

## Article

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# Weaving culture: The many dimensions of the Yup'ik Eskimo *mingqaaq*

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Molly Lee\*

**Résumé:** Tisser la culture: les nombreuses dimensions du *mingqaaq* yup'ik

Il est courant de penser que les arts dits touristiques sont considérablement simplifiés et moins étroitement liés aux cultures autochtones qui les ont produits que les formes d'art «traditionnel». Dans cet article, je soutiens que le panier en colombin (*mingqaaq*) des Yupiit, une forme d'art qui s'est développée pour être spécifiquement vendue aux étrangers, est en fait étroitement lié à la culture yup'ik d'aujourd'hui par le biais de l'usage de certaines matières premières (joncs de plage ou de seigle et boyaux de mammifère marin). Son apparition récente sur divers supports médiatiques à travers l'Alaska—sur la couverture du bottin téléphonique, comme logo d'une société autochtone, comme accessoire de podium à côté d'un leader autochtone défendant la cause des activités de subsistance pour n'en nommer que certains—suggère que le *mingqaaq*, la forme d'art yup'ik la plus largement vendue aujourd'hui, a peut-être embrassé le rôle de symbole politique dans le débat très controversé du droit à la subsistance des Autochtones d'Alaska.

**Abstract:** Weaving culture: The many dimensions of the Yup'ik Eskimo *mingqaaq*

As a general rule, so-called tourist arts are thought of as greatly simplified and less closely tied to the indigenous cultures that make “traditional” art forms. In this article, I argue that the Yup'ik Eskimo coiled basket (*mingqaaq*), an art form developed specifically for sale to outsiders, is in fact closely connected to modern Yup'ik culture through its use of raw materials (beach, or rye grass and sea-mammal intestine). Its recent appearance around Alaska in various media—on a telephone book cover, in a logo for a Native Corporation, and as a stage prop on the podium beside a Native leader arguing the subsistence cause, to name a few—suggests that the *mingqaaq*, the most widely sold Yup'ik art form today, may have taken on the role of political symbol for the highly contentious issue of Alaska Native subsistence rights.

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## Introduction

“Objects,” as Thomas (1991: 4) reminds us, “are not what they were made to be but what they have become.” In the following article, I attempt to make sense of what Yup’ik Eskimo coiled basketry has become in the century or more of its existence. Spawned with nothing more than the market in mind, the *mingqaaq* (meaning “sewn,” or “coiled basket” in the Central Yup’ik language), today is the most widely created market art in the Yup’ik Eskimo area of southwestern Alaska. As an object type arising under circumstances of acculturation, the *mingqaaq* should lack, according to common assumption, an “authentic,” validating history and depth of cultural context. In fact the opposite is true. As their recent history shows, the *mingqaaq* has acquired, through a series of transformations, associations that have led it to assume a prominent place in the pantheon of contemporary Yup’ik art forms. I will argue here that because of the *mingqaaq*’s persistence as well as its close ties with subsistence activities through the raw material of its manufacture, these baskets have been appropriated by Alaska Natives generally as a material metaphor for their ongoing political struggle over land claims.

## History and social context of Yup’ik coiled basketry

For more than a hundred years, Yup’ik Eskimo women in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta of southwestern Alaska have made the coiled basket out of the beach, or rye, grass (*Elymus mollis*) that rings the shoreline of the Bering Sea. Coiled baskets did not appear until after historic contact in this area, where a loosely twined grass carrying and storage basket known as the *issran* was ubiquitous. Coiling probably moved into the Yup’ik region in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as a result of contact with the Inupiaq Eskimos around Bering Strait, who in turn had borrowed it from Siberia (Lee 1995), but it was Moravian missionaries, who settled in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta in the late 1880s, who first encouraged its large-scale production.

