

Festivals and Ceremonies of the Alaskan Eskimos: Historical and Ethnographic Sources, 1814-1940

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this article is to shed light on the festive and ceremonial events of some of the Eskimo cultures of Alaska through a review of the ethnohistorical documents at our disposal. The study centers on the ancient societies of the Alutiiq, Yup'ik and a part of the Inupiat, communities that share a series of common features, and sees their festive and ceremonial activities as components of the strategies implemented to maintain control over social reproduction. This review of the historical and ethnographic sources identifies the authors and the studies that provide the most pertinent data on the subject.

Key words: Ethnohistory, social reproduction, musical behaviors, Alaska Eskimo.

Festivales y ceremonias de los esquimales de Alaska: fuentes históricas y etnográficas, 1814-1940

RESUMEN

El objeto de este artículo es arrojar luz sobre las fiestas y ceremonias de algunas culturas esquimales de Alaska a través de la revisión de documentos etnohistóricos a nuestra disposición. La investigación se centra sobre las antiguas sociedades de los alutiiq, yup'ik y parte de los inupiat, comunidades que tienen una serie de rasgos comunes y contemplan sus actividades festivas y ceremoniales como parte de estrategias para mantener el control sobre la reproducción social. Esta revisión de fuentes históricas y etnográficas identifica a los autores y a los estudios que proporcionan los datos más significativos sobre el tema.

Palabras clave: Etnohistoria, reproducción social, comportamientos musicales, esquimales de Alaska.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. Selection of the historical and ethnographic sources. 3. The history of social reproduction, ceremonies and celebrations in the Alutiiq, Yup'ik and Inupiat cultures. 4. The first descriptions of ceremonial and festive events. 5. Historical and ethnographic accounts from the 1880s onwards. 6. The ethnohistory of the Twentieth Century. 7. Conclusions. 8. Bibliographical references.

1. Introduction

The ancient Eskimo societies of Alaska implemented a series of strategies in order to control social reproduction¹ and thus to ensure their survival. The performance of festivals and ceremonies in which dances and songs played a predominant part represented an important feature of these strategies. Together, the observations of

¹ Strategies of social reproduction are a key features of hunter-gatherer societies. An efficient system of social reproduction allows swift adaptation to the various circumstances, both positive and adverse, that affect human groups. Restricting or stimulating human reproduction has been one of the main strategies used by hunter-gatherer societies to maintain a balance between natural resources and their consumption by the population. Their social reproduction strategies of these societies have been based on an asymmetric form of social organization dominated by men. Ceremonial events and festivities were the collective contexts in which hunter-gatherer societies reproduced and maintained these asymmetric systems of social organization.

the explorers, missionaries and ethnographers who visited and lived in the coastal regions of western Alaska between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries comprise a valuable body of ethnographic data. The detailed analysis of this information allows us to establish ethnoarchaeomusicological² reference points which so far have not been studied in detail (Salius 2010; 2011).

This study presents an appraisal of the ethnohistorical sources that record the festive and ceremonial activities of the Alutiiq, Yup'ik and the south-western Inupiat societies. In so doing we aim to answer the following questions: (1) which of the sources are the most informative regarding the social reproduction strategies implemented through dances and songs? (2) how is this information expressed? (3) which features occur consistently in the sources, and which appear less frequently than we might expect?

2. Selection of the historical and ethnographic sources

This bibliographical review begins with the secondary sources that record a large part of the historical documentation that has come down to us. Some of these studies refer only in passing to the documents and the authors who supply essential information on the festive and ceremonial events³. To define the ethnographical picture further, we also carry out a parallel investigation to locate other materials not cited or reviewed in these secondary sources.

The main criterion for including the ethnohistorical sources was the presence of features that are common to the different Eskimo cultures of Alaska. Materials relating to the Aleut peoples are excluded, because they differ significantly from the rest of the societies of south-western Alaska. Some years ago, Margaret Lantis already noted the difficulty of classifying and interpreting the ceremonies and celebrations of the Aleut communities (Lantis 1966: 76)⁴.

With regard to the Inupiat peoples, this study includes only the regions in the Seward Peninsula and Kotzebue Sound. The wealth of ethnohistorical material available for these territories highlights the major similarities between the strategies of social reproduction implemented in these peoples and in the Alutiiq and Yup'ik. The geographical proximity of the Inupiat and Yup'ik cultures and the trading activity in the Bering Strait area (Griffin 1996: 99-100) well have allowed the transmission of social organization strategies and traditions. Nevertheless, the relations between the societies that inhabited these territories until the early nineteenth century, were characterized by the alternation of periods of hostility and periods of peace (Burch 1980: 272-274).

² Ethnoarchaeomusicology is a scientific discipline that explores the musical behaviors of ancient societies. Its methodological approach focuses on three different areas of knowledge: ethnology, archaeology and musicology. Ethnoarchaeomusicological research can be used in two main areas: (1) the study and understanding of the musical behavior of ancient societies as it is reported in historical and ethnographic accounts; (2) the study and understanding of the musical behavior of prehistoric societies through methodologies and hypothesis obtained from a critical analysis of ethnographic accounts.

³ Lantis (1966), Oswalt (1979), Ray (1975) and Fienup-Riordan (1994) are good reference points.

⁴ Veniaminov (1984) and others confirm Lantis's theory that the celebrations and ceremonies of the Aleut societies differed substantially from those of the neighboring regions of south-western Alaska.

3. The history of social reproduction, ceremonies and celebrations in the Alutiiq, Yup'ik and Inupiat cultures

The first explorations of the coastal regions of Alaska date from 1732. Mikhail Spiridonovich Gvozdev and Ivan Fedorov mapped the north-western coast. The first explorers understood next to nothing about the social organization of the cultures of the north and south-west of Alaska. Many of the observations published made in newspapers and reports were narrated from an ethnocentric perspective (Ray 1975: xix, 40) and the «myth of the noble savage» appears frequently in the language used. In fact, rather than a cultural reality, to a large extent the explorers' ethnographical accounts can be said to project onto the Eskimo peoples their own preconceptions based on earlier contacts with other «tribal» societies. As a result, some of the ethnographic data are not particularly reliable and reflect rather condescending value judgments. In addition, some of the sources are inaccurate and do not give a clear idea of the type of celebrations or ceremonies they are describing⁵. It should also be noted that the explorers often describe dances and songs outside a ceremonial or festive context; in their brief encounters with the newcomers, groups of coastal Eskimos often used music and dance to welcome the «white man» and to facilitate contact and trade. Accounts of this kind are quite common in the historical sources.

