

“IS THAT A SLED YOU’RE MAKING?” “AH, NO, A BOOKCASE.” LEARNING, HANDWORK AND VISUAL ICONOGRAPHY IN SOME YUP’IK CONTEXTS

Chase Hensel

1674 Red Fox Drive, Fairbanks, AK 99709

Abstract: Doing ethnography requires gaining knowledge of another culture on a variety of levels. This learning is mediated by the culture based learning styles of both ethnographer and host culture. Learning local handwork can help clarify both particular techniques and tasks, and larger issues of how learning is conceptualized. Many opportunities of this sort arose while learning wood and ivory carving, and ulu making in a Yup’ik Eskimo community. My working in local forms also raised issues of appropriation. Simultaneous with my learning of handwork there has also been a slow but steady revival of some traditional Yup’ik forms, including masked dances and festivals, and a perhaps unrelated decline in men’s and women’s handwork. I conclude that cultural change has left some of my skills as obsolete as those of any colonial wooden bowl maker facing the onrushing tide of pewter and pottery, but that what one learns about learning styles remains useful.

Keywords: Ivory Carving, Ulu

Picture me 26 years ago, newly arrived in a small Yup’ik village in Southwestern Alaska. I am literally awash with curiosity. I want to know how everything is done, and why and when. However, it soon becomes obvious that the cultural approach to learning that I grew up with, the question-answer format, does not work all that well. I almost never see Yupiit (the plural) engage each other in this fashion, and when I try, I feel that people are being polite, but long suffering.

But, it’s my paradigm, so, the first question I needed to answer was, “how does one find out things?” “How does one learn things in a culturally appropriate fashion?” Over time this led me to ask, “what is learning?” as this also seemed to be conceptualized differently than what I had always taken for granted.

Eventually, I began to develop a mental model for some of these differences. For us Kass’at— (Non-Natives), the focus of instruction is typically on verbal exegesis. Even when there is hands-on learning, it is usually accompanied and/or proceeded by verbal instruction. While we may actually learn most by the activity, we teach a lot by talking, as if that were the most important part. The operative words are “listen to me,” or “are you listening to me?” For Yupiit, on the other hand, learning is more often being able to perform the task/activity at hand when faced with the appropriate context.¹ One of

the most common phases said to children is “*Tang*” (Watch, visually attend). The assumption is that after sufficient watching, that is, when one is ready, one will try the task. After this initial attempt, one will self correct (or be corrected verbally, or by another’s example) and try again until mastery is achieved, a process that might be called Watch-Understand-Try-Correct-Re-try (Hensel et al. 1983:Ch. 5, pp. 19-21).

Janet Schantz of Bethel talked about this process of watching, perhaps for years, before attempting a task:

My mom started doing her fish, she started when she was pretty old. . . after her mom died. . . Our grandma had provided all of our smoked fish for us. . . . The older people are the ones who are in a position to cut the fish. Somebody else can fish and get them, but the actual cutting and drying and processing is only done by certain people in the family. My mom said that she tried to help my grandma as my grandma grew older, but my grandma always said, “You’re gonna butcher the fish, you’re gonna to butcher them, you’re gonna mess them up”. . . . And she wouldn’t let my mom help. And my mom said when, after her mom died, it was a year or two, it wasn’t immediately. . . when she started to make her first flat fish, which is

¹This discussion applies to non-emergency situations. In emergency or high risk situations, Yupiit are admonished to follow traditional wisdom, and there is a large genre that might be called ‘solutions to use in dangerous situations’. So, for example, if you fall through the ice in cold weather and have trouble getting out, wet one mitten and slap it hard onto the sound ice. It will stick (freeze) there and you can use it to pull yourself out. At that point, stuff your clothes with dry grass for insulation, before they freeze around you. And so on. Elders frequently say that even if you were not listening carefully, you will remember this wisdom when you desperately need it.

