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Yup'ik Culture and Context in Southwest Alaska: Community Member Perspectives of Tradition, Social Change, and Prevention

Paula Ayunerak, Deborah Alstrom, Charles Moses, James Charlie Sr., and Stacy M. Rasmus

Center for Alaska Native Health Research, University of Alaska Fairbanks, PO Box 757000, Fairbanks, AK 99775, USA

Stacy M. Rasmus: smrasmus@alaska.edu

Abstract

This paper provides an introduction to key aspects of Yup'ik Inuit culture and context from both historical and contemporary community member perspectives. Its purpose is to provide a framework for understanding the development and implementation of a prevention initiative centered on youth in two communities in Southwest Alaska as part of collaboration with the University of Alaska Fairbanks and the National Institutes of Health. This paper is written from the perspective of elders and local prevention workers from each of the two prevention communities. The co-authors discuss their culture and their community from their own perspectives, drawing from direct experience and from ancestral knowledge gained through learning and living the *Yuuyaraq* or the Yup'ik way of life. The authors of this paper identify key aspects of traditional Yup'ik culture that once contributed to the adaptability and survivability of their ancestors, particularly through times of hardship and social disruption. These key processes and practices represent dimensions of culture in a Yup'ik context that contribute to personal and collective growth, protection and wellbeing. Intervention development in Yup'ik communities requires bridging historical cultural frames with contemporary contexts and shifting focus from reviving cultural activities to repairing and revitalizing cultural systems that structure community.

Keywords

American Indian and Alaska Native; Culture; Community based participatory research; Community intervention; Suicide

Introduction

As prelude to the intervention story profiled in this special issue, we asked community co-researchers from two of our partnering Alaska Native communities to reflect on both long-

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Correspondence to: Stacy M. Rasmus, smrasmus@alaska.edu.

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standing cultural traditions and more current issues that informed the design and content of the interventions themselves.

The four co-authors are from two different Yup'ik communities both on located on the west coast of Alaska. One of the communities, Alakanuk, *Alarneq*, in the Yup'ik language, has collectively chosen to have their community prevention research efforts shared openly and resolved through tribal process to allow the name of their community to be used in publications. The other community has not yet initiated a parallel approval process to allow the use of the community name in publications and will therefore be referred to as "Village A." Both communities partnered with the University of Alaska Fairbanks to develop prevention projects for youth based on cultural-traditional rituals, practices and values. Both communities were motivated by the collective recognition that the traditional ways of life have changed and that young people are suffering as a result. Many of the children growing up today in these communities are struggling, and some are not making it through their most difficult times early in life. The authors of this paper argue that children no longer have the secure mooring once provided by their Indigenous culture. The work of helping these youth must happen through a revitalization and re-interpretation of the values, traditions and practices that once provided the guidance, instruction and reasons to live for the ancestors of contemporary youth struggling to acquire this same purpose today.

The authors of this paper are Yup'ik community members who are concerned for the future of their children and young people. The first author, Ayunerak, is an elder of the community of Alakanuk. Ayunerak comes to this work with a deep knowledge and experience in the health and healing fields; she was the first community health aide to work in the newly established health clinic in Alakanuk. Ayunerak served in this role for over 25 years, and continues to serve her community as a member of the board of directors of her regional Alaska Native health corporation. Ayunerak was one of the primary leaders in the development and implementation of the *Elluam Tungiinun* (Towards Wellness) youth prevention project in her community. The second author, Al-strom, is also from the community of Alakanuk and served as one of the local coordinators for the *Elluam Tungiinun* project. The third author, Moses, is a community member of Village A and served as the local coordinator for the *Yupiucimta Asvairtuumallerkaa* (Strengthening Our Identity as Yupik People) project. The fourth author, Charlie, is also an elder from the community of Village A. He worked with Moses to oversee the development and implementation of the *Yupiucimta Asvairtuumallerkaa* project.