Why Yup’ik women would have adopted a second basket-making technique is a matter of conjecture, but the preponderance of available evidence suggests that the greater suitability of the coiled technique for commercial purposes was probably the reason. Thanks to Moravian encouragement, Yup’ik women made coiled baskets for sale from the start, and the baskets produced in the coiled technique are more robust and would better withstand the packing and shipping required for reaching the marketplace than would their twined counterparts. Furthermore, decorated baskets are more appealing to collectors, and the coiled technique permits a wider range of decorative possibilities than does twining (Craig Bates, pers. comm. 1995). These would have been compelling reasons for Yup’ik women to add coiling to their basket-making repertoire.

The *mingqaaq*’s success as a commodity seems to have been immediate. This was due in large part to several ready, if distant, markets. The onset of coiled basket-making in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta coincides with the North American Indian basket craze of 1900-1910 (Lee 1998). Moravian Church reports from the Yup’ik village of

Quinhagak reveal that as early as 1906, baskets from there were being shipped to the southern states to help finance Moravian missionary efforts in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta (Schoechert 1906: 69; 1909: 56). Another target was the increasing number of outsiders who flocked to Alaska during the Nome gold rush of the 1890s, and a third was furnished by the burgeoning tourist industry in southeast Alaska at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta may have been isolated but we know from traders' records that Yup'ik baskets were transported to Nome and other seaports to sell at about this time (Lee 1991).

The historical record is inconclusive as to the number of baskets that were exported annually from the Delta in the early days because most ended up in private hands. Many older museums on the eastern seaboard have a few early examples in their collections, but the majority of these were acquired later from descendents of their original owners, making documentation difficult. At the University of Pennsylvania Museum, however, there is one collection of 28 examples gathered along the lower Kuskokwim River and on Nunivak Island by George Gordon in 1905. The size of this collection obtained from a single, original source suggests that Yup'ik coiled baskets were probably made in substantial numbers at the height of the basket craze.

Further evidence for the *mingqaaq*'s commercial genesis is its marginalization from Yup'ik domestic culture. To a limited extent, the *issran* is still made and used in southwest Alaska as a gathering and storing receptacle, but the *mingqaaq* was never<sup>1</sup> integrated into the basic Yup'ik household inventory. When I asked a basket maker from Nunivak Island to explain the difference between the two, she pointed to an *issran* and said: "We use these," and, pointing to a *mingqaaq*: "We sell those."

### **The centrality of subsistence in Yup'ik Eskimo culture**

Despite its commercial genesis, the *mingqaaq* is closely tied to the subsistence way of life practiced by Yup'ik women. As Hensel has shown, subsistence—the "hunting, fishing, gathering, processing, and sharing" of available natural resources—is more than an economic necessity (Hensel 1996: 7, 2001: 217). It is the very thread that binds together the economic, intellectual, and spiritual life of Yup'ik communities. Today, the ongoing relationship of subsistence to spirituality is demonstrated by the prayers for the return of animals that once were the focus of indigenous ceremonies and now are routinely incorporated into Christian religious services. Continuity between past and present is also evident in the Yupiit's continued use of ancient place names denoting favourite hunting localities. Moreover, the sharing of subsistence products like basket grass strengthens the bonds of those in rural areas with the growing number of Yup'ik "expatriates" who have migrated into Alaska's urban centers (Lee 2003). Finally, Yup'ik subsistence skills such as harvesting and preparing basket grass are a source of positive feedback from mainstream culture, and this, too, has helped establish subsistence as a key symbol of Yup'ik identity. According to Hensel:

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<sup>1</sup> With the recent rise in ethnic self-consciousness, I have seen a few collections of Yup'ik coiled baskets in Yup'ik households, but this is still relatively rare.

[If there is] one complex of Native practices that many white Alaskans envy and would like to master [it] is the complex of hunting, fishing, wilderness travel, and camping skills as well as systematic ecological knowledge now reified in the image of Natives as the 'original conservationists' (Hensel 1996: 96).

