

## THE "INVITING-IN" FEAST OF THE ALASKAN ESKIMO

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### INTRODUCTORY.

In the winter of 1911-12, I was located at St. Michael, Alaska, as government teacher in charge of the Unaligmiut Eskimo of that vicinity. When, in January, it was rumored that a great mask festival was to be celebrated in conjunction with the neighbouring Unalaklit, Malemiut from Norton sound, I immediately became interested, particularly since the natives informed me that it was to be the Aithúkāgûk, or "Inviting-In" Feast: a native festival which had not, to my knowledge, been witnessed by scientific observers before.

The Aithúkāgûk, or "Inviting-In" Feast, is observed in the month of January, after the local rites<sup>1</sup>—the Aiyāguk, or Asking Festival, and the Bladder Feast (*Tcaúiyûk*)—have been completed. The "Inviting-In" Feast is a matter of great moment to the Eskimo, for on it depends the success of the hunters. It differs from the Bladder Feast in that while the latter placates the spirits of animals already slain, the Aithúkāgûk is an appeal to the spirits represented by the masks, the totemic guardians of the performers, for future success in hunting. In the Eskimo ritual, this festival is only equalled in importance by the Áithúkātúkhtúk, the Great Feast of the Dead. One supplies the material wants of the living, the other the spiritual needs of the dead.

The Eskimo village of St. Michael, or Tátcek,<sup>2</sup> where the celebration was to take place, is situated on an island near the mouth of the Yukon river. On account of its convenient position at the mouth of the river, it is the chief port for the Yukon trade, and was selected as such by the Russian-American Fur

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<sup>1</sup>Held during the months of November and December.

<sup>2</sup>Known as Tézuk to northern tribes.

Company. As a result of long occupation the Unalit<sup>1</sup> became mixed with the Russian traders, so that at the present time a majority bear Russian names, and belong to the Russian church, although still practising their ancient religion.

The Unalaklit, on the contrary, have kept their blood and customs pure. They are counted as a model Eskimo tribe, and look down on their unfortunate neighbours, who have been unable to resist the encroachment of the white man, and its inevitable result—native deterioration. The Unalaklit are the southernmost branch of the Malemiut; the largest and most warlike tribe of Alaskan Eskimo.

The early home of the Malemiut was on Kotzebue sound; but in following the wild reindeer which formerly covered the interior of Alaska, they spread across Seward peninsula, crowding back the weaker tribes—the Kavaigmiut and Unaligmiut.

The Unalit never resisted the encroachment of these powerful invaders, as they were continually harassed by the Magemiut of the lower Yukon, and in most encounters came off second best. The remains of one of their villages, which was wiped out by the Magemiut, can still be seen on a little island in St. Michael bay. It is very probable that the present good feeling between the tribes may be due to help received against the Yukon raiders; at any rate, the Malemiut and Unaligmiut mingle freely in border villages like Shatolik and Unalaklit, hence it is not surprising that, for many years, they have celebrated the great inter-tribal feasts together.

But my anxiety to witness the feast nearly came to grief owing to the over-zealous action of the young missionary in nominal charge of the Unalaklit. He scented some pagan performance in the local preparations, and promptly appealed to the military commander of the district to put a stop to the whole thing. Consequently, it was a very sober delegation of Eskimo that waited on me the next day—including the headmen and the shaman who had been hired to make the masks and direct the dances—to ask my assistance. They said that if they were forbidden to celebrate the feast on the island they would take to the mountains of the interior and perform their rites where they could not be molested. But if I said they could

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<sup>1</sup>Or Unaligmiut.

dance, they would go on with their preparations. They also asked me to use my influence with the military commander. To this I readily consented.

I found the captain a very liberal man, not at all disposed to interfere with a peaceful native celebration, which had lost most of its religious significance, and which was still maintained mainly for its social significance, and as offering an opportunity for trade between two friendly tribes. The last day of the festival he was invited to attend, as the Eskimo wished him to see the dances for himself, and form his own opinion. On this occasion the Unalaklit chief made a remarkable speech, in which he summed up the native attitude toward the dance. The Eskimo is not given to public speaking, as is the Indian, and usually expresses himself in the shortest possible manner; but under the stress of strong emotion even he becomes eloquent.

"To stop the Eskimo singing and dancing," he said, "was like cutting the tongue out of a bird. It was as natural for them to dance as it was for the white man to eat and sleep. They had danced long before the white men came, and would not know how to spend the long dark winters if their only form of amusement was taken away.

"They did not dance for pleasure alone, but to attract the game, so that their families might be fed. If they did not dance, the spirits (*iñua*) who attended the feast would be angry, and the animals would stay away. The shades of their ancestors would go hungry, since there would be no one to feed them at the festivals. Their own names would be forgotten if no name-sake could sing their praises in the dance.

"There was nothing bad about their dances; which made their hearts good toward each other, and tribe friendly with tribe. If the dances were stopped, the ties between them would be broken, and the Eskimo would cease to be 'strong.'

"They were as little children before the white men, who could see if their dances were good. If anything about them was bad they would stop them, but if not, they would never brook any interference again."

The old Unalit chief arose and explained that the dances also supplied the wants of the Eskimo. The interchange of gifts at the festivals resulted in each tribe getting what they

needed most. At the conclusion of the feast the surplus was distributed among the needy natives. He smote his breast as he sat down, declaring that his heart was good.

At the conclusion of the feast I asked the old man for the masks which had been used in the dances. They are usually burned by the shaman after the ceremonies are over. I was much surprised the next day when the old fellow appeared with the masks and the whole paraphernalia of the dancers. The people were grateful, he said, for the assistance I had given them. I believe he got around the religious difficulty by supplying an equal amount of wood for the sacrificial fire. I also was obliged to make gifts to the other headmen, so that the *kázgi ínua*<sup>1</sup>—the spirit which sits in the posts and presides over the *kázgi*—might not be offended.

#### THE KÁZGI, OR DANCE-HOUSE.

The *kázgi* (or *kacím*, as it is known among the Yukon Eskimo) is the communal house of the village. It is the club house, town hall, bath house, and dancing pavilion, all in one. Here, the unmarried men—termed *kazgimiut*, or *kazgi* people—make their home; here, tribal meetings are held; here, the men gather for the sweat bath; and here, strangers are entertained and the annual dances and festivals held. In short, the *kázgi* is the centre of the Eskimo's life. As a child he must gain admittance by gifts to the people, and to the *kázgi ínua*, the spirit which is master of the *kázgi*. In manhood he takes his seat on the *ínlak*, or platform, according to his age and rank. Even in death he is represented by a namesake in the *kázgi*, who feeds his shade and extols his virtues at the Feast to the Dead.

The *kázgi* is usually built on a larger scale than the native house or *ínne*, and, for convenience sake, is located near the centre of the village. It has, as a rule, a winter and a summer entrance, the former being used by the shamans and dancers, and the latter by the public.

This arrangement, however, is only for convenience, and guests and dancers mingle freely in the festivals. The following

<sup>1</sup>The *Kázgi ínua* is supposed to appear in the shape of a decrepit old man, who has no hair on his body or bones in the back of his head. To touch him would result in immediate death. See Boas, *The Central Eskimo*, pp. 597 and 636, 6th Annual Report, Bureau of Ethnology.