A Message from Eagle Mother

The Messenger’s Feast of the Inupiat Eskimo

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In January of 1988 the North Slope Borough of Alaska sponsored a Kivgiq. It was the first such presentation in over 80 years in the Inupiat Eskimo Messenger’s Feast, which can trace its origins to the beginnings of the Inupiat culture. Participants came together in Barrow, Alaska, from all of the eight arctic villages of the North Slope Borough—where the sun sets in mid-November and rises mid-January each winter. The 2,000 plus spectators and participants that gathered in the high school gym for three days represented the largest single gathering of people ever on the North Slope. The revival of the Kivgiq was motivated not by the spiritual necessity of its origins, nor by trade or barter, which it later facilitated, but by renewed interest in the traditional social and cultural values that the Feast encodes. The 1988 Kivgiq brought together in performance the songs, dances, and events that had been scattered in cultural memory and threatened with extinction. And with this revival came a reaffirmation of Inupiat values that consoled the present as it rediscovered the past.

It was in 1987 when newly elected Borough Mayor, George Ahamaogak, coming to office on the heels of a political scandal and sensing the need for an uplifting community event, decided to sponsor a Kivgiq. He appointed a “special assistant,” Rex Okakok, who met with elders throughout the North Slope Borough to reconstruct the Kivgiq from their memories. The elders were more than glad to comply for they had long been concerned with the increased Westernization of their culture; the old ways were being lost and the language forgotten because there were fewer and fewer cultural events to hold it. “Every time I spoke to someone about it there was a sense of excitement; just by mentioning Kivgiq to the elders [. . .] there was a real positive feeling to bring people together” (1992), recalled Okakok of his travels to the villages of the North Slope. Starting with oral history records and then personally interviewing elders, Okakok, with the help of a North Slope Borough History and Language Commission (a three-person committee) then decided what basic understandings of the Kivgiq would be performed. “We came up with the central events in the
Kivgiq and used those as the basis to kind of organize the event,” said Okakok, “but the major theme was to get people together for Eskimo dancing and to visit their long lost relatives and sharing the culture” (Okakok 1992). Inupiaq leader James Nageak, a Kivgiq performer, Presbyterian minister and assistant professor of Alaska native language at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, recounted some of the motivation behind reviving the Kivgiq in 1988:

The elders were seeing that we don’t use it as much as we need to, the Inupiaq language. And there are some activities that we have lost over the years that get the people together. In the Western world, where we have the [native] corporations and the North Slope Borough and all of these things on a daily basis, we get involved in that. So I guess the elders said let’s get back the Inupiat values and those activities that they use to do. They tried to think back to the last time they had a Messenger’s feast. It was 1910. A lot of the elders said: “I’ve never been to one, but my father, my parents, and my grandparents talked about the Messenger’s Feast, what kind of activities they had, and why it was used.” (1991)

The Kivgiq was a pathway to the rediscovery of traditions and values that had been challenged by years of near epidemic drug and alcohol abuse provoked by the cultural and social trauma wrought by the introduction of Western culture. Yet even in memory, the Kivgiq served as an encoder of traditional culture. The songs, dances, regalia, and events, though fragmented and incomplete provided a doorway to the past. The doorway opened by performance led directly to the mythological core of the Inupiaq people, for in the performance of the Kivgiq were the echoes of

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1. Participants from eight arctic villages gathered in Barrow, Alaska for the 1988 Inupiat Eskimo Messenger’s Feast. (Photo by Bill Hess)
ancient myths and rituals. Living in the revived Kiviq is the Inupiaq creation myth, the myth of the Great Eagle Mother's Gift of Song and Dance, the shamanistic Eagle-Wolf Messenger's Feast, the animistic Wolf Dance, and the secular precursor of the contemporary Kiviq, the Messenger's Feast.¹

The Messenger's Feast will provide the focus of my exploration because of its historical and cultural detail. But the Messenger's Feast is only a point of departure within a cultural context where past and present, old and new, have blurred distinctions—often elusive to the control and relevance of time as the Western world knows it. The Messenger's Feast has traveled a path that is as much myth as it is memory, as much mystery as it is fact, and as much of the spiritual as it is of the material, world. The Inupiat people could be represented in no other, nor better way.

The Inupiat Context

The traditional philosophy and beliefs of the Inupiat of Northern Alaska—as with other aboriginal people—is to live with the earth. In keeping with this, their scattered ritual records, myths, artifacts, and archeology point to performance (ritual/ceremony/theatre) based on spirit-human world interaction that serves to maintain or achieve harmony with the earth. That the ancient Inupiat Messenger's Feast survived to this century intact is as much a consequence of geographic isolation as it is of delayed contact with Western culture. The perseverance of the Messenger's Feast is also a testament to the deep cultural roots from which it springs; it remains relevant today because, like the Inupiat, it has developed a bond and relationship with a part of the earth from which it is inseparable.

The advent of “civilizing” missionary pressures—which in some cases persecuted and banned the Inupiaq language, songs, and dances in any form—became most severe for Inupiat Alaska during the 1920s. Overt magico-religious and animistic performances such as the Eagle-Wolf Messenger Feast did exist up until that time, when participants were shamed, pressured, or persecuted into either abandoning or secularizing their traditional culture. When Inupiaq elder and Barrow Dance Group leader Martha Aiken was asked if Inupiaq dances held any spiritual significance she replied:

It keeps our culture alive. That's spiritual. If you mean do we do our shamans, that's another thing. We don't and we've forgotten those parts. Because a shaman cannot be a shaman unless taught a ritual song. And we have lost those. We don't even know what they sound like. The shamanistic part had faded away, but not the cultural, that's still alive and well yet. That's part of the spirituality. They confused the two. They did not understand how it was. Most of the denominations, when they came to a native village, thought all Eskimo dancing was shamanistic. But they were just celebrating some catch; they misunderstood. They thought everything was for shamans. (1992)

Possibly the most devastating event for the Inupiat was the “great death” that occurred between 1910 and 1930. During this time entire villages were decimated by diseases—cholera, diphtheria, and polio—brought by European and American commercial whalers. The Inupiat culture that survived, devastated by the loss of its tradition-bearers and shamans, was altered irrevocably. Weak and vulnerable, the survivors of the once complex and ancient Inupiat tradition were no match for missionary pressures.
As a consequence of the "great death" and subsequent forced Christianization, many songs, dances, rituals, and celebrations were either lost or dislocated from their original context and spiritual origins. In some villages, Eskimo dancing and singing were considered as expressions of paganism and banned outright. Today some of these villages have lost their traditions entirely. What has survived—with few exceptions—has done so by virtue of its secularization, fading in meaning and significance with each passing generation.