After the discovery of the Aleutian Islands and the Gulf of Alaska in 1741, Russian traders began to exploit the territories of this part of the Pacific. The first historical accounts that include ethnographical information on Alaska focused almost exclusively on the Aleutian Islands (Black 2004: 59-72; Ray 1975: 26-38; Townsend 1975: 22-23). The Russian presence effectively forestalled any attempts by western Europeans to establish a foothold in the area and it was not until 1778 that the first western Europeans arrived. Captain James Cook pioneered the exploration of the territories situated north of the Aleutian Islands, thus initiating what Ray calls the second historical period of the Bering Strait (Ray 1975: 39). Although Cook wrote descriptions of some of the Eskimo groups on the coast (Cook 1805: 307), he made no mention of their ceremonies and celebrations; he refers only once to the presence of songs and dances and does not name the type of event observed (Cook 1805: 304). Interestingly, however, he does describe several festive activities on the island of Vancouver which he witnessed on the Discovery's outward voyage (Cook 1805: 130-221). The attention that Cook paid to describing the various societies he encountered is very uneven, probably because of questions of geography and climate. His expedition suffered tremendous difficulties in its attempts to find the North-western Passage through the Bering Strait; the volatile weather conditions, the ice and the shallow waters posed a constant threat to any ship attempting to navigate the Arctic. Devoting efforts to get to know the societies that inhabited the Alaskan coasts was not one of the Discovery's priorities.

⁵ Examples are the reports by Grigory Ivanovich Shelekhov (Shelekhov 1783-1790: 38-49) and William Coxe (Coxe 1787: 180, 198-200, 217, 219).

4. The first descriptions of ceremonial and festive events

The first descriptions of ceremonies and festivals date from the nineteenth century (Ray 1975: 175-176). The oldest account that unquestionably relates a ceremonial event appears in the diary of Gavriil Ivanovich Davydov⁶, a Russian naval officer who described the lives of some of the societies of south-west Alaska between 1802 and 1807. His accounts were published in 1816 under the title *Reise der russisch-kaiserlichen Flott-Offiziere Chwostow und Dawydow von St. Petersburg durch Sibirien nach Amerika und zurück in den Jahren 1802, 1803 und 1804* (Davydov 1816)⁷. Davydov's study of ethnographic aspects of the inhabitants of Kodiak Island takes up around half of the book (Davydov 1977: 146-249). The most significant feature of this study is the fact that it contains the first description of the Bladder Festival observed among the societies of south-western Alaska (Davydov 1977: 107-111). Davydov's account is incomplete, but it is detailed enough to allow us to identify the event and its main features. With regard to the strategies of social reproduction implemented by the Koniaga, Davydov records the roles and tasks of the women in the celebrations and the songs and dances they performed (Davydov 1977: 165-167, 173-174, 184). The information he provides is very interesting, even though it is important to contrast and complement it with later sources.

During the first quarter of the nineteenth century, more ethnographic accounts were written, though few of them record ceremonies and festive events. Examples are the reports by Urey Fedorovich Lisiansky and Georg Heinrich von Langsdorff, members of the Russian expedition led by Adam Johann von Krusenstern⁸. On this expedition, the Russian captain Lisiansky was the commander of the ship *Neva* between 1803 and 1806. His accounts were published two years before Davydov's, under the title *A Voyage round the World: in the Years 1803, 4, 5, & 6* (Lisiansky 1814). In this article we only consider the author's ethnographic notes on Kodiak Island, dating from May 1805 (Lisiansky 1814: 190-214). In the main he records quite general aspects of the customs of the inhabitants of this island, but he concentrates above all on the material elements of their everyday lives – expressing his admiration, for example, for their different types of kayak (Lisiansky 1814: 211-212). The observations he compiled on the festivals are very uneven; he devotes only a few lines to the songs and dances, describing them as slightly different from those performed by other «savage nations» (Lisiansky 1814: 208-210).

Langsdorff, a naturalist, was a member of Krusenstern's crew on board the ship *Nadezhda*, on the same expedition. His writings were also published in 1814 under the title *Voyages and travels in various parts of the world: during the years 1803, 1804, 1805, 1806, and 1807 part II* (Langsdorff 1814). This work contains ethnographic notes on the inhabitants of Kodiak Island recorded in the summer of 1805 (Langsdorff 1814: 58-80). He describes their customs and elements of their material culture. However, he only mentions the presence of the dances in passing, placing

⁶ This explorer appears as Davidov in other sources (Lantis 1966).

⁷ In 1977 it was translated into English and published under the title *Two voyages to Russian America* (Davydov 1977).

⁸ In Russia he was known as Ivan Fedorovich Kruzenshtern.

them on the same level as «sports», which were very popular among the Koniaga. In fact the only musical instrument he mentions is a rattle made from puffins' beaks which, rather surprisingly, he likens to «Spanish castanets» (Langsdorff 1814: 64). Unlike Lisiansky, Langsdorff says nothing about songs. In general, the accounts of the two men are quite similar, and neither contains much information on the ceremonies and festivals. It should be borne in mind that they both visited Kodiak Island in the warm seasons, when the Koniaga peoples devoted themselves almost entirely to productive activities.

Some years later, in the months of July, August and September between 1825 and 1828, Frederick William Beechey participated in an expedition in search of the North-west Passage. His writings were published under the title *Narrative of a voyage to the Pacific and Beering's strait, to co-operate with the polar expeditions: performed in His Majesty's ship Blossom, under the command of Captain F. W. Beechey ... in the years 1825, 26, 27, 28* (Beechey 1831). Beechey was one of the first explorers to define the societies of the west coast of Alaska as Eskimo cultures (Ray 1975: 86). The notes he wrote on the island of St. Lawrence and the southern part of the Inupiat region (Cape Prince of Wales and Kotzebue Sound) are particularly interesting. Like his predecessors, he visited these regions during the warmer months, and so he did not observe or describe the main celebrations and ceremonies; nor did he venture away from the coastline (Beechey 1831: 358), a fact that also limited his observations. His ethnographic notes cover aspects such as the physical appearance of the natives and a wealth of detail on their material culture, which he compared constantly with other societies in south-western Alaska (Beechey 1831: 330-412). Beechey's descriptions of the dances, songs and drums usually narrate isolated events and encounters with Eskimo communities (Beechey 1831: 361, 365, 395-396). His description of the sexual division of space and roles in these coastal societies is especially interesting (Beechey 1831: 395): he records that the men played a preeminent role in beating the drums, singing and dancing. Beechey's descriptions do not go into great detail, nor does he refer to other activities related with strategies of social reproduction, but he does offer valuable information that to a large extent coincides with and complements later ethnohistorical reports.

