REPORT

QALUYAARMIUT ARNAT NEQET CALIAQELARAIT/NELSON ISLAND WOMEN'S ROLES IN FOOD SECURITY AND STEWARDSHIP

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KALIKAMI IGAUSNGALRIIT/ABSTRACT

In this report, I share my Indigenous food processing experiences and explain women's food stewardship positionalities in the village. *Qaluyaarmiut*, or Nelson Island women's roles in food security, will be defined and explained based on my life experience growing up in a traditional Yup'ik village on Nelson Island by the Bering Sea. I will discuss how climate warming has impacted the village women's ways of preparing food. There will be some discussion of how women's social norms/roles have changed throughout time.

IKIIRUN/INTRODUCTION

Wiinga yugtun Arevaugua. Angayuqaagka Kangrilnguunkuk Anguyaluk-llu. Apaurluugkawa Qungurkankuk Ussuugan-llu. Maurluugkawa Angyinkuk Piiyuuk-llu. Anglullruunga Qaluyaani. Yuurtellruunga Umkumiuni. Anelgutengqertual tallimanek angutnek, estamanek-llu arnanek. Anglillruukut nalluvkenaki nutemllaryarat.

I am a Yup'ik person. My Yup'ik name is *Arevgaq*. My dad's mom is *Angayinkuuk* and my mom's mom is *Piiyuuk*. My parents are *Qungurkankuk* and *Ussuugan*. I have two brothers, *Kangrilnguunkuk* and *Anguyaluk*. I have three children, two boys and one girl. We used to live in *Nunakauyarmiut, Qaluyaani*. I went to school in *Umkumiut*, which was also a fish camp. I learned English from many men, some of them white, some of them black. We did not forget our traditional ways.

My Yup'ik name is *Arevgaq*, which translates to the baby whale. My parents are *Kangrilnguq* (Paul John) and *Anguyaluk* (Martina John). My dad was the traditional chief of the village of Toksook Bay and was the first chief of the regional Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP). My mother was a professional skin sewer. I was born in a summer fish camp, *Umkumiut*, located near present-day Toksook Bay on Nelson Island along the coast of the Bering Sea. My siblings and I were raised in a traditional knowledge system taught by our grandparents.

The village had no electricity or federal Bureau of Indian Affairs school. My siblings and I spoke fluently the *Yugtun* language and are fully immersed in epistemic *Yup'ik* cultural values from prominent Elders. During my early childhood on Nelson Island, we lived a nomadic lifestyle based on resource availability. I remember migrating every spring from the inland village of Nightmute to *Umkumiut* by dogsled. In late fall, we would travel back to Nightmute for the winter. Our survival was based only on a subsistence economy, eating what was available from the natural world. The cash economy was slowly trickling into the Yup'ik subsistence traditions, eventually requiring a more sedentary lifestyle for the establishment of the school, church, tribal office, and stores. In 1963, residents from Nightmute decided to permanently settle in the present-day location of Toksook Bay.

I acquired my Western education (7th–12th grade) from St. Mary's Mission High School on the Yukon River. My University of Alaska credentials include a bachelor's

degree in sociology (1983), secondary teaching certificate (linguistics and humanities, interdisciplinary, 1991), a master's degree in multicultural education (1993), and a doctor of philosophy degree from the Center for Cross-Cultural Studies (2010). My dissertation was entitled "*Yuraryararput Kangiit-llu*: Our Ways of Dance and Their Meanings." I served as an associate professor for over 10 years in the Center for Cross-Cultural Studies. I taught classes on Indigenous knowledge systems, traditional ecological knowledge, Indigenous oral traditional knowledge, and Native ways of knowing.

Yupiit people know that *Ellam Yua*, or the Creator, provided us a way of being, a way of believing, and a way of living off the land and ocean since time immemorial. Prominent Yup'ik Elders instructed the men and boys in the *qasgiq* (men's communal house) on the protocols of learning how to hunt and to read the weather. Women were generally not allowed to hunt. They were instructed by wise Elder women about how to find and pick edible plants, medicinal plants, berries, and inland and beach greens. Grass was used for shelter, was braided to hang food, and was woven to make a storage bag for dried foods and for clothing. Essentially, our survival depended upon perfecting hunting knowledge and skills.

