

## **BODY AS TEXT**

### **The Story Dancing of the Yup'ik and Inupiat Eskimo**

#### **THE HUNTER-GATHERER BODY**

Dance for the Yup'ik and Inupiat Eskimo of Alaska was traditionally, and remains to a great extent today, a practical and tactile expression that enables the direct, psychological, emotional, physical interaction with their respective places on and with the earth. At their core, the Yup'ik and Inupiat cultures are a community of place that included every aspect their environment: other humans, animals, the elements, climate and geography, their ancestors and spirits.

Philosopher David Abrams called the hunter-gatherer way of being in the world an all-encompassing sensual reality that,

Includes, along with humans, the multiple non-human entities that constitute the local landscape, from the diverse plants and the myriad animals, birds, mammals, fish, reptiles, insects--that inhabit or migrate though the region, to particular winds and weather patterns that inform the local geography, as well as the various landforms--forests, rivers, caves, mountains--that lend their specific character to the surrounding earth (Abrams 1996: 6-7).

For the traditional Yup'ik and Inupiat, survival was tenuous and everything had a spirit, a *yua* or *inua*, necessitating the full utilization of mind, body, and spirit. They had to be efficient, resourceful, and effective. For them performance was practical and necessary to maintain life and well-being in possibly one of the harshest environments on earth. Yup'ik elder Oscar Kawagley remarks that dance provided an important and practical release necessary for "a positive mental attitude to make a living and a life in a

unpredictable environment” (Kawagley 1995: 36). For the Yup’ik—as is arguably for the all of the world’s cultures—performance enables a reaffirmation of a specific place and cosmological worldview, providing reflection, adjustment, and participatory interaction, necessary for survival. Harold Napoleon, Yup’ik elder and activist further remarks on the place-practical function integrating concept of *Yuuyaraq*, the Yup’ik “way of being in the world” and how dance was a vital part of it.

To the Yup’ik, the land, the rivers, the heavens, the seas, and all that dwelled within them were spirit, and therefore sacred. They were born not only to the physical world of the Bering Sea, the Yukon, and the Kuskokwim rivers, but into a spirit world as well. Their arts, tools, weapons, kayaks and umiaks, songs and dances, customs and traditions, thoughts and actions—all bore the imprint of the spirit world and spirit beings. (Napoleon 1996: 3)

Where non-Yup’ik people might discuss various life and artistic activities as separate categories—dance song, story, art, objects—it is doubtful that the Yup’ik or Inupiat people would make the same analytical distinctions. The Yup’ik and Inupiat languages vividly reflect the differences in approach to meaning. Both are agglutinative languages in which a root word can be built up with prefixes and suffixes to convey in one word a thought that in English requires a separate pronoun, noun, verb, adjective, and adverb. In the same way, the meaning and function of dance to the Yup’ik and Inupiat people are understood as a single complex of experiences (Wallen 1990: 7).

Traditionally the Yup’ik and Inupiat people danced for sheer pleasure as well as to communicate with the spirits that shared their world and affected their daily lives and livelihood. It was a true folk dance and not restricted to specialist or professionals (although ownership, ceremonial expressions of some dances restricted participation). Dances were simultaneously recreational and ceremonial, as much a prayer as a story and entertainment, dancing for and with humans, the animals, spirits and, elements.

For the Yup'ik and Inupiat of today, the line between social dancing and ceremonial dancing is no longer a fine one. With the advent of western ways of cash economics, politics of oil, Christianity, and the diminishment of the subsistence life-style, traditional dancing, though still central to the community, have been drained of its spiritual significance.

## **THE HUNTING-GATHERING WORLDVIEW**

Approximately 99% of humanity's time on earth has been as a hunter-gatherer. It could be said our organism, in mind, body, and spirit evolved from and developed in respect to humans being hunter-gatherers. According to Anthropologist Richard Nelson, humans have versatility and endurance, and along with our acute senses, color vision, tough skin, and ability to eat a variety of foods, makes humans the most flexible of the earth's species. The deep structure of our modern biology and psychology has its origins in our hunter-gatherer self, shaping in turn, our society, politics, economics, and culture. We are a hunting-gatherer organism, and we are what we are today because of what we were. Arguably the most successful and enduring mode of human living has been hunting and gathering.