This paper describes the Yup'ik way of life from tribal community member and elder perspectives. The co-authors discuss their culture and their community from their own perspectives; drawing from direct experience and from ancestral knowledge gained through learning and living the *Yuuyaraq* or the Yup'ik way of life. The authors point out that while no life is free of trouble, children in their own communities are growing up and experiencing stress and hardship unlike that occurring in the lives of children raised in the dominant society. It is against this backdrop that the intervention development work was undertaken in the communities to give children the strengths and skills they need to survive as Yup'ik people today. The authors present aspects of their community histories, indigenous

knowledge and social customs that they identify as most important to the community intervention research described in this special issue.

The four co-authors worked in two teams with Ayunerak and Alstrom taking lead on introducing and describing aspects of Yup'ik community history, culture and context that are critical for understanding the current status, needs and strengths of the Yup'ik people. Moses and Charlie follow this with a discussion of social change in Yup'ik communities, highlighting some of the more disruptive impacts of social change for Yup'ik youth, families and communities.

The authors collectively indicate that intervention development in Yup'ik communities is based on identifying the underlying structure of cultural-traditional activities in order to determine the processes that make these activities protective and strengthening. These underlying protective factors or protective processes embedded within Yup'ik culture provide a basis for intervention development and implementation. Identifying what is protective within Yup'ik culture requires bridging historical cultural frames with contemporary contexts. It requires shifting the focus from reviving cultural activities to repairing and revitalizing the cultural systems that structure activity in the communities.

Our editorial goal of this paper is to strengthen the power of the words written by our co-researchers while also preserving diction and their way of describing their world. Our collective aim is to describe how indigenous knowledge and practice can simultaneously enhance and accelerate the progress of scientific knowledge and practice in intervention research. This foreword and the accompanying conclusion are meant only to provide the necessary framing to allow greater access and understanding across our target audience for the special issue.

Who We Are: History of a Yukon River Community

Paula Ayunerak and Deborah Alstrom

In the earliest days there were many intertribal wars between the Yup'ik (Inuit) groups on the lower regions of the Yukon River drainage and the Athabascan (American Indian) groups inhabiting the interior regions and borders of the Yukon River (Fig. 1, Community Map). Those Yup'ik groups at the borders of Athabascan territory eventually left to a safe place near Nelson Island on the western coast of the Bering Sea. Somewhere during the latter years of the 1500s to the early 1600s, the families who were originally from the Yukon River border regions began a return migration back home from the Nelson Island area west of Bethel and Southwest of the current village of Alakanuk. This migration followed the annual summer harvest of fish and berries.

The eldest man, who was also an '*Anallkuq*' or Shaman/Holy Man, had decided to take a rest at Tin Can Point or *Akmiut*, where he ended up settling, feeling that he was too old to continue on the journey. He and his family became comfortable because the area had everything that they needed to survive and it was peaceful there. By that time, the wars between the Yupiit and Athabascans (*Enqillit*) had long subsided. People still traveled to

their summer, fall, spring and winter camps for their seasonal harvesting, but always returned to *Akmiut*.

The Yukon River was a very narrow river a few centuries ago. Many warriors and hunters would take the turn into *Nalugciq* slough thinking that it was either the Yukon River, *Kwiqqak* for Yup'ik speaking peoples, or the *Kwiqqak* slough, a tributary of the Yukon River. Different parts of the *Nalugciq* slough were established sites for hunting and camping purposes used by people in the days when families used to migrate from area to area following their food sources. The slough eventually started being called *Nalugciq* or *Naluik* after some time had passed. As time went on, the *Nalugciq* ultimately became *Alarneq* (Alakanuk).

Our Cultural Ways: Moving Towards Wellness Through the Strength of Our Creator

Our ancestors were strong. They were strong in their bodies because of their hard work on the land, and strong in their spirit because of their beliefs and rituals. This strength came from our connection to this place where our ancestors settled and raised families. The things that once kept our people safe and well remain important for us today. The teachings, practices and knowledge of our ancestors prevented harmful things from happening within individuals, families and communities. Some aspects of our culture and traditional-spiritual life were particularly important to us for our survival, and these we sought to bring back up through our prevention research project *Elluam Tungiinun* (Toward Wellness) that took place in this contemporary time. We cannot go into too much detail in this paper, and instead will focus on a short list of core values, beliefs and practices that the Yup'ik people live by.