My grandparents made sure that my siblings and I were prepared to be good caretakers of the food resources. My paternal and maternal grandfathers carved my food processing tools that I used to care for the harvested food, such as fish and seal. I still have the first *qapiarun* (a special hand tool used to make a seal poke) that my maternal grandfather *Ussuugan* made for me.

ARNAT NEQKAT AULUKARKAQAIT/ WOMEN'S ROLES IN SUBSISTENCE LIFEWAYS AND STEWARDSHIP

Yupiit women play a major role in subsistence lifeways and food stewardship. Our Indigenous knowledge education stems from the oral traditional teachings of the elderly women. I remember when I was seven years old, both my paternal and maternal grandmothers taught me how to cut up a seal skin with a very sharp *uluaq* (a traditional Yup'ik women's knife) and *qapiarun*. My first *qapiaq* (processing a seal poke) was at *Umkumiut*. My *qapiarun* would accidently cut through the skin because I applied too much pressure while scraping the skin. I made a lot of holes in the skin, but my grandparents never scolded me. The village children are given an opportunity to learn by experience and trial and error. They explained that I would learn the proper ways of using *qapiarun* and *uluaq* as I grew up.

ELLPENGQELLRIIT NALLUNRITARKAT/ SPIRITUALITY AND KNOWLEDGE

Respect, spirituality, and relationality are key components of Indigenous food stewardship shared across Indigenous cultures in Alaska (Carothers et al. 2021). Women begin to care for the catch as soon as the hunter delivers the meat. Seals and other marine mammals are butchered, geese feathers are plucked, and the fish are filleted and hung immediately to avoid spoilage. We believe that all human and nonhuman beings have a spirit that deserves utmost respect (John 2009). Elders often utter, "*Ungungssiq-gguq cikiutektuuq elluarrluni aulukestekaminun,*" or "They say an animal gives itself up to someone who will [take proper] care of it" (John et al. 2018:352).

Traditional Yup'ik protocol requires prompt processing to acknowledge the fish and animals for sacrificing their lives. It would be disrespectful to let food spoil because of laziness.

Women bond together in the village to prepare the food harvest. There is a collaborative effort to support proper care of the catch. They tell family stories while working on the food, promoting workflow. There is laughter in the air and gratitude of the workers while working hard together. This critical cultural subsistence practice is essential for everyone's well-being because communities and households take care of one another by sharing the land's harvest and processing the food.

This critical Indigenous value and principle is repeatedly taught to the young women to remind them how important it is to always care for the catch properly. All the edible parts of the animals are processed and nothing is wasted. For example, we air-dry the fish backbones on the rack even with small amounts of meat on them for a half-dried meal. My paternal grandmother told me that the only piece a person does not eat from an animal is the bone. The role of the men in food lifeways is to catch the food, and once the food is inside the house it becomes the women's role and responsibility. Men and boys would get up early in the morning to begin their training. It was uncommon to witness males inside the house after dawn.

I remember my paternal grandmother telling my brothers the traditional method of how to become a good hunter. One of the teachings was to clean the doorways

of houses and the *qasgiq* at nighttime to please the spirits of the seals. My brothers told me that they still practice this teaching by shoveling the doorways of the Elders' homes after a winter storm. Hunters believe that the spirits of the marine mammals are always watching their good deeds to bring them luck. When Yup'ik hunters catch their seals, they acknowledge that their prayers were spiritually answered. As the women are processing animals, they often speak of their appreciation to the spirits of the animals who gave themselves to the families of the community.

NERANGNAQSARARPUT PICIRYARATLLU CIMIRTUQ/SUBSISTENCE ROLES, TRENDS, AND SOCIOECONOMIC CHANGES

Traditional subsistence roles of the Yupiit men and women have drastically transformed along with the changing climate trends. Traditional hunting equipment and techniques have slowly evolved over time as modern tools and technology become available. Transportation machinery and electronics have allowed hunters to expand their hunting territory and provide better chances for successful hunts. It is safer to hunt now with navigational tools like GPS and improved communication systems such as portable VHF radios.