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century the Russian explorer and scientist Lavrenty Alekseyevich Zagoskin, in the employ of the Russian Naval Fleet, described various celebrations and ceremonies of the Yup'ik cultures. Between 1842 and 1844 he travelled along the main rivers in south-western Alaska (Oswalt 1979: 251, 254), and his diaries contain a great deal of information on the societies that inhabited these regions. His detailed ethnographic notes were published in *Lieutenant Zagoskin's travels in Russian America, 1842-1844: The first ethnographic and geographic investigations in the Yukon and Kuskokwim Valleys of Alaska* (Zagoskin 1967); his notes on the collective winter celebrations are particularly interesting. Zagoskin was one of the first visitors to describe the building where the joint festivals and ceremonies were held, the «kashim» (Zagoskin 1967: 115), and also one of the first to provide detailed accounts of events such as the Bladder Festival, the Feast of the Dead and the Great Feast of the Dead (Zagoskin 1967: 122-124, 229-231). His writings contain references to dances, songs and drums (Zagoskin 1967: 119-120)

and to the sexual divisions in the societies he observed. Interestingly, Zagoskin also mentions the process of acculturation already underway in these societies in south-western Alaska; for example, he reports that some Eskimo populations had incorporated Russian songs in their entertainments (Zagoskin 1967: 118).

By the mid-nineteenth century, a significant part of these Eskimo populations were experiencing a rapid process of change due to their continued contact with the cultures from outside⁹. But it was not just acculturation that generated change; the smallpox epidemics of 1838 and 1839, and later in 1900, which were brought by the newcomers, wiped out entire populations and caused serious disruptions in the traditional social organization (Wolfe 1982; Fortuine 1989). For these reasons, the critical analysis of the ethnographical descriptions of the structure of the collective celebrations of south-western Alaska must take full account of the presence of outsiders.

During his stay in south-western Alaska in 1851, Heinrich Johann Holmberg compiled a set of ethnographic data. We have little information on Holmberg, but we know that he was an entomologist who explored the Kodiak archipelago (Mannerheim 1853). His notes were published under the original title *Ethnographische Skizzen über Völker des russischen Amerika* (Holmberg 1856)¹⁰. The ethnographic data that Holmberg supplies are not very detailed, but they describe certain aspects of the Koniaga such as their material culture, the sexual division of labor, and their customs and celebrations. With regard to the festivals and ceremonies, he mentions the building where they were held, the «kashim» (Holmberg 1985]: 44). Holmberg did not attend any festive events during his stay in the Kodiak archipelago in June, and limits himself to describing the Bladder Festival that Davydov had witnessed in 1802 (Holmberg 1985: 54-56). The use of data from other ethnohistorical sources was a common practice among the explorers; nonetheless, if we compare the original description made by Davydov (Davydov 1977: 107-111) with Holmberg's, we find notable differences, and the information should be treated with some caution.

Fifteen years after Holmberg, the American William Healey Dall compiled new ethnographic data on the societies of south-western Alaska. Dall was a naturalist and a prestigious malacologist who carried out scientific explorations between 1866 and 1868. At this time Dall was a member of the *Western Union Telegraph Expedition*, which toured the region of the Yukon compiling information on its geography, natural resources, and inhabitants. His observations were published under the title *Alaska and its Resources* (Dall 1880), and included ethnographic information about different Eskimo societies. The book contains many references to the presence of the festive and ceremonial building, which he calls the «casino», which was a feature of many of the settlements (Dall 1880: 13, 16-18, 36, 144-158, 404-406). Here we also find the first accounts of winter celebrations in different Eskimo cultures (Ray 1975: 175-176; Oswalt 1979: 176). Among the festivals Dall describes are the Asking Festival, the Feast of the Dead (described very briefly), and the Messenger Feast (Dall 1880:

⁹ The early twentieth century the societies that inhabited the valleys of the inland regions had no contact with the white man. However, in the preceding decades they had acquired some European technology through indirect routes (McClellan 1964: 6).

¹⁰ The work was translated into English in 1985 and published under the title *Holmberg's Ethnographic Sketches* (Holmberg 1985).

148-150, 150, 152-157), outlining the main features of these events and the dances and songs accompanied by drums. His descriptions give a good idea of how these communities organized themselves socially and how they implemented strategies of sexual division in tasks and roles. Dall published another study containing ethnographic data, entitled *On the Remains of Later Prehistoric Man obtained from Caves in the Catherina Archipelago, Alaska Territory, and especially from the Caves of the Aleutian Islands* (Dall 1878), which uses comparisons with the societies of Norton Sound to describe the celebrations, dances and songs of the Aleut societies. The author stresses the sexual division observed in dances performed by women wearing masks – a detail we do not find in the other sources for the south-west of Alaska (Dall 1878: 4-5). The study also describes the use of other masks that Dall found together with some Aleutian mummies, which he associated with traditions he had observed on Kodiak Island (Dall 1878: 28). In another description of festive events entitled *On Masks, Labrets, and Certain Aboriginal Customs, with an Inquiry into the Bearing of their Geographical Distribution* (Dall 1884), Dall provides a classification of the masks from various societies in South and North America, including several Alaskan cultures (Dall 1842: 121-143), and contextualizes the masks through descriptions of the dances in which they were used. Nevertheless, this study was more a catalogue of cultural materials than an ethnographic account.