***Ellam Yua*: The spirit of the universe**

Ellam Yua/Tangrumanrilnguum, Spirit of the Universe/Unseen One, gave us our *Yuuyaraq*: Way of Life; *Alerquun*: Rules of Life and *Piciryaraq*: Truth of Life through the *Angallkuq* or Shaman/Holy Man. *Ellam Yua/Tangrumanrilnguum* gave life to the *Yupiit*, or 'the real people of the land,' as well as to all the animals that live on the land and in the water. He was the creator who made everything. We did not say God but we said *Ellam Yua*, the spirit of the universe who is everywhere. Even if we think that we are alone we are not. He is aware of us, and He is watching us. In those days we had a very strong religion and respected everything that *Ellam Yua* created. For example, wood was highly respected: we made shelters, houses, heated our houses, and fashioned dog team sleds, *kayaqs* and other boats. Furniture, plates, bowls and ladles of all sizes were made of wood. Fish and mink traps of all sizes were also made of wood. Wood-working had healing power; if a man became deranged, he would be put to work on wood so that he could recover.

Ellam Yua provided the real people and the animals with food from the land and the water. Each person and animal has a spirit given to it. Both the *Yupiit* and the animals inhabit a sentient world infused with spirit. All living things have to be respected. The land gave *Yupiit* meat from animals and birds, while the water provided fish, seals and whales.

Vegetables and fruit came from both the land and the sea or rivers. The rain, lakes and rivers all provided sources of drink both in the form of liquids and ice. Even though *Ellam Yua* gave to the real people the animals, they must still show proper respect to secure them as food. Fish were always brought into the house in a pan in case the fish was accidentally dropped where people walked. This prevented disrespect of the fish. They poured water into the seal's mouth when brought to the house or village in order to quench its thirst because it was a water animal. This was a way to show great respect for the seal that had been killed for food.

Yuuyaraq: Rules to live a Yup'ik Way of life

There is a very close connection between the animal world and human world. We believe that humans and animals communicate through *Ellam Yua*, and that these relationships are governed by rules. For each different type of food, there are rules that men and women must follow to take care of it. If the rule is not followed for that particular animal, then that food source will either become scarce or disappear entirely, depending on the intensity of the violation. If the rules were followed carefully and the animal spirit was pleased for example, with the way that the weapons were handled after it was caught, or the way that it was cared for and eaten, then the food source would multiply and the hunter would be blessed with more to catch. Subsistence required good relationships between humans and animals and maintaining this relationship was the only way people survived long ago. Respect for the land as well as the sea ensure the seasonal provision of food given to us through *Ellam Yua*.

Yuraq: Marking our development as a people through Yup'ik dancing

Eskimo dancing has been going on for many decades. There are several ways to dance: *Kivqiq* is a dance of giving and asking for an item from the head of the household. *Ellriq*, is another type of dance done by an individual man or a woman. He or she will get ready for 5 years making clothes, blankets and other items made of cloth, skin or baskets as well as plates and ladles made from wood. For the *Ellriq* dance, one boy or girl will be dressed from head to toe with new clothes, including a parka, cap, mittens and mukluks. *Agayuliyaraq* is a dance that is a prayer asking for animals, fish, berries, wood or good weather at a certain time of year in the hunting or fishing cycle. Men would sometimes use masks of different animals that are described in the verses of the songs as part of the *Agayuliyaraq* dance. After the dance is over, the masks would be taken out to the tundra, away from trails, and left there. It is said that the masks would never be seen again, even if one went out the next day to find it. The *Agayuliyaraq* dance is the only type of dance still used today. People stopped performing the other types of dances after the missionaries came to the area and labeled them evil and superstitious. In all of these dances, *Yup'it* included their family members who had passed on as a way to honor them.

Before the missionaries, Eskimo dancing was performed as a kind of prayer asking *Ellam Yua* for blessings of different kinds. It was also done as an expression of thankfulness for the blessings given from *Ellam Yua*. The different leaders of the village would come together to teach their songs to the rest of the group of men or women. When the songs were learned, they then could teach the dance movements to the rest of the people in the community. The dance movements were basically sign language showing what happened in the story.

Different masks were also made to show what kind of animal spirit was being honored because it gave its life to the person(s) who caught it; or they could show what was being requested to catch, for example, in preparation for a seal hunt.

