

## Multiple Ways of Knowing: Life stories, Oral history and Education

### **Richard Knecht**

Department of Alaska Native and Rural Development  
University of Alaska Fairbanks (Alaska, U.S.A.)  
raknecht2@alaska.edu

### **Theresa Arevgaq John**

Department of Alaska Native and Rural Development  
University of Alaska Fairbanks (Alaska, U.S.A.)  
tjohn@alaska.edu

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The panelists in our session were drawn from graduate students and faculty members representing the Rural Development Program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Our department primarily serves indigenous village-based students living throughout rural Alaska. Our distance-learning program is designed to provide students an opportunity to earn an undergraduate or graduate college degree while continuing to live in their home villages. We comprise an unconventional academic department and it seemed natural enough to in turn present an unconventional panel session that included western academic papers side by side with Yupik and Cup'ig song and dance. This diversity of discourse and presentation technologies reflects both our educational philosophy and the goals we set for ourselves and our students in terms of respect for multiple ways of knowing and being.



Ayapaq George Owletuck, Theresa Arevgaq John and Nicholas Charles opening the session with a drum dance, Paris 2006.

A university education presents challenges for every student, but doubly so for students from indigenous cultures. Rural Alaskan students must often find a way to transcend the poor level of academic skills provided by many school systems in bush communities. An even more daunting prospect for students from more traditional areas and households is the cultural gulf between their home community and the college campus. For some the university is a kind of foreign country, with unfamiliar language, lifeways and expectations. Each student manages to find their own ways between these worlds. Even with support systems it can be a lonely journey. Distance learning helps students navigate at least some of these cultural hazards.

Three of our panel presenters were graduate students who were working on or had just completed their Master's degrees in Rural Development. A common theme in their presentations was their struggles in finding balance between traditional and western worlds. Angie Santa Ana's Cup'iq name is Nuss'an, meaning 'to be tamed'.



Angie Santa Ana, giving her paper at the Conference, Paris 2006

She presented a paper entitled 'Rural Development from a Contemporary Cup'it Perspective'. She provided background on the people and cultural roots of her home community of Mekoryuk, on Nunivak Island and showed a photograph of her grandmother Nan Kiokun taken by Edward Curtis in 1928. In her view the rural development program is a modern equivalent and even an extension of older forms of education: "While pondering the notion of rural development within its western context, it dawned on me how our indigenous history utilized their own form of community development. The Yup'it have dwellings called *kazigis* (man's traditional house), the

Cup'it call them *kiiyar* (traditional men's community houses). The *kiiyar* were communal institutions taught by Native instructors who produced homegrown leaders." Angie also underscored the story telling incorporated into class sessions in the distance learning program. Most of our students are older adults who have lived full and story-rich lives in rural Alaska. The lessons and examples of life stories shared by students in class are among the most valued texts in our courses.

Ayapaq George Owletuck's presentation was 'Implications of Alerquutet in the Post-Modern Age. For Owletuck, spirituality is crucial to indigenous education:

The *Kuigpagmiut*—Yupik Eskimos of the Lower Yukon – traditionally taught us ways to live right through *alerquutet*, “laws or instructions” in a setting where we were expected to sit still and listen attentively. Amongst the first concepts we learn is an awareness of the *Ellam Yua* – Creator of the Universe-God and the spirit world. We are advised to have compassion and love for others, to be self-less and are held personally accountable for our behavior. Our *Kuigpagmiut* traditional teachings have been supplanted by a western education system that removes God and the awareness of the spirit world out of the classroom. The growing emergence of Indigenous scholars, the decolonization of research methodologies, and the accommodation of academia provides an opportunity for *Alerquutet* in the post-modern age to re-construct a place for *Ellam Yua* and spirituality in the classroom.

A more materialistic view was presented by Nicholas R. ‘Nick’ Charles, then a graduate student and Vice-President of Calista Native Corporation. Calista owns what could someday be one of the world's largest gold mine and Charles promoted the economic possibilities of the Donlin Creek project. Donlin Creek is 300 miles west of Anchorage and has a gold resource of about 13 million ounces. Still in the planning stages, the mine development is being carefully monitored by the Native community wary of long term threats to subsistence life styles. According to Charles, while the dangers of development are real enough to human life, so are the threats of poverty and hopelessness.

The authors of this report are faculty members at the Department of Alaska Native and Rural Development. Our faculty is culturally diverse; of our eight faculty, five are indigenous people from Alaska. Theresa Arevgaq John discussed the paths taken by three Native Yup'ik women from Southwest Alaska each of whom acquired a Master degree from the Department of Alaska Native and Rural Development at UAF; Ana Cooke; CEO of Bethel Native Corporation, Evelyne Pensgard, Kuskokwim College academic advisor and Ms. O'Brien Yukok Kuskowim Health Corporation Manager of Human Services. All women balance their professional lives with traditional subsistence and child rearing. They have achieved success in both the western and indigenous worlds and have met the challenge of multiple cultural transitions.

