

Alaska Native Studies
"Knowledge of Native Elders"
Notes for Dec. 2, 1986 by Evelyn Ekada

Main topics: 1) Time of Whaling
2) Butchering and dividing of the whale
3) Whaling Festival-blanket toss
4) Thread made out of sinew from the back of a caribou leg.

The best time of joy for Isa is during the time of whaling. When they catch a whale, the happiness increases. After the whaling season comes the whaling festival and that brings even more joy for her.

In the old days the whale was shot with a big brass gun, then harpooned. Now since there's many laws and regulations made on how the whale should be killed, they say the whale should be harpooned before being shot. Hunters harpooned the whale in the back of the neck area, near the blow hole. After the whale is killed, it is pulled onto the ice by a pulley and rope. The rope is tied around the back tail, then pulled up with a pulley. Many people, including women and children go out on the ice to help pull in the whale out of the water. From imagining the size of a whale, they'd need as many people as they can get.

The whale meat is divided among the crews, hunters, crew members, and women. The crew who caught the whale get a section called the tausi. It is located between the back tail and stomach. The crew divide this section among its crew members. The back tail is saved for further use. And

the belly and head parts are divided among the many different whaling crews that went out on the ice. Then each crew takes their share into town and divide it between the crewmembers involved.

While the people are butchering the whale, they have guards on the lookout for more whales to come. After the whale is butchered, everything including the meat and blubber is taken back to the village.

When the first skin and blubber is removed, they're boiled in a pot above a fire out on the ice. Isa said that's the best part of the whale. It's also delicious, especially when you eat it with dry fish. This skin and blubber is known as muktuk. The skin is thinner than a inch with a lot of blubber. You can keep as much blubber as you desire on the skin.

Isa said the whale intestines are not used for anything, so people boil them and eat them. Besides there is usually not that much in the whale to be taken out.

The whale blood is also made use of. People used to save the blood in containers for their dogs. The blood was boiled with the soup made for their dogs. I guess it gave their dogs strength. That's the first time I heard of some animal's blood being cooked for dogs. Must be energy for the dogs.

Isa said the whale heart covering is used for drum coverings. It is still being used today. People would scramble for this covering when it's taken off the heart. Before it was worked on, it had to be frozen. I was talking about the drums the Eskimos used when they Eskimo danced.

Crews caught many whales during seasons. There never was a time when they didn't get one. Isa said she remembers a guy who caught 10 whales in one season. Now that's a lot of meat.

After the whaling season is over, the crews wait til the snow melts, so the festival can come into progress.

Early in the morning the people come to the area where they have put up wind shelters and stay there while others bring them food. The people who caught the whale bring the food to the people sitting by the wind shelters.

Then the blanket toss is ready and children use it during the morning and afternoon, while the older people are eating. People come form all over the place, even from other villages to celebrate in the festival. About 6p.m in the evening, the whale meat is served. After all the whale meat has been consumed, the adults begin the blanket toss until midnight. Then they place the blanket on the ground and start dancing to the special songs sang by two blind women and a man playing the drum. The special songs were sung only for the whaling festival(Nalukataq). Isa said

these songs are no longer in existence because people don't know them.

Once in a while accidents do occur during the blanket toss, especially to the ones that make themselves jump on their own, instead of letting the people toss them up.

Isa said anyone can get on the blanket. There's no special order of people that goes on the blanket. If there's a person who killed a whale and has a family, the people shout out "agvilik" while they are tossing him up into the air. "agvilik" means here is one that has caught a whale. I guess that's a way of showing their gratitude to the successful hunter.

The blanket (mapkug) originally comes from the bearded-seal that formerly was the cover of a stored boat (umiak). The blanket is used year after year until it has weakened in strength.

The second half of today's lecture, Isa demonstrated the making of thread out of the sinew from the back of a caribou leg. It was very interesting to watch her because that was the first time I seen any woman make thread out of sinew. I read about it in books, but I never witnessed it before.

First, the meat have to be taken off the sinew with a ulu(knife). Then the sinew is hung somewhere in the house to dry, but before you hang it, the sinew has to be rinsed

in water. After the drying is done you can start splitting it into strands.

Isa make threads to sew boot soles onto the body of the boot and to sew the skins together for the covering of a umiak. Three strands of sinew is put together for a thicker thread. One end of a piece of thread has to be narrower than the middle, so it'll be easy to go through the eye of a #5 skin needle. The needle has three sharp sides with an angular top.

Today was very interesting, especially when Isa demonstrated the making of thread out of sinew from a caribou leg. I wish we had caribou around my hometown, so we could make our own thread out of the sinew and save a little money.