Traditionally, the Messenger's Feast had also served a trade and bartering function, brining villages together to exchange local specialties. The advent of commercial stores and a cash economy rendered obsolete this function of the Feast. Nageak offers his theory about why the Messenger's Feast ceased:

The Nunamiu people [inland dwellers] get seal oil and all of these other things they normally don't get inland. And of course, the wolf skins and the wolverine skins and the caribou skins—the people from the Qualimut, they get those. So when we're looking at about 1900, there were these [commercial] whaling activities. Charles D. Bower began setting up a store in Barrow and branching out to these other little places like at Brownlow Point, the Hooper Bay area; people can get what they need. They didn't need the Messenger's Feast anymore. (1991)

*The Messenger's Feast in Two Histories*

Written historical accounts of the Messenger's Feast and its derivations exist today as fragments scattered among anthropological, ethnographic, and travel writings, and oral history transcriptions. More recent records exist as photographs, audio- and videotapes. However, the history of the Messenger's Feast is also held in the living cultural memory of the Inupiat people. It is here that it exists most vitally—in the bodies and minds of elders, and in individual songs and dances that are performed to this day. These songs and dances literally breathe the tradition, keeping it alive in many forms and contexts throughout northwest Alaska. That there is no one single and definitive representation of the Messenger's Feast is as it should be. The derivations are evidence of how Inupiat holistic (oral and physically transmitted) history and performance traditions have traveled through the regions, passed generation to generation, with a fundamental structure intact. Martha Aiken commented that in the 1988 Kiivigq all they wanted to do was "a little part of it, just to show how they did it" (1992). Nageak addressed the flexibility and the evolutionary process of the Kiivigq:

I think what they're trying to do—as long as they can remember—is to try to pick out one aspect of the Kiivigq as they understand it. And some years later they might do that again. I think that's why you don't see the whole thing, but different aspects of it. That and the time constraints of the three days. I think the attitude is, do your own thing, surprise us a little bit sometimes, you know. Sometimes they said things like, "Next year we're going to do the dancing where we dance with the gift." Every year it is a little different and that's okay. (1991)

Vincent Nageak, an Inupiaq elder and father of James Nageak, gave another description of Messenger's Feast adaptability:
There is not only just one certain way to have a Messenger Feast. It's different in Barrow, the people-of-Nuvuk do it differently, also the people-of-the inland do it differently, the people-of-Wainwright also do the Messenger's Feast differently. You just keep adding the customs, which are different. (in Kisautag 1978:575)

However, though different in detail, each version shares the same well-spring of fundamental Inupiat culture and psychology. Based upon his interviews in the 1940s with two Inupiaq elders from the Kobuk River area J.L. Giddons drew similar conclusions about the diversity of the Messenger's Feast, which is referred to below as the "trading feast":

The slightly different accounts of Pegiruk and Oolayak point up the variations possible on a main theme, and indicate the futility of trying to reduce the trading feast to a single formal pattern. The ceremonies of the Kobuk were built about a central idea, and built upon long-established framework, but each actual procedure was staged and directed according to the ideas of individuals who were eager to produce an original and outstanding show. (1961:152)

This inconsistency and variation is much to the chagrin of Western expectations that look to written, rational, consistent, and, above all, objective verification to mark historical credibility. The Messenger's Feast has remained elusive, ephemeral, irrational, subjective, contradictory, and consequently outside the framework of Western performance and historical scholarship. Even Inupiak Rex Okakok, who has possibly done more research and organizing of the Messenger's Feast, is the first to admit that "to this day we don't have a full picture, and things kind of come out here and there" (1992).

There are many hazards inherent in any attempt to portray a performance such as the Messenger's Feast in an article such as this. There is an inherent irony and contradiction in trying to reveal an aspect of an integrated cultural system by pulling it from a tightly woven cultural context and using a systematic, written analysis that is antithetical to its very nature. Such is the liability of any attempt to transfer and equate the means and terms of one culture to that of another; one can only aspire to an informed awareness that will do more justice than damage in such a situation.

History and Culture as Community

Each element of the Messenger's Feast is a culturally accepted manifestation of identifiable antecedents in Inupiat mythology. These familiar elements need not explain themselves, they are immediately understood within their tight cultural context. The simplicity of the identification process is also due to the limited variety of options and character types in early hunting and gathering societies where work and identity were communal functions. Diversity of occupation, geography, climate, and social circumstances did not exist for the Inupiat who created the Messenger's Feast; they were less concerned with a particular individual's story and more concerned with how the story related to group beliefs, behaviors, and relationships. The mythological reference points explain the changes that the unfolding events of the Messenger's Feast will bring. The performers, in a sense, enact and reenact as they interact with the mythological spirit world.

The Messenger's Feast and its derivations—both historical and present
2. Rex Okakok dances with the Barrow group.
(Photo by Bill Hess)

day—are not performed unless there has been a successful hunting season. The contemporary analogy for a successful hunting season is financial viability. Although lifestyle adjustments have been made to accommodate living in a cross-cultural cash-economy world—where many Inupiat hold 9 to 5 jobs in addition to subsistence hunting—the context for the Messenger’s Feast presentation has remained intact. Okakok illustrates how the traditional community support system for the Feast has evolved:

[The initial 1988 Kivgiq] was funded through the North Slope Borough and [native] corporate giving. Villages, city councils, tribal governments, individuals. The private part totaled between $85,000 and $89,000, which we raised in the villages. The rest of it, an additional $120,000 came from the Borough. The general feeling that the mayor and I had was that if we’re going to get real support in this, that maybe if people would give a little they’d own the thing and really participate in it. (1992)

The successful community still provides the context from which the performance is initiated. The community itself is the medium of expression. The archetypal successful hunter of Messenger Feast mythology is parallel to and emblematic of the successful hunting community that can afford to provide for the presentation of the Messenger’s Feast. By deciding that it should and can afford to present the feast, the community takes the first step in its enactment of the Messenger’s Feast.

A version of the Messenger’s Feast myth recorded in Kotzebue at the turn of the century demonstrates the community’s involvement once it decided that the Messenger Feast’s was to be held. The successful community is parallel to the Young Man, the archetypal successful hunter; both com-
munity and Young Man must be prepared for their journey into the per-
formance.

Now began the preparations for the coming feasting and dancing,
preparations which lasted all summer and until after the fall freeze-up.
Furs of all kinds taken in their prime and skins were laid away. Meat,
marrow, and fat were sorted. Toward the end of summer, fish were
captured and dried, then new clothes were made. The people were glad
to know that they had plenty of food for their visitors and themselves;
that all would be well dressed. (Curtis [1930] 1970:173)

The community's decision to present the Messenger's Feast implied ma-
terial as well as spiritual preparedness. Giddings made some general obser-
vations about the special demands of providing for performance realization:

This reunion of families from the various local groups along the
Kobuk and neighboring rivers furnished the means of enriching rela-
tively isolated culture patterns with ideas and goods from all over the
general region. [. . .] The building of a Kadegi [temporary ceremonial
house], and temporary concentration of a local population, increased
the group solidarity of a neighborhood; and its exchange of local
goods for exotic goods cross-fertilized the material and spiritual con-
tent of culture.

