

ANS 401 Knowledge of Native Elders
Elder In Residence: ISA SOLAVIK
November 4, 1986 by: Dana Bartman

This class period, we met an Inupiaq Eskimo woman who would be the second elder-in-residence for this semester. Her name is Tuuglak and she is also known as Isa Solavik. Her name Tuuqlak had also been given to her older sister (Olive) who had died before Isa was born. Although she doesn't know what her Inupiaq name means literally, it does make reference to an "ice pick", or tuug. Isa mentioned that when she was a child, young boys enjoyed taking advantage of that reference and teased her. We also met Edna Maclean during this class session. Edna is an Inupiaq speaker and teacher here at UAF. She is originally from Barrow, and she was to help Isa translate what she wanted to say from Inupiaq into English.

Isa was born and raised in Barrow. She was born December 5, 1914, to Paniuniyuk and Nora, who had both also been born and raised in Barrow. Isa had an older brother named Shirley Phillip, also known as Iliaq, two older sisters: Olive and Cornelia, and a younger brother, Noah Phillip. Isa attended school at Barrow up to the fourth grade. Other things that she did as a young girl included helping quite a bit around their house (which was very clean), getting ice for their drinking water, and wood for the day's cooking. The house was very cold when she awoke in the mornings, she recalled, so cold that their wash-basin water would be frozen solid. One other activity during her childhood that Isa chose to share with us was a game called "Manna Manna", which she explained in detail. There were ten participants, all girls, which divided themselves into two teams of five. Each team

had a "jail", a designated area where their captives would be detained. They each also had a home base. The object was to enable one of your own teammates to run around the opposing team's home base three times in order to win. There was a danger, however, because your opponents would try to capture you and your teammates by tagging as you made these attempts. If you were captured and placed in jail, your teammates would also try to tag you in order to get you back into commission. Having an abundance of teammates was important because some girls could try to distract the opponents in order to provide one girl a free path around the home base.

Isa talked a lot during this class about Paniuniyuk. He was a whaling captain and reindeer herder and also a deacon in the Presbyterian church. He owned all of the equipment necessary to sustain a whaling operation, and also owned a herd of reindeer. He had other people in his whaling crew and also employed people to do the actual reindeer herding away from Barrow. In August, the herders brought the reindeer to Barrow for butchering. Paniuniyuk's family had plenty of Native style foods when she was growing up, Isa said. Altogether there were three underground meat caches, two for whale meat and one for the butchered reindeer.

Paniuniyuk was unfortunate to have contracted tuberculosis, however, and when Isa was 10 or 11, he could no longer hunt. Isa then went to live at Wainwright with Steven Segevan, whom she called her uncle (although this Western kinship ties are not necessarily limited by blood relation). Steven Segevan had grown up in the same household as Paniuniyuk, and therefore he was considered to be Isa's uncle. By the

way, there was only one living blood relative that she does remember. He was related to her father, and his name was Qupilguq. During the period of her life that she spent living in Wainwright, whenever Isa was to return to Barrow for a visit, her uncle always made her promise that she would come back to him and his family at Wainwright. Although she yearned to stay at Barrow with her friends, she remembered her promises to her uncle and did not fall back on them. Sometimes, however, her older sister would go and live with their uncle and that would give her a chance to stay with her family at Barrow. This was a difficult time for her during her childhood because she felt as though she had two sets of parents and she was always separated from one set of them.

One of the earliest camps that Isa remembers is Ataniq, which is near Wainwright. This was a camp that Steven Segevan took her to, and some people used this camp for their permanent homes because it was a good area for hunting. She missed any additional formal Western education when she was living with Steven Segevan because of all the camping that they had done.

Isa also spoke a little more about the whaling operation. Each year two inutuq came to her father to be captured because of his very special relationship that he had with the whales. An inutuq is a choice whale: rounder, softer, and more tender than others. Other whaling captains might receive larger whales, or possible a greater number, but Paniuniyuk always received two inutuq. Isa specifically remembered that, after her father received a whale, her mother would cook two pots of fresh meat. One contained smaller pieces and these

were for the children. The other contained larger pieces that had been prepared for the adults. Isa mentioned that after she had children (at the time she had nine boys), the people at Barrow had asked her to start her own whaling crew so that she could receive the inutuq that before had come to her father. She never obeyed them, mainly because her father had to sell his equipment after he became ill because their house had become too difficult to heat and he needed a smaller home.

Isa was asked about how the whaling crew did the sharing after a whale had been received. Edna diagrammed which section of the whale was saved to be served during special occasions, specially Whaling Festival, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. This portion of the whale included the tail and was that entire section beneath the tavsi. The crewmembers who had caught the whale received their share from a special part of the whale, referred to as the "belt" or tavsi, which was about two feet in length and encircled the entire whale. These portions were shared evenly. The remaining upper portions of the whale were shared generally amongst the people.

One last topic of conversation, but certainly quite an important one, was Isa's late husband, Pete Sovalik. Together, Isa and Pete were two of "the best Eskimo dancers on the North Slope", Edna said. Pete Sovalik was a historian, ethnologist, and zoologist for the Naval Arctic Research Commission on the North Slope. The scientist at the Commission went to Pete Sovalik for information about the North Slope area.

This concludes our first very interesting class with Isa Sovalik.