

Dancing Dreams, Drumming Life: Winter Dances on St. Lawrence Island

by James E. Williams

In 1967, shortly after I started to study wildlife biology and anthropology at the University of Alaska, I temporarily set aside my academic studies and spent the winter and the following spring living at Savoonga, one of the last traditional Siberian Eskimo villages on St. Lawrence Island. I had just turned eighteen years old, and it was a powerful experience being "called" by some mysterious inner force to live in a world where everything was borrowed from nature and yet nothing was free except one's innermost feelings—and even those were often public knowledge.

One of the unexpected highlights of spending the winter at Savoonga was being able to attend the traditional communal dances that were being practiced there openly again, after surviving a long spell of repression by both church and state. To the isolated St. Lawrence Islanders, dancing was more than ritualized drama or creative release from the boredom of the endless Arctic winter nights. It was a sacred gathering of power-a direct expression of the hidden spiritual and unfathomable being of lifeinvoked through drumming and chanting, and made manifest by dancing. To experience traditional Eskimo dancing (aghula) is to take an inner journey directly to the roots of original expression and collective memory.

Partly in support of the indigenous rights of Natives and partly for my own enjoyment, I participated enthusiastically in the traditional ways, not only during the dances but in daily life as well-hunting walrus, eating raw seal meat, and cutting blocks of snow for water. I was always touched by how willing my new friends were to share their lives with me. Maybe it was because I was young and I didn't pose a threat; maybe it was because I wasn't a researcher trying to analyze them or take something away from them.² Whatever the explanation, I found the Savoonga Eskimos to be a people of generous spirit, who nourished a love of life born from the dangers of living in a rigorous environment. I will forever remember that year, and I feel privileged to have been allowed to so intimately experience their traditional culture.

In the 1960s, the St. Lawrence Islanders still lived in two distinct, yet related, worlds. One was the world of daily tasks, primarily revolving around hunting, and the other was the world of power, spirit, and magic. The Eskimos moved easily between these two worlds-the mundane and the magical-often blurring the boundaries. Both worlds were equally real, and they were intimately interconnected. What happened in one profoundly affected the other. During my short stay at Savoonga, I came to understand that what held the two worlds together was the human emotions and feelings which emanated from the heart, and that the sound of the drum—the heart beat of the inner world—created the passage that linked the worlds to each other.

As I soon learned, traditional dancing on St. Lawrence Island was an integral aspect of existence-as basic as hunting, sexual interaction, birth and death, and the changing of the seasons. Dances were held once or twice each month, and they were usually planned several days or weeks in advance. Good weather, a remarkable hunt, or a change of season were all cause for a dance, and it seemed there were many times when dances were held just for sheer pleasure and enjoyment. However, the dances were never casual affairs; the drummers routinely practiced several times a week, and to prepare for an important dance, they might practice daily for weeks.

On the night of a dance, the drummers arrived separately at the chosen house or the community hall, ceremoniously carrying their drums wrapped in furs or sealskin cases. Greeting each other with reserved smiles and multiple nods of their crewcut heads, the drummers avoided conversation or direct contact with the other participants. They even spoke very little to each other and then only in whispers. During the dances,

they were custodians of the past, caretakers of the sacred realms, so they kept separate from the mundane.

The drummers sat in a row, usually on the floor but sometimes on folding chairs, with the oldest, most respected drummer sitting on the left as one faced them. After settling into his assigned place, each drummer carefully unwrapped his drum and began the process of waking and dedicating it. Brown, weathered fingers softened the drum's skin by barely wetting it with water and gently rubbing in the moisture for resilience. Then, tapping the skin, the drummer tested the sound while the drum warmed. This tuning process took at least a half hour, during which the dancers and other participants arrived.

The skin drum—saguyak—was a most valued possession on the island.³ Made from the stomach of the walrus, the giver of life, the drum was a symbolic tool. It was round like the world, flat like a calm sea, white like snow, and translucent like ice. When played, it sounded like a heart beating, like ocean waves against the shore, like summer thunder from the sky.

One by one, the drummers finished preparing their drums and then closed their eyes, with their drums resting—almost floating—on their knees. Soon, the room full of people hushed in respectful anticipation. We heard the ever-present wind whistle outside, as it sculpted the curved mounds of hard-packed snow around the village houses. At some invisible cue from the lead drummer, the drummers raised their drums, in perfect unison, to chest height and poised their drumsticks above the now-taut skins. Then, with a powerful surge of drumming, the ceremony began.