We would dance with animal masks at the potlatch where the whole community came together and invited other communities to come for entertainment. The mask was used only once at a potlatch on one song, danced by the person it was made for. Taking masks to the tundra afterward signified that the prayer or thankfulness was sent to *Ellam Yua*. It was believed that the mask reappears to a purified or chosen person in the future.

The drum is the main tool we use to dance. The drum's circular design is made as a way of depicting the *Yup'it* belief that our lives go on in a cycle. The center of the drum is like the womb in women and represents life returning back after death, such as when people die and are reincarnated through the births of new babies; or when the animals used for food sources return back to the hunting areas depending on the way that the hunter and receiver treat it after it was caught. It is this renewal, continuous and carefully completed, that allows us to survive as a people.

We believe that we are all part of a community, those in bodily form and those who have left this earth. There is a belief that all our family who have passed on to the next world comes to a potlatch to watch and participate with their living family. There is another belief that if a person died before or during a potlatch time, it is a favorable time to go because he or she will not make the journey alone to *Pamaalirugmuit*. *Pamaalirugmuit* is a name of the wonderful and peaceful place that the people have a chance to go to after death (just like Heaven in the Bible). The newly deceased person is picked up by the spirits of their deceased ancestors and taken along with the other spirits to their new home. This is how we marked the transitions in our human life.

Qasgiq: Our rituals create a community

The *qasgiq* was a very important and sacred building in each different village. In the latter years after the missionaries arrived and built churches, the importance of the *qasgiq* was described to have the same intensity of significance as a church. It was a place that was highly respected. The men of all ages used it as their home and would sleep in it, eat in it, bathe in it and make the tools they needed to live. Women and children lived in separate sod houses surrounding the *qasgiq*.

The entire community used the *qasgiq* for ceremonial and entertainment purposes, like the *Agayuliyaraq*, or potlatch. The *qasgiq* brought men, women and children together to listen to the elders of the village talk about *Yuuyaraq* (Way of Life), *Alerquun* (Rules of Life) and *Piciryaraq* (Truth of Life). It was a place to teach Yup'ik morals and values and survival skills. Children raised in the *Qasgiq* were given daily talks on *Yuuyaraq*, *Alerquun*, *Piciryaraq*, and were instructed about the cycle of life and death. We believe that a living person can prepare for his journey to *Pamaalirugmuit* while he is still living. There are many things that a person can do to prepare for his/her afterlife journey, such as helping others and keeping a clean house and body. Children in the *qasgiq* were taught to live in a

world where all of their actions will affect their future and their life, even after their bodies no longer live.

In the *qasgiq* way of life, each and every member of the community was needed and each needed the other for seasonal harvest and daily life activities. Families were the key to survival long ago. Parents began teaching their children from the earliest age possible, and it continued throughout their lives into adulthood. Parents taught by role modeling their behaviors and demonstrating through their own actions the ways to do things. When the children grow older, they remember what they saw and what they heard in the *qasgiq*. The *qasgiq* was the spiritual center of the Yup'ik communities. People abandoned the *qasgiq* when the epidemics came and the large pits that made the foundation of the *qasgiq* were needed for graves. Missionaries also encouraged the Yup'ik to build single-family homes, above ground using materials brought into the region. This changed the way of life of our people, when we moved away from our spiritual center.

How Our Ways Have Changed: Life Today in a Community on the Coast of the Bering Sea

Charles Moses and James Charlie, Sr

We will discuss in this section how our ways of life have changed, and the effects this has had on our families in the villages. It once was that families would move around on the land and there was no permanent settlement where all families would reside year-round continually in one place. Our village (Village A) was established as a community in 1964 and had just over 280 people. It has grown over the years and today has a population of about 600. Along with its growth, our village has experienced a cultural change as well. When it was first established, the economy was largely subsistence-based. This meant that families still had to work together in order to survive. Traditional values connected with our subsistence economy were still taught and practiced by everyone. Parents would spend much of their time teaching their children these subsistence ways.