Ellam murilkellra cimillra-llu, or the traditional ecological knowledge experience, shows that weather predictions are more difficult with warming temperatures. Initially, weather predictions required daily observations and analysis of the wind directions, cloud colors and formations, sea ice, and current weather conditions. The respected Elders foretold that climate change would occur in parallel with social change. Today, we recognize these changes as we move forward in life. Yupiit men used natural resources to build sod houses and large oceanic boats, and they crafted their own hunting tools from natural materials. Sled-dog teams provided transportation, and now they have disappeared due to the introduction of snowmachines (snowmobiles). Village hunters now purchase high-powered aluminum boats, rifles, metal traps, nylon fishnets, snowmachines, and four-wheelers. Today, money is a necessity for subsistence activities.

The traditional roles of women in my grandmothers' times included being the caretakers of the men's catch. Today, gender roles have changed. Yup'ik women can practice subsistence hunting, and they may own hunting equipment and tools like the men. Occasionally, there is a reversal of gender roles in subsistence lifeways. Today, men may be the child caregivers while wives work to earn wages. Male family members may now also butcher the meat, fish, and pick berries. When I was growing up, my five brothers never touched a child's *qurrailitaq* (diaper) or participated in what they called "woman's work." Children were always the duty of women, who had the responsibility to raise them in a proper way. Indigenous Yup'ik spiritual belief holds that the men would lose their hunting luck by touching a child's urine. Today, I see men carry diaper bags in stores as they shop for food. The Western invasion and colonization, alongside proselytization of the Christian religion, have eroded Indigenous values and customs, with some being "Westernized" and others replaced by Western traditions.

The well-being of our natural resources has changed over time. *Tungunqut*—bearded seals (*Erignathus barbatus*)—used to have thick blubber that provided a lot of seal oil and oily meat. As the climate warms, the overall health of many marine animals has deteriorated. The Nelson Island Yup'ik villagers have observed some changes in the quality of the meat. We often witness open sores on the seal hide, and the blubber has shrunk to a thinner layer than normal. The thinner layer of blubber provides less seal oil for the family. The geese are showing weight loss. Salmon have less oily flesh and skins, and slimmer bodies. Ecological changes such as warming water temperatures and wetter weather have impacted the natural resources that we rely upon to provide traditional foods. The predominance of wet weather prevents fish and meat from drying properly and causes mold and spoilage while on drying racks.

ELLIVIIT/FOOD STORAGE

Traditionally, Nelson Island families had underground food storage ice/permafrost pits before electric freezers were introduced into villages. The ice pits were dug deep into the ground where ground ice remained frozen. In these, the fermented and other processed foods were stored. Fermented foods were a delicacy, providing good health and medicine that kept the people physically and spiritually healthy. They said when we ate the fermented food, the organisms inside our bodies become more active, and they would eat the germs in our body that would cause sickness (John et al. 2018).

Nick Andrew Sr., a respected Yukon River Elder, said:

> Back in those days, they cut [salmon and dried them] and stored them in barrels back when we

> didn't have freezers.... She [grandmother] said even if salmon are extremely moldy and covered in mold, it won't become inedible. She said that [mold] is medicine... and then they would cut the heads off of *teggmaarrluut* [chum salmon] and cut them to dry. And we'd make a pit in the ground, put them inside, filling it with a lot [of chum salmon heads], even though it was deep. Then they check on them, they cover the top, the rim, with fish milt and then cover the top tightly so that flies wouldn't get in. (John et al. 2018:276)

Nelson Islanders also stored dried herring inside a barrel and put them underground. The pit would be so deep that the food was always frosted when taken out to eat. My maternal grandmother *Piiyuuk* told me that she would put the waterproof sealskin poke filled with seal blubber in the lake. Once the lake was frozen, families would retrieve the seal oil poke to be eaten after the freeze-up. Cloudberries were put inside large grass bags lined with organic wild spinach to preserve them in the lakes. Families picked them up after the freeze-up. This storage method was changed to putting food into the freezer after the warm climate thawed and melted the pits. As climate warms and ice pits thaw, it is essential to have freezers inside the houses to keep food frozen and to keep dry fish protected from mold and spoilage.