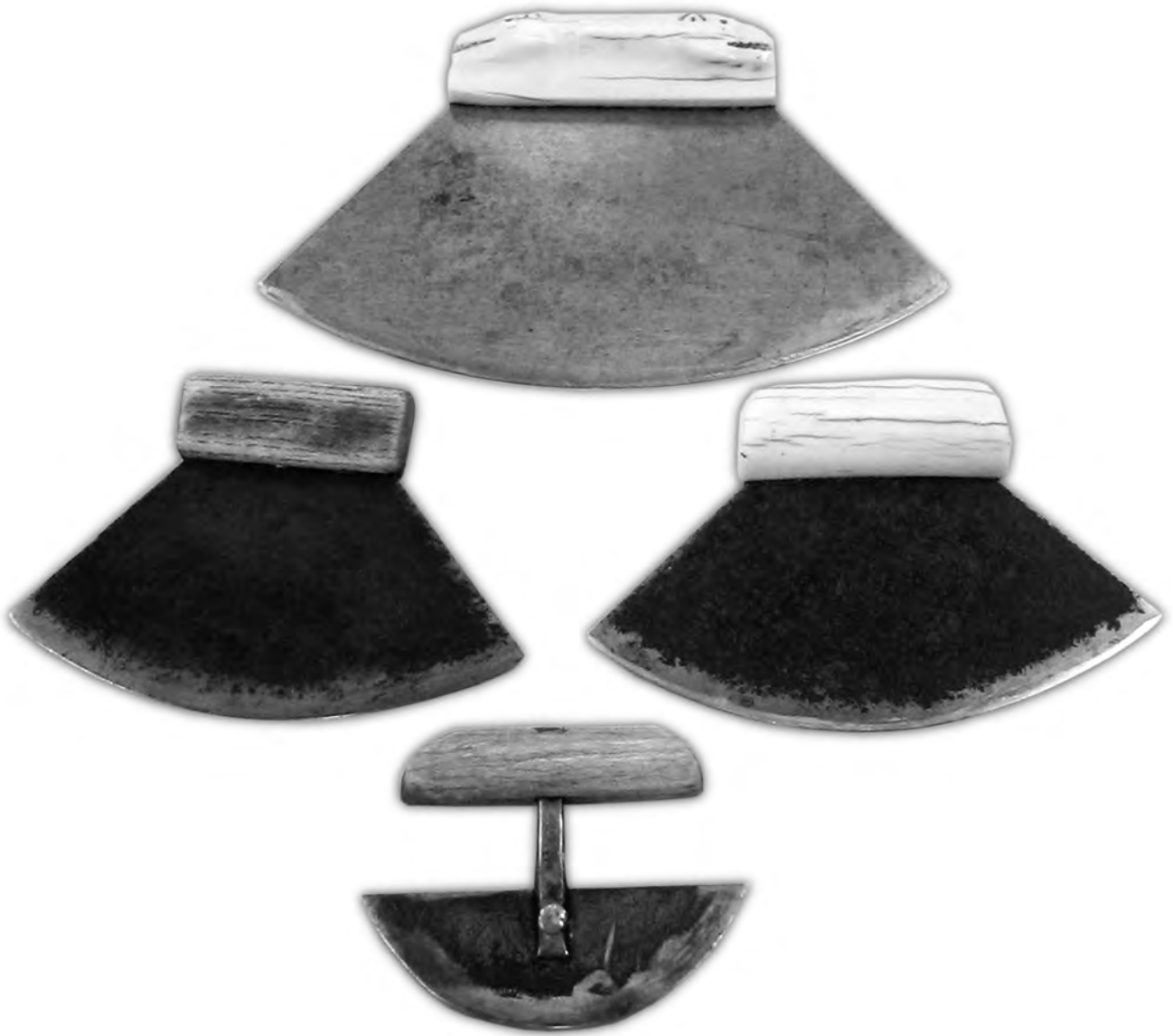


Figure 1: Ulus made by author (Private Collections).

the most elaborate bunch of cutting that you have to do, she stood there at her table, with no help, and made the cuts. And she said it was if my grandma's hand was on her hand, as she made her cuts.

And she said she was just [able to] from watching all those years, and she made a blanket [another name for the 'flat fish' referred to above] for the first time. . . . And she said it wasn't perfect, but it was all there. . . . I'm thirty-eight, and I have friends who have just taken up the knife, and the same thing happened that happened to my mom (Hensel 1986: 61-62).

Much of the proof of learning here can be in the consumption—Is the dried fish good (was it processed in a way that is tasty, not too salty, enough smoke, no fly

eggs or souring)? Which is not to say that people will not eat less than perfect food, only that they recognize and prefer to eat the best.