Yup'ik culture has evolved through thousands of years and is continuing to do so to this day. Over the past few decades the economy of our village has become more focused on wage-labor. Living in our village today is like living in a different environment for many of the older residents who remember what it was like to live in tents and move around to camps on a seasonal round. As a result of these changes to community life and culture, the people have less certainty that the old ways will continue to provide for their families. Many new parents are unsure about methods of child rearing. Some are looking to our traditions for guidance; others are learning western ways of child-rearing as outside influences begin to overtake our Yup'ik language and teachings.

When the missionaries of the various religious denominations originally contacted the Yup'ik in Southwest Alaska, they first had to learn the language to begin their missionizing work. Those missionaries who eventually became fluent in the language may have themselves begun to realize the complexities of the culture, because the traditional Yup'ik language is the code to truly understanding the culture. The missionaries' presence had impacts on our communities that we could not have anticipated upon their arrival. The

missionaries were welcomed into the communities, but looking back it is clear now that some of the policies the missionaries instituted had lasting effects on the Yup'ik people. For example, in some communities today, school-aged children can no longer speak their Yup'ik language, while in other communities, there is no longer any Eskimo dancing. Among the most disruptive outcome of contact and outside influence is the erosion of the core values; the loss of what made the traditional Yup'ik people a community.

The social framework within which our ancestors once lived came out of an adaptive process, consisting of trial and error and testing and retesting, over a span of thousands of years. Imagine creating a *qayaq* (kayak) without any prior experience or model to copy, and using only the tools provided by nature. You would start with an idea, but chances are that you will go through several failures before you finally succeed in creating one that can be used safely in any season or weather. It would take you many trials and redesigns to get it right and keep yourself safe on the water. This is how the Yup'ik society was created. Contact and contemporary processes have led the modern Yup'ik peoples away from something that has been developed, tried, and proven over many centuries; and much of the suffering in our communities today is related to this movement away from our traditional core values, subsistence strategies and families.

The authority of elders in a changing world is at question today. This should not be the case, but we find today it is. The elders were always those in the community that could speak the most from their own direct experience in the world. For all the wisdom they possess, an elder would remain humble. You will know you are in the presence of an elder should you receive advice qualified with something to the effect of, "When I was young, an elder told me..." elders will only speak about what they have heard or seen using their own senses.

Today we hear the young adults in our communities say that the old ways are no longer relevant. This has truth on the surface because it is true that we as Yup'ik are no longer completely dependent on a subsistence way of life. So we may feel, today, freer to ignore the concerns of our elders and embrace the changes without considering the time and process it took by our elders to get where we are today. The elders made it possible for the young people today to have more choices about what they want to do with their lives and who they want to be.

For example, modern transportation technology has done away with the *qayaq* and the dog team. Coupled with modern hunting and fishing equipment, like guns, motors and nylon nets, subsistence has become less time consuming and more easily accomplished. Because of this change, men and women no longer have to rely on working together to the same degree in very specific yet different complementary ways to bring about success and wellbeing of their families.

The result of these changes is indifference and distance from our traditional values, roles and responsibilities, practice of spirituality and respect for the nature of the hunt as well as the game itself. Our disrespect of the animals and the environment where we pursue our food has led to our becoming wasteful of life.

Other changes have also impacted our culture. For example, children today are no longer being strengthened mentally and physically with the necessary chores of emptying the honey-bucket (toilet), packing water, chopping wood, feeding the dogs, or any work associated with contributing to the survival of a family in a totally collective subsistence way of life. In fact, most children in Southwest Alaska, especially those in communities with water and sewage systems, don't really have regular or daily chores anymore. Instead, children in the rural communities spend their weekdays in school and their evenings and weekends watching TV or playing video games. The traditional values associated with education in the *qasgiq* and in the homes have been overtaken with the Western social values taught in the schools. It remains a vital practice to teach the children the Yup'ik values that allowed for generations of successful living on this land.

It is not just the Yup'ik communities that are experiencing these changes and the problems associated with these changed and changing conditions. All the indigenous communities are going through the same transitional stages in varying ways and degrees. The Yup'ik are fortunate to have elders in most, if not all, of the villages that still recall the traditional ways, and speak their language fluently. These communities are in a good place to revive their language and many of the customs and the associated values, relying on the strength of these elders. This is not a call to elders only, it also starts with reviving values associated with traditional child-rearing techniques. Every village has parents and grandparents who continue to practice some of the traditional ways of raising a family at home, and it is their children (and the influences of these children on others) who will keep these communities going as strong Yup'ik communities in the twentieth century.