Because of the enterprise required for the staging of a festival, as
well as the surplus of goods that had to be accumulated before invita-
tions were sent out, no single community could afford to hold a trad-
ing feast oftener than perhaps once a decade. (Giddings, 1961:151–52)

That the Messenger's Feast is held less frequently today may be, in part,
attributable to the wane and dissipation of collective community conscious-
ness and values once held and demonstrated by the performance realiza-
tion. The Messenger's Feast, in the context of the late 20th century, has
evolved beyond its original meanings to take on new meaning and cultural
significance. James Nageak explains the importance of Kivgiq and how its
function has changed:

People don't necessarily go out hunting and gathering all the time
now. They have 9 to 5 jobs too. And the young people grew up
without having to work too hard for what they have on the table, or
what they put on in the morning when they wake up. It is just a
matter of going to the store and there is no respect for the care you
had to have when you had to go out and hunt for the food and cloth-
ing. The activities that pertain to hunting and gathering activities, the
respect for the equipment, and how you take care of your clothing
can save your life. The young people today haven't had that experi-
ence. The clothing is put together someplace else and the value of
working for what we have—these things are lost. They're going to be
lost if we don't reenact them. Because the art [of the Kivgiq] is the
reenactment of what happened. It is no longer a reality. But there
should be ways in which we can at least show the young people.
That's how I'm defining art. (1992)

A significant part of the Messenger's Feast tradition is its late 19th-century
adaptation emphasizing regional bartering and trading. Flossie Hopson, an
Inupiaq elder, recalled that "people would gather together, coming from ev-
I think there are a lot of things that we can do with it, we just have never tried. Using Kivgiq as a basis to deal with [social problems] both from a traditional standpoint and the modern. I think that just knowing that as a community you're not alone in this ordeal and that there are other people going through the same thing. It kind of puts people together to do something. (1992)

*Core Narrative of the Messenger’s Feast*

In the ancient myth of the Eagle’s Gift the Great Eagle Mother gives song and dance to the lonely and isolated Inupiat people. When the Inupiat use the gift of song and dance the once old and sad Great Eagle Mother becomes young and happy. Song and dance bring together the small nomadic bands to participate communally relieving the isolation of the long, dark winters.

A Kotzebue version of the Messenger’s Feast myth demonstrates how the structure of the ancient Eagle Gift myth is maintained as it has evolved to reflect the needs of contemporary Inupiat and the changing relationship between the human, animal, and spirit worlds:

One time, about sunset, when out alone, the young man saw something shining up in the sky. The object came closer to earth, and he made out the form of an eagle which was carrying a flint knife and a bow and arrows in its beak. With its claws the huge bird held a large whale. The young man was frightened. He thought that now he would be killed, but his spirit prompted him to shoot at the monstrous eagle. [ . . . ] As the eagle flew slowly above him, the young man shot an arrow at its breast. The Bird glared at him with eyes as large as moons. It rose high in the air. The young man then shot at its belly. (Curtis [1930] 1970:169)

The once benign Young Eagle messenger of the Eagle’s Gift myth has here evolved into a fierce threat. And the Young Hunter of the Messenger’s Feast, rather than being a supplicant to the Young Eagle, kills the bird. The Messenger’s Feast mythology reflects an evolution away from the harmonious and respectful coexistence with the animal world.

As the Young Hunter strips off the skin of the Young Eagle, two spirit messengers appear—they have been sent by the Great Eagle Mother. These two messengers are the antecedents of the two messengers found in the Messenger’s Feast performance. The Young Hunter is informed by the spirit messengers—usually a red and/or white fox that has human qualities—that he must go with them to the Great Eagle Mother:

As they progressed, a thunderous noise, as regular as a heart-beat, shook the air. The two reached a huge cache from which oil dripped and ran down the trail. Great whale bones surrounded it. Fox-man
said: “The old ones who wish to see you live in a house on the highest pinnacle. You remain outside while I go in.”

A young woman soon came out. Her face was painted red with blood, and she wore a hairless parka. She pointed to many human bones scattered about the house. She offered the young man food and water, enjoining him first to make an offering to the spirits. Before eating, he threw some small pieces of meat in the air and sprinkled water on the ground. While satisfying his hunger, he noted two great caches filled to bursting with food, furs, and clothing. Then the young woman bade him to enter. In the entrance way were two huge eagle-skins hanging on the walls. Inside he saw an old couple, both of enormous stature, dressed in old clothes. The heart-beats of the woman made the air tremble. Food was again offered, and all ate in silence.

The old man finally spoke in a low, sad tone: “Young man, you have killed my only son, our hunter who brought us food. Now you must do something for us. I shall tell you how my eagle son is to be brought home.” (Curtis [1903] 1970: 169–70)

The life-or-death symbolism of the human bones juxtaposed with the “great whale’s bones” reinforces the extreme consequences for Young Man as it suggests the belief that all creatures, human and animal, are from the same spiritual source. The young woman that the Young Man meets is wearing an attractive “hairless parka” (probably white or light in color) that contrasts sharply with her face painted with red blood. Throughout this the pounding of the Eagle Mother’s heartbeat makes the “air tremble” with a trance-inducing drumbeat. The sense of the unexpected is heightened as the Young Man sees food caches filled with furs and clothing. Images of
abundance and domestic contentment juxtapose sharply with an atmosphere filled with potential threat. When the Young Man is finally confronted by the old couple they are in human form, of enormous stature (befitting their power over the Young Man) and dressed in the old clothes of neglected elders. Significantly, the Eagle Mother in this version of the myth has been transfigured into human form and has been joined by an Eagle Father. The old man continues: "When you go home, do not kill so much game, only what is needed." The old woman adds: "My heart is beating fast. Whenever I think of my son, my heart nearly bursts, so I try not to think of him" (Curtis [1930] 1970:170).

In all variations of Messenger's Feast mythology the Young Hunter is taken to the Great Eagle Mother where he, like the Young Hunter of the earlier Eagle Gift myth, is taught by the Great Eagle Mother. This time, however, the world is more complex, hence the teaching more detailed and elaborate. In all variations of Messenger's Feast mythology the Great Eagle Mother's teaching is assisted by spirit helpers and is what provides the foundation for the performance of the Messenger's Feast.

There were two spirit men standing. [ ... ] The two men talked like one man. They spoke to Toolik [the hunter/shaman], "You are a human. You cannot return the timgmiakpak's spirit to his mother yourself. You must watch us and tell the Kauwerak men to do just as we do. When you do everything we spirits are teaching you, we can take the bird's spirit to his mother.

"Send two men dressed like we are to all the villages near and far around Kauwerak. We will help you human men so you can do the job. Your men will be messengers. They should invite the other villages to take part in a great dance. At the same time they must ask four strong hunters at each village to bring things to give. The marks on the red alder-bark dyed bands on these messenger staffs will remind them what each village should send." (Oquilluk 1981:153)

The Messenger's Feast mythology also indicates that four men are chosen to perform the Eagle and Wolf dances. Like the messengers, the four dancers that the Inupiat community chooses to participate in the Messenger's Feast are part of mythology:

Once more a voice called. This time there were four men standing on the air. They were all dressed alike. They wore eagle feathers standing up in a band all around their heads. They wore long sealskin mittens with little pieces of ivory sewn on. When they moved, the ivory made a rattling noise. Nobody had ever seen anything like that before. The men danced a strong dance. They danced to songs Toolik had never heard before. The spirits said, "We will help you to remember the songs." Then they were gone. (Oquilluk 1981:154)

William Oquilluk cites the contemporary interpretation of the myth: "Four of you older men who have the biggest families in Kauwerak and help other people out when they need it, are the men the spirit people said should be dancers" (1981:157). These four Eagle-Wolf dancers are the community's best, wealthiest, and most influential hunters and secular leaders. They have gained the most from the animal/spirit world and as a consequence owe the most in terms of spiritual return and thanksgiving.
The sense of return and thanksgiving is still central to Inupiat cultural values, as Okakok describes in referring to the Kivgiq:

A good hunter who had a very successful year, or a couple years, and had a lot to share gives everybody an opportunity to renew family ties. That's the very highest part of our values, I think. Part of sharing our environment is something. The animals we get that are put here on earth are from the creator and part of our management is to make sure that we do it right—with great care. And at times we get a lot more than we normally get, so when they do that then we share with everybody. The Point Hope dancers especially do a lot of storytelling relating to the creator, the story about the earth, a variety of storytelling that relates back to living with the environment and honoring the creator for the gifts that have been given. That seems to be the main theme when talking to the elders of Point Hope. (1992)

The four successful hunters of Messengers' Feast mythology take responsibility for the enactment of the Feast—as dancers, patrons, and as organizers. Much in the same way, the North Slope Borough—enjoying success from mineral and oil right royalties—supported and organized the modern Kivgiq.

