



## Yup'ik Eskimo



The history of Central Yup'ik Eskimo mask dancing from West Alaska is long and varied, beginning over 30 centuries ago. The Yup'ik Eskimos of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta area in Western Alaska live on a mostly flat, marshy plain crisscrossed by many waterways, which the Yup'ik have used in place of roads. Because this region is below the Arctic Circle, temperatures are more moderate and hunting and fishing continued most of the year. Temperatures can range from -80F in winter to 80F in summer. Due to the relatively moderate climate, a wide variety of vegetation grows in the area, supporting a rich population of birds and mammals. Larger game animals including bear, moose, and caribou, live inland. The sea and various waterways provide are home to whales, seal, walrus, and many varieties of fish. Historically, the abundance of food enabled the Yup'ik in the region to form a more settled lifestyle with larger groups of people, although yearly fluctuations in food availability and weather conditions

necessitated some degree of mobility. Village groups, tied together by blood and marriage, varied in size from 50 to 250 persons. In Western Alaska, Yup'ik-speaking Eskimo cultures have designated themselves "Yup'ik," meaning "real person," in representing themselves to other cultures.

While many Eskimo cultures from further north in Alaska were more austere, the Yup'ik culture includes a vast amount of ceremony, dance, and elaborate costumes. Masks are used with the storytelling, singing, and dancing, which are the main sources of entertainment, information, and history for the Eskimos. Masks are also important for expressing supplication and prayer to the whims of the universe. The masks have always helped humans to see through the eyes of the animals who dwell with us. The Yup'ik have used masks in asking for the things they needed from their environment and for their well being. The Yup'ik believe that everything, even a speck of dust can have awareness, and that awareness simply exists in the universe. Masks describe and define the very awareness of the Yup'ik universe.

In Alaska masks are, and have since ancient times, been used in theatrical and ceremonial productions, performed for a whole village, or in competition between villages. These productions take place inside the ceremonial house, on a stage, so Yup'ik dance is at home on modern stages. Along with masks, traditional costumes for Yup'ik performances are elaborate, with many ornaments and tassels. Each piece of ornamentation has a meaning and a story associated with it. The costume that will be worn by **Chuna McIntyre** in **People Like Me 2002: Face to Face!** is one that tells his family's history.

The Yup'ik Eskimos had contact with outsiders much later than their northern Arctic counterparts. It was not until the 1800s that Russian explorers encountered the Yup'ik. Consequently, change from outside contact did not happen until the late 1800s. Unlike earlier explorers of the sixteenth century, who characterized the northern Arctic Eskimos as savages, the Russians described the Yup'ik in more favorable, but romanticized, terms. Russian Orthodox missionaries came to live among the Yup'ik in the late 1800s, introducing the Yup'ik to Christianity. The Yup'ik were selective as to the elements of Christianity they accepted, depending on whether or not they were compatible with their traditional beliefs.

By the 1920's, missionaries attempted to repress masked dancing, but the last 20 years of the 1900's has seen a revival of many ceremonial events. Because the traditional Yup'ik language is still spoken, and the focus on the extended family as the center of social life remains, they were able to revitalize traditional arts, a feat that is more difficult when a people's language is lost. Recent interest in documenting and maintaining cultural traditions has led to support of scholarly study, performances and demonstrations intended to explore, record, and share Yup'ik life. Through dancing and ceremony, the Yup'ik continue to keep their traditions and their culture alive.

The piece that will be seen in **People Like Me 2002: Face to Face!** is a creation story with Raven and Snowy Owl, performed by Chuna McIntyre. The Snowy Owl mask, primary in this piece, incorporates the colors black, red, and white, important to Yup'ik culture. In this piece, Raven the Creator begins alone in the empty universe, creating things, animals, and humans. The magic of Yup'ik masked storytelling is embodied in this mystical and graceful performance.

Chuna McIntyre was born and raised in the village of Eek, in southwestern Alaska, on the shores of the Bering Sea. Traditionally, Yup'ik is the first language in his village, where they carry on the ancient traditions of their ancestors. He was raised by his grandmother, from whom he learned the ancient traditions -- the dances, songs, and stories of his Eskimo ancestors.

He performs frequently for both Native and non-Native audiences, so that they may experience some of the richness of his people's culture. He is founder and director of Nunamfca ("of Our Land") Yup'ik Eskimo Dancers, which has traveled the world sharing Alaska's native cultural heritage. At the University of Alaska, he helped organize Tuma ("Footprints") Theatre, a native dance and drama group. He attended the University of Alaska at Fairbanks as well as Sonoma State University in California. He received a Bachelor's degree from Sonoma State University in 1991 with a major in studio art and a minor in Native American studies. He currently instructs in the Central Yup'ik language for Stanford University.

*This PDF file was added to the Viewer's Guide in 2002.*