



Photograph courtesy of Maria Williams

To Dance is to Be: Heritage Preservation in the 21st Century

By Maria Williams

Alaska Native cultural practices continue to be a central force in virtually all villages throughout Alaska. In order to maintain cultural knowledge and ensure its survival, Alaska Native people need to learn the best methods of recording and archiving music, dance, and oral history. In 2003 and 2004, two Inupiaq communities, Wales and King Island (see map on page 2), took leading roles in two major heritage preservation

projects. Their experiences provide useful models for other communities that plan on embarking on their own heritage preservation endeavors. Both projects were funded in part by the Shared Beringian Heritage Program of the National Park Service, Alaska Region, which was established in 1991. The program focuses on research in the Bering Straits area, including support for exchanges between the United States and Russia. Alaska Native people have been dealing with outside pressures since the early eighteenth

century, beginning with the Russian colonial presence and continuing when Alaska became an U.S. territory. Along with the expansion of Europeans and Americans into Alaska were accompanying hardships for the indigenous people: epidemic diseases, strong Christian missionary activities, and western educational policies such as English language-only rules. These resulted in decimated populations throughout the entire territory of Alaska, a decline in indigenous languages (see article by Gaul, this issue),

Figure 1. Wales Kingikmiut Dancers.

At the festival, dancers of all ages were brought together. From left to right: Ernie Franksen of Tikigaq Traditional Dancers of Point Hope; members of the Wales Kingikmiut Dancers; a young dancer of the Tikigaq Traditional Dancers of Point Hope; and Autumn Ridely of the Anchorage Kingikmiut Dancers.



and in many cases the abolishment of traditional religion and associated music and dance repertoires.

Native people are deeply spiritual people; historically, they had a rich ceremonial life that was profoundly expressed through music and dance—core means by which people communicate their identities and beliefs. With the introduction of Christianity, traditional cultures, including aspects such as music and dance, were not viewed favorably by the missionaries. Sadly, most of the missionaries did not tolerate masked dancing and other forms of religious expressions. Dance, language, and ceremonial practices either had to be practiced in secret, or were lost.

In the 1960s, during the Native Solidarity Movement (*Williams 1997*), as Alaska Native people became more politically active their re-identification with their cultures, languages, music and dance became a banner of their newfound political and social strength. One of the major outcomes of that movement has been a renaissance in traditional music and dance practices, resulting in multiple dance festivals and younger people becoming actively involved in their village dance groups.

The King Island IRA Council and the Native Village of Wales undertook documentation projects that focused on music and dance, which they view as a vital part of their cultural patrimony. Both projects

were supported by the Shared Beringian Heritage Program in 2003 and 2004. These provide exceptional examples of how Alaska Native communities are using recording technology to document their cultural knowledge so that it will not be lost.

The Fifth Annual Kingikmiut Dance Festival

In 1999, the Native village of Wales resolved to sponsor an annual dance festival in June of each year. The concept for their festival was based on a historical practice in which multiple villages come together for trade and exchange. Previous to 1999, Wales had not hosted a dance festival in decades.

In June 2004 the village celebrated its Fifth Annual Kingikmiut Dance Festival (*Figure 1*). Kingikmiut is the Inupiaq word for the village; it was named Wales after Captain Cook's voyage in 1778. For the 2004 festival, Wales IRA Council members Luther Komonaseak and Wenton Weyapuk, Jr. were inspired to re-establish ties with their Siberian neighbors. Wales is only 54 miles from Siberia and in the past, until the Cold War began in 1948, exchange between the Inupiaq peoples of Alaska and eastern Russia was very common. The gatherings that accompanied such exchanges always included song and dance. The Fifth Annual Kingikmiut Dance Festival featured a large Russian dance group (*Figure 2*), as well as



Photographs courtesy of Gregory Gause





Photograph courtesy of Gregory Gause

Figure 2. Special guests at the 5th Annual Kingikmiut Dance Festival included a Russian dance group. This is a dance that originates in the Chukchi area.

the Tikigaq Traditional Dancers of Point Hope (Figure 3), and dance groups from Brevig Mission and other villages on the Seward Peninsula.