UQIIQURYARAQ/THE FIRST SEAL PARTY

Spring seal parties were a method of sharing marine mammal oil and meat. The ceremony provided essential seal oil and meat throughout spring in southwest coastal Alaska. Parties serve to equalize the food distribution in the village because there are families that do not have hunters.

Uqiiquryaraq is the first seal party, a way to honor men and the boys' first spring *tungunquq* catch for the year. The seal party ceremony is to celebrate the boys' rite of passage for their first spring seal catch. The women celebrate their husbands' first seasonal bearded seal catch. This means that the wives of successful *tungunquq* hunters must conduct a seal party every spring season. The men and their sons work very hard to catch their first bearded seal so their wives and their grandmothers can *uqiiquq* for them. For example, a woman who has five boys living at home can have a total of six parties per year, including for her husband.

The ceremony also serves to honor and welcome the spirit of the seal to the village. When the seal is brought inside the home, the hunter and/or the women would give water to the seal before the butchering. The seal is given water to honor the spirit of the seal for giving itself to the family and the community. The method of honoring the seal spirit would be to cut with a knife across the seal's forehead.

In preparation for the seal party, women planned and then orchestrated the parties. They cut up the blubber and the meat to share with other households. The *uqiiquq* celebration was restricted to Yupiit women only. Men and boys are forbidden to participate in the seal party, for being there would bring them bad luck in hunting. Qualified village women are invited to the seal party, also known as a "throw party." One had to be married or the head of the household. When an Elder woman is unable to partake, her grandchild may represent her at the party. For example, I went to seal parties to represent my grandmother when she was unable to attend.

In addition to the seal blubber and meat, women buy and share household necessities. There were no stores in the village when I was a young girl. I remember my grandmother sharing daily necessities such as tea, sugar, flour, milk, needles, strips of fabric, and yarn. Elders sit on the ground or in chairs in a semicircle by the house doorway. Women stand behind them organized by age. The youngest participants stand farthest outside of the circle. The gift-giving begins with seal blubber and meat. The rest of the party items are passed out individually, starting with the Elders, and extra items are thrown into the air for anyone to catch. The energy of the party rises with the women yelling, "*Maatmun!*" or "Throw this way!" The traditions and rules of who can attend have changed over the last few decades. I was not allowed to attend while I was an unmarried woman attending college. Now unmarried women, young girls, young boys, and close family relatives, such as the host's sister, may attend. For example, my own mother attended her daughter-in-law's throw party, whereas in the past this practice was considered unethical. However, young boys or men still do not generally participate in seal parties in Toksook Bay.

MATUM NALLIINI ARNAT UQIIQURYARAQ CIMIIRAT/CHANGING PRACTICES OF *UQIIQUQ* FORMS AND FUNCTIONS

Modern Yupiit society has tremendously changed the organization and function of the seal party in many villages. The seal party is no longer restricted to the first seasonal seal catch. The purpose of the contemporary *uqiiquryaraq*

ceremony now includes the celebration of a high school or college graduation, weddings, anniversaries, birthdays, and a chance to honor the first catch of a moose, caribou, salmon, berries, or goose. Instead of women sitting in a circular formation, other village women stand on top of a high platform to aimlessly throw items to the women, and even men, standing in a tight group. The types of gifts have changed too. Younger generations throw party gifts that may include expensive items such as clothing, boots, gloves, and coats. The original gift items included were affordably suitable for families without jobs.

With modern technology, cell phones are used to broadcast party announcements to broad audiences. Younger generations inform Elders that they can participate and offer to take them to party houses by snowmachine or four-wheelers. Today, weddings, an Elder's birthday, new jobs, and college acceptance are events that call for modern parties. I believe the seal party's forms, function, changes and trends are due to a lack of traditional knowledge rules and proper teachings of customs among the younger generations. The methods of honoring the spirits of animals seem to be replaced with generic purposes to party, not necessarily to practice a cultural ceremony.