The Messengers

Amasungag, an Inupiaq elder from Teller, told Rasmussen in the early 1920s of when he was a young man and a messenger.

We were two young men who were sent out as messengers. Each of us received a staff to carry, decorated with eagles' down and painted with red rings of ochre. Each ring stood for a name we had to remember; and the names had to be given accurately, in the order in which we had received them. [ . . . ] Early in the autumn we set out and took the trail down over the mountains that led to the sea. Many nights running we made our solitary camp, often in fine weather and comfort, sometimes during storms, when we had difficulty in finding even the simplest shelter because of blizzards. But we were young and restless and used to traveling. (in Rasmussen 1932:40–41)

Like the fox-man of mythology, the Messengers carried a staff symbolic of their sacred mission, the eagle down recalling its spiritual origin. All Messengers had "asking" or "inviting" sticks that represented requests and were carried to the invited villages. According to anthropologist Margaret Lantis, the staffs of the Messengers functioned partly as mnemonics, referring to the host's requests, and partly as a symbol of office (1947:70). The staffs also functioned as a kind of spiritually symbolic vertical that went to the heavens or to the mountain top where the Eagle Mother lived. An Inupiaq elder, Pegliruk, describes his early-20th-century memory of the inviting stick:

The kevhok [Messengers] take the message from each man to his partner, inviting him to come to the trading feast. And the way they do it is to make a reminding stick for each kevhok. This stick is about four feet long and about an inch thick. It has rings painted around it with
graphite and other colors of paint, and between these rings it has strips of skin—one strip of skin for each family to be invited. When the kevhok invites someone, he takes off the strip of skin and gives it to the man he invites. That person must bring that skin when he comes to the feast. (Giddings 1961:25)

Dressing in fox skins and running great distances over barren tundra for several days—some Messengers were also known to fast—further emphasized the sacred and mythic aspects of the task. Armasungag continues with his personal account: “When at last we reached our destination we were received with great cordiality and treated as holy men who ran the errands of the mythical eagle. We were solemnly entertained, and many meat offerings were made to the originator of the feast” (41).

The Messenger for the Barrow Kivgiq of 1988 was a little less formal: Rex Okakok served as a Messenger simultaneously with his official role as organizing the Kivgiq. As a modern day Messenger he flew in small Cessna planes between the eight villages of the North Slope Borough, and though he was without traditional regalia and ritual, his function was the same. However, unlike the Messengers of the past, Okakok the Messenger brought memories together as well.

After I made the initial contact and found that we could possibly hold it with the initial funding we got, I went around and kind of served as a Messenger, telling them what we’re planning to do and what kind of reactions I got from the village themselves. It really got exciting as I hit each village. [The elders who belonged to dance groups] would tell what had happened and what they had heard from their parents, or from the stories that they normally tell. And in each village somebody had a story to tell. The intent was to have people share their knowledge about Kivgiq. I flew, you got to take into consideration the modern conveniences as much as possible. Blend the tradition with modern-day technology. (1992)

In subsequent years the role of the traditional Messenger was replaced by a far more convenient and expedient teleconference among the eight villages of the North Slope Borough.

Trading Partners

Historically, between the time the Messengers make their requests and the time they leave, the invited village hastened to prepare the items requested. Such items included a variety of furs (caribou, fox, wolf, polar bear, seal skins (used in mukluks—shoe making), ivory, and a quantity of food items for feasting. The same exchange of gifts occurred during the 1988 and each subsequent Barrow Kivgiq. Today, as well as historically, gift giving is organized by the establishment of trading partners from different villages. These trading partnerships develop into friendships that are maintained over the years. For the Inupiat, trading is understood as sharing and gift giving rather than trade for profit. The Barrow Kivgiq served to renew and formalize trading partner friendships. Exchanging local specialties is once again an integral part of the Kivgiq, as Okakok explains:

When you sit down to share with somebody you talk about things you enjoy doing, things that are happening in your area, food that
they have and the kind of stuff that they would like to have. When you hear that you kind of remember. And when you have a partner you try to send them something that is very special, that they probably don’t eat a lot, or don’t have, like a fur in their area. You give them something very special that they don’t normally get. (1992)

Okakok, like many others, has several trading partners; gift exchanges are done informally. James Nageak has two trading partners:

I have two partners—one at Anaktuvak Pass. When I first went up there in ’61, Noel Auguk, kind of made me his partner. I was living in Barrow so over the years we have interchanges. I asked for caribou
6. A participant in the Feast carries a contemporary “asking stick.” Messages for requested gifts are written on the paper.
(Photo by Bill Hess)

dry meat, the special one. That was my message. And the following year my partner in Barter Island wanted an ice chisel and scoop for when he went camping. (1991)

The formality of the “inviting” stick of the historical Messenger’s Feast is less adhered to. An “inviting” stick was used in the 1989 Kivigq. These request messages were hand-written notes attached to the inviting stick. Nageak continued:

I wrote out a little something in Inupiaq and asked: “To my partner Herman Wexford, I want you to make me a knife.” At the gathering at Barrow, where all the villages are represented, they read the messages. There was a message to “Winford at Wainright.” He had a message from Rachel from Anaktuvak Pass. And Rachel said “I want fermented walrus flipper.” The partners that heard the messages are to produce those things for the following year. (1991)

Messengers of Mythology

Historically, the Messenger’s role and actions were defined by culturally shared mythological references that became a loose text, holistically transmitted. Those who accepted the role of Messenger accepted the responsibility
for becoming mythological or spiritual surrogates; their actions embodied, for the duration of their enactment, what was culturally inscribed and shared. They were entrusted with the responsibility of making momentarily visible what is normally invisible—namely the belief that human-animal transformation exists and that there is a linkage between the spirit and human worlds. The distinction between performance and myth, animal and human worlds is blurred. The Messengers of Kauwerak mythology not only emulate, but embody the spirit Messengers. Like the fox-men Messengers that Toolik, the hunter/shaman, experienced, they too are paranormal beings.

Being of both the mythological and human world simultaneously, the Messengers required a response that had to be weighed carefully by the invited village. Acceptance of the invitation made not only extensive material and physical demands—goods, preparation, and travel—on the invited village but also required their participation in performance. In the past the rituals, ceremonies, social dancing, gift-giving, feasting, and competitive games could last for weeks.

The Kauwerak version continues as the entire village—having been alerted to the surprise appearance of the fox-men Messengers—has gathered in the kazghi ceremonial house. Once the entire village is gathered, the Messengers make their appearance by way of the fire pit (katauk) entrance, which was connected to the lower world of the spirits.

All at once those people heard a loud noise like ice breaking. Then they saw two hands had slapped hard on the floor [. . . and] a man's body was coming up out of the katauk. He was raising himself up using just his thumb and first finger to pull his body. Then that man swung his legs out on the floor. Suddenly, he jumped up standing straight and holding that staff. He moved over a little way, and a second man came up through the katauk, just like the other one. (Oquilluk 1981:159)

The appearance of the Messengers—their unusual regalia and presentation—is complemented by their singing and dancing of the requests from their home village. This spectacular entrance was followed by the request of the Messengers.