It is true that Yup'ik often simplify a task, particularly for children, by breaking it down into manageable sub-tasks. A younger person will be allowed/compelled to do increasingly more complex parts of a task until able to complete the task alone (first frying the fry bread, then learning to make a quick dough, then maybe learning to make a yeast dough). Success (consumption of the fry bread) encourages future attempts. Because people reach for the pieces of bread they find most attractive, burned or undercooked breads get left in the bowl until the last, where all of the cook's mistakes are separated out by this consensus of personal choices. This sort of unspoken statement of community standards can also encourage correction in future attempts.

A classroom example of this approach to learning occurred when I was teaching college level math to adults in Nunapitchuk. I expected to lecture on the topic, then have students work some problems. My students kept interrupting me mid-lecture, to ask if they could work some problems. Eventually I adjusted to their patterns, of watching me solve a few problems, then trying themselves. Teaching helped me to understand Yup'ik approaches to learning as well.

Underlying this system is the idea of successive approximations, that attempts will come ever closer to community standards over time. A woman said to me the other day, in reference to a possible substance abuse prevention program in the schools, that the point was to try something, and then you could see what worked and what didn't. Over time, you could get the program to where it needed to be.

A corollary to this system of learning seems to be that most Yupiit feel there is little point in talking about a topic with someone before their interlocutor is at least at the 'Correct—Re-try' stage. It is this belief that was, in part, the basis for my problems trying to learn through a question and answer format (another problem being that repeated direct questions are generally seen as rude or coercive). To engage in a conversation about almost any process/object/activity required knowledge about it on one's part. So, for example, before I went beaver trapping I couldn't seem to get men to talk about it. Most of my questions about techniques were answered with some variation of "the usual way," or "enough", or "it depends." However, after I had helped make a few beaver sets, I was pleased to get someone to talk at length about obscure ruses to trick adult beaver. I actually used information I'd learned in a book as conversational bait, but, together with my hands-on experience, it was seemingly sufficient to show some mastery. This learning to "talk-the-talk" well enough to be a successful interlocutor on a wide variety of topics was a major conversational challenge.



Figure 2: Story knife earrings made by author (Private Collection).

LEARNING BY DOING

So how does all this relate to material culture? One way to gain a sufficiently detailed understanding of an artistic process (as well as most others) and the local terms in which it is discussed, is to try to learn that process through doing. I am not suggesting that one has to achieve competence, but rather that acquiring at least a beginner's hands-on knowledge will pay big dividends in terms of learning about that process more generally. However, I'm not sure how aware of this I was at the time I started learning various local crafts. If anything, this motivation was only one, among several (poverty, a need for specific tools, a desire for competence) moving me to learn.

Of these, my major motivation to learn some local, gender appropriate craft was that living in a Yup'ik village, I struggled with my incompetence in almost all realms. I used to say that the only skill I brought from my former life that had any local relevance was that I was competent with a shotgun. Not only was I easily lost when out of sight of the village, but I could in fact be lost within sight of the village. That is, given the complex maze of interconnected shallow waterways surrounding it, it was entirely possible to see the village clearly across miles of marshes, shallow lakes and sloughs and not know the path back to it.

Poverty and our perceived need for ulus also motivated me to make some. My wife Phyllis Morrow was learning to cut fish and needed appropriate tools of her own. And anytime a Yup'ik visitor helped with a cooking or processing task she asked for one to use. One could find ulus for sale, but they tended to be either poorly made, or beautiful and expensive with carved ivory handles. In either case they were unlike the ones I saw people constantly using. Someone showed me a partially roughed out blade and I suddenly understood how I could make them as well. I roughed out blades by grooving both sides of an old cross-cut saw blade with a triangular file, then snapping the steel along those lines to make a rough, trap-

