

## Community History and Environment as Wellspring of Inupiaq Eskimo Songtexts

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**Abstract.** – Fieldwork and tape-recording was carried out among Inupiaq Eskimo communities in northern Alaska; songtexts and musical characteristics were subjected to comparison and analysis. Findings indicate that community history, regional lore, subsistence activities, and cultural values serve as the main wellspring for songtexts. The emphasis within songtexts and the profile of musical features vary according to social function and to the social role of the performers who use them. Dance and song are used to regulate deviance, foster social cohesion, cement alliances within the social network, and to honor deceased ancestors. Additionally, traditional musical performance serves to affirm ethnic identity and to demonstrate community pride. [*Alaska, Inupiaq Eskimo, Music and Society, Dance, Songtexts*]

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The Inupiaq Eskimo of Alaska number about 6,000, in coastal whaling communities such as Kaktovik, Barrow, Wainwright, Point Hope, Shishmaref, Wales, and Kotzebue, and in northern inland river communities such as Noatak and Kobuk. The author conducted intermittent fieldwork 1973–1985, tape-recording songs at the formal Inviting-In held periodically by pairs of adjacent villages. Interviews were carried out with knowledgeable informants and traditional song-composers, such as David Frankson of Point Hope, Weir Negovanna of Wainwright, and Charlie Penatac of King Island (now resident in Nome).

The songs were examined for subject content and for their melodic, rhythmic, and structural characteristics, which in many cases are related to literary and poetic factors. Findings tend to suggest that the songs function partly as a historical repository of community lore, including heroic deeds of ancestors, cultural achievements of immediate forefathers, the coming of the whalers, the coming of the missionaries, and the coming of the commuter airplane.

Inupiaq Eskimo vocal music, like that in many non-Western societies, is multi-functional. The nature and power of music and dance is such that they lend themselves readily to a variety of social uses. Among the Inupiaq today, dance and song are used to mildly criticize and admonish wayward members of the community, to praise one's trading partners and cement alliances, and to help preserve certain ancient values and beliefs which are referred to within the songtexts.

An additional use of music is seen in the contemporary utilization of songs as mementos of the deceased. The songs of several celebrated song-composers – Jimmy Killigivuk, Paul Green, Charlie Jensen, and Arctic John – are used at the Inviting-In and at the Whaling Feast as tributes and eulogies to these respected elders.

In earlier times, songs were used by the shaman for spirit-communication, spirit-placation, and to heal the sick within the community. Magical hunting songs were used to aid in the tracking and capture of game animals and sea mammals.

The subject-matter of these song types is related to the social function they were designed to serve, and to the different social roles of the musical ensembles performing them. Additionally, Inupiaq songs of all types fulfill two overriding social functions, in that (1) at the Eskimo "national" level they symbolize ethnic identity in the face of culture-clash, and (2) at the local regional level they represent community pride and community solidarity.

### The Musical Characteristics

The profile of musical characteristics of each song type is adaptive in a way best suited to fulfill social function and role. Dance songs, for instance, feature interesting additive rhythms, alternating 5/8 with 6/8 with 7/8. Where the exposition of the story requires that motion slow down, rhythm