The first Messenger walked one step. He pounded the floor of the kazghi with the bottom of his staff. Then he took a second step and pounded the floor again. Third time, he did the same thing. He stood still. [. . .] The kingaahk [Messengers] started their songs. They told why they had come to Sinrapaaga. Then the first Messenger pointed to the red bands on his staff. (Oquilluk 1981:160)

The Messengers called out, in turn, the names of the four Eagle-Wolf Dancers from their home village and then told of their material requests. Once the Messengers finished they sat down, laid their inviting sticks next to them, and faced the fire pit entrance. The Messengers were fed with a variety of food but no response to the request was given. "Then the Messengers told the Sinramuit what they should do to help the Kauweramuit return the tingmiakpak's spirit to his mother. The Sinruk people wanted to help them" (Oquilluk 1981:160).

Historically, once a village was invited by the Messengers and preparations were made for travel and the feast, the invited village—preceded by the Messengers—would set out, en masse for the host village. Once outside the host village, the invited village would wait and sometimes camp.
The “Bow and Arrow Challenge” was performed in 1989 only by the Wainwright dance group. (Photo by Bill Hess)

The guests arrived in a long procession with heavy laden sledges. But for a long time before this, a lookout was kept for them, for they must be received by special envoy a day’s journey from the settlement. For this, young men were chosen who were called runners. They had to be the best sportsmen, the swiftest, the deftest, the strongest. They, too, received sacred symbols during the festival, and their foreheads were adorned with strips of skin decorated with eagle’s feathers. In their hands they must carry a staff at the tip of which there was fastened a dainty morsel. [. . .] As soon as the runners came in sight, the whole procession had to stand still. All the men, women and children placed themselves in line and struck up a song. (Rasmussen 1932:44)

The Bow and Arrow Challenge

Historically, once the invited village is seen waiting outside of the host village, the young men of the two villages would engage in a race to the kazghi. The purpose of the race was to “take the kazghi” which meant honor for the runner’s village and entertainment for all. This race was revived during the 1991 Kivgiq with the runners starting at the Barrow airport and running through the streets to the gym where the Kivgiq was held. After the race—in both historical and modern occurrences—the Kivgiq begins with the runners being followed by the rest of the people. For the Barrow Kivgiq, the eight North Slope Borough villages formed a procession to their places in the gym and there were ceremonies for the start of events.

In historical occurrences, as exemplified by the Kauwerak version of the Messenger’s Feast myth, the host village would line up in front of the
kazghi facing the visitors, who would do likewise. The four invited men (village leaders) from the guest village would stand together in front of their people and sleds. All would watch as the four counterparts from the host village came out of the kazghi:

They were dressed in old clothes. The parkas had no hair left on them. The sleeves were too short, and there were holes where the elbows showed. The pants were old and the knees were showing through. They sure looked poor. All those men had belts with a tail hanging from it on the back. These were wolverine, fox, or wolf. [ . . . ] They carried bows and arrows [ . . . and] they waved their bow in front of the Sinrapaaga with the arrows put in backwards. Then they turned the arrows around and shot them up in the air and over on the ground away from the Sinrapaaga. (Oquilluk 1981:162)

These four men were hunters who behaved poorly and then challenged and threatened their guests with their bow and arrows. The older Kotzebue myth portrays a similar and far more extreme picture: “These runners had painted their heads, arms, and hair with charcoal. Another man, naked except for boots, and armed with a bow, rushed up and threatened the visitors as if they were unwelcome” (Curtis [1930] 1970:175).

The challenge, which was taken with great seriousness, ended when the hunters shot their arrows into the air. The purpose of the challenge is debatable. The Kotzebue version states that “if any of the four men became

8. The women of the Wainwright Dancers perform the “Bow and Arrow Challenge” as part of the kalukag dance. (Photo by Bill Hess)
9. Two Point Hope dancers in loon feather headdresses perform one of the Eagle dances during the Kivigq. By wearing gloves, the dancers prevent the entrance of evil or unwanted spirits through the particularly vulnerable palms. (Photo by Bill Hess)

10. Robert Aiken, Sr., (Left) and Robert Okpeaha, Sr., of the hosting Barrow Dancers perform a dance of welcome at the opening of the 1990 Kivigq. (Photo by Bill Hess)

frightened they would be ridiculed and not allowed to take part in the dances, feasts, or gift-making” (Curtis [1930] 1970:175). This implies challenge to leadership and/or spiritual worthiness. Roxy Ekowana, an Inupiaq elder, commented on a story about the spiritual aspects of the Bow and Arrow Challenge:

Things usually occurred while the anartug, and the mediums, were in full swing. The arrows are always aimed right above the spectators' heads. One of the contestants was going to do just that when the bow string broke. There was nothing one could do, but to stand
there in stunned silence. These I have heard my mother tell us.
(Uniq 1988:33)

Another explanation may be found in the King Island version of the myth. The Young Hunter, while preparing for the festival, accidentally kills one of the Messengers. Rather than tell anyone and spoil the preparations, he dries the body and brings it into the festival where he proceeds to feed it and treat it as if it were alive. This creates confusion, the sudden exit of the guests, and then more killing. The King Island version of the myth, which is essentially the same as the others except for this element, concludes with this admonishment:

And this was the occasion of the first war that ever took place among men. [. . . ] Thus merrymaking and war succeeded each other. It could not be otherwise. Merrymaking and gaiety warm the mind; it is but a step from wild exuberance to rash behavior. (Rasmussen 1932:17)

It could be that the hunters' challenge expressed the opposite of what was appropriate, providing a warning. With the challenge, the worst is over with and the festival can proceed; the worst possible scenario has been exposed. The Bow and Arrow Challenge was presented by the village of Wainright at the 1988 Kivgiq but has not been performed since, probably because its original significance was lost to the modern Inupiat.

The Welcome

With the Bow and Arrow Challenge complete, the guests were welcomed with smiles by their hosts, who were bearing torches of seaweed dipped in seal oil to illuminate a night that is two months long. The host villagers would run among the visitors to warm them and accustom them to their new surroundings. The people of Barrow, in keeping with this tradition of the Messenger's Feast, welcomed their Kivgiq guests into their homes. For the closely knit Inupiat, guests are either friends or family for whom the revival of the Kivgiq brought an unexpected awareness, as described by Okakok:

Getting people together to visit with their long-lost relatives. Renewing their family ties. Something we didn't realize, something we just sort of took for granted, was that people knew their relatives fairly well when they traveled. So it was great for people to renew their family ties. Kind of take a look at their family trees and how they were related. What we didn't plan, after Eskimo dancing, after an event like the one in the morning, people would get together and just talk about families and eat until three or four in the morning. We didn't realize that was happening till the last day. It was something exciting that was unplanned. We kind of took it for granted that people knew each other because of the telephone and letters. (1992)

The Events

Like every other aspect of the Messenger's Feast and the modern day Kivgiq, there is no one strictly adhered to structure of events. Traditionally, events lasted over a period of three or four days. However, the visit of the guest village could last longer. Generally the first day was filled with greetings and competitive events. The first evening brought the ritual of
the Eagle-Wolf Dance (described in greater detail below) as performed by the host village; then there was feasting. The second day was for visiting and competitive events. During the second evening it was the visiting village's turn to perform the Eagle-Wolf Dance to help return the spirit of the Young Eagle to the Eagle Mother. Again there was much feasting. The third evening was the ritual of returning the spirit to the Eagle Mother. There was feasting, gift-giving, and social dancing. If there was a fourth day, it would also include social dancing. Social dancing includes: "regular" dancing (dances shared by the villages) and "invitational" or freestyle dancing, when everyone is invited to do what they want; "motion" dances were and are more specific to each village and tell stories of local events; and "unique" dances are specific to a village's history and/or ritual practice. Only the unique dances could not be shared because they were "owned" and generally sacred.