The cadence of the drumming was basically a one-two beat, with choreographed downbeats occasionally varying the otherwise steady rhythm. The skill of the drummer brought to life the throbbing sound emanating from the taut skin, but each drum had a power of its own. The drums looked



as if they were flying, floating, lifting up on their own—as if the drummers were only guiding their movements so that they didn't fly away.

Although both men and women danced, only men drummed. Moreover, all the drummers were respected, older men who held positions of authority in the community. These men had reached a stage of life that allowed them to channel the natural spiritual energy needed to master the power of the drum.

There were about a dozen drummers in Savoonga, and usually five to seven drummers played at any one time. If one got up to dance, another drummer or an apprentice would usually step in to take his place. The drummers played with exuberance, grace, and great vitality, animating the room with a tangible presence of spiritual power. They played with such force—using their whole bodies, lifting their feet and legs in unison with each beat—that sometimes I expected the drums to break apart in their hands.

Unlike their distant Yup'ik relatives on the Alaskan mainland, the Savoonga dancers wore no special attire, adornments, or masks. For the most part, they dressed in loose-fitting everyday clothes. Some individuals wore traditional ceremonial sealskin boots, beaded around the top with colorful geometric designs, but external decorations played no significant role in their dances.

Although dancing was usually initiated by the older men, there was no particular order to who would dance. Some men danced alone, while others danced in pairs or in groups of three or four. Even though I knew that some dancers had been dancing for forty, fifty, perhaps even sixty years, the fluidity and spontaneity of their styles were extraordinary. There was no particular right way to dance, yet everything had a meaning. Some dancers used ritualized patterns, called *sayugh*, which required very complicated sets of choreographed movements—full of subtle nuances lost on outsiders. Others improvised new dances on the spot.

The men's dances were created out of their hunting exploits, out of the village's reliance on an abundance of animals, and out of thousands of years of survival amidst the mysteries of the ice. The older men sometimes enacted shamanic teachings received from dreams and visions, usually about how the animals had taught humans to survive. As the main source of food, shelter, and even transportation (the boats were covered with the skin of the female

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walrus), the walrus often figured prominently in their dances.

In contrast, the women appeared to dance from direct inspiration and spontaneous trance states. Despite the different themes and forms of the various dances, once one understood the meanings behind the appearances, one saw that all the dances were connected to the unbroken circle of life.

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The dances were always special occasions for me, and I looked forward to attending every one. During the cold, dark winters, people tended to stay in their homes, and if they went outside, they covered themselves with furs and parkas. The dances provided some of the few occasions where I could actually watch and interact with large groups of people in one place, and it didn't hurt that everyone genuinely seemed to appreciate my attendance.

As an anthropology student, I was especially interested in learning about the old ways, and almost all of Savoonga's old people came to every dance. The old ones were all very sweet and kind, and their mannerisms fascinated me—especially the way the old couples lovingly cared for each other. Some elders were too weak to dance, but even they listened attentively and respectfully to the drumming and moved their feet and hands in the dark, keeping pace to the rhythm of the drum.

The people who interested me most were the older women, who stayed in a group off to one side. All of these women had intricate, clearly visible tattoos on their faces, necks, and hands. In the dim light, the concentric blue-gray lines, circles, and other geometric patterns etched into their cheeks, noses, foreheads, and necks turned these women into strangely beautiful otherworldly beings. Curious, I asked often about the

significance of the tattoos, but I was told that their meanings were long forgotten. The tradition seemed to be dying out. None of the middle-aged or young women had the extensive facial tattooing of the older women, although many had small tattoos on the backs of their hands and knuckles.

Kora, the elder woman of the household in which I lived, was extensively tattooed on her face, chest, and upper back. She also had tattoos on nearly every joint of her body, including her wrists, fingers, ankles, and toes. Whenever she stood to dance, the concentric circles of her tattoos seemed to come alive. Often, as I watched the hypnotic movement of her spinning, spiraling tattoos, my consciousness would begin to drift into another, more dreamlike and timeless state.

Sometimes, during the dancing, the drummers would punctuate their songs with guttural, staccato shouts of "O-huck"—an exhortation, also used during hunts, which meant "to get going" or "to put everything you have into it." As in the hunt, every participant was expected to give his or her all during the dance. Anything less than one hundred percent was not good enough.