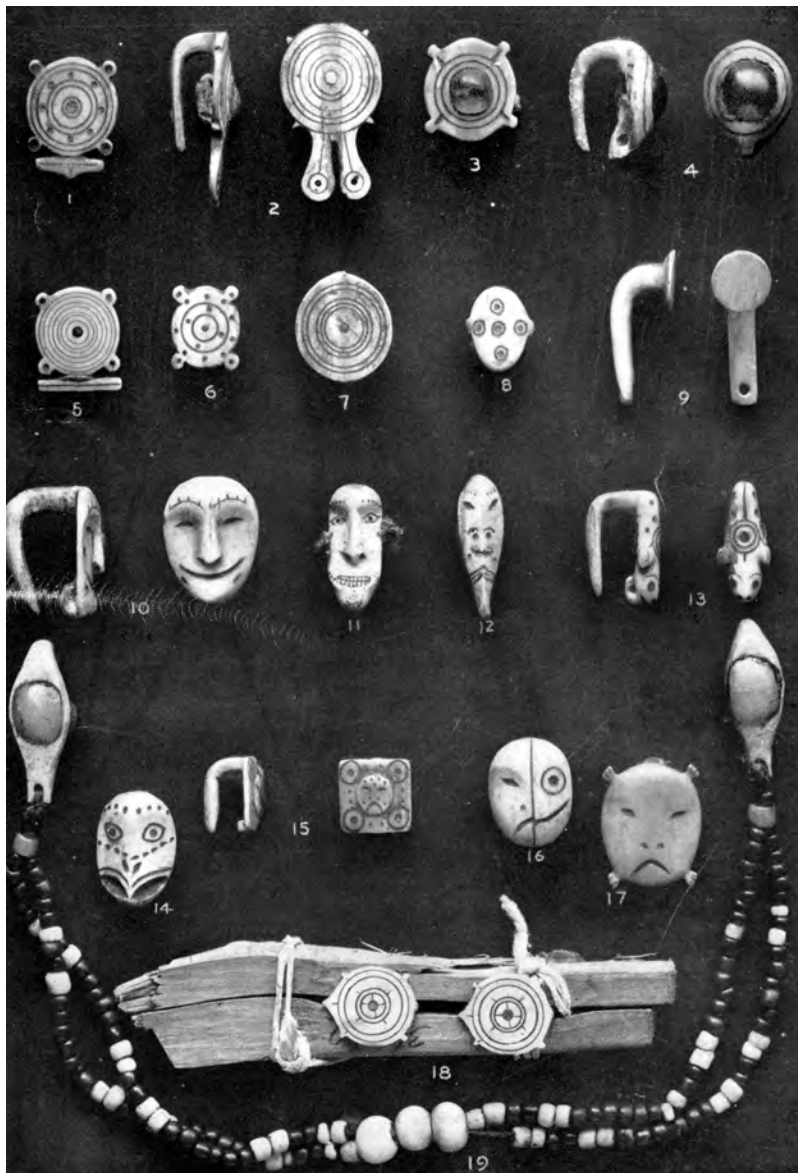


Figure 3. Illustrations from E.W. Nelson (1983: plate XXIV; Fig. 3).

ezoid in exactly the way that Yupiit once worked slate. I then filed the blank to the finished shape and attached a handle. Fifteen minutes with a power grinder would have replaced 10 hours of file work, but I had lots of time. Once I had made some ulus (Figure 1), I realized what appropriate gifts they made for women. One of the issues we grappled with living in a Yup'ik village was how to properly host people, to feed them food that they found really delicious and satisfying, that nourished them. The problem for us was that we needed a stock of subsistence foods to cook from, and it took some time to accumulate these foods, as well as to learn to cook to local tastes. It was the same with gift giving. It took some time to figure out what gifts nourished relationships.

I did my first ivory carving as a substitute art teacher at Bethel Regional High School, and produced a pair of story knife earrings as a present for my wife. They were a bit crude, but well received. I might not have done too much more, except that that pair were misplaced, so I made another (Figure 2). And then I made a replacement ivory earring hook for a broken one. I had reveled in the tremendous diversity of ivory earring hooks shown in E.W. Nelson (1983: plate XXIV; Figure 3) although by this time (the late 1970's) the diversity was much reduced in contemporary carvings. In general, the complex visual iconography that embellished and brought to life thousands of utilitarian objects collected by Nelson was nowhere to be seen. I decided to copy some of those wonderful designs from a hundred years ago (Figure 4). I was aware this was appropriation. I justified this to myself in a number of ways. Yupiit generally were quite interested in, and taken with these earrings, no doubt because of their historical resonances and unusualness. And I wasn't selling them, or producing more than a couple of pairs. At heart, I had a hunger to bring into my life artifacts otherwise only visible in books and museum collections, in exactly the same way I might now brew a Belgian style ale that I can not regularly afford to buy, or bake a French country levain bread not locally available. And in all these cases, while never exactly duplicating the standard, I can strive to come close, hopefully close enough to enjoy the process and the results.