The 1988 Kivgiq posed a far greater organizational challenge than its historical antecedents. Okakok had to organize eight villages for the gathering rather than the two (or, rarely, three) that historically participated in the Messenger's Feast. The distance between the villages of the North Slope Borough is great--Barrow and Point Hope are nearly 650 miles apart. The wealth and diversity of memories also created the dilemma of what to use and what not to use. Okakok and the North Slope Borough commission on History and Language defined the major events, but allowed enough freedom for each village to present its own Kivgiq. Okakok describes his organizational work:

There are nearly 250 dancers from all over the North Slope and we wanted to give them as much time as possible. But at the same time you get tired watching. [...] What we did was take on a major dance group like Barrow, Wainwright, Point Hope, and started with the host community, which was Barrow. Then, we took one of the smaller villages like Point Lay, Nuiqsat, Kaktovik, trying to keep the interest going, trying to mix in Anaktuyak Pass, an inland group that does it a little differently. So we try to balance that out. It is just balancing what might keep the group interested all the time. But the first time, the interest was so high that no matter what you put in, or who you put in, it didn't matter. (1992)

Each village dance group performed three times over the period of the three day Kivgiq. Dance gatherings took place in the evenings because many of the Barrow participants held 9-to-5 jobs. The first day consisted of "regular" dances; the second day "motion" dances; and the third day a little freedom was given to dance groups to present dances unique to their own village. "The regular dance the first night is a way to get everybody participating; the second night is specialized dancing; and the third night is about keeping the communities unique, to see how they each do it, a kind of showcase of the community" (Okakok 1992).

Activities began in the late morning with some Barrow people and the guest village people gathering to share what they know about Kivgiq. The afternoons were a time to do village specialized events, such as comedy dances. It was also a time for storytelling and bartering—which is distinct from the gift-giving that occurs in the evening. Furs and sealskins were bartered; specialized food such as caribou and Dall sheep from the inland villages was exchanged for Whale from coastal villages. The bartering can best be described as a good-natured and friendly exchange. In 1988 gift-giving occurred on the third evening of the Kivgiq. For the second and each subsequent year the gift-giving has been done on the first evening. The ad-
justment was made by general consensus so partner relationships had more time afterward to develop. The Point Hope dancers had a special song to accompany the gift-giving: The Barrow elders knew that there was once a gift-giving song that their village practiced but no one remembered it.

The Eagle-Wolf Messenger Feast

The ancient precursor of the modern Kivgiq and the Messenger’s Feast is the sacred Eagle-Wolf Messenger’s Feast. Not performed in its entirety since 1912, the Eagle-Wolf Messenger’s Feast provides a vivid portrait of how Inupiat values, mythology, and spirituality were expressed in performance. Highly ritualized, animistic, and shamanistic, the Eagle-Wolf Messenger’s Feast was possibly the most significant performance expression of the Inupiat. It is from the deeply seated cultural roots of the Eagle-Wolf Messenger’s Feast that the secular tradition of the Messenger’s Feast and the modern day Kivgiq grew.

The Eagle-Wolf Messenger’s Feast can be traced back to the creation story of the Inupiat people. Its progression from creation myth to sacred performance to the modern secular celebration is outlined by James Nageak:
It's important to get back, to get as far back as you can. Back to the creation story. Because the stories that were perpetuated over generations were not just being talked about, they were being performed through the dancing and the celebration, and the exchange of gifts. Those activities and the stories behind them make your world view and how you relate to the people around you. They might be refined over the years, kind of a trial and error situation, rather than "this is the way you're supposed to do it." The creation stories become human stories and so the creator becomes wolves and foxes after they have become human beings. (1991)

The road from creation myth to Eagle-Wolf Messenger's Feast to Kivgiq passed through generations of Inupiat performers; it was transferred, transformed, and adapted. Altered, and shamed, censored by Westerners and Western religions, the structure of the Eagle-Wolf Messenger's Feast is still viable and the spirit of the Inupiat intact. "It keeps our culture alive, that's spiritual" (1992), says Martha Aiken about the ancient dances that have survived to the modern Kivgiq. But she admits that parts have been lost to misunderstanding missionaries: "That's why they looked down on Eskimo dancing, some religions thought we were doing shamanism" (1992). The missionaries, sensing the central and spiritual place of the Eagle-Wolf Messenger's Feast and not able to distinguish social from sacred dancing, put an end to all dancing in several villages in Alaska. As a consequence much of the spiritual heritage that was encoded in the Eagle-Wolf Messenger's Feast was lost.

The implication of the Kauwerak myth is that the spirit/animal world required performance to reveal itself; the language of the humans was inappropriate and too limited. The Eagle-Wolf Messenger's Feast was an appropriate form that allowed for a fleeting participation with the spirit world, a place where the human, animal, and spirit worlds could comeingle.

Toolik saw a circle of spirit dancers. Men and women were one next to the other all around the circle. The men were all dressed alike. Each wore a hood made of wolverine headskins. On top of the white parkas they had skins hung across their chests and backs. Weasel tails hung down from the side of their sleeves next to their bodies. [. . .] The spirit men danced a lively dance and the weasel skins and tails looked like they were floating around their bodies. The women danced and the wolverine strips all moved the same way at the same time. The drummer told the dancers what to do by the beat of his drum. (Oquilluk 1981: 153)

Compare the description to the historical photographs, observing the wolverine hoods, the white parkas, and the weasel tails across their backs and chests (plates 12 and 13). Found in these photos, taken circa 1912, are the details described by mythlogy.

The Songs and Dances of the Eagle-Wolf Messenger Feast

Many of the songs and dances presented at the modern day Kivgiq have been handed down through generations. However, the older the song or dance, the more vague the understanding of its original meaning and application. Songs and dances are not standardized nor necessarily distributed throughout the region, but rather vary from village to village, as explained by Martha Aiken:

12. Performers from the Kauwerak region of Inupiat Alaska in a group portrait (circa 1912). These dancers are wearing the regalia for the Eagle Dance section. Gloves are seal skin and covered with puffin beaks which serve as rattles. The headgear is made of eagle and loon feathers. (Photo courtesy of the Archives of the Alaska and Polar Regions Dept., University of Alaska-Fairbanks)

13. Dancers wear their Wolf-Dance regalia in this 1912 photo. (Photo courtesy of the Archives of the Alaska and Polar Regions Dept., University of Alaska-Fairbanks)
Some villages have certain dances they do, maybe the islanders had that wolf dance. But they don't do it in Barrow. Point Hope has the very ancient rituals that we don't even know about. Some of these are very, very old rituals. In the Barrow area the dancing is not connected with the shamanistic rituals. (1992)

All eight villages of the North Slope Borough have thriving dance groups (Point Hope has two) which maintain traditional songs as they create new songs and dances to reflect modern events such as basketball, boxing, and motor boating. But the traditional songs and dances included in the Kivgiq are treated with respect. As Vincent Nageak recalled: “So Kivgiq started on the instructions of an animal. It is not known why the movements are so precise, but you have to understand that the instructions came from an animal” (Kisautag 1978: 184). The instructions are vital: “If we follow instructions carefully, the Eagle spirit will return home [ . . . ] let all do their best [ . . . ] this is not my ceremony, but that of the Eagles” (Curtis [1930] 1970:176).