Rick Knecht presented discussed field projects and outreach activities of the department on Nunivak Island and the Kodiak Archipelago, where Tribal entities are embracing cultural stewardship as part of their economic development strategies. This reflects our departmental emphasis was on the need to develop the human capital of Alaska in a way that allows people to participate in the world economic system while at the same time preserving the cultural integrity of indigenous communities. In our view it is

crucial that development be informed by traditional cultural values and knowledge.

In that spirit the Yupik members of our department, Theresa, Nicolas and George, presented a series of traditional song, dance and music. This was not meant as entertainment in the western sense, but was included as educational content. It was also meant to bind the disparate points of view into a meaningful whole, in the same way that Yupik dancing brings together a community and its universe and celebrate renewal.



Theresa Arevgaq John, opening her presentation at the Conference with a drum dance – Paris 2006

One of the traditional songs was the purification song called *Taarvarnauramkan*. It is a song about purifying the living and hunting space, which includes the environment such as the ocean and land. The Yupiit believe that all living things (land, people, natural resources, earth) have spirits and must reside together by share the Earth or "Ella" with highest level of respect for each other.

The critical purpose of the purification song is to ensure that the unwanted spirits are eliminated through ritual purification of the hunting tools and equipment as well as the knowledgeable specialists in the community that use them. Each spring the communities gathered prior to hunting season to purify all of their tools, qayaqs and people themselves



through a ritual process. The ritual was carefully planned and prepared for. The prominent composers (elders, composers, choreographers, shamans and performers) created appropriate songs and dances for each honored participant. This song in particular includes in its verses the mammal hunters and those who gather from the land. The song requests safety and prosperity for all village providers. The ritual process employs Labrador tea or "ayuq" from the tundra which is used to smudge hunting tools while singing the song.

The song originated from our ancestors a very long time ago. Although the cultural landscape has changed over time, this song is still practiced today and in fact is sometimes sung in Catholic mass. The essence of the song and drumming is accepted by church authorities as a legitimate form of prayer done through song and dance. For dance is indeed a form of prayer. From ancient times when people wanted to show respect and ask for food resources, good hunting conditions, and wellness of the villagers, they planned to agayu at the qasgiq. To agayu is to dance, to agayu is to pray. Dance is essentially prayer in motion.

Another of the songs was composed by Theresa Arevgaq's father Kangrilnguq; a song called *Anuuqenguuq* or the wind song. He was originally from Nelson Island and composed the song while commercial fishing in Bristol Bay back in 1980's. The content of the song was about his fishing experience in winding Bristol Bay River called Nushugak. The chorus describes the howling wind blowing into the river making fishing unbearable. The verses in the songs are critical moments.



Theresa Arevgaq John singing her father's song *Anuuqenguuq*: the "wind song", Sept. 2008.  
(click on the image to launch the video)

There are two verses to each song. The first verse describes the sheer force of the wind he experienced while fishing. The second verse describes his prosperity after safely delivering fish to the tender. This song is practiced in the village today. Memories of the

experience such as this are performed to preserve and share personal accounts of survival. In this case it is economic survival, getting fish to exchange for contemporary need of cash economic based society.

Dance reflects both traditional and contemporary times of our cultures. Today, villagers dance children's dances depicting them going to school, being inside the classroom, playing basketball or playing in the playground. Other dances are ritual dances; purification song, bladder festival song, honoring the first catch of the children, first seal hunters catch, honoring elders knowledge and stories. Some songs describe contemporary tools like snow machines, outboard motors, four wheelers, and airplanes. Other dance themes include experiences of going to villages to dance and celebrating rituals together as regional communities.

Drums are regarded to have spirits or yua as was the qasiq used by our ancestors. All the regalia, designs, voice were tools of meaning. The masks were used to interact with animal and earth spirit worlds that coexists with in this world. Gestures, words and dance tools had meanings that reflect the prayers of our hunting and gathering societies. Each composer maintained close connection with daily human and animal activities and in turn that connection provided the information and inspiration for composition.



Theresa Arevgaq John, drumming after the Conference Banquet, Paris 2006

Through our session we tried to show how we draw on multiple ways of knowing in the educational discourse generated within our department. We also performed these and other songs and dance during our evening dinner aboard the barge. It was a remarkable evening, particularly in that we performed our songs with our colleagues from the eastern Arctic, from the far end of the Inuit world from Alaska. The sounds of our drums were heard together as our boat traveled that night through the heart of Paris. Perhaps you can hear them still.

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