Despite the Yupiit's devotion to subsistence living, however, they, like all Alaska Natives today, are stakeholders in late-capitalist consumer culture. Everywhere, CDs, Coca Cola, pilot biscuits and Crisco supplement locally available salmon, moose and waterfowl, and for obtaining them, metal skiffs, four-wheelers, and high-powered rifles have long since replaced kayaks, dog teams and harpoons. Because of the need to buy and maintain this expensive equipment, subsistence practices require a cash outlay that can run into thousands of dollars annually (Hensel 1996: 117).

In the Yup'ik Eskimo area as among Native Alaskans generally, the sale of arts and crafts such as coiled basketry has long furnished a dependable cash supplement to the Yupiit household budget (Ray 1970). Since 1842, when the Russian lieutenant L. A. Zagoskin pushed north into the Kuskokwim drainage from the Alaska Peninsula, Westerners have exhibited a continued fascination with the ingenious and aesthetically pleasing Yup'ik material culture, and have furnished a ready market for ivory carvings, haunting composite driftwood masks, intricate fur clothing, and articles woven of grass. But today, as the ever-accelerating pace of modernization widens the distance between the Yupiit and their indigenous way of life, art forms replicating indigenous object types continue to decline. For example, ivory carving once dominated the market but is now severely curtailed<sup>2</sup>. In contrast, coiled grass basketry has grown increasingly popular with buyers and is unquestionably the most vibrant art form now made in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta (Evans 1985: 4-6; Lee 2003).

There are several reasons why coiled basketry has persisted while other art forms have declined. One explanation may be that fewer women than men are employed in wage-labor activities in rural Alaska. Another is that the activities of gathering, processing, and sharing of beach grass (*tapernnat*), are deeply embedded in Yup'ik women's culture. In the late fall, when berry picking is over, the women go out onto the land to cut, bundle, and braid the long, golden grass stalks. The grass harvest is a time of comradeship as well as hard work, and even women who do not make baskets themselves go out with the others. Insulated against the biting delta wind by snow pants, down jackets, and headscarves, they put in long hours stooping, cutting and bundling the grass, stopping now and then for gossip and hot tea from a thermos. They return to the village at nightfall with *issran* or backpacks bursting with bundled stems. Once home, the women untie the bundles and using the floor as a work surface, spread out the grass and braid its stems into long fringed curtains for drying.

Before imported goods were common, dried beach grass provided the raw material for a wide array of domestic necessities. Loosely bundled grass padded the sleeping

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<sup>2</sup> Among the reasons for the decline in ivory carving are the downturn in the local walrus population and the commensurate rise in the cost of buying ivory. The decrease in free time due to the "double-shifting" of wage labor and subsistence activities (Hensel 1996: 119) is also a factor, as is a reduction in buyer demand due to the politically incorrect associations with elephant ivory, which have negatively affected the walrus-ivory market (Graburn, pers. comm. 1998).

surface as a mattress and was stuffed into children's mukluks for protection against the cold. But grass was also twined into a wide variety of articles such as insulating socks to wear inside mukluks, a wide array of carrying and storage containers (Nelson 1899: 202), and into liners for fish-skin mittens (Fienup-Riordan in press). Furthermore, the multi-purpose twined grass mat (*ikaraliik*) served as floor covering, door curtain, kayak seat, and boat sail. Today, most of these uses are defunct, but the sale of baskets coiled from this same grass helps Yup'ik households meet expenses incurred in leading a subsistence way of life. From this perspective, the harvesting and preparation of grass for *mingqaaq*-making could be said to commemorate the many earlier uses of grass that are now met by imported technology.