Revitalizing Culture and Context

Through Kinship, Charlie Moses and James Charlie, Sr

Our communities are still beautiful communities in many ways because of the people, but many are beginning to lose their traditional character and spirit because of the pressures to change and assimilate to a more modern way of life. The structure of our families is changing the most rapidly and with the most consequences for our youth. Many young parents no longer experience the benefit of raising their children with the help of their extended family members. Many young people grow up today without knowledge of who their family is and where they come from. As part of the *Yupiucimta Asvairtuumallerkaa* (Strengthening our identity as Yupik People) Program, we endeavored to create a manual on applying traditional child-rearing techniques in the 21st century (reference to online appendix). Young parents can review and apply these teachings as they raise their own children.

Our families create our communities and we cannot have a strong community without a strong knowledge of our connection to each other through kinship. In our intervention program we also developed a Yup'ik kinship terms activity to remind each us of how we are connected to the others in our community. Kinship is part of raising a child, and children feel lost today because they do not feel connected or like they are part of a culture or community. The key for the modern Yup'ik is to ensure that our children succeed in the Western school system *while at the same time* teaching them traditional cultural values that

have stood the test of time. In an effort to identify and highlight some of these time-honored strengths and traditional values that have served the Yup'ik and other Alaska Native people so well over these many thousands of years, Dr. Gerald Mohatt and his staff from the Center for Alaska Native Health Research (CANHR) interviewed over 100 Alaska Native individuals who each shared his/her own life story as it related to alcohol, so that others might benefit from their experiences (Mohatt et al. 2004). Through these life stories we were able to identify some of the strategies that people are actually using to prevent and/or recover from alcohol abuse. Some of these are personal, individual strengths or decisions that people made; others are strengths, values, supports, and successful ways of behaving in today's world that were developed in the family; and yet others are strengths, values, supports and successful ways of behaving that come from the community.

It is this model of increasing protection and strengths through the revitalization of traditional practices and ways of life that guides our work with children in our community. We have realized through this work that the proven ways of our ancestors still impact our people today. We need to continue these ways to continue as communities. We need to continue to recognize the natural ways to prevent and/or recover from the modern ills like alcohol abuse, and revive the identity of Native individuals as well as communities, thereby enabling them to "evolve" into the twentieth century *Yupit*.

Through Ritual and Paula Ayunerak

The desire to belong to a community is a key characteristic of being human. For Yup'ik (the real people) there are different levels of community; kin relations, school community, working community, village community, male and female community, elder community and others. Community is created by the customs, practices and values held by its members. Yup'ik live their lives through their communities, and the rituals that make their communities are important even today. The *Curuuqaq* or Potlatch is one example of a ritual event that creates community for Yup'ik peoples. The potlatch is not done in any part of the year except in the winter after Christmas. When potlatch season comes around, it brings together a wider community of different people. One of the purposes for the potlatch is to memorialize our recently deceased kin. This may take place the year following after the death or longer depending on when the family has prepared for the give away of goods and food in honor of the deceased. The potlatch brings people together from all spiritual backgrounds to observe this rite of passage for the deceased and families of the deceased. This ritual has been going on for generations and has evolved from a smaller scale family rite to community-wide ceremonial involving several families, and large displays of giving and sharing.

Other rituals that once were used for prevention or for ceremonial purpose, such as smudging, can be continued like the Potlatch in our communities today. Long ago, there were different ways of smudging. People used the Labrador tea (*ayuk*) to cleanse their houses, and would go into each room in the house, light the tea and allow the smoke to circulate. This circulating of the smoke combined with prayer is what we call smudging. For men, the Labrador tea was used for purifying their own bodies and the bodies of others, and for purifying their tools/weapons before going out hunting. They also used to go home and