From time to time, the dancers or members of the audience shouted, "O-huck," encouraging the drummers to push the beat—escalating the adrenaline, beating the drums harder and faster—kallegneq, kallegneq. The rhythm remained consistent, but as the sound rose and fell in speed and intensity, the pulse of the drums took on a life of its own. The women swayed entranced, while the men vigorously stamped out hunting exploits with powerful but graceful strutting movements, arching their necks and backs, using sudden twists and turns of the waist and ritualized or improvised foot movements.

Although well into his sixties, Piikkaq, the captain of the boat I hunted on, was still an active and skilled hunter. He was also one of the lead drummers and one of the strongest, most impressive dancers. A stout man with close-cropped white hair who dressed in traditional sealskin pants and cotton tunics, he thoroughly enjoyed dancing out his hunting exploits, and whenever he danced, he dominated the floor space with the grace of a polar bear. Pounding his broad feet on the wooden floor of the community building with such force that echoes were heard along the walls, he would move first forward and then backward. Suddenly, he would spin and turn to face his quarry, flashing an exaggerated look of surprise.

enough light inside me so that, like the starry sky, I had no room for emptiness—or for the light to be so clear and transparent that only pure emptiness would exist.

I flashed back to what the dancing dreams had taught me:

Watch the birds soar in the sky, listen to the music of a river, and follow the drum beats—kallegneq—in the dark or into visions and then let them go. Let the birds feed on them and carry them away. Let the river or the ocean wash them out of the mind. Let kallegneq work its power—but don't hold on. See—but don't possess.

For a long, breathless moment, I stood alone in the near-religious quiet of the village, looking at the sky, finally interrupted only by the incredible cold which sucked at my face as if trying to pull the breath right out of me.

"Don't inhale deeply," I told myself.

Inhaling deeply in such cold—forty below zero, without the windchill factor—could turn the moisture in the lungs to ice immediately. Hurriedly, I pulled on my hood, and the cold retreated. As I inhaled and exhaled through the wolverine fur ruff, my breath became warmer, but the fur that circled my face also hid the stars. My vision was now focused in front of me and down, back to the earth.

As I stepped forward into the night, the snow squeaked under my *mukluk* boots. The hard-packed snowy path reflected the light of the stars, making it easy to see the way. I hurried along, trying to avoid the penetrating, intense cold which seemed to follow me, as if it was trying to get under my parka and inside me. The cold always seemed more menacing at night than in the day.

Finally, I came to the tiny wooden house where I lived. Opening the outer door, I stepped into the darkness of the anteroom and waited for my eyes to adjust to the dark. The cold had found its way in there, too, but at least the wind was gone. The air was heavy with the pungent smells of frozen seal skins, fox furs, and old hunting equipment. I stepped through the inner door into the small all-purpose room that was the house, savoring the warmth from the oil stove. Kora had left a kerosene lantern burning dimly for me to see by.

Carefully and quietly, I stepped over the sleeping bodies of children and adults, as I made my way to my sleeping area. I removed my boots and parka, took off my pants, slipped into bed, blew out the lantern, and immediately fell into a deep sleep and began to dream. I was told that I often

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spoke Yup'ik in my sleep, which proved tremendously amusing to my hosts. Sometimes, in the morning, they would pantomime my whole dream for the entertainment of family members and visiting neighbors that were there.

That morning, when I woke, Kora was already up and tending the stove, as was her custom. The others were just beginning to stir in their bedrolls. I lay under the old blankets, listening to the wind outside chase the snow against the wooden siding and lightly shake the roof and walls.

As the winter passed, I felt the spell of the Arctic deepening in me. I would often spend hours just sitting with the old people, watching their daily activities: women sewing, men carving ivory or making a drum, grandparents playing with the children. I realized that only the warmth of love could sustain a people generation after generation, millennium after millennium, in a world of often nearly unbearable hardships.

As I became more attuned to the old ways, the communal dances became more meaningful for me. The dances were always happy occasions, with smiles on every face, but they were also serious affairs. To the traditionalists, the dances were statements of their right to be Yup'ik, as well as prayers for the continuation of life. The dances were part of the old world the elders came from, and part of the world they hoped to preserve for their children and grandchildren. The dances took people close to the center of life, where the heart pushed the blood. They also made it possible for people to regularly return to the source of their own uniqueness-a force ancient and yet timeless—the wellspring of life.

I often sensed the older ones were consciously trying to reach the younger ones, to

let them know that there was a way to live in harmony with life, even with the new ways being brought by the Whites. The dances certainly generated a sense of harmony among the people and all things in their lives—and I began to feel that a little of it was rubbing off on me, as well.