### The Yup'ik *mingqaaq* as material metaphor

Over the past decade, sales of Yup'ik coiled basketry have increased exponentially, and along with them, the *mingqaaq*'s visibility. What is more, this visibility today is not confined to the essentialist or descriptive. Rather, images of the *mingqaaq* have begun to appear in a variety of different contexts that, taken together, suggest a new purpose. Indexing associations with the land and subsistence practice, the *mingqaaq* has begun to function as a material metaphor for the long-simmering political battle over subsistence rights in Alaska. To grasp the metaphoric dimension of Yup'ik baskets, it will be helpful to review the logic whereby material objects, events, and persons are connected. Christopher Tilley (1999), following Gell (1998), makes a persuasive case for the efficacy of solid, or material metaphors as opposed to the linguistic metaphors of Levi-Straussian structuralism. Unlike linguistic metaphors, which are only activated by the agency of persons, Tilley argues that art objects also mediate social agency. As material metaphors, they embody complex intentionalities: "Just as persons make things," Tilley points out, "things make persons" (Tilley 1999: 262). Furthermore, he continues, linguistic models unfold over time, in the course of written text, whereas material metaphors are spatial and immediate, and are read as a whole rather than from a previously constituted series of sentences. "Their material presence," according to Tilley (1999: 263), "permits the unsaid to be said [...]. They condense meanings in a manner which would require an entire string of linguistic metaphors to accomplish a similar effect."

A number of recent *mingqaaq* images suggest that the Yup'ik coiled basket has become such a material metaphor. The images represent a continuum of strategies ranging from the non-Native appropriation of basket images common in earlier times up to its re-appropriation by Alaska Natives for their own political<sup>3</sup> ends. In Figure 1, a Yup'ik *mingqaaq* appears at the center of the letterhead of the non-Native-owned Moravian Bookstore in Bethel. Embedded at the center of the book shop's name, the *mingqaaq* acknowledges the growing prominence of coiled grass basketry among contemporary Yup'ik arts and crafts sold at the bookstore, but it is also a fitting reminder of the Moravians' influence on the history of coiled basketry over a century

<sup>3</sup> Here, I follow Frazer in my use of "political" to mean an issue that is "contested across a range of [...] different publics" in the process of becoming a matter for legitimate institutional intervention (Frazer 1998: 166).

ago and brings to mind the Moravians' former reliance on the sale of *mingqaaq* to finance their missionary project in the Yup'ik area.

In the wider context of the history of Native American basketry, the image of the *mingqaaq* superimposed on the bookstore logo also recalls the Euroamerican appropriation of the Native American basket as a symbol of nostalgia and loss. An outgrowth of the American arts and crafts movement at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Herzog 1996; Lee 1991), the dominant culture's appropriation of the Native American basket was linked to the sense of estrangement brought on by growing industrialization and the disappearance of the small rural community that had formerly characterized North America. The American arts and crafts movement sought to combat the ennui of industrialization by promoting communally-based cottage-industry handicrafts. In their search for models, they embraced Native American cultures—at least metaphorically—because of their close connection between life and handicraft. From there, it was only a short step to adopting the Indian basket as a symbol of the simplicity, spirituality, and closeness to nature they found lacking in mainstream American culture. An example of the arts and crafts movement's romanticizing of Native American baskets is evident in an article written by May Grinnell in 1901. She writes: “[T]he patient squaw, sitting lonely at her humble task, feels the communion of earth and sky [...] and weaves it in with her grasses [...] supplying the one touch of nature which makes the whole world kin” (Grinnell 1901: 137). In short, the craze for Indian baskets a century ago, of which the Yup'ik *mingqaaq* was a part, is what we recognize today as an imperialist appropriation, one in which the dominant culture adopts some feature of a subordinate group then transforms it into a symbol whose meaning does not necessarily bear any resemblance to its original intent.

