

Hiroko Ikuta

"We Dance Because We are Iñupiat" -- Iñupiaq Dance in Barrow: Performance and Identity

Abstract: The defense will discuss the ongoing analysis of one-year fieldwork with the Barrow Dancers in Barrow, Alaska. Founded in the early 1950s, the Barrow Dancers, who have a membership of more than sixty people perform on important occasions in Barrow and elsewhere in Alaska for Iñupiaq and non-Native audiences. Dance, like other forms of expressive culture, is an important vehicle for creating, maintaining and expressing identity. For the Barrow Dancers, song, gesture and drumming are means of creating and maintaining continuity in a community undergoing rapid social change. Observable differences between performances for outsiders and those for themselves also shed light on the unequal power relations that have existed between them since historic contact. Collectively the troop appears to dance with greater freedom and innovation for their local audiences whereas their commodified performances for outsiders are more formal and repetitive. Like many such cultures, the Iñupiat in general and the Barrow dancers in particular look back to the past to validate the uncertain present and precarious futures. I will argue that the knowledge of the Iñupiaq language, a theme which underlies group interaction, is the strongest ethnic marker in their quest for Iñupiaq identity in the modern world, the key to this complex situation.