In 1872 Alphonse Louis Pinart presented new data on Alaskan celebrations and ceremonies. Pinart as a philologist, ethnographer, and collector who explored the Aleutian Islands and the Kodiak archipelago. He published a number of studies based on his journeys, among them the *Catalogue des collections rapportées de l'Amérique russe* (Pinart 1872), and an article containing ethnographic information on the societies of the Kodiak archipelago entitled *Eskimaux et Koloches: idées religieuses et traditions des Kaniagmioutes* (Pinart 1873: 673-680). The catalogue of his materials contains few ethnographic data, and only a brief reference to what he terms «shamanic dances». His description also mentions the presence of the «*kagime*», where the «religious ceremonies» and the festive events were held (Pinart 1872: 11-12). In the article *Eskimaux et Koloches*, Pinart stresses the high level of acculturation due to the Russian presence and that these societies had lost a substantial part of their «traditions and customs» (Pinart 1873: 673). He also records some «religious» dances, but does not go into detail. Interestingly, he associates the dances of Kodiak Island with those of the region of the Yukon River (Pinart 1873: 676). Pinart also states that the societies of the Aleutian Islands had acquired the traditions and customs of the Koniaga, and suggests that the «religious songs» came from other cultures in different parts of Alaska, «which now form part of a lost heritage» (Pinart 1873: 676-676). The rest of the explanations contain brief accounts of initiation rites in some of the whaling communities (Pinart 1873: 679). The author proposes an interesting hypothesis based on the similarities between different cultures of the south– west of Alaska, although he does not back up his theory with convincing arguments. Taken as a whole, Pinart's work does not provide a basis for identifying the celebrations or ceremonies were held on the Kodiak archipelago, or the control strategies that were in place; his account needs to be complemented with other ethnohistorical documents that add detail to his descriptions.

The fullest, most detailed ethnohistorical source for the various celebrations and ceremonies of Alaska is the work of Edward William Nelson. Nelson was a naturalist and ethnologist who arrived in the Norton Sound in 1877 (Goldman 1935: 144). He explored the area until 1881 (Fitzhugh and Kaplan 1982: 13-15), and covered a large part of the coast of Alaska¹¹. During his journeys he observed the traditions and customs of many Eskimo cultures. All the ethnographic information that he compiled was published in *The Eskimo about Bering Strait* (E. W. Nelson 1899), considered one of the most complete ethnographic sources for the ancient societies of Alaska (Fair 2000: 465; Fienup-Riordan 1990: 24; Hughes *et al.*, 1965: 27; Ray 1967: 25;). Nelson described a variety of ceremonies and festivals, most of them in great detail. His book contains four different chapters on features of these events: the music and the dances in general, «the feasts and the festivals», the masks, and a chapter on «other ceremonial objects» (E. W. Nelson 1899: 347, 357, 393, 415). His study also includes information related to social reproduction, for example the «*kashim*» – the ceremonial house or men's house – and puberty (E. W. Nelson 1899: 285, 291). Oswalt says of Nelson's publication that it combines information from different Eskimo cultures, which makes it difficult to form an accurate image of each particular «tribe» (Oswalt 1979: 252), and it is certainly true that Nelson's descriptions include a great deal of ethnographic data from different populations. Nevertheless, the explicit references to ceremonial and festive events do provide a distinct image of each people. What is particularly interesting about Nelson's work is that he describes other aspects in a generalized way, for example the «*kashim*» and the drums used to accompany the dances and songs, the function of the winter celebrations, and the geographical context of some festive events (E. W. Nelson 1899: 350, 358-360, 363, 365). However, his observations should be treated with some caution. Nelson did not always witness everything that he describes first-hand; for example, he concedes that the information he provides on the «*Inviting-In Feast*» comes from the oral eye-witness accounts of other observers (E. W. Nelson 1899: 359). In spite of these criticisms, the ethnographic information that Nelson compiled represents an extremely valuable source due to the wealth of data and detail that he provides throughout the book.

5. Historical and ethnographic accounts from the 1880s onwards

During the 1880s a series of significant changes took place in the regions of southern and north-western Alaska (Fair 2000: 480-481). Although the territories and societies all had distinctive features of their own, they would all feel the impact of the newcomers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. By the 1880s Alutiiq settlements were already highly acculturated and their social organization showed profound changes. The continuous presence of the Russians in Kodiak Island since 1784, the smallpox epidemics of the late 1830 (Fortuine 1989: 230-235), and the United States' acquisition of Alaska in 1867, transformed Alutiiq society (Crowell

¹¹ As a naturalist he was able to make detailed observations of the fauna and environment of these regions, which he recorded in his *Report upon natural history collections made in Alaska: between the years 1877 and 1881* (Nelson *et al.* 1887).

et al 2002: 54-65). In the Yup'ik region the arrival of Orthodox missions from 1845 had dramatically altered the lives of the coastal settlements. But from the year 1885 onwards, with the establishment of the Moravian and Catholic Churches in the Kuskokwim River area changes also reached the inland regions. These new missions were far more intent on converting the inhabitants than the Orthodox church had ever been, but even in this new context many Yup'ik settlements along in the upper parts of the rivers continued to maintain a «traditional» lifestyle until the mid-twentieth century (Oswalt 1990: 94-180; Fienup-Riordan 1994: 31-34).

By this time, the Inupiat regions had begun to abandon their traditional beliefs. There were several reasons for this. The first was the growing acculturation promoted by the US government and the various evangelizing missions, which by the 1890s had managed to convert almost all the natives (Burch 1994: 81). Second, obligatory schooling led many families to abandon the villages of their birth to move to the settlements where there were schools; and third, the introduction of the rearing of reindeer from Siberia, as a way of «civilizing» these peoples which until that time had been hunter-gatherers and fishermen, permanently changed the economic model of the Eskimo societies. To implement these strategies, the authorities exerted strong pressure on these communities to give up their nomadic life styles and to settle in the same place throughout the year. As a result of these drastic changes, the communities lost many of their customs and traditions, and their local and social autonomy as well; at the same time, they were obliged to assimilate the «Protestant work ethic» characteristic of the cultures of some of the newcomers (Fair 2000: 480).

In 1880 Ivan Petrov¹² was put in charge of the Tenth Census of Alaska (Ray 1975). The data compiled were published in the *Report on the Population, Industries, and Resources of Alaska* (Petrov 1884). Petrov describes the various societies of Alaska (Petrov 1884: 124-177), focusing on their lifestyles, social organization, and their customs and traditions. With regard to the festivals and ceremonies, Petrov describes the house where they were held, the «*kashga*», the use of masks and drums, and the dances and songs performed (Petrov 1884: 128-144). He also mentions the differences in the roles of the men and women in the festive events. We should note that Petrov uses Zagoskin's accounts to describe the ceremonies and the celebrations, for example, the Great Feast of the Dead (Petrov 1884: 129-131). For this reason, his study should be considered with caution and the data he provides should be contrasted carefully with those of others; in fact, some secondary sources have considered his information to be inaccurate (Black 1981: 34-36; Pierce 1968: 5; Pratt 1997).