One thing that was slightly odd (or perhaps not) was that I was doing this ivory carving in a tundra village, away from the coast, with no ready source of ivory, and no other ivory carvers, though there were lots of wood workers. I could be the best carver in the village, also, as far as I knew the only one! I acquired my ivory in various ways, including being given a tusk, which had been beach-combed by a non-Native pilot friend and trading for some bits of mammoth ivory, whereas in a more typical coastal ivory carving community, I might have participated in walrus hunts and acquired ivory as part of a crew share (setting legal issues aside).²

I continued on an intermittent basis making ivory jewelry and the occasional ulu, learning as I went. I upgraded

²According to the Marine Mammal Protection Act, non-Natives may possess beach-combed ivory, but it must be sealed by US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) within 30 days of being found. Ownership of such ivory may not be transferred from one person to another without permission from USFWS. Non-Natives may not hunt sea mammals, receive crew shares of sea mammal parts, etc. There are no restrictions on ownership of fossil ivory.



Figure 4: Earrings made by author from E. W. Nelson designs (Private Collection).

my tools over time, getting a set of small files to replace the ignition point file I had used for almost all detail carving. I continued to receive intermittent instruction in two main ways: through suggestions and comments from people who looked at my work, and through conversations with other carvers and examining their work. Once the objects were in use, or being worn, they often drew evaluative comments. I tended to discount polite praise from people, because people are always telling the artist how much they like his/her work, and often they are just being nice. Attempted commissions or compliments given by someone who did not know I was the carver I accepted happily. Friends and acquaintances made suggestions: “sometimes people do it in such-and-such a way, so it doesn’t have some problem”, which usually I tried, or at least considered carefully. So, for example, I eventually learned to cut out a hidden slot for the blade on ivory ulu handles, rather than cutting a lengthwise saw kerf to take the blade and then plugging the ends of the kerf with additional small pieces of ivory (Figure 5). While more time-consuming, the invisible-slot method reduces both cracking, and the problem of loose end pieces.

Finally, I also talked to carvers when the chance arose, generally at events like Christmas Bazaars. Because of my own carving, I was much more cognizant of details: noticing how the carver used the white outer layer

of the ivory to best advantage; how even and careful the polish was; how well both the lines and pigment were applied on any scrimshaw work, whether a piece was finished in 3D, or only on the upper surfaces; how well the lines flowed, etc. I was also much more able to ask specific questions about materials, techniques and equipment, because of knowledge gained by hands-on experience.

Other Yup’ik carvers were always quite encouraging, exactly like Yupiit were with my subsistence efforts. It might be that they did not see the world as a zero-sum game, so that my carving didn’t reduce their perceived market, in the same way that my fishing was not seen as reducing their catch and perhaps even increasing it, given the Yup’ik understanding that fish come because people catch them/need them. Or it may just have been largeness of spirit.

YUP’IK ICONOGRAPHY GOES PUBLIC

In the early 1980s Phyllis Morrow and I started working as applied anthropologists, developing Yup’ik language curriculum for high school students. We moved from thinking and sometimes writing about culture, to expressly teaching about traditional and contemporary aspects of Yup’ik culture.

It was clear, on a variety of fronts that some more general Yup’ik cultural revival was occurring. For example, people seemed to be more willing to talk about the pre-Christian past, precisely as that past was becoming more distant and less threatening to present Christianity. The first masked dance in many years was held in Bethel in 1982. The Catholic Church was incorporating indigenous symbols in celebrations of Mass (Fienup-Riordan 2000). William Fitzhugh and Susan Kaplan co-curated an exhibit from the E.W. Nelson collection at the Smithsonian, as well as the catalog *Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo* (1982). Many Yupiit saw that exhibit when it came to Bethel. After E.W. Nelson’s book was reprinted in 1983 it again became locally available.

We developed a Yup’ik High School curriculum for the Lower Kuskokwim School District, working closely with a group of Yup’ik high school teachers and aides (Morrow and Hensel 1987). One priority they set was to

include materials about traditional Yup'ik ceremonies. They felt that they, and certainly their students knew very little about this past. We developed a month-long unit to showcase this pre-Christian past and its iconography (including contracting with Elsie Mather for a pamphlet which became the book *Cayarnariuq* ("Time for Drumming") on traditional Yup'ik ceremonies (Mather 1985). To start off that unit we developed a board game (Yupiit Qaraliit) to teach students how recurring visual themes were combined and recombined to create this densely layered expressive art (Hensel and Morrow 1985). I admit to having had some hope that we would again see local handwork for sale as well as in every day use embellished with these shapes and figures, and that these high school students would grow up with these designs as part of their artistic vocabulary.