My second example of a Yup'ik *mingqaaq* adopted for use as a material metaphor is its appearance on the cover of a telephone book published by a communications conglomerate with branches in rural Alaska (Figure 2). Here, we see Yup'ik basket maker Mary Ann Sundown of Scammon Bay in a sentimental pose handing on her knowledge of “traditional” *mingqaaq*-making skills to her great-granddaughter. Not only is the *mingqaaq* a non-traditional art form, but also anyone familiar with Yup'ik culture would recognize the falsity of the pose. Mary Ann Sundown is shown in a didactic pose actually teaching her great-granddaughter, but Yup'ik children learn by watching, not by formal demonstration. The image is also a testimony to the growing presence of the *mingqaaq*; it is unusual that a woman's art was selected for this purpose rather than a male art form such as ivory carving, which enjoys higher status but today is practiced far less frequently.

My final example (Figure 3) situates the *mingqaaq* squarely in the centre of the Alaska Native political context. In this September 1999 photograph published by the *Anchorage Daily News*, Julie Kitka, President of the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN), the body charged with settling land-claim issues raised during the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act of 1972, stands before an audience of several hundred federal and state legislators in Juneau, the state capital. Beside her on the podium is a Yup'ik *mingqaaq*. The occasion was Kitka's delivery of a speech outlining AFN's position on the contentious issue of Alaska Native subsistence rights, which at

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Figure 1. Letterhead from Moravian Bookshop, Bethel, Alaska, using Yup'ik *mingqaaq*.

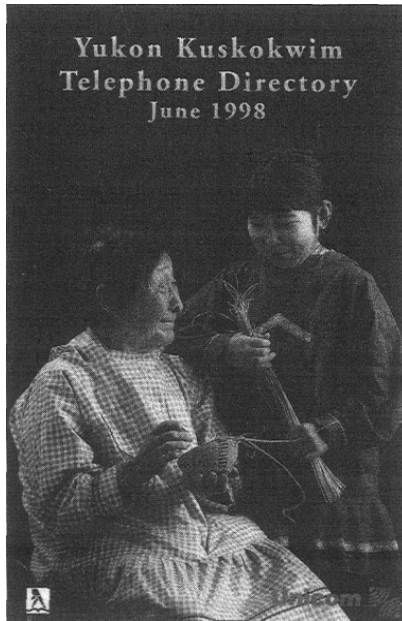


Figure 2. Unicom Yukon-Kuskokwim Telephone Book Cover, June 1998, showing Mary Ann Sundown and her great-granddaughter.