Johan Adrian Jacobsen, an ethnographer employed by the *Königliches Museum* in Berlin, traveled through several regions of the North American continent between 1881 and 1883 and compiled information on the Eskimo communities. During his journeys he took a series of notes which Adrian Woldt would publish in 1884 under the title *Capitain Jacobsens Reise an der nordwestküste Amerikas 1881-1883: zum Zwecke ethnologischer Sammlungen und Erkundigungen nebst Beschreibung persönlicher Erlebnisse*¹³ (Jacobsen 1884). In 1882 Jacobsen arrived in St Michael, which was to be

¹² The name «Petrov» was also written as «Petroff» (Fienup-Riordan 1991; Berardi 1999) or «Petrof» (Lantis 1966).

¹³ The English translation was published in 1977 (Jacobsen 1977).

the starting point for his journeys along the west coast of Alaska. True to his aim of recording as much ethnographic material as possible (Jacobsen 1977: ix), his notes make several references to features of the festive events of the Eskimo societies of the time. Jacobsen describes in detail the building where the celebrations were held, which he calls the «*kassigit*» (Jacobsen 1977: 87-88), and other festivals and ceremonies such as the [Great] Feast of the Dead¹⁴, the Welcome Ceremony, and the Bladder Festival (Jacobsen 1977: 134-137, 142, 144-145, 149-150). Jacobsen's description of the Bladder Festival presents notable differences compared with other ethnohistorical sources regarding the sexual division of men and women. Nonetheless, his information on other aspects coincides with the other sources – for instance, the separate spaces inside the «*kassigit*» during the celebrations, and the costumes and the distinct movements in the dances. Jacobsen's descriptions are not widely quoted in the anthropological literature, but they constitute invaluable ethnographic material for contrasting and complementing the ethnohistorical sources of the late nineteenth century.

Between 1884 and 1904, Lieutenant John Cassin Cantwell sailed along the coast of Alaska under the orders of Captain Michael A. Healy (Walker 2009), who was employed by the *United States Revenue Cutter Service*, the maritime vigilance service. Healy commissioned Cantwell to carry out a series of explorations to compile information on the region's natural resources. Cantwell's reports *A Narrative Account of the Exploration of the Kowak River, Alaska* and *Exploration of the Kowak River, Alaska. Ethnological Notes* were published by Healy in 1889 as the *Report of the cruise of the revenue marine steamer Corwin in the Arctic Ocean in 1884* (Cantwell 1889). Cantwell's notes contain brief ethnographic data on the subject of social reproduction – for example, descriptions of the dances and the songs accompanied by drums in the festive events – and information on marriage and puberty (Cantwell 1889: 72-73, 88). Cantwell also describes what he terms «festivals, games and amusements». Interestingly, he states that the settlements in the region of the Kobuk River did not have a «*qargi*», the gathering place specifically used for celebrations¹⁵. Cantwell takes the absence of the *qargi* as evidence that the festive events of these cultures were different from those of other regions of Alaska; however, this conclusion (Cantwell 1889: 89) may not be entirely reliable, because we know that in the summer, the season in which Cantwell carried out his observations, celebrations were never held inside the «*qargi*»; these buildings were used only in winter. Cantwell published another book entitled *Report of the operations of the US revenue steamer Nunivak on the Yukon river station, Alaska, 1899-1901* (Cantwell 1902), which also contains some brief notes on festivals and celebrations. However, the information he provides is very general, and the lack of detail makes it practically impossible to identify the events he describes (Cantwell 1902: 213-214). Unlike his first study, this report does refer to the presence of a «*kazhim*». The dances are the feature that Cantwell notes the most frequently, and it is surprising that the songs are referred to only in passing and that there is no mention at all of the presence of drums. However, Cantwell records the use of instruments such as

¹⁴ Gunther identifies the celebration described by Jacobsen as the Feast of the Dead. However, after a thorough study of the source, we contend that the event is in fact the Great Feast of the Dead (Jacobsen 1977: 226).

¹⁵ Some of Cantwell's observations should be treated with caution, because modern archaeological studies have shown that the *qargi* was not always larger than the rest of the dwellings in the settlement (Lutz 1973: 111).

the violin and the accordion accompanying some of the dances (Cantwell 1902: 214); clearly, in this second account, he is describing societies that were already acculturated and had incorporated western elements into their customs and traditions.

A year after Cantwell began his journeys, John and Edith Kilbuck, a missionary couple from the Moravian church, settled in the region of the Kuskokwim River. The Kilbucks recorded their experiences in diaries and yearbooks between the years 1885 and 1921, some of which were published by Fienup-Riordan under the title *The Yup'ik Eskimos: as described in the travel journals and ethnographic accounts of John and Edith Kilbuck who served with the Alaska mission of the Moravian church, 1886-1900* (Kilbuck and Kilbuck 1988). The ethnographic data contained here reveal these missionaries' perceptions of the Eskimo families, and describe certain features of sexual division of labor and roles in these societies (Kilbuck and Kilbuck 1988: 15-19). The Kilbucks also compiled information on festive events. They describe a celebration they define as a «masquerade», and speak of the songs and the drums and the contexts in which they were used (Kilbuck and Kilbuck 1988: 23). Their notes contain a partial description of a Bladder Festival, and of two celebrations shared by two communities, which they termed «*eckrushka*» and «*potlatch*» (Kilbuck and Kilbuck 1988: 24-28, 41-43, 45-46). Their descriptions of festivals are not very detailed, but they corroborate the data from other ethnohistorical sources. It should also be noted that the missionaries' clear evangelizing mission (Fienup-Riordan 1991: 38; Oswald 1979: 286) meant that their response to the customs and beliefs of the peoples in these territories was hardly objective (Oswald 1990: 83). During the first years of their stay among the Eskimos the Kilbucks regarded the festive events as harmless activities as there were no idols or «pagan excesses», but when John Kilbuck learnt the Yup'ik language he came to believe that some of the celebrations were religious rituals (Oswald 1990: 86). The Kilbucks now censured these events, which they saw as running counter to their mission (Fienup-Riordan 1990: 89-90; Fienup-Riordan 1991: 69, 71, 189, 199, 283); they took it upon themselves to prohibit the use of masks and to change the calendar of the festivities, replacing them with Christian celebrations (Oswald 1990: 86-87). For all these reasons, the Kilbucks' first accounts should be seen as the product of a rather naïve ethnocentrism, which with time developed into a strategic evangelizing vocation.