Instead, as so often happens, things have gone in another direction. I have not seen any more of that visual iconography in use on things Yupiit hand make for sale or for themselves, but it has become omnipresent on everything from phone books to book bags. If what we were in part doing was trying to re-contextualize this lost patrimony in the sense of bringing it meaningfully back to life, then what has happened is that it has been de-contextualized from its shamanic and ceremonial meanings and reduced to marking primarily Yup'ikness, or even Alaska Native-ness. So, a silkscreen image of a mask that was made to celebrate the Bladder Festival of 1879 in Ikogmut, and that may have celebrated the interaction of one man with one seal, now primarily marks Yup'ikness or Native-ness. So, for example, local Native for-profit and non-profit corporations, the Bethel Council on the Arts and local businesses routinely use this iconography on logos and letterheads, apparently because it is local, and 'cool' in a variety of ways (attractive and artistic, indigenous, etc.) This kind of narrowing and channeling of meaning often happens in cross-cultural interactions, where parts (a cross, a crescent, a red sun, a red star) are both given and taken to represent wholes. And this process is generally circular, as these meanings and symbols are imported and exported simultaneously, with new meanings accruing on both fronts (for further discussion, cf. Hensel 1996:87-96, 179-186; Lee n.d.; Mason 2002).

But what about the ulus and ivory hooks? Ulus are obviously still being made. They continue to be ubiquitous, wherever animals or fish are cut, split or processed. They are also ubiquitous items in the tourist trade, both in locally produced and commercially produced versions.

The trend seems to have been away from heavier blade materials, such as old crosscut saws and flat shovel blades towards lighter ones, such as current carpenter's hand saws (or stainless steel in the commercial versions). But I have seen some beautiful ulus made in the last few years.

Ivory hooks are another matter. They went from being "the" earring of adult women, and some teenagers, to being less common. One thing that has affected the use of ivory hooks, according to some people (including my wife, who kept breaking hers this way) is the introduction in the 80's and 90's of household telephones. If one forgets and holds the receiver, "no hands" in the crook of one's shoulder, it is easy to break a hook. And this problem is probably exacerbated by another change that I believe has occurred, a tendency to wear a greater variety of earrings, many not ivory hooks. Twenty-five years ago it seemed there were many Yup'ik women who wore their same favorite hooks day in and day out. Putting them on was part of getting dressed. They might wear other earrings occasionally, but certain ones such as those of Teddy Moses, a famous Toksook Bay carver, were a staple. Typically, the hook part of such earrings had a larger cross section, which is much stronger, but necessitates stretching out the holes in one's ears. If one wears regular metal wire or stud earrings for a few days, the holes start to close and one has to re-stretch them, using toothpick sections, or tobacco stems, often lubricated with antibiotic cream. A solution is to get smaller diameter hooks made (or have someone thin down the ones you have), but this makes those hooks much more fragile. So wearing a variety of earrings, of which only some are ivory hooks, may mitigate against ivory hooks also. Today, most ivory hook earrings I have seen in use have larger, more durable hooks, supporting the idea that these may likely be the staple earrings of their wearers (or that they have other, similar sized pairs).

MEN'S CRAFTS

I think there has been a general decline in the number of men making crafts. For example, the sets of arrows or harpoons, spear throwers, etc., ranging from miniatures to lifesize, which used to be so common at craft sales, are now quite uncommon. At the April 2003 Messenger Feast in Kotlik, there were reportedly complaints from the Calista Elders Council that so few of the gifts were hand made (James Barker, personal communications, May, 2003).

³ This is a perfect illustration of a point made by McLuhan (1964) about obsolete technology becoming art, such as Navajo rugs (suggested by Molly Lee).