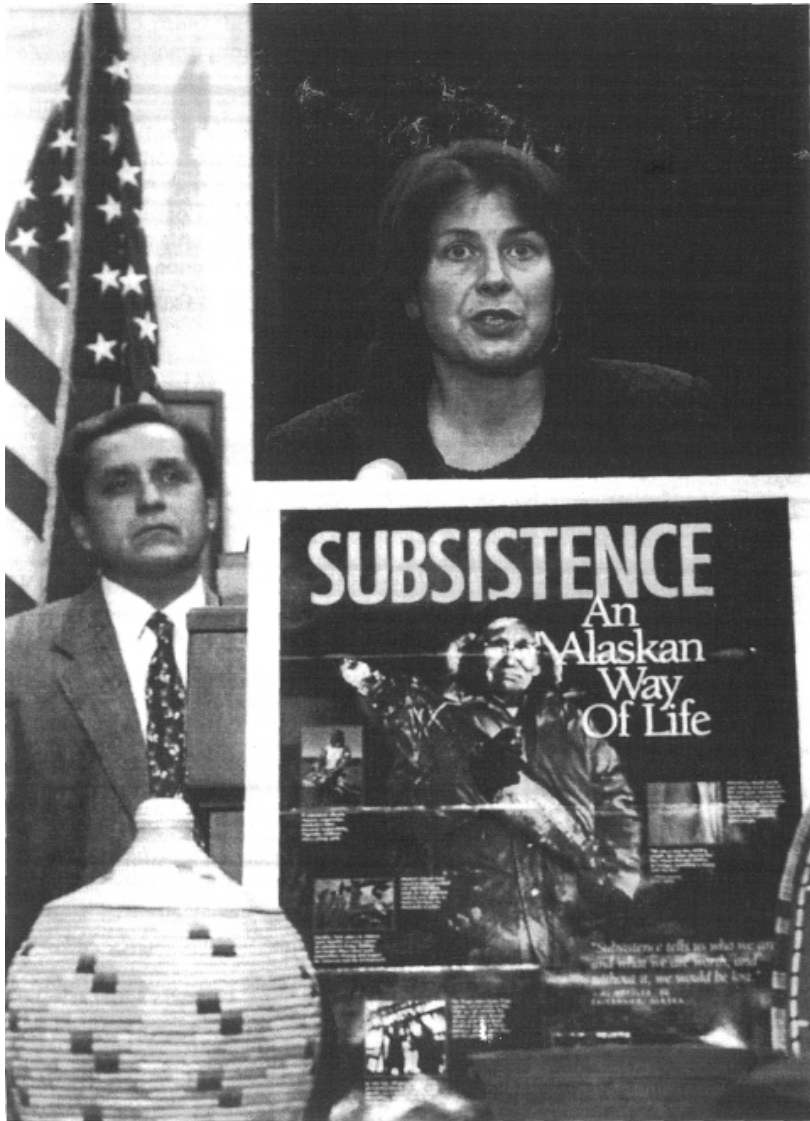


Figure 3. Alaska Federation of Natives President Julie Kitka delivering a speech about the Alaska Federation of Natives position on Alaska Native subsistence rights, Juneau, Alaska, September 1999 (photo courtesy of Seanna O’Sullivan, Associated Press).

present are severely threatened by pressure from the more powerful non-Natives in Alaska, who demand equal access to the diminishing natural resources on Alaska's public lands. The photograph is striking for several reasons. First, Kitka is an Alaska Native of mixed Athabascan Indian and Alutiiq—but not Yup'ik Eskimo—heritage. Using a Yup'ik *mingqaaq* in this context implies that the basket's reputation has extended beyond the Yup'ik area, and that it is seen as a material metaphor for Alaska Native subsistence rights generally. The use of Native art as a basis for collective political action evident in this image has yet to receive the theoretical attention it deserves. As Edelman (1995: 2) points out, art is a powerful tool for use in the service of politics: "Contrary to the usual assumption—which sees art as ancillary to the social scene [...]," he argues, "[art] should be recognized as an integral part of the transaction that engenders political behavior." Now more than ever, Native American art objects such as the Yup'ik *mingqaaq* are in a position to serve as a source of images to promote contentious and widely publicized political debate. In present-day struggles of subordinate groups over issues such as land claims, access to social services, and artifact repatriation, the reappropriation of Native artifacts by Native people to serve as symbols of resistance and dissent can be expected to proliferate.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have used the case of the Yup'ik *mingqaaq* to argue that arts of acculturation can have histories as intricate and complex as those that associated with objects made for local use over many generations. The disinclination to acknowledge that such arts can be as rich in associations as any other is yet another example of the dominant culture's disinclination to de-exoticize artifacts associated with subordinate groups. The Yup'ik *mingqaaq* is an example of one such appropriation. Commercial genesis notwithstanding, once the coiled basket was launched, it acquired layers of associated meanings, linking past and present much in the same way as any cultural artifact. As the only remaining large-scale<sup>4</sup> use of beach grass, today it could be said to stand for the many earlier uses of beach grass now defunct. And through its visibility as the most widely practiced art form in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta at present, it is now acquiring added resonance as a material metaphor increasingly used to represent a way of life that is presently threatened by political forces more powerful than its own.

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<sup>4</sup> A few older women still twine *issranet* out of beach grass, but the number is far smaller than the number of coiled baskets. In a few localities such as Nelson Island, herrings and other small fish are braided into ropes for drying, but generally, inferior or damaged grasses are used for this purpose (Chase Hensel, pers. comm. 2002).

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