

Song Categories and Musical Style of the Yupik Eskimo

Thomas F. Johnston

Abstract. – This is a study of thirteen Yupik song categories in southwest Alaska, and the melodic, rhythmic, structural, and songtext characteristics which distinguish them from each other. Findings indicate that both song topic and song style are determined in part by social function and by the social role of the singer. It is further indicated that Yupik Eskimo vocal music possesses (1) a core configuration of musical features which overrides song category, (2) musical and behavioral features which are common to the music of the Inupiaq Eskimo of northern Alaska, and (3) musical and behavioral features which contrast with those found among the Inupiaq. [*Alaska Yupik Eskimo, ethnomusicology, song categories and musical style*]

Thomas F. Johnston, Professor of Music at University of Alaska. M. A. in Music, 1968; Ph. D. in Ethnomusicology, 1972. – Publications include: *Eskimo Music: A Comparative Circumpolar Study* (Ottawa 1976); *Tsonga Music in Cultural Perspective* (*Anthropos* 1975); *Community History and Environment as Wellspring of Inupiaq Eskimo Songtexts* (*Anthropos* 1988). – Current research: Eskimo music (National Endowment for the Humanities).

The Yupik Eskimo number about 17,000 in southwest Alaska, residing in communities such as Bethel, Emmonak, Alakanuk, Hooper Bay, Scammon Bay, Toksook Bay, in communities on Nelson Island and Nunivak Island, and along the Yukon (St. Mary's and Pilot Station) and Kuskokwim (Eek, Akiak) rivers. Here, the indigenous language is stronger than among other Alaskan Native groups, the population larger, the climate slightly milder, and with a traditional subsistence which, in addition to hunting sea mammal, includes salmon fishing and reindeer herding. The Yupik feature their own radio station, Bethel's KYUK, and their own Yupik language newspaper.

Compared with the Inupiaq, Yupik communities are closer to the Athabaskan Indians of the Interior, and there has occurred more historical interaction, trade, and exchange of cultural traits. The Yupik are also closer to Anchorage, the large (200,000) multi-cultural metropolis situated on Cook Inlet, from which all supplies are flown by air to Yupik villages.

The author carried out intermittent fieldwork

in numerous Yupik villages 1973–1985, attending festivals, observing traditional dance, tape-recording songs, interviewing musical performers, and documenting case histories of prominent song-leaders, such as traditional composer Joe Friday of Chevak. This research was conducted under grants from the National Science Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The author also had access to a collection of tape recordings made by ethnomusicologist Ronald Walcott in 1972, now in the possession of the Alaska Native Language Center, Fairbanks.

Vocal music is classified by the Yupik into thirteen main categories, as follows:

1. dance songs
2. shamans' songs
3. hunting songs
4. teasing songs
5. travelling songs
6. berry-picking songs
7. story songs
8. juggling game songs
9. jump-rope game songs
10. ghost game songs
11. bird identification songs
12. fish identification songs
13. *inikum* 'cooing' songs

The first six of these categories are mainly for adults, and the other seven are mainly for children. Custom dictates this arrangement, and there exists no particular taboo or prohibition controlling who performs what. In some of the categories, songs are sometimes sung by adults, for children.

1. The Dance Songs

Traditional Yupik music in Alaska is largely vocal, there being only one or two musical instruments. The main musical instrument is the flat, round, wooden frame-drum covered with delicate sea mammal membrane. There is usually a traditional drum-maker in each village. Occasionally, one may observe rattles being employed, such as hoop