Similarly, when I first went to the YK Delta in the late 1970s, it was unusual to be served *akutaq* (Eskimo ice cream) with anything but a locally made wooden ladle. These ladles just seemed ‘necessary,’ like the saucers put under the cups of older people, so they could pour their tea into the saucer to cool it for drinking. When I was doing fieldwork in three Yup’ik villages in 1996, I noticed that this had changed. I was invariably served *akutaq* with a plastic or stainless steel spoon, but I often noticed wooden ladles, a few new, more old, hanging on peoples’ walls.³ In two cases I knew people well enough to ask about this (Questions and Answers again). The reply I received was that they were no longer used because all of the ladle makers were dead, and the women didn’t want them broken by use. They were keepsakes that had somehow made the transition from utilitarian objects to decorative ones. When I pointed out that one of the ladles in question had been made by the woman’s husband, who was very much alive, she repeated that they were too precious. At the Messenger Feast mentioned above, the one conspicuously handmade gift exchanged was a wooden ladle that the Stebbins ‘King’ made for the Kotlik ‘Queen.’

When I returned from that fieldwork, I made three ladles to send as thanks to women who had been particularly kind to me. When I saw one of those women at a bilingual conference, I asked her if she was using it. She said, no, it’s much too light, it’ll get broken. My assurances that it came with a guarantee of replacement should it fail were to no avail (though another woman who was there suggested I make them out of birch, because they would be stronger). On a visit last fall I saw the other two ladles I had made. One was hanging on the wall, never having been used. The other was used to serve me more *akutaq*, and was well colored with blueberry juice over the ocher stain I had applied. Its owner said that the *akutaq* just tastes better served with a wooden spoon.

If I step further back from the issue of men’s craft, it would seem that there has been a general shift from local production of many of life’s essentials to manufactured production of them. So, for example, 25 years ago the first ‘Housing Authority’ houses were a new introduction, and most village families lived in houses they built themselves. Similarly, though there were lightweight aluminum skiffs,

the standard boat was the locally made plywood skiff, and indeed, men could often tell what village someone was from by the shape of their boat at a distance. Now the welded aluminum skiff has become the standard larger boat. Similarly, as snow machines replaced dog traction sleds became much less intricate, and, in many communities, both are replaced much of the time by 4-wheeled and trailers. This is true of what was ‘women’s work’ as well, where similar shifts in sewing, baking and other home production can be observed. The clear exception, as Lee (2002) has pointed out, is coiled basket-making (along with doll making by a few women in a few communities). Basket-making is still a flourishing art, even though it probably pays less than minimum wage to the artists. So why has basket making continued while woodworking has largely ceased? Four related reasons come to mind, all economic. First, women in marriages often have limited control of the family finances (Hensel 1996:126-34). Money from basket sales may be more valuable to women because it is less subject to male knowledge or control. Second, even if basket-making pays poorly, it pays something, can be done simultaneously with household tasks such as cooking and child minding, and does not disrupt the household like a woman’s wage labor might. Thirdly, it is an ‘open entry’ occupation. Unlike the few pink collar jobs available, basket-making requires neither the symbolic capital of credentials and certificates, nor powerful family connections. Finally, the demand for baskets may be considerably more elastic than that of carved objects (excluding masks) because they are seen as ‘art,’ not utilitarian objects. One full time carver might saturate the Delta with ladles. The cost-per-unit difference may figure in here as well. It may be less trouble to sell one \$450 basket than fifteens \$30 ladles. This is an area where further research is warranted.



Figure 5: Ulu handles made by author (Private Collections).

One result of this general shift to manufactured objects is that my skills, as in the ladle example above, are old-fashioned, and in a way obsolete. Nowadays for Yupiit, like non-Natives, ladles come from the store. Ladle making has historical interest (like Colonial treen-ware work for non-Natives) but little contemporary relevance. And did I learn to just look first and ask questions later? Not really, or at least not as my first thought. I am reminded of the time our outboard started making strange noises. I went to shore, and pulled out the manual, turned to the trouble-shooting section, and started trying to diagnose the problem. While I was doing this, a Yup'ik friend came by and suggested that we should pull off the cover and take a look. There were the parts causing the problem, laying around inside, and detached from where they should be. But, on the other hand, I cured my competence problem by becoming an academic, where often word knowledge suffices, and if you don't have an answer you can always recommend a book to someone that might be helpful. This was perhaps pre-ordained, as the partially built bookcase being mistaken for a sled in my title indicated. Even living in a village, we had more books than places to store them, and seemingly more need for a bookcase than a sled.

And at this point in my life I find both irony and comfort in the recognition that the constant pace of cultural change has marginalized some of my skills just like those of my Yup'ik age-mates. If a college education is what remains after one has forgotten all of the specifics, perhaps the same is true of an ethnographic education, where understanding *how* to learn remains useful long after the details of *what* was learned are relegated to the midden of history.

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