purify themselves and their gear if they had an unlucky hunting expedition the first time that they went out. A woman used it to purify her body after a menstrual cycle so that she would not contaminate her husband or her husband's hunting equipment. Smudging was once part of a family's ritual observance, and it was a custom that identified us as Yup'ik hunters or caretakers. Smudging today is carried on by mainly a few elders and happens in private contexts in the community. We chose to revive the practice of smudging as part of our intervention work with the children in our community. We would burn Labrador tea to open each of our intervention activities. We would explain how the circulating smoke, combined with our prayers would clean out our minds and bodies and allow us to do good work and fill up on the knowledge we were receiving that day. At first there were a few people who disagreed with the revival of a traditional practice used by our ancestors. Over time, those people that once disagreed came to see that the ritual had good uses and opened people up to learning things about who they are and where they come from. The ritual reminded people that they all belonged to the same community, joined together by the circle of smoke and prayer.

Other rituals also used to have the power to change things and bring people together as a community. Many of these we have forgotten or lost over time, but some we still remember. For example, the act of laughing at, making fun of or openly talking about a spirit considered to be evil or bad for the people has been practiced since the flu epidemic occurring at the beginning of the twentieth century. Along with humans and animals, many other things around us are deemed to have a spirit. There are spirits of sickness, injury and bad luck or misfortune. Spirits can become either weak or strong depending on the fears or strengths of the humans. In the early 1980s, the spirit of suicide came to our village and it became so strong in our community that many lives were lost to it.

One of the elders helping to create our prevention program came up with a ritual on how to deal with that particular spirit of suicide. This elder had been in many meetings with other elders that helped him remember hearing about a way to deal with a particularly strong and bothersome spirit. He brought this idea out during one of our work group meetings and it caused one of our younger people to think about the way of the musk ox. The way of the musk ox involves protection of the young members of the group by the older members encircling around them. We added this to the ritual of ridding the spirit of suicide and decided to try conducting this activity as a community-wide ceremonial.

We gathered together as many people in the community as we could and had the elder give instructions about the ritual. We first came together with all the adults holding hands encircling all the youth who had come to the activity just as the musk ox do with their young to protect them. Then the elder asked for us to pray as hard as we could for help that day to have the spirit of suicide leave and never come back. After praying, he asked for the whole group to stomp the floor as hard as we could four times together. We followed the stomping with the act of smoothing out the floor with our feet. Then the elder instructed the group to laugh hysterically at the spirit. All through the steps that were followed, the adults held their hands together surrounding the youth and children. The final part of the ritual involved the elder making throwing movements with his arms four times toward the west, to cast the spirit in a place of no return or luck.

After our community performed this ritual we felt a difference among each other and in our homes and lives. We all felt lighter and happier. We smiled at each other more easily and things got better for our young people. The ritual brought us together and together we were stronger.

This set of articles describes how we created a research project with the University of Alaska Fairbanks as part of our community response to the deaths that were happening among our young people. It is informed by what we have described, including the focus on strengthening our elders, utilizing the concept of *qasgiq*, the sacred learning space, revitalizing traditional parenting, and recreating rituals. This is our home, the place that we love. This is our way of life, how we look at the world. We have an ancient knowledge that is as important today as it was for all of our past generations. *Alarneq*, our ancestral home, remains today a place that can nurture and grow healthy youth and protect them from alcohol abuse and suicide.

Editorial Conclusion

Stacy M. Rasmus

The authors of this paper identify key aspects of traditional Yup'ik culture that once contributed to the adaptability and survivability of their ancestors, particularly through times of hardship and social disruption. These key processes and practices represent dimensions of culture in an indigenous Yup'ik context with enduring capabilities to contribute to personal and collective growth, and to protection and wellbeing.

Traditional-cultural practices such as *Qasgiq* (Men's House), *Yuraq* (Potlatch) and *Yuuyaraq* (subsistence way of life) are examples of historically important contexts into which intervention was introduced. In the *qasgiq*, boys were taught how to make the tools they would need to make a living and survive out on the land. The *qasgiq* was a place where people would go to get advice and seek healing. *Yuraq* and *yuuyaraq* were important dimensions of the *qasgiq*. Yup'ik culture and Yup'ik life functioned through the *qasgiq*.

Hawe et al. (2009) argue for a "systems-approach" to intervention research that starts with careful and detailed study and understanding of the context in which intervention will take place. This study of culture and context will reveal the system of important formal and informal "activity settings" (p. 267) and the social networks that connect people to these activities. The intervention is understood as a critical event in time in this system.

