

# **Christmas, a Day of Obeisance in Villages**

Christmas in villages is to share one's happiness with the rest of the villagers in a community gathering in memory of Christ who was born on Christmas Day.

They pick out their largest hall in the community and parents, children, grandmothers, grandfathers, cousins, neices and visitors gather together to pray, feast dance and watch ancient games of skill or participate in them. This is particularly true in communities along the Arctic coast.

For example, let us take the village of Tikiqaa, which means a point that points like the forefinger on the far northwestern part of Alaska. There, like anywhere else in villages, the people look ahead to Christmas Day. The mothers begin making new mukluks, parkas and other new clothing for the members of their families. The men begin to hunt with little more effort to bring fresh meat to the village so there will be plenty when the feast is put before the gathering. There will be many kinds of meat in huge containers, caribou, seal oogruk, bowhead whale meat and muktuk. New innovations, like cakes and pies, gallons of tea and coffee, will grace the feast preparations.

Whale meat and muktuk will be the special food for the occasion because the Eskimos in that area have made it into traditional repast on Christmas and Thanksgiving Days. The village whalers caught five of the

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huge mammals during the past whaling season in April and May and stored the meat and muktuk in their ancient and functional underground caches and kept them frozen through the summer by emanation of the permafrost beneath.

When all is in readiness on Christmas Day, the villagers in clusters of families will converge to the large hall. There won't be enough seats to go around and the people will sit down on the floor filling every available space. Before the feast is served, everyone of the people will stand and in unison, pray, "Our father, who art in heaven. . ." When the prayer is over, strong men and women will then commence to pass the food to all the people. The huge room will hum with animated conversation and laughter as the gathering partakes of the feast.

When the feast is over, the people will go home for an hour or two and will come back to the hall for a joyous Eskimo dance. Elderly men of the village will be the drummers and chanters. There will be motion dances in which two, three or four dancers will perform in unison in a colorful display of precise moves of the traditional dances as done by their forefathers. When these special performances are over, common dances for the people will be out on where anyone can dance in his own way and what uninhibited, joyous gyrations will then be seen. Children, along with the elders, will join.

The dance will last until after midnight and by that time, young children will have fallen asleep on their mothers' laps or in their arms. The performance will finally be called to an end and the elderly drummers will pile their drums in front center of them, a signal of the termination of the joyous occasion. A priest, or a lay leader of the church, will then ask the people to rise once more and a song will echo through the large hall, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

So will end the festivities for the day at Tikiqaaq commemorating the birth of Christ. But, the celebration will continue until New Year's Day in which dogteam races, ancient dances, that may be likened to light operas, and the performances of the old and traditional games. The men will probably take sides in accordance with the old whaling fraternities, the Oaqmaqtuuq, the northside village faction, and the Ungasaqsikaaq, the southern faction. The contests will be difficult, even painful, in the keen competition but they will be done in a friendly tests of skill and endurance--games that were devised for physical fitness under the severe conditions of the Arctic--and they will last for hours and hours.

And so the holy days will be celebrated in the Arctic. Other areas will observe the birth of Christ with variations but all will commemorate the occasion with obeisance that come from the heart.