In 1889 the doctor Harry M. W. Edmonds traveled to Alaska as part of the expedition led by John Henry Turner (Ray 1975: 197, 243). Edmonds made several ethnographic observations for the *U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey*¹⁶, although in fact his notes were not published until 1966 under the title *The Eskimo of St. Michael and Vicinity as Related by H. M. W. Edmonds*, edited by Dorothy Jean Ray. His ethnographic information is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the material culture and social structure of these ancient Eskimo societies (Ray 1966: 23-74). The second part explains their annual cycles and the ceremonial season, describing the main features and festive events (Ray 1966: 75-103). With regard to the ceremonies, Edmonds provides data on the space in which they were held, the «*casine*». He also

¹⁶ The US Coast and Geodetic Survey was the agency that coordinated transport, communication and mapmaking, and other activities related to science and engineering.

devotes several pages to the dances and the contexts in which they were performed, and to the differences between the movements of the men and the women (Ray 1966: 51-52, 85-87). His reports are based on three ceremonial events that he observed in the settlements of Saint Michael and Stebbins. The first ceremony he describes is the *Asking Festival* (Ray 1966: 87-91); he outlines the main features and activities and the sexual division of tasks and roles. Edmonds places great emphasis on the dances, which he mentions on several occasions, and he also stresses the absence of masks. The second ceremony is the [Great]¹⁷ Feast of the Dead (Ray 1966: 91-101), the event he describes in greatest detail, underlining once again the clear difference between the roles of the men and the women. Thirdly, he gives a brief account of the Bladder Festival (Ray 1966: 101-103), but he does not mention the climax of this celebration, when the bladders are returned to the water. This omission raised doubts about whether the author was sufficiently knowledgeable of the purpose of the event, or whether this description differs from the other ethnohistorical accounts for some unexplained reason. In general terms, Edmonds's accounts are different from the other sources from the same era; in the Great Feast of the Dead and the Bladder Festival, for example, he is alone in mentioning the presence of masks (Ray 1966: 101). For this reason his work is considered supplementary to other ethnohistorical documents of the era (Oswalt 1979: 270).

In July 1890 Harrison Robertson Thornton came to Port Clarence, Alaska, to work as a teacher at the American Missionary Association in Cape Prince of Wales. The main aim of the association was to educate and «civilize» the natives of the area through a strict policy of acculturation. Thornton spent only three years at Cape Prince of Wales before being killed by three natives, who had been expelled from school for committing a robbery. During the first year of his stay, between 1890 and 1891, Thornton recorded his experiences among these Eskimo communities in his journal. His notes contain descriptions of the natural history of the area, and ethnographic observations on the natives' life. This manuscript was published in 1931 by Neda S. and William M. Thornton under the title «Among the Eskimos of Wales, Alaska 1890-1893» (Thornton 1931). Among the ethnographic information there is a detailed description of the men's house, the *Kosge* (Thornton 1931: 109-111). Thornton also describes some festivals that he observed, one of which was a welcome party to honor foreign visitors. His report underlined the dominant role of the men in dances and songs (Thornton 1931: 111). Thornton describes another festival held to mark the first bear hunt, in which the hunters and the hunted bear were the main protagonists (Thornton: 112-114). Thornton's notes also include descriptions of whaling festivals and ceremonies which draw attention to the differences in the roles of men and women (Thornton: 163-169). In all the festivals he describes the men held the main roles in the dances, songs and drumming; women were excluded and were at the service of men.

Robert Percival Porter was superintendent of the *U.S. Department of the Interior Census* during the Eleventh Census carried out in Alaska in 1890. The data he compiled were published in the *Report on population and resources of Alaska at the*

¹⁷ According to Ray, this event was the Feast of the Dead. However, after a thorough analysis of Edmonds' descriptions, we conclude that it was actually the Great Feast of the Dead.

Eleventh Census: 1890 (Porter 1893), which was divided into two parts, the first focusing on the peoples inhabiting each district, and the second on their economic activities. The first part presents information on the social organization, traditions and customs (Porter 1893: 3-198); Porter specifies the number of inhabitants and dwellings in each settlement, and in some areas such as the Kuskokwim and the Yukon he makes frequent references to the festive and ceremonial houses, the «*kashga*» (Porter 1893: 99-128). These data are interesting because they identify the villages with a *kashga* – which the census defines as a space of sexual division used for festive events, but above all associated with the productive and social activities of the men (Porter 1893: 101-120). Porter also describes a celebration he observed in the Norton Bay area which he defined as *potlatch*¹⁸ (Porter 1893: 140-141). The account of this event is brief but it provides information on the ceremonies, dances, and songs accompanied by drums. Porter mentions the sexual division in many of the activities, although in the case of the dances it is not clear whether the division existed or not. Similarly, the author describes other festivals held during «the whaling season», in which he mentions again the dances and the songs accompanied by drums¹⁹ (Porter 1893: 141-142). As a whole, the ethnohistorical information provided by Porter is valuable and complements other accounts. The later studies of the social reproduction and organization of these cultures owe a great deal to his compilation of such a large body of statistical data on villages with a *kashga*.

6. The ethnohistory of the Twentieth Century

Around the turn of the century, the arrival of outsiders changed the social organization of the Eskimo societies of Alaska for ever. The first years of the new century saw an avalanche of gold diggers and the emergence of transport and communication systems along the main rivers. This increasing mobility and the contact between outsiders and natives brought with it a lethal new epidemic, alcoholism, which caused havoc among the Eskimo communities living near the goldmines and severely weakened their social structure (Napoleon 1991; Wolfe 1982). This situation was compounded by the process of «Americanization» of the Eskimo societies, which put an end to most of the customs and traditions that still survived (Fienup-Riordan 1994: 31-34; Oswalt 1990: 94-180).

In this context of profound change, Frank Alfred Golder recorded ethnographic data between 1899 and 1902 while employed as a teacher on the Aleutian Islands. The information compiled by Golder during this period is unusual in that it reproduces songs and tales from different regions of the south-west of Alaska. It was published in 1903 in the *Journal of American Folklore* (Golder 1903). This first edition did not provide any specific information on festive events, only mentioning the words *feast*

¹⁸ Analysing Porter's description of this *potlatch*, we consider that this celebration was a Great Feast of the Dead.