The Shared Beringian Heritage Program sponsored the Siberian exchange and provided funds for the village of Wales to hire

a professional videographer and recording engineer to document the festival. This is one of the few examples in which an Alaska Native village controlled and in essence owned the documentation of such an event. The organizers produced 18 DVDs of the complete three-day festival in

addition to a 28-minute documentary film. The Native Village of Wales will archive the materials, use the documentary for educational purposes, and market it to generate income that could support the documentation of the next festival. The video, entitled *Nilgaq: 5th Annual Kingikmiut Dance Festival June 25-27, 2004*, was completed in October of 2004. It features highlights of the dance festival in addition to interviews with many of the dance groups and captures the heart of why the annual dance festival has become so important.

Kingikmiut, or Wales, was once known as the dance capital of the Seward Peninsula. Captain Henry Trollope visited Wales in 1853-54 and wrote... *the place is sort of a capital in these parts and has four dancing houses, which is a very expressive manner of estimating the extent and population for a place* (Ray 1975). Because of its strategic location, Kingikmiut flourished. Before the 1900 and 1917 epidemics, it consisted of two related villages and consolidated into one village once the populations had been decimated by disease. After these terrible epidemics, Christian missionary policies along with western educators' English-only policies, forced music, dance, and other expressions of traditional Native culture to go underground.

Repression of Native culture by western educators and missionaries was common all over Alaska and is a major reason why many Alaska Native languages are threatened today. In the first part of the twentieth century, traditional dance and music became associated with the old ways and were looked down upon. After the 1960s, a strong revitalization movement arose.

Today there is a renaissance in traditional music and dance practices. In Wales and other Seward Peninsula communities, the younger people, who make up a large percentage of the population, have a great thirst for learning to sing and dance their traditional songs. There is even a group in Anchorage called the Anchorage Kingikmiut Dancers, which was formed by Wales people and their descendants now living in Anchorage. Wales descendants Gregory Nothstine and Roy Roberts learned songs from their elders and reconstituted their cultural patrimony. One of the outstanding features of the Kingikmiut Dance Festival is that it features so many young dance groups (Figure 4). The Kingikmiut Dance Group of Wales, the Anchorage Kingikmiut Dancers, the Brevig Mission Dancers, and the Shishmaref Dance Group are all made up mainly of junior high and high school students. Young composers like Roy Roberts are beginning to write new songs, and it is



Photograph courtesy of Gregory Gause

Figure 3. The Tikigaq Traditional Dance Group of Point Hope, Alaska are joined by two dancers from the Wales Kingikmiut Dancers at the 5th Annual Kingikmiut Dance Festival in June 2004.



Photograph courtesy of Maria Williams

Figure 4. Young Drummers with the Wales Kingikmiut Dance Group.

exciting to see their vitality and energy at these festivals.

The Kingikmiut Dance Festival is a symbol of survival. It is a beautiful illustration of the strength that is found in indigenous peoples. The festival encourages them to express who they are as their ancestors have done for thousands of years: To dance is to be.

King Island Heritage Preservation Project

Another heritage preservation project, partially funded by the Shared Beringian Heritage Program, was undertaken by the King Island IRA Council. Like the Wales project it also focuses on music and dance.

The King Island people have undertaken a monumental task: to document their entire music and dance repertoire. In the years since they moved from their home on King Island to Nome and elsewhere in the 1960s, the former residents of the village have maintained a large repertoire of songs and dances, including masked dances and ceremonies, such as the Wolf Dance and Polar Bear songs. King Island elder Ted Mayac,

Sr., along with Gabriel Muktoyuk, Chief of King Island, worked with the author for two years to record their music and dance repertoires along with information on cultural context (Figure 5). In addition to the songs and dances, the documentation includes interviews with King Island elders Catherine Kasgnoc, Edward Muktoyuk, Helen Pushruk, and Leo Kunnuk. Some of the interviews were with people from Little Diomed and Russia. Historically, King Island people traded, married, and sometimes went to war with people in these Bering Straits communities (Figure 6). Music and dance were often traded or gifted among all these indigenous groups. King Island is a small island off the coast of the Seward Peninsula. In the early twentieth century, it was isolated for



Photograph courtesy of Maria Williams

Figure 5. Ted Mayac, Sr. and Gabriel Muktoyuk in Nome, Alaska in June 2004 during one of the recording sessions.

