

# 'Time Caretaker' mask symbolizes beliefs

by Maria Williams  
for the Tundra Times

Charlie Kairaiuak, a Yupik artist and village advocate, recently completed a spirit mask. The "Time Caretaker" mask is a complex symbol of the Yupik belief system pertaining to the cosmic world and concept of the time continuum.

In a recent interview Kairaiuak expressed his deep concern with traditional values and talked about his artistic pursuits.

"The masks were used to record histories and record stories of our people and to show personal expression," Kairaiuak said of the "Time Caretaker" mask he recently completed.

Kairaiuak learned traditional mask making while he was growing up in the village of Chelornak. While he was a young boy he began asking questions of his grandfather, Apachuar, and other elders. He became fascinated as his instructors revealed the depth and complexity of these masks — the symbolic meaning of the materials used and how they reflected a deeper meaning.

Kairaiuak discovered through the elders that the masks were used in ceremonies, dances and also as icons for specific purposes.

"They are a vital part of the way

our people lived... because the masks were an expression of spiritual strength and the bond that our people have with the land and spirit world," he said.

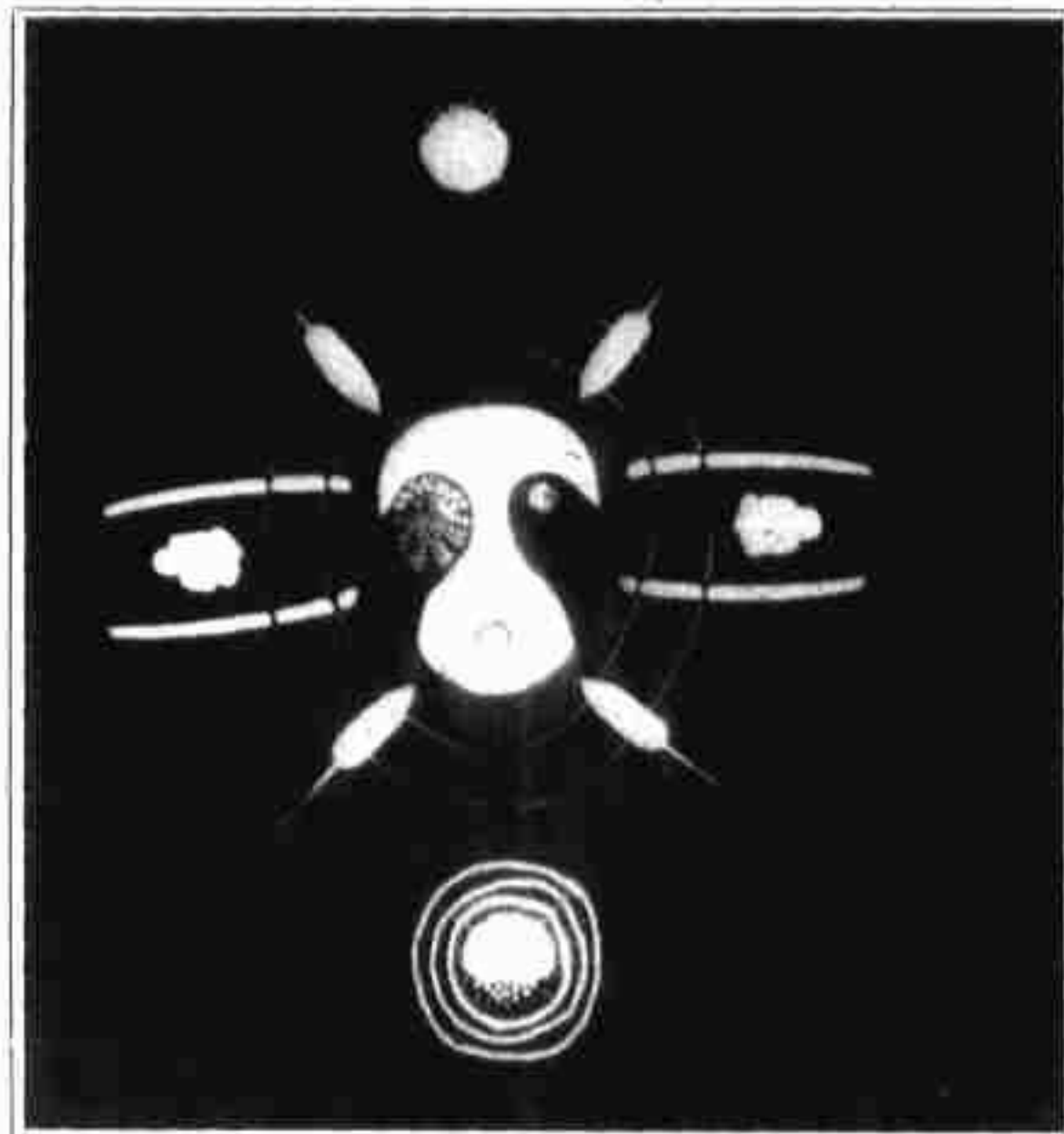
Kairaiuak also learned the history, mythologies and traditional religion of his people from his early teachers. He has managed to retain his strong village ties and commitment to Native rights and sovereignty.

Kairaiuak is both an artist and an advocate of Alaska Natives. His work, artistically and politically, symbolizes his commitment to traditional values. His experience and research have validated his suspicion of the foreign structures that have entered Alaska Native societies.

Institutional changes brought about by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, changing federal and state regulations on subsistence and Western educational values have all brought a certain amount of loss and pain to