¹⁹ Porter reference two festivals: an encounter between inhabitants of different settlements, which seems to have been the Messenger Feast, and a festival involving the exchange of presents between men and women, which could be taken to be the Asking Festival.

or *song* outside the context of collective celebration (Golder 1903: 16, 19, 26). Later, in 1909, Golder published other accounts of his stay in the Aleutian Islands. One of them focused on the area of the Karluk River on Kodiak Island (Golder 1909: 23-24), which provides information on the social organization and sexual division of spaces and roles in the celebrations. The account also mentions dances and songs accompanied by drums in a space that Golder termed the «dance–hall», although he does not explicitly state what kind of celebration he is describing. Golder's information is not first-hand, but it is valuable nonetheless: story-telling had a variety of purposes for these ancient Eskimo societies, among them the maintenance of particular customs and traditions in accordance with their social organization.

Ernest William Hawkes was an anthropologist with an interest in the Inuit societies of Canada and some of the Eskimo cultures of the south and north-west of Alaska. His studies addressed a wide range of questions, although in the present article we will just mention his reports of the festive events he was able to observe. Hawkes published the *Inviting-In Feast* (1913), and a general description of the celebrations held in the area of the Bering Sea, entitled *The Dance Festivals of the Alaskan Eskimo* (1914). The first publication describes one of the most important celebrations in these societies, the «*Inviting-In*» *Feast*, in which several communities took part. His study is one of the most detailed of all the ethnohistorical sources; he stresses important contextual factors such as the presence of the missionaries and their attempts to prohibit the celebration of these events (Hawkes 1913: 2). He also describes the building where the celebration was held, the «*kazgi*», and the spaces assigned to the participants in the festivities. The author records many features of the dances and the songs accompanied by drums in great detail, and he also describes the sexual division of the roles inside the celebrations, in which for the most part the men played the leading role. He also explains the differences between the movements of the men and the women in the dances, their positions in the space, and their respective roles. Hawkes's second account is more generic and focuses on a variety of festive events. It includes a short section on «the participation of the sexes» in these celebrations and offers a singular vision of the role of the women in the dances, stating that there were no restrictions on their participation (Hawkes 1914: 11-12). In the light of the accounts of other authors this claim is surprising; though it may be the case that the sexual exclusion of women did not necessarily take the form of a blanket prohibition, but may have been expressed through the roles they were allowed to perform before, during and after the celebrations. In this regard, the author's view seems to be rather limited and actually inconsistent with his own information, because in his description of two of the main ceremonial events, the Bladder Festival or the Feast of the Dead (Hawkes 1914: 26-29), he does not mention women at any time. What is more, the absence of any discussion of other ethnographic aspects of the life of these societies rather weakens some of the author's claims. Nonetheless, his descriptions provide essential data that coincide with other sources.

Knud Johan Victor Rasmussen was a leading explorer and ethnographer who devoted his entire life to the study of the Inuit and Eskimo societies (Oswalt 1990: 182). On his expeditions he studied aspects such as geology, geography, zoology, archaeology and ethnography (Thalbizer 1934: 588-589). His studies of the socie-

ties of Alaska are published in *Across Arctic America: Narrative of the Fifth Thule Expedition* (Rasmussen 1999: 304-388) and *The Eagle's Gift: Alaskan Eskimo Tales* (Rasmussen 1932). The first of these books contains information compiled between 1921 and 1924 and includes notes on his journey through the region of the Bering Sea. The observations referring to Alaska cover part of the regions of the north and south-west of this territory. In an explicit reference to the celebrations and ceremonies, Rasmussen briefly notes features such as the masks, songs and dances, and the ceremonial and festive house, the «*qagsse*» (Rasmussen 1999: 326, 348, 352). He only reports one festive event, the Bladder Festival, described to him by the natives of the island of Nunivak (Rasmussen 1999: 352-355). Rasmussen's second publication includes the accounts that he compiled between 1921 and 1924. In one of them he describes the Messenger Feast. In this tale is reviewed the myth of the «the eagle and the wolf's dance», usually held in this celebration (Rasmussen 1932: 17-33). This work gives a good idea of the structure of these ancient cultures and the strategies of sexual division they implemented, but it is not as thorough or reliable as other eyewitness accounts by late nineteenth-century authors.

Edward S. Curtis was a photographer who began to record the lives of the native societies of North America in 1906. His work, which eventually expanded to twenty volumes, was published under the title *The North American Indians* (Curtis 1930). The last volumes depict some of the societies of southern and north-western Alaska, and include ethnographic descriptions and images compiled in 1927. As the author notes in the introduction, the expeditions were carried out in the summer season, which means that only a part of the lives of these communities is reflected (Curtis 1930: xvi). In fact Curtis does not give first-hand accounts of any festive events but relies on the natives' descriptions. The data in his work are structured systematically, presenting each culture with a general description and its mythology. For some societies he adds a section on the social customs, but the only ceremonies depicted are those of the Nunivak; in fact the information on the festivals and ceremonies of the Nunivak culture is very interesting, with its descriptions of the «the men's house», the space where the celebrations were held, and the drums, songs and dances. He mentions the Messenger Feast frequently, although he only describes it in detail in three sections (Curtis 1930: 67-71, 146-147, 213-214). The Bladder Festival or the Asking Festival are also mentioned on several occasions, but are only described once (Curtis 1930: 55-56, 65-67). Curtis also reports other events like the ceremony for a boy after catching his first bird, or «the walrus ceremony», but does not describe them in detail. In fact the book is valuable for its numerous, high-quality images rather than for the ethnohistorical data contained in the text. The photographs do not show any celebrations or festivals, but do show features such as a «men's house» and two masks (Curtis 1930: 8-12, 80, 82). In general, Curtis's book offers valuable insights into how these cultures were structured and how they continued to implement some of the strategies that had enabled them to survive as hunter-gatherer and fishing societies.