Their first missionary, arriving in the 1920s, was a Jesuit Priest named Father LaFortune. He believed in bilingual education and allowed traditional dancing to continue. Because the King Island people were able to continue to openly speak their language and celebrate their songs and dances, their repertoire remained quite large.

months at a time by the winter ice pack, thus shielding the community from some of the epidemic diseases that swept most other Alaska Native villages. Their first missionary, arriving in the 1920s, was a Jesuit Priest named Father LaFortune. He believed in bilingual education and allowed traditional dancing to continue. Because the King Island people were able to continue to openly speak their language and celebrate their songs and dances,

their repertoire remained quite large. After the forced relocation of the village to the mainland in the 1960s, the effects of being removed from their protective homeland became apparent. The younger generations began losing some of the traditional knowledge, especially in the areas of language and winter hunting skills (Kasgnoc 2000).

King Island culture bearers such as Paul Tiulana—who noted that with the passing of each elder a large amount of history, songs, dances, and other important cultural knowledge were being lost—began recording cultural and historic information about King Island in the 1980s and 1990s in order to conserve their knowledge (Tiulana 1987). In 2000, Ted Mayac, Sr. and Sylvester Ayek continued this work in a sound repatriation project involving the recordings of Father Bernard Hubbard. In 1936 Father Hubbard came to King Island with recording engineer Ed Levin. Although there to deliver and install a large statue of Jesus Christ on top of King Island, they also filmed 27 hours of footage and taped over seven hours of sound recordings. The film footage had been repatriated to the King Islanders in the early 1990s, but the sound recordings remained elusive. The author, working with the Smithsonian National Studies Human Film Archive, received funding from the Ford Foundation and the



Photograph courtesy of Maria Williams

Figure 6. View from Wales, of Little Diomed with Siberia to the right.



Photographs courtesy of Gregory Gause

The Kingikmiut Dance Festival is a symbol of survival. It is a beautiful illustration of the strength found in Alaska Native culture.

Alaska Humanities Forum to obtain copies of the sound recordings and organize a gathering in Nome in 2000. Elders listened to the recordings and were able to identify the songs, composers, and speakers. This inspired Ted Mayac, Sr. to begin planning a larger project to record the surviving repertoire of the King Islanders so that no more songs nor dances would be lost (Figure 7).

The final outcome will be a large collection of compact disk and video recordings

that will be indexed and archived in Nome at the King Island IRA Council offices. This project will insure that King Island music, dance, and other cultural knowledge will be maintained for the younger generations, who will be able to learn their songs along with the associated history and cultural contextual significance of their repertoire.

The Significance of Historic Preservation Projects

For all indigenous people, music and dance are unique expressions of who they are. Their songs include origin stories, famous events in the village history, encounters in their daily subsistence lifestyles, and social commentary. Each village has its own unique style, and as generations pass, the repertoires have been shrinking. With the advent of desktop computers and digital cameras, documentation and recording can now be done by semi-professionals. The huge costs of filmmaking have been significantly reduced. With younger people's familiarity and ease with computer technology, these processes can now be undertaken by community members, even high school students.

Local control of information is important. The two examples cited in this article are significant because the village councils managed these projects and will maintain the archival information. These two projects are based on a different model from the usual scenario of an anthropologist who comes to a village, learns some basic information, and then returns to an urban or university setting where s/he develops theories based on what was collected. Indigenous people have not always

received copies of the material, recordings, or articles, produced in such research, thus diminishing anthropologists' reputations in Native communities.

These two projects did work with a qualified academic person – myself, an ethnomusicologist. However, my role was to facilitate the projects, find the funding, provide professional expertise, and basically stay out of the way. The indigenous scholars in these two projects led the discussions



Photograph courtesy of Maria Williams

Figure 7. Earl Mayac and Ted Mayac, Sr. reviewing notes for the King Island Heritage Project, March 2004.

and interviews, guided the videography, and were clear about what the final outcomes would be. Indigenous scholars such as Wenton Weyapuk, Jr. of Wales and Ted Mayac, Sr. of King Island, who are knowledgeable and fluent in their own languages as well as English, created a rewarding research environment because they translated for outsiders and Natives who did not speak Inupiaq. They were able to explain the meaning of song texts, or tell of the importance of certain genres. They also had knowledge of their own village's history and the ties with other Bering Straits communities on both the American and the Russian side.