The socioeconomic opportunities and air travel options allow the head of household to purchase goods from city stores such as Costco in Anchorage. Sharing is made easier with frequent flier mileage and by accumulating local airline travel points. Modern seal party hosts can buy bulk items in the cities, or mail-order items online, to share at the parties.

The seal party provides for everyone in the community, including the elderly, widowed, disabled, and families who do not have hunters or food providers. The sharing of seal blubber and seal meat feeds multiple families, young and old alike. Women from surrounding villages also travel to attend seal parties. Interior women stay for a long period of time during the spring seal hunt. Some of them can bring home 15 gallons of seal blubber and meat to dry. The seal parties benefit multiple generations and families from inland who otherwise would not be able to acquire seal oil and meat for their families. Yupiit women play a critical role in the seal party, sustaining and maintaining Indigenous subsistence ways of life in the community.

ARNAT CALIARIT/ YUPIIT WOMEN'S SOCIAL ROLES

In my observation, women are the main wage earners among the *Nunakauyarmiut* (Toksook Bay people). Local workplaces include the Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKHC) Sub-regional Clinic, Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD) K-12 public school, Nunakauyaq Traditional Office, the Nunakauyaq Yup'ik Corporate Office, and the City of Toksook Bay. In addition, there are three local stores, airport maintenance, and babysitting opportunities. The YKHC offers computer jobs and gas station jobs, while LKSD provides jobs as certified teachers, teachers' aides, maintenance employees, and administrative assistants. Women are more comfortable working at a desk, whereas men only want to hunt. The traditional role of the men in the community is still the same: to serve as the family or community food providers. Women as wage earners help buy hunting equipment and gear, stove oil, and gasoline. Men go out into the natural world to fight the challenges of cold ocean waves or traveling in icy conditions. The local women seem to have an easier way to adapt to working in offices. Men are accustomed to hunting outdoors. My hunter brothers did not like going to college during spring hunting season. In fact, they had to drop out of college because they could not adapt to sitting inside buildings while dreaming of hunting.

Food-source animals such as moose, bears, and wolverines are migrating into the region. These natural resources are providing different forms of food and hunting opportunities for residents. The warming climate seems to have caused changes in marine mammal hunting. The ice is thinner now and only forms close to shore, so the hunters have to travel longer distances to hunt. Hunters travel farther offshore where it is more dangerous and they are exposed to stormy seas. Today, the ice does not form until later in the year, such as in January. This means that men and women now use more gas when they travel out to the ocean to hunt seals and walrus.

My father, late AVCP Chief *Kangrilnguq* Paul John, predicted food shortages would occur in the Yup'ik region. Traditionally, we lived a nomadic lifestyle. Extended families had fish camps up and down the Toksook River to catch riverine fish and animals, and gather berries, plants, and greens. Prior to climate warming, we had plenty of

salmon (*Oncorhynchus*), blackfish (*Dallia pectoralis*), loche (burbot, *Lota lota*), Pacific tomcod (*Microgadus proximus*), needlefish (*Belonidae*), and herring (*Clupea pallasii*). Now the Nelson Island people have noticed the quality of subsistence foods have changed. The herring and salmon are thinner, seals have less fat, capelin (*Mallotus villosus*) are disappearing, and salmon are hard to catch. Oily herring were delicacy meals. Prior to climate warming, women put away 15 gallons for the marine hunters. This type of food protected people from hypothermia in the cold weather. Now, warm weather dries food into thin layers. Today, changing weather leads to smaller and thinner dried salmon, capelin, and lush fish (loche/burbot). Cloudberries (*Rubus chamaemorus*) do not grow like they did in earlier times because the land is drier.

On the other hand, the changing, wetter climate also disrupts the drying process of the food. With rainy days, women have to keep a close eye on the food to prevent it from spoilage. When it rains for many days, mildew can spoil all the food drying on racks. The women now use electric fans under the fish racks to dry them. An alternative drying method is to hang the food inside a garage or in the living room to dry, using fans. This new method is exhausting and expensive to manage.