Eventually, I began to dance out my story. It was not the story of how an eighteen-year-old White boy came to Savoonga in search of himself; it was not about how I was awakening to a self interconnected with nature and all life; nor was it about how I had found that love was the most important thing in life. Though all these feelings were in my heart, I dared not express them in dance. I was, after all, a young man, expected to be a hunter.

Truthfully, although I enjoyed the excitement of the hunts and I accompanied every one, at heart I was not a hunter of animals. Not yet willing to accept what society expected of me, and still struggling with a definition of myself, I was seeking answers to questions I didn't know how to ask. Love became the object of my hunt—and it still is. Although I felt deep emotions, I dared not speak of them to the others—I was afraid the hunters would find me too sensitive. So, I kept my feelings to myself, and when I danced, it was about events that had happened to me.

I often danced about the time I saved the skin boat, pantomiming how the walrus attacked us when we tried to kill it. I would loom up to imitate the huge, enraged creature, and pound three steps forward to indicate its aggressive intent, putting my hands to my face with fingers pointing downward to show the ivory tusks that had missed the fragile boat by mere inches. I arched and twirled and twisted and yelled, "O-huck." The drummers responded with echoing shouts and accelerated drum beats. Then, I raised my arms over my head and brought them down three times to indicate how I had hit the walrus on the head with the paddle. Each time I reenacted this story in dance form, I relived the encounter and remembered how close we came that day to having the boat ripped in half, leaving eight brave Eskimo hunters and one White teenager from Massachusetts to drown in the cold, dark green sea.

Sometimes, I danced about the dog teams, transforming myself into a lead sled dog, yelling, "Wanga kikmiq—I am a husky." Dancing around the room, I pantomimed the power and intelligence of these great

Then, with intensely focused concentration, he would raise his arms overhead and sink his harpoon into the heart of the sacrificial walrus. Sometimes, he and his best friend, Iya, would dance together in perfect synchronization, made possible by years of hunting and dancing and thousands of performances.

As the night wore on, I could see the old women gradually fall under the influence of the hypnotic beat of the drumming. Sitting on their knees or squatting—often with their eyes closed and the everyday world shut out—they swayed and twisted in rhythm with the drumming. Sometimes, the pupils of their eyes would roll upward, showing only white, as they moved entranced into another world—an inner world of magic.

One by one, the participants drifted into that other place—the world of animals and spirits. I could see by the expressions on their faces and by their rhythmic body movements that they had let go and entered into the mythical world under the sea. In the dim light, the dancers became the objects of their dances: whale, walrus, polar bear, swan, or owl. As I watched, I learned things about how the animals behaved. Traditional knowledge unfolded and myths were revealed. Walrus taught humans how to live in the barren north, giving its body so that the people could survive. Polar bears were formidable and dangerous competitors.

After the main traditional dances were performed by the older men, and after the younger hunters had their turn, the women would rise to their feet as if puppets pulled up by strings. The women's feet seemed firmly rooted to the floor, and their bodies and arms moved by themselves, animated by some ancient inner force. One by one, they came alive, dancing gracefully, drifting gently through the sky on broad, soft, white wings, like the swans that came to nest on the island every June. It was a dance of birth and beauty.

Guided by the primal rhythmic beat of the walrus skin drums, the dancers swirled into a world of dreams and power—dancing their dreams and the power of life. After several hours, the drumming became hypnotic. It became easy for me to fade in and out of consciousness. Boundaries slipped and the threshold of consciousness shifted. The dimly lit room was transformed into non-ordinary reality. The atmosphere became charged with a tangible pulsation that I felt penetrating my body, stimulating my heart to beat in rhythm with the drums.

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The power of the drum came directly from the heart of the land of the midnight sun, from someplace deep and outside the realm of time. The powerful beat kept reaching inside me, trying to find a seat of forgotten memories, an undefined center at the core of my being. Like stones thrown into a mirror-calm sea, each drum beat dropped into my blood, breaking the surface in patterns of concentric rings, stirring powerful emotions of awe and ecstasy. I was at one with the Earth, the sea, and the ceaseless, changing rhythms of nature—beating, flowing, ebbing, breathing, and renewing.

