builds; a group from the village starts off carrying a big star. They go from house to house, village to village. The people invite them into their homes. The group faces the person twirling the star and starts singing carols. After the caroling the starring group is asked to sit down to a special meal or partake from food laid out, smorgasbord style; presents might be passed out. When the group is ready to leave, they invite the people from the house to join them and the ritual is repeated until late into the night.

The Native star is made out of available material such as wood, wire, garland, Christmas tree ornaments, etc. It is approximately three feet in diameter. In the center is a religious icon. Directly in back of the icon is a small pole with which to hold the star.

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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.

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Russian Christmas in Nondalton, AK By Marilyn Balluta

Russian Christmas is January 7-14: one whole week. This is a busy and exciting time in Nondalton. Nondalton is 190 miles southwest of Anchorage in the Lake Clark/Lake Iliamna area. Everyone is getting ready for slavy (slavivk). We start out by going to church in the morning and again in the afternoon at 1:00 p.m. They first sing Russian Christmas songs in church and then go to the graveyard and usually sing by someone's grave who had recently passed away. The candle holders go first, then the icon, star holders (as many as four or five), the singers, then rest of the crowd. There is a leader who directs the group and decides which house will be next.

The first house is the preacher's house and second house is the church keeper's house and the third house is another church keepers house. The third house they will decide if the group should split up into two groups. This always happens because there are too many houses and it would take all night into the next morning before they are done.

Before the slavy group enters the house they sing "Glory to God in the Highest, Piece on Earth" outside. This notifies the people that Jesus was born. This also gives the family time to stand in one place and someone lights the candle by the icon. A long time ago they would shoot three times before the slavy group came to the house. This signal was telling everybody that the family was rejoicing, everybody is happy. (It's like when everybody brings in the New Year with fire crackers). Today they have phones to call each other but some people still do the traditional shooting.

Once inside the house they sing a total of 4 major songs (Russian and English); the other songs are Christmas carols. The very last song is "Many Years, Many Happy New Years". They wish the family many more years to come and everyone says "Merry Christmas". The family goes and kissed the icon and leaves money by the icon for the church. Everyone does the same thing and shakes hands or kisses the family members and says Merry Christmas. When they're done the family starts to serve everyone food. The elders will be served first. Last year we started cooking big pots of soup early in the morning until late that evening. Sometimes you will be eating at three houses, one right after the another. At each house you go to all the food is given out and you cannot refuse to eat when you're served. The same with when they are giving out candy, gum, dry fish, cookies, etc. That's why people take bag with them, to save some of the food.

The two groups will decide which house will be last and meet at that one house. They let the family of the house know ahead of time so this means sitting up all night until 2-3:00 in the morning. When they are done everyone goes home to get a few hours of sleep and it's time to get ready, because other villages will be coming the next day to sing. Also they decide who will be the singers, which stars, and candle holder, will go to the next village.

Last Russian Christmas there were five villages (Newhalen, New Stuyahok, N. Naknek, S. Naknek, Kokaknok) that came to Nondalton. When there are two or more different groups in one village they try not to meet at one house or meet in the road. If they do meet, no matter where, one village has to sing all their songs and then the other village sings all their songs. This is like holding a full church service.

This happened to Nondalton group of Iliamna. We met another village as we were leaving a house and they were coming to the same house and met right in the middle of the tundra. It was cold and we had to stand there until they got done singing. The only good part about that is there were some Northern Lights dancing in the sky. We all hopped back onto the trucks, Hondas, and snow machines, to go to the next house. Lots of fun visiting and traveling!

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Upper Tanana Winter Festival By Jill Ekstrom and Patricia Partnow

Despite the hard work required just to survive in the interior environment, there were times when work was halted and fun was the order of the day. One of the most important times for the Upper Tanana was the Winter Festival, which took place during much of the month of December.

This was the time when all the fall fish, berries, and meat had been gathered, prepared, and stored, and people had ample supplies for the time being. Hunting was not as good as previously, and these two factors, coupled with the desire to rekindle social relationships, made the Winter Festival a time to be looked forward to.

The festival was a gathering of all the band members, numbering from 20 to 100 people. Its purpose was to visit and have fun. Riddles, storytelling, games, and contests were the order of the day. Different men hosted parties throughout the month, but all these parties were part of the festival itself.

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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.