The sequence of songs and dances noted below are from the Kauwerak version of the myth as done “just as Toolik saw the spirit people do up on the mountain” (Oquilluk 1981:163). The following dances were performed by the four Eagle-Wolf dancers (in full eagle regalia) and their wives. It should be remembered that songs were often community specific. The songs listed below are specific to the Kauwerak version.

Introductory Songs: Eagle Dances
1. A song about the village people coming together to feast
2. A resting song without words
   (Note: resting songs mean not danced with great physicality)
3. Song about all the beavers that lived around Kauwerak
4. A resting song about the enjoyment of walking in the land in the springtime
5. Song about eating ripe, soft salmon berries around Kauwerak and the good taste of salmon-eggs
6. A resting song about how spring was really coming when the birds sing out on the open ground
7. Song about fresh rabbit meat to be found around Kauwerak
8. A resting song about gathering of caribou fawn skins in the early spring (Oquilluk 1981:163)

For the following section the four Eagle-Wolf dancers are wearing wolf heads. They dance the following sequence after having suddenly appeared backwards into their “dens”—2-foot diameter holes cut out of a sheet of wood covered over with stretched walrus or seal skins. The male assistants sitting above the holes quickly cover them with stretched, semi-transparent seal gut. The women, who are standing above the wolf den holes, sing and dance a resting song. Suddenly, the Eagle-Wolf dancers poke the seal guts from the inside, timidly considering an entrance; they are wary of the Great Eagle flying overhead. Toolik shakes his drum club at the Eagle-Wolf dancers and they draw back. This goes on for some time until finally the seal gut is lifted from the holes and wolf heads look timidly out; they are progressively more courageous. Finally the Wolf dancers suddenly jump out of their holes. They are wearing masks fixed at the top and front of their heads—real wolf heads supported internally by wood. As the songs progress the wolves look up to reveal their human faces, then face down to become wolves again. The transition between wolf and human is

14. & 15. Depicted in these photos from a 1952 performance of the Eagle-Wolf Messenger's Feast in Anchorage are the Eagle Dance (top) and the Wolf Dance. (Photos by Steve McCutcheon)
highly theatrical; one can only imagine what effect it had in the fire-lit confines of Inupiat ceremonial houses a century ago.

The next group of songs comprises the Wolf Dance. The wolves have different concerns, as expressed in their songs and dances.

Wolf Dances
9. A song tells that the wolves are ready to go back in their dens when the tingmiakpak (great eagle) flies overhead again; the wolves then threaten to come out of their dens
10. A happy song—The wolves are going to come out of the den and will soon share the food the giant bird has left behind after eating
11. A very happy and lively song—the wolves dance to show how happy they are to share the tingmiakpak's food
12. A resting song—The wolves are showing that they are very happy to be helping the Kauwerakmuit return the giant bird's spirit to his Mother
13. A happy song—The wolves help the Kauwerakmuit send the spirit on its way to the Mother who waits in the Kigluaik Mountains. (Oquilluk 1981:163)

A spirit tells Toolik, the archetypal hunter, that when the wolves eat the remains left them by the Great Eagle it is a way of asking Toolik to be kind to the Great Eagle Mother who has been kind to the wolves (i.e., humans). The implication is explicit: since you have shared the bounty of the Great Eagle Mother, you must show thanks by some return gesture. The return of her son's spirit (by humans) will make the Great Eagle Mother (the universal being) happy. The means of return is via performance.

**Significance of the Wolf**

The Wolf-Dance segment of the mythology is elaborate and complex. The prominence of the wolves has a significance that can only be discovered by closely examining the Inupiat mythology.

Four spirit men were sitting on the edge of a wide sitting-shelf along the wall. Four spirit women stood on the bench behind the men. Each woman held a staff with an eagle's wing feather on the top. Next to the feather was a thin strip of baleen with a ball of eagle down at the tip. [ . . . ] There were four round holes in the wall. [ . . . ] somehow, Toolik knew the holes in the bench were sittit [wolf dens]. (Oquilluk 1981:155)

The appearance of the four round holes is significant for several reasons. The use of four dens compliments the four spirit men and suggests the four cardinal directions—beyond suggesting a birth canal or mysterious place of transformation. The wolf den holes can also be symbolic of holes that go into the earth—similar to the holes that a shaman enters to journey to the lower world. So strong was this belief that the Kotzebue version of the myth included a divining segment at the conclusion of the Messenger's Feast. The entire community—hosts and guests—would crawl through the fur-lined wolf holes, with lamps shining from behind the holes. Those casting the longest shadows would live the longest and vice versa (Curtis [1930] 1970:176).

That they are wolf dens has significance in light of the ancient Inupiat
belief that all people once came from wolves. In the King Island performance myth, as told by Inupiaq elder Frank Ellanna, the drummers are marked on either side of their noses with ochre (referred to as dance marks) to convey the appearance of and identification with wolves (Ellanna 1988:109–11).

Inupiaq elder Elijah Kakinya recalls asking elders, when he was a boy at the turn of the century, about the origin of the universe. What follows is a story that he was told by two old men from his village. The men were so old and feeble that they had to crawl to get around; the young Elijah reasoned that they must be the first people because they were like wolves on all fours.

I cautiously asked one of them, “A long time ago, when you were young, what did you hear sometimes, regarding the beginnings of the universe?” [. . . ] He said: “It is said that at that time, long ago, their sky was that which is now down under us. [. . . ] It is said that it was dark, there was no sun. [. . . ] After it was that way for a time, the earth turned over. [. . . ] While they were down there a wolf had two children, a little boy, a little girl and from these two the people multiplied and increased while they were still down there. [. . . ] It is said that from these wolves, from this part wolf, this young person, this little girl and little boy came all the people and began to multiply and increase. [. . . ] I call myself part wolf, to myself. [. . . ] When it [the earth] began to have people it turned over this way.” (in Kisautaq 1978:42–44)

Through performance the community revitalizes a myth that directly leads back to the core of the Inupiat culture and their relationship with the earth and its spirits. The spirit world performance is but a model for performance in the ordinary world. The spirit world gives what is needed—
Dancers look for an eagle flying above in the Wolf Dance. (Photo by Bill Hess)

17. Dancers look for an eagle flying above in the Wolf Dance. (Photo by Bill Hess)

souls, songs, dances, and the means to return the animal spirit to the universal being. Expressed is the underlying belief of the Inupiat people that what is taken must be respected, and the taker has responsibility for its spiritual return as a way of giving thanks. The hunter and those who benefit from the universal spirit are only a part of a cycle. A game-hunting morality—and the obligation to respect the spirit of the game—is asserted. In the Kotzebue myth the Eagle Father admonishes: "When you go home, do not kill so much game, only what is needed" (Curtis [1930] 1970:170).