Unable to resist the pulse of the drums and finding it difficult to keep my eyes open, I eventually learned to let go. An amorphous but powerful feeling of energy would begin to move inside me, expressing itself in sound and motion—the bird must fly, the fish must swim, and humans are born to dance—so I would dance. Sometimes, I danced with the others. Sometimes, I danced alone, stamping out my own rhythm to the beat of an internal drum—on barren ice or snow fields where no one could see me, twirling around in the snow until I felt as if I could see and feel everything.

In time, I discovered that the cadence of the drumming provided me the means to move from one reality to the next. It opened the ancient inner doors of perception and empowered my dreams, letting me glimpse life as it had been before the coming of the White man. By allowing the drumming to enter my spirit and open me to the dance, I experienced a sense of emergence, a coming out while going within. It was a feeling that I would become more familiar with later—a sense of finding myself, only to forget about it or lose it in the next moment; a sense of awakening, only to fall asleep again. Seeing and remembering, then forgetting; finding,

then losing; living, then dying.

Once, I saw myself under the Bering Sea, moving with the strong currents, the ancient tides. I saw the dark, huge, smooth shapes of humpbacked whales—aghveq—passing by, gentle giants in the deep green water. I felt great peace, as I spiraled and plunged with them to the depths and then we propelled upward together, breaking the surface in great, graceful arcs.

Then, I was swimming with a pod of walrus—ayveq. They moved as one, diving and surfacing, moving swiftly toward some ancient destiny, the water bursting and frothing when they came up for air. Packed closely together, their bodies and flippers moved in powerful undulating movements like those of the dancers. The walrus were creating their own dance to life.

The whales were dancing, the walrus were dancing, everything was dancing. Now, I was seeing things as if I were a bird. I was anipa—the snowy Arctic owl—soaring above the cliffs, gliding over vast, white expanses of snow and ice. As I flew, I saw three polar bears—nanuq—running across the ice: two creamy cubs following their mother on relentless journeys.

I saw people hunting out on the ice, and I noticed how they followed the same flow of life as the whale, the seal, the owl, the polar bear, and the walrus. Everything possessed its own inherent sense of wild harmony, its own core of being. As all these beings moved across the winter wilderness, they merged with the rhythms of life beyond their control. None could survive without adapting to the ever-changing balance. The wind and the water; the animals and the humans; the moon, sun, and sky—all things were related to the others, each requiring the others.

Then, the lead drummer shouted, "O-o-huck, O-huck," and on one powerful last beat, the drumming stopped.

As my normal consciousness returned, I saw that many people had already gone home, and everyone was sleepy. The drummers had finished their last song and had begun to gather their parkas and wrap their drums. Thanking the drummers, I slipped into my parka, said goodnight to my friends, and stepped outside. As I closed the door behind me, I looked up at the night sky. Millions of stars speckled the infinite space above me. In the clarity of the Arctic air, the night sky was so thick with tiny spots of light, stretching from horizon to horizon, that there was almost no space left for the blackness of night. I wished that there was



Arctic animals—part wolf, part dog, part spirit—pulling the sled, chasing a polar bear, and above all else, being loyal to humans.

I forgot myself when I danced. I imagined that I probably looked absurd to the others, but it didn't bother me, and they didn't seem to mind. They never said anything, and the old ones always smiled and nodded in my direction, flashing their eyes at me as if to say, "Yes—aa."

One spring day, one of the older men, Nagotak, told me a story about how, in times past, the shaman's drum had been considered magical. He explained that, in the old days, before the Russian-American Cold War, his people-the Siberian Eskimosused to hold a gathering every spring at Gamble.4 People came from all over the island, as well as from the Siberian mainland. Friendships were renewed, relatives visited, and men found wives. Tests of skill were performed, including harpoon throwing, racing, wrestling, carving, walrus skin splitting, and sledding, among other events. There were also great dances, with the drumming lasting for days. Most importantly, there were tests of power between the shamans of the island and those from Siberia.

One year, among the Siberian shamans, there was a young man who claimed only average powers for himself compared to those of his teacher, who had remained in Siberia. He said his benefactor had given him a magical drum with the power to change the size of animals. As the crowd listened to his incredible story, someone challenged him to prove his claim. In response, he asked for an animal to be brought to him. One man said he had captured a white Arctic fox alive, and he brought it to the young shaman in a bag.

The young shaman placed his drum over the bag and uttered some magical words. Then, he reached inside the bag and pulled out a miniature white fox and placed it on the drum. The tiny fox ran around in circles on the rim of the drum. Everyone saw it, and they watched it for hours while the shaman continued to tell stories of the powers of his mentor, who could fly, disappear, change into animal forms, and cure the sick. Eventually, the shaman picked up the fox, put it into his pocket, and told the crowd to respect the drum and to never underestimate its powers.