The authors of the current article have provided readers with a nuanced descriptive account of selected primary activity settings in which intervention takes place in Yup'ik communities. For example, the authors describe how the *qasgiq* functions as a key activity setting and a social network within a Yup'ik system, providing us with an appreciation of the ways in which intervention occurred naturally and effectively. Rapid social change brought about disruptions within these aboriginal Yup'ik systems. Missionaries actively worked to shut down the *qasgiq* in many Yup'ik communities. In its place were constructed single-family houses that were often of poorer quality in that they were less adaptively suited to the environmental context than the traditional Yup'ik semi-subterranean multi-

family dwellings. This event dramatically altered the system that provided the structure for the activity settings, and project efforts involved revitalization of the *qasgiq* as an important activity setting and network for intervention in Yup'ik communities. In the communities described in the paper, the *yuraq* and the *yuuyaraq* are still practiced today and function as activity settings for intervention. However, these settings occur within a very different ecological system that continues to change rapidly over time.

Collectively, the authors of this paper assert that a primary function of intervention with Yup'ik youth and families must involve repair or revitalization of the indigenous system that once provided for action in their communities. The authors give examples of how they participated in the re-creation of key Yup'ik activity settings and social networks as part of the community intervention described in the special issue. In one community, this occurred through the revitalization of a traditional Yup'ik kinship setting in order to increase connectedness between family members and strengthen family-level resources. The other community revitalized *qasgiq*, using a traditional ritual setting. In both communities, the goal was systems-level change occurring through the re-creation and re-interpretation of vital settings within local traditional culture and practice, in order to offer new possibilities for the survival, growth and wellbeing of Yup'ik youth today.

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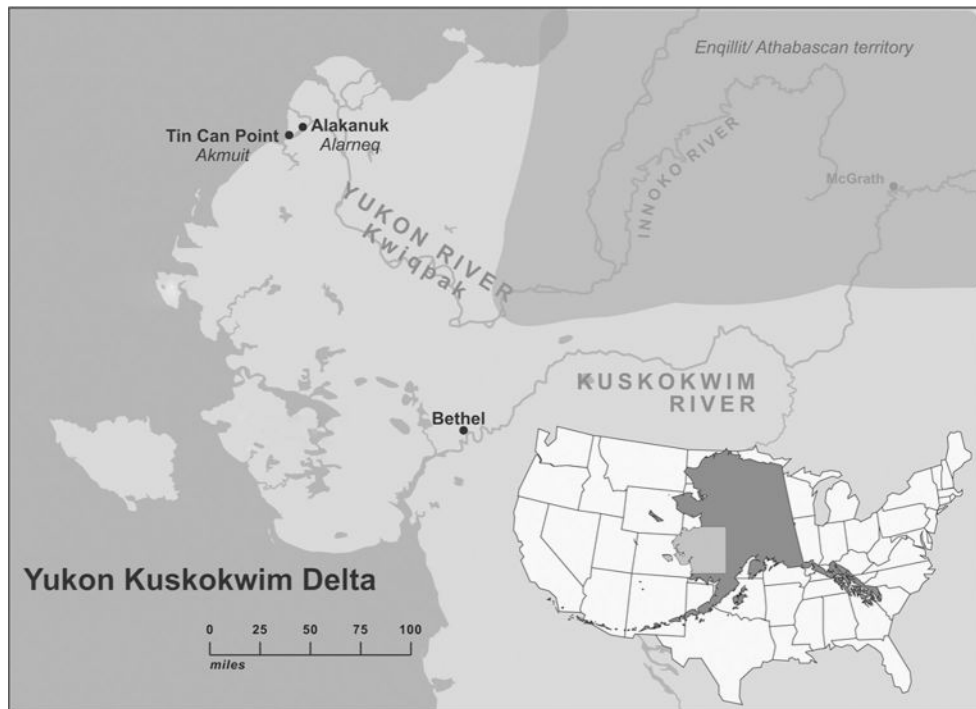


Fig. 1.
Map of Southwest Alaska with locations of traditional settlement sites