Alaska is home to a diverse and large indigenous population and each village has its own unique style of dance and music. The repertoire is reflective of a place in its geographic environment and spiritual place. This "insider" information is understood by members of a village community but often remains hidden to an "outsider" who is not a member of the culture. Pairing knowledgeable elders and indigenous scholars with academic researchers establishes a more effective context for research,

REFERENCES

- Kasgnoc, Katherine. 2000. Personal interview, Nome, Alaska.
- Ray, Dorothy Jean. 1975. *The Eskimo of Bering Strait, 1650-1898*. University of Washington Press. Seattle, WA.
- Tiulana, Paul with Vivian Senungetuk. 1987. *A Place for Winter: Paul Tiulana's Story*. Cook Inlet Region Inc. Foundation. Anchorage, AK.
- Williams, Maria. 1997. *Rise of Native Solidarity* (three part series). Tundra Times, October 1997. Anchorage, AK.

one that puts the control in the hands of the Native villages. Cultural knowledge needs to be maintained at the village level. These two projects have been successful because of the researchers' sensitivity and the National Park Service's awareness that this new way to conduct research could have a positive outcome for all involved.

One of the rewards of the two projects described above was learning about the importance of music and dance repertoires

in the history of both communities. For example, the King Island people feel that their Polar Bear songs, especially composed for successful hunters who killed a polar bear, are their most sacred repertoire. I learned that the polar bear is a highly respected and almost revered being for King Island people. There are special terms for polar bears, and when one is hunted the whole village gathers. The special event includes newly composed songs that tell

the story of the hunt, the hunter, and the bear. As part of his obligations, the hunter must host a large gathering and feed everybody. Because these songs are historical time-markers for the King Island people, retaining them is vitally important.

As indigenous communities across Alaska find ways to maintain their unique identities and histories, documenting their culture practices is important. How they are documented by audio or video record-

ing, what type of information is recorded, and who will have access must be acknowledged and defined. Hopefully these two projects will provide useful models for future endeavors. This was a remarkable experience with which to be associated and an honor to work and learn from our Native elders and culture bearers.

To learn more about the Shared Beringian Heritage Program and these two projects visit <http://www.nps.gov/akso/beringia>.

The Road to Ethnomusicology

Maria Williams (Tlingit) was born and raised in Anchorage, Alaska. Growing up there, she was exposed to many different kinds of music, partially because Anchorage is home to many different Alaska Native music and dance groups. She studied music in public school and played in the orchestra as well. Williams earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Music from Dominican College of San Rafael and also played with Anchorage Symphony Orchestra for a few seasons.

Williams decided to study ethnomusicology when she learned about the program at University of California - Los Angeles (UCLA). She received an M.A. and Ph.D in Music, specializing in Ethnomusicology from UCLA and loved it. "I feel that ethnomusicology is very interdisciplinary and combines anthropology, music, and culture studies as a way to understand how music is placed within different societies," Williams said.

Currently, Williams teaches ethnomusicology courses at the University of New Mexico. These include Native American Music, Alaska Native Music and Culture, and Indigenous World Music. She feels that, "ethnomusicology opens a window to understanding other cultures, and music is such a wonderful vehicle to learning about other people."

Williams, an Alaska Native, said the best preparation for this career was already having an understanding of



Maria Williams

the indigenous world. "Of course, my academic background in western classical art music also helped because it is a rigorous pedagogy," added Williams. Ethnomusicology is looking at or trying to understand music within its cultural context. It is not limited to non-western music.

Ethnomusicology is a wonderful area because there are many beautiful music traditions in the world. "We live in a rich

human soundscape and we should celebrate our diversity as human beings. If anyone is interested in pursuing ethnomusicology I would recommend that they get well-trained in one or more music traditions—even western classical art music offers a great background," said Williams. Having a good understanding of one music tradition or method does make it easier to study or learn about another, she added.