I asked Nagotak if he had actually seen the tiny fox himself. He replied that he had: "I saw it with my own eyes in the morning daylight, in a group of other people who saw the same thing."

He admitted that he, too, had been skeptical at first, but eventually he'd had to believe what he saw. It couldn't be explained, but it was true nevertheless. Then, he looked at me with his piercing, gray eyes—the color of old ice—and said in a whisper, as he turned away, "Respect the drum."

As I looked up at the vivid blue morning sky, I thought I heard an echo saying, "Respect life."

Toward the end of my stay on St. Lawrence Island, the elders and drummers called me to a meeting and informed me that I should have my own drum. As was their custom, no explanation was given; they simply noted what was happening. Having not yet found my own balance, I left the village before the drum was finished. My drum never reached my hands, but I will always remember the power and meaning of life that these good people shared with me. Of all the things I saw and experienced on the island, the greatest gift I took away was the awareness that love exists.

Notes

1. Savoonga, or Sivungaq in Yup'ik, means "up front" or "on the rim." The name refers to the fact that the village was situated on the northern side of St. Lawrence Island, at the tip of the cape by the same name. Located just below the Arctic Circle, in the Bering Sea, St. Lawrence Island is about one hundred miles in length and twenty miles wide. Although politically part of Alaska, the island is only forty miles from the Siberian mainland and more than two hundred miles off mainland Alaska. For this reason, the St. Lawrence Islanders are closely related culturally to the Asiatic or Siberian Eskimos of mainland Siberia, and they are classified by linguists and anthropologists as Siberian Eskimos.

Over the last century, Islanders have intermarried with people from mainland Alaska and from various parts of Siberia.—Kora, my host, was originally from the Kamchatka peninsula of Siberia. Then, during the Cold War, the Islanders were cut off from their Siberian relatives and forced to relate more to mainland Alaskans. Thus, although their cultural and spiritual roots are predominately Siberian, the Islanders have evolved a society distinct from that of either mainland.

It should be stated that I have purposefully chosen to use the term *Eskimo* in this article—partly for practical, esthetic, and historical reasons, and partly because that is how the St. Lawrence Islanders referred to themselves when speaking English. In the past, Whites erroneously referred to all indigenous people of the North American Arctic and Greenland as Eskimos—ignoring the fact that they came from different cultures and spoke different languages, such as Inuit, Inupiaq, and Yup'ik.

During the indigenous rights movements of the 1970s and 1980s in Canada and Alaska, indigenous people won the legal right to be called by their original tribal names. For example, the Yup'ik-speaking people of mainland Alaska now refer to themselves as Yup'ik-However, there are several distinct groups of Yup'ik-speaking peoples in Alaska: those that live along the Bering Sea north of the Aleutian Islands, the St. Law-

rence Islanders, and those that live along the southern coast of Alaska. Although the St. Lawrence Islanders speak a Yup'ik dialect, it is distinctly different from that spoken on mainland Alaska. In fact, the Islanders once considered the mainland Yup'ik speakers, particularly those in the southern regions, to be their enemies.

- 2. I purposely took no notes, photos, or recordings, choosing to fully experience the day-by-day lives of the people as they did. Eventually, I was adopted by the family with which I lived, and I was given the name Yupihucq (often called Yupik for short), which means: "You are a real human being."
- 3. There were no trees of any kind on St. Lawrence Island, so the frames of the drums were made of seasoned hickory or spruce wood imported from mainland Alaska. In times past, the Islanders had traded with their cousins in Siberia for the needed wood. A hardwood strip about two inches wide and an eighthinch thick would be soaked in water, steamed overnight, and then bent into a circular hoop, about eighteen to twenty-four inches in diameter. A wooden handle, the taflu, was attached to this frame. Then, a specially prepared skin of walrus stomach—as thin as parchment paper, yet strong and resilient-was stretched over the frame wet, and as it dried it tightened until it became taut and resonant. Sometimes, an inner circle of wood helped hold the skin in place, while adding strength to the drum's main frame.
- 4. Gamble, Sivokak, is the village at the far western end of St. Lawrence Island, closest to the Siberian mainland, about forty miles away. It was here that, every spring, the Siberian mainlanders and the Islanders would gather to visit, trade, and perform shamanistic feats.

Recommended Reading List

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