The Box Drum

Like other aspects of the Messenger's Feast myth, the box drum and its use have evolved. In the Kotzebue telling of the myth, the Great Eagle Mother instructs the Young Hunter:

My heart is beating fast. Whenever I think of my son, my heart nearly bursts, so I try to think of him. When the dance begins, I shall send my heart-beats to the box. It must have handles of whale whiskers. When you are ready for the beating, go outside and fill the bucket with water. This you must pour in the box, that it may not become thirsty, but will beat faster and give the time for the people to dance by. If any one does not like our dance, send him outside, and we shall eat him. We must have some human to eat. By following these instructions carefully, the spirit of our son will return to us. (Curtis [1930] 1970:170)

The sawtooth pattern cut out at the top of the drum represents the mountain top where the Eagle Mother lives and where the Hunter journeyed. The booming hollowness of the drum is the heartbeat of the
mother. Pouring water into the box drum not only creates a water drum but quenches the thirst of the eagle spirit, of which the drum is a symbolic manifestation and incarnation. The whale whiskers are significant for the Inupiat culture, one of the last great noncommercial whale-hunting cultures.

The mother's threat of "We must have some human to eat" is probably meant metaphorically; if one does not abide by the feast then the natural or animal word will have its revenge. However, it may suggest that there was at one time human sacrifice associated with the Eagle-Wolf Messenger Feast.

In 1885 ethnographer John Murdoch recorded the use of a box drum in the village of Point Barrow which was intended to represent a tree. Shamans in numerous other indigenous cultures (including neighboring Siberia) climb the "tree of life" or "world tree" to visit the upper world of the spirits (Eliade 1972:120). The vertical tree as a connection to the spirit world is comparable to the use of dance staffs, both acting as "antennae" to the spirit world. The drum as a symbolic tree is surprising in the arctic tundra inhabited by the Inupiat where there are no trees and the only vertical deviation to the landscape are mountains. Murdoch goes on to detail the use of the drum and accompanying performance, although he was ignorant of its meaning. It is likely that Murdoch observed a derivation of the Eagle-Wolf Messenger Feast; the vividness of his performance account gives some insight into the intensity of the performance:

At one end a small space was partitioned off with a piece of an old sail, and from the roof in the middle hung an object intended to represent a tree. This was made of two oblong boxes about 6 inches in diameter, open at both ends, the lower about 2 and one half feet long and the upper about 1 and one half, hinged together with a seal thong. At one side hung a wolf's skull, and on the other a dried raven. Two performers sat in the middle of the floor with their legs extended one between the other's legs, with his nose touching the tree. A row of old men beat drums and sang, while the performers chanted a monotonous song, in which could be heard the words "rum, tobacco, seal, deer, and whale."

Presently the bottom of the curtain was lifted and out crawled five men on all fours, wearing on their heads the stuffed skins of the heads of different animals—the wolf, bear, fox, lynx, and dog. They swung their heads from side to side in unison, keeping time to the music, uttering a low growl at each swing and shaking their rattle mittens. This they kept up for fifteen or twenty minutes, while the chant still went on, and the chief performer, with excited gestured, embraced the tree and rubbed his nose against it from time to time. At last all sprang to their feet with a howl, and ended the dance with wild gestures. (Murdoch [1892] 1987:374)

The Future of the Messenger's Feast

The North Slope Borough did not sponsor a Kivgiq in 1992, preferring to use those funds normally used for Kivgiq for a summer 1992 event celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. It was this 1972 congressional act that gave Alaska's indigenous people both land and cash settlements, and established native corporations to manage their newfound wealth. The North Slope Borough does plan to hold a Kivgiq in 1993. What form it will take and what will be included will be
18. Between the drummers and the dancers is the box drum. Its sawtooth edge represents the mountains where the Eagle Mother lives. (Photo by Bill Hess)

another stage in evolution of the Messenger’s Feast. In any event, the Kivgiq will adjust to reflect the changes in the lives of the Inupiat people.

In addition to traditional Inupiat dances, gift-giving, storytelling, and bartering, the 1991 Kivgiq included Tae Kwon Do awards and a Boy Scout presentation, a blessing (in Inupiat) by a local minister, and a talent contest that was heavy with country/Western music. Another part of the entertainment in 1991 was the Barrow Mother’s Club presentation of a “Hawaiian Hula” dance parody. This addition of contemporary culture doesn’t seem to trouble the Inupiat; they are just a part of what happens when Inupiat people get together. The inclusion of nontraditional elements doesn’t bother James Nageak. His concern is more for what he views as the commercialization of Kivgiq over the last few years:

One of the things I don’t like is the commercialism. RAT NET [Rural Alaska Television] comes in and that kind of disrupts the flow. We have to start at a certain time, Western culture’s time. What happens is that the people that are performing, all of a sudden, “Okay, they want to see Koktovik people today.” So the people that were already on get off, and then Koktovik comes in. It’s kind of a media show. If they want to do it on the terms of the people, they can’t interrupt. (1991)

In addition of being shaped by the media—Kivgiq is broadcast throughout rural Alaska and to Anchorage—the event has increasingly been manipulated by local politicians who see it as a form for demonstrating their adherence to traditional values. Nageak continues:

It feels like it is no longer something that is just spontaneous. That wasn’t the intent. The thing is to get people together. We are losing the Inupiaq language; we are losing things that we really need and contribute to the world. I guess that’s where the media can come in and contribute to the world. Interpret the value system, the worldview of the Inupiat people. But on our own terms. But now it is something more commercialized. “Oh, this would be something good for the tourist industry.” No, that isn’t the intent. (1991)

Sometime in the fall of 1992, Johnny Lee Aiken, who is the North Slope Borough’s person in charge of Kivgiq, will have a conference call with the leader and elders of the borough’s eight villages. Discussed will be
the days of the event and how Kivgiq can be improved. The dance groups of each village will then rehearse their traditional dances and think about presenting something unique and special. Furs, meat, fish, and other local specialties will be gathered in preparation for the Kivgiq still months away. Because there was a lapse of one year, trading partners will telephone or otherwise communicate what they would like to receive as a gift. And so the spirit of the ancient Messenger's Feast will travel again through the minds and hearts of the Inupiat people.

Notes

1. The word "Kivgiq" means "Messenger's Feast" in Inupiaq. In this essay I use the word Kivgiq to identify specifically the recent Barrow presentation. Messenger's Feast is used to refer to the tradition and mythology of the Feast and all of its derivations. Kivgiq is a Messenger's Feast and is of that tradition. A note on the use of Inupiat: Inupiaq is singular and refers to the language of the Inupiat people. Inupiat is plural and refers to the people and culture. Inupiak, used seldom, refers to two Inupiat people.

2. Competitive events are integral to the Inupiat cultural tradition. In addition to foot races and some ball games, the Inupiat and Yup'ik of Alaska developed several games that would keep hunting skills sharp during the long, cold winters. Most of these games evolved from subsistence activities. Several evolved from the animals. For example, for the "head pull" two hunters would face off—like locking tusks—with a hide strap around their heads, trying to pull each other out of a circle. Other games, like the ear pull, were for endurance and would see how far a contestant could carry a weight suspended from an ear. High kicks with a stuffed seal skin ball, evolved from the signals used to identify a successful hunt from a distance. Many of the traditional competitive games used by the Inupiat traditionally are still practiced today. Each summer Fairbanks hosts the World Eskimo-Indian Olympics which gathers athletes from throughout the arctic region for five days of competition, social, and cultural events.

3. The 1982 presentation of the "Wolf Dance," a derivation of the Messenger's Feast still practiced by King Islanders, included the use of the wolf holes and a near verbatim performance of the Eagle and Wolf dances as noted in this essay.

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Uuniq

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TDReadings