In 1936 and 1937 the German anthropologist Hans Himmelheber carried out ten months of ethnographic research on Nunivak Island²⁰. During this time Himmelheber

²⁰ Himmelheber is also known for his numerous studies of African art.

was able to observe different ceremonies and traditional activities associated with this culture. His ethnographic observations were published in several books. Under the title *Eskimokünstler: Ergebnisse einer Reise in Alaska* (Himmelheber 1938) Himmelheber compiled observations on Yup'ik carvers and painters; the book was translated into English in 1993 under the title *Eskimo Artists* (Himmelheber 1993). The author published another collection of legends and stories under the title *Der gefrorene Pfad: Mythen, Märchen und Legenden der Eskimo* (Himmelheber 1951); and finally there is the work *Ethnographische Notiz von den Nunivak Eskimo* (Himmelheber 1980) containing his ethnographic notes, was not published until 1980. In 2000 the anthropologist Fienup-Riordan published the book *Where the Echo Began* (Fienup-Riordan and Himmelheber 2000) which includes the two previous works translated into English. Himmelheber's works contain descriptions of ceremonies and festivities. One of these events is *The Women Dancing, Agaiach* (Fienup-Riordan and Himmelheber 2000: 108-117), stresses the importance of the role of women in the dances and describes how gifts were given to old people and the poor. This celebration is not mentioned in the above sources. In addition, there is a detailed description of the Bladder Festival, *Nagatschuchdachelu'ting* (Fienup-Riordan and Himmelheber 2000: 117-130), which coincides with most of the sources that have been reviewed. Interestingly, however, Himmelheber reports certain details that are not found elsewhere, such as the women's presence in the men's house in some ceremonial activities (Fienup-Riordan and Himmelheber 2000: 126). Finally, the author also mentions an event called *Halving It, Kokchlu'ting* (Fienup-Riordan and Himmelheber 2000: 130-131), in which men give each other presents in the men's house, and in which the women could participate in the dances. In conclusion, Himmelheber's accounts shed a rather different light on the nature of ceremonies and festivities from other sources, such as Curtis and Rasmussen, who in fact did not directly observe what they reported.

Finally we should mention the work of the American anthropologist Margaret Lantis, who lived and did research on Nunivak island for a year in 1939-1940. The ethnographic information that she collected was published under the title *The Social Culture of the Nunivak Eskimo* (Lantis 1946). This book describes various ceremonies and festivals and provides additional information as well. One of the events that the author describes in detail is the Bladder Feast, *Uksô'galu'tin*. Her description differs somewhat from the accounts of Curtis and Rasmussen, who also did research in Nunivak Island²¹. In Lantis's observations, which are similar to Himmelheber's, women play a more active part in this event, in some of the activities that were held in the men's house, such as dances (Lantis, 1946: 182, 184-186). Interestingly Lantis's work also has a section on mythology containing two stories about the Bladder Feast (Lantis 1946: 290, 307-308), and descriptions of other festivities and ceremonies linked to the Bladder Feast related to childhood and puberty (Lantis 1946: 224-227). The author also briefly mentions a celebration called the Exchange Feast, *Patu'xta'galu'tin* (Lantis 1946: 187-188). She does not go into great detail about the feast's activities, but the information she provides

²¹ Fienup-Riordan points out that Lantis could not have seen many ceremonial elements because, as a woman, she could not access the men's house (Fienup-Riordan and Himmelheber 2000: xv). On the other hand Lantis would have had access to certain women's activities, which authors like Rasmussen, Curtis and Himmelheber did not mention.

resembles that of other sources that describe this event as the Asking Festival. Finally Lantis give a full description of the Messenger Feast providing interesting information on the sexual division of the tasks and roles that make up this event (Lantis 1946: 188-192). One interesting detail that she records, which coincides with Curtis's descriptions, is the presence of masks in the Messenger Feast. Overall, her observations provide a wealth of information on various aspects of Nunivak culture, which complements many of the earlier accounts of this society.

7. Conclusions

The ethnohistorical record of Alaska contains a wide range of information concerning the strategies of social reproduction adopted by the Alutiiq, Yup'ik and Inupiat cultures. Some of these strategies were embodied in ceremonial and festive activities, from which women were excluded, or in which they played only a secondary role. A good example of this is the evidence that all festivals and ceremonies were managed by men, who also occupied a prominent place in the dances and singing groups. In the main events, the women's role was always secondary; in many of these activities women were only spectators, or when they participated in the dances and songs their role was subordinate to that of the men.

The historical and ethnographical sources analyzed in this study present significant differences in terms of their contents and also in terms of their general approach. The first historical records of the celebrations and the festivals of Alaska date from the early nineteenth century. Some of these documents provide only partial descriptions that shed little light on the overall reality of those cultures, and so they should be understood only as interpretations, sometimes quite subjective, of what was really observed. To this we should add the fact that already in the nineteenth century many societies of the south-west of Alaska were undergoing evident social changes due to the continued and diverse presence of outsiders, which had begun during the second half of the eighteenth century. So the descriptions and ethnographical data referring to the Eskimo societies of the nineteenth century should be analyzed critically and contrasted with other records.

The most accurate and detailed descriptions of Eskimo ceremonies and festivals date from the period between 1870 and 1890. In fact, the ethnohistorical sources of this era lay particular emphasis on these events. The most interesting accounts describe the celebrations held during the coldest months, since between November and February an accentuated strategy of sexual division was implemented in the winter settlements; in fact, the ethnographical information from the period suggests that this strategy characterized all the productive and celebratory activities.

At the start of the twentieth century we find the last genuinely ethnohistorical accounts of the Eskimo societies, produced mainly by anthropologists. By this time the level of acculturation was already very high. Although some of the traditions and customs were maintained, many festive and ceremonial events had died out. For this reason, much of the ethnographic information recorded in this period proceeds mainly from the oral accounts recorded from all over Alaska.

Although there is a secondary bibliography that has analyzed an important part of the ethnohistorical documentation of Alaska, a great deal remains to be done. The valuable ethnohistorical documentation we mention here can serve as the basis for future ethnomusicological and ethnoarchaeological studies and for the proposal of new lines of research. Currently, ceremonial and festive activities are largely ignored in archaeological research. It is necessary to encourage ethnoarchaeological research into contexts such as the *qasgi* or *qargi* in order to see how these Alaskan cultures developed an important part of their cultural practices. Clearly, there are sufficient recurrences and coincidences between the sources to be able to establish sound working hypotheses for the study of themes like the strategies of social reproduction in the ancient Eskimo societies of Alaska which so far have not been studied in any great depth.

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