Traditionally, seal oil is the main part of our diet. It is consumed daily and used as medicine. Women made a seal poke to store foods during cold winter days. A seal poke is filled with blubber and meat. With climate warming, the foods to be fermented need to be placed deeper down into the land in order to be chilled and processed (fermented) properly. Inadequately frozen ground pits change how the food is stored. The alternate plan is to store food inside plastic containers inside freezers where they can get spoiled or freezer-burned. The freezer-stored foods taste different; they do not taste natural.

The role of Yupiit women today has changed drastically from the past. Some own boats, outboard motors, four-wheelers, guns, snowmachines, and hunting equipment and tools. Women still care for the food that they catch when they go home. In many cases, both the husband and the wife go out hunting marine and land animals and camp together to provide food for their families. The traditional social roles have transformed so women are not stay-at-home mothers anymore. The women work just as hard as men to learn hunting skills to feed their families. It is good to see collaboration between modern couples who cooperate to make ends meet, especially in costly economic and climate-challenging days. Many men do not work for wages but still hunt because their wage-earning wives support their needs financially.

Western cultural influence has contributed to the breakdown of local traditional norms, such as how men were the main family providers while women raised children. Women tend to succeed in higher education more so than men, and they prepare themselves for successful participation in a Western lifestyle. For example, in my family four of us have bachelor's degrees, three have master's degrees, and two have doctorate degrees. These female graduates have secured Western jobs such as college professors, culture-bearers, and federal government administrators. The village-dwelling siblings serve as tribal village leaders, airplane mechanics, airport maintenance workers, carpenters, commercial fishermen, and food providers. Village men are still the main walrus hunters in the community.

Technology, Western education, and Christianity have changed how we speak, live, and communicate. Community members watch television and play games online. It is common to see families watch sports and movies on weekends and play games. Family communication is lacking because the choice is not to make time to tell oral history stories but instead to listen to English all day long in school and at home. The cultural fabric of traditional life is disrupted like global warming is disrupting nature. In my observation and experience, climate warming and social changes are both happening simultaneously. Both are impacting how people think, their emotions, and social practices. This trend is not slowing down soon. Hopefully, Yup'ik societies will make time to have a dialogue to discuss the causes for cultural breakdown before it is too late. The cultural trends can be directed to the right way to empower our Indigenous ways of knowing, ways of living, and ways of being.

Climate warming has impacted wildlife activities where inland animals migrated into coastal lands. We see the moose mingle with musk ox and caribou. Toksook Bay is located high above sea level, and the village has not been physically impacted by climate warming like neighboring villages have, where the lack of shore ice has not protected villages at sea level from winter storm floods.

Times have changed, but the way that Yupiit survive off the land is still alive. For example, the Nelson Island intervillage government implemented geomats for road-building. The roads help reduce land disturbance from four-wheelers and snowmachines and has made tundra travel accessible to hunt and collect greens more easily, and most importantly allows related families to visit.

The roles and responsibilities of southwestern Alaska women in food security and food stewardship are the supportive fabric of our annual lifeways. Women play a critical role in ensuring that there is enough food for kin, family, community, and annual community ceremonial events. It is the woman who orchestrates food security in partnership with her spouse. Women still manage the amount of meat, fish, and seal oil required for survival in collaboration with their spouse. The annual seal parties help to distribute food among the families to ensure that everyone has food to eat.

CONCLUSION

Socioeconomic and climate changes have drastically impacted relationships that ensure healthy community wellness. Today among Yupiit, the women mostly work in the Western economic workforce while the men mostly hunt in the wilderness. Family roles are experiencing changes in social, economic, and spiritual ways. Despite these outside forces, food security and stewardship still survive to create healthy, traditional ways of living among the Yupiit.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to give credit to my ancestors, grandparents, parents, and Yup'ik experts who provided Indigenous knowledge to help me understand our ways of knowing, ways of being, ways of believing, and knowing our worldviews.

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