Today there are .001 hunting and gathering societies remaining in the world. The Inupiat and Yup'ik Eskimo of village Alaska are among the last aboriginal people in the world, and even though they are part of our cash economy, they still depend on animal meats and fats hunting for subsistence. Given their adverse climate they are possibly the toughest and human kind's most sophisticated hunting technicians. They have hunted the biggest animals (whale, walrus, caribou, polar and grizzly bear and seal) over the widest and most forbidding ranges for well over 5,000 years. Daily contact and an

intense relationship with animals, along with understanding their environment were prerequisite for their success as hunters and survival as a culture.

Daily, bodily interactions for the Yup'ik and Inupiat were the primary ways of "knowing" and being a holistic part of the earth, for theirs was a sensual and physically interactive reality. As their body was shaped by their sensual interactions with place, so too was their cosmology. To see an eagle flap its wings lifting itself into sky is to vicariously experience the eagle through one's own body. To perform the eagle movements, chant its call, wear its feathers, is to vicariously become the eagle. To see a Raven or bear, clouds or northern lights was to been seen by them. To think of a distant or dead relative was to hear them talk.

The sensual reality of the Inupiat and Yup'ik was traditionally, and remains to this day, an open circuit. The world is shared ether in which all exists. Reality and perspective are unfixed, porous, and malleable allowing for transformations between human, spirit, and animal realities. Jamake Highwater calls this a simultaneous point of view. Unlike the western perspective, which is like the "eye as a camera," the indigenous perspective is rather a "mind's eye," which consummates everything we know, imagine, feel, conceive, perceive, and dream about and object allowing transformation taking our bodies into the visionary realm. Transformation relinquishes the point of view of the camera and provides us with direct physical contact allowing for visions, inspirations, and intuitional insights (Highwater 1981:88).

The body within this worldview is a multi-level receptor, thinking, reacting, and understanding, and always sensing body. Within this context the body is an open circuit completed only through its presence within the world. It is a dance style with a multiplicity of origins: psychological, historical, environmental, idiosyncratic factors, psychomotor socialization patterns, and invention, borrowing, convergence, or any combination of the

above. The overwhelming majority of Yup'ik and Inupiat dance motions derived directly from and related to survival needs and were symbolic of arctic subsistence activities such as harpooning, hauling, and scanning the horizon (for the men), and carcass-cutting, skin sewing, and plucking birds (for the women). Yup'ik and Inupiat Eskimo story dancing is a mix of mimetic, abstract, and metaphorical movements, combined to depict particular significant events, daily functions, and cultural experience and history (Johnston 1990: 199). This is not to say that new dance expressions were not added, they were, and in this way the dance form remained flexible and evolving, reflective and a dialogue of the journey of the Yup'ik and Inupiat people.

## **THE BODY NARRATIVE**

Skill and knowledge for the Yup'ik and Inupiat Eskimo was derived from place observation and interaction. Their methodology equal to that of a scientist: observation, deduction, and systematization. Traditional knowledge was based on watching, learning, and adjusting, for the earth is a living organism that mandates: if you are to survive you must never stop learning. Observations were of the physical world, but also of emotional, dream realities, with the realities of the *angakok* or shaman, having an importance equal if not greater to that of that materially observed. Inupiat elder, William Oquilluk told of how the Eagle-Wolf Dance had spiritual origins and required exactitude of execution.

The shaman told those people they should keep on doing the Eagle-Wolf Dance just like the spirits showed them. They would make the spirit people happy and they would help out the Eskimo people. He told them to tell all their coming generation about it from generation to generation. He said, 'we must teach our children and our children's children about the Eagle-Wolf Dance. They must do it just like we did. If they forget it, there will be trouble for all of us Eskimo (Oquilluk 1981:165).

Once identified, interactions with place were diagrammed and codified into symbolic ideograms of knowledge, passed via elders from generation to generation, adjusted, augmented, and refined to remain viable and practical; reflecting social, cultural and environmental evolution but always reflecting their community of place. Dance was, as theatre visionary Antonin Artaud might describe, a double for another archetypal reality.

Place for the Inupiat and Yup'ik was understood and manifested in the body through the medium of dance. To tell a story was to dance—to dance was to tell a story that was both archetypal and particular. Dance was immediate and dependable, a braid of the psychological, physical, spiritual and emotional, and part of a highly personalized generational and environmental continuum. To perform was to harmonize with the universe and to balance and maintain place, which in turn sustained self.

The performance of Alaska's Yup'ik and Inupiat Eskimo emulates the movements, sounds, and personalities of the animals inhabiting their place: the seal, raven, walrus, eagle, and bear most notably. Intermixed with mimetic animal and human actions are movements derived from the natural environment, the northern lights dancing, the distant hills, water, and wind. These coded movements accumulatively create a vast cultural vocabulary from which to speak of and to place, providing, simultaneously, responses, expressions and dialogs with place. The coded dance movements of the Yup'ik and Inupiat are in many ways practical mnemonics, revealing a way of being in and with the world, simultaneously participating, articulating, and celebrating a physical, emotional, and spiritual interaction that is both of the present and of time immemorial. Eliade observed and understood the dances of indigenous people:

All dances were originally sacred; in other words they had an extra-human model. The model may in some cases have been totemic or emblematic animal, whose motions were reproduced to conjure up its

concrete presence through magic...The dance may be executed to acquire food, to honor the dead, or to assure good order in the cosmos [...] for every dance was created in *illo tempore*, in the mythical period, by an ancestor, totemic animal, a god, or a hero. In a word, it is a repetition, and consequently a reactualization, of "those days" (Eliade 1959: 28-29).

Dance was for the Yup'ik and Inupiat a code that allowed connection with the fullest sense of self and being. Victor Turner cites codes as a medium by which all cultures, each in their own way, experience their underlying values. Performance codes and structures, their repetition and adaptation, are necessary for staying connected to the invisible principles that guide and order our lives.

In the village of Savoonga on St. Lawrence Island in the middle of the Bering Sea, Siberian Yup'ik elder Jimmy Toolie told me: "When we dance we dance with the animals. We dance with our ancestors, and all the spirits that are around us. When we dance we know they are there and they know we are dancing for them" (Toolie, interview: 16 May 1989).

The individual movements of Yup'ik and Inupiat dance are a vocabulary--dance in this way becomes a narrative, the body a text by which cultural traditions are held and transmitted. The performance of the human body as text in this way is a complex expression and container of a culture's environment, worldview, and mythology. What anthropologists refer to as "orally transmitted cultures" should be more aptly termed "oral-movement" or "sensorial" cultures.

Alaskan Eskimo dance is unique among indigenous people in the degree it applies mimetic movements and gestures--the Inupiat and Yup'ik themselves refer to it as "story dancing." The story dancing of Yup'ik and Inupiat Eskimo of Alaska illustrate a full range of expressions and feelings such as looking, hearing, eating, walking, hunting, joy, age, surprise, talking, birds, seals, mountains, walrus, raven, happiness, north wind,

and northern lights. Understood in this context, the body was a magical entity, a nexus, the primary way of relating to the world.

Bodily existence was simultaneously spiritual, mental, and physical, with each aspect being an expression of the other. Dance was to be fully alive, and like its opposite, death, it brought the decomposition of the body, mind, and spirit into the elements signifying a reintegration, joining ancestors, animals, and environment in a living landscape, from which all, too, are born.

Entire multi-dimensional stories can be performed with one dancer taking on all of a story's components. For example, one Yup'ik dance tells the story of a hunter while traveling spots a goose. Through dance movement happiness of a beautiful day, the sun and wind are expressed. A goose flying in the air is identified and immediately and easily the performer transforms, through dance, into a goose. With next move the performer transforms into a hunter looking and shooting the goose with bow and arrow, only to transform back to the goose and illustrate the wounded and falling bird. The dance ends with the hunter dancing happily and giving thanks to the day and *Ellam yua*, the "owner of the universe."

Over the course of several years English poet Tom Lowenstein observed, through his poetry, the dances he witnessed during the time he lived in the Inupiat village of Point Hope.

Whether it is character that flows  
Though the weaving-without-person  
That the dancer created with his first design,  
Or the force of dance-form  
That drives hands, voice, arms and feet  
It's uncertain who is dancing there:  
Man, spirit, ancestor or some compound of these,

The dancer is a loon, he juts his neck, retracts, recoils,  
His hard eye flicks, and his half-open mouth,  
Non-human with dance cry reveals his own shadow

And spirit of the teaching animal.

(Lowensten 1993: 106).

Traditionally Yup'ik and Inupiaq dance served the their respective communities in communicating with the animal, ancestral, and cultural spirits. In dance they entered into a state necessary for heightened perception reaffirming simultaneously their sensorial and cosmological being. Speaking through song and dance the dancer participated in choreography both human and spiritual. Today, faced with the demise of traditional practice and the exploitative and eroding effect of culture-contact, Yup'ik and Inupiaq dance has assumed a new role in society, that of symbolizing cultural roots and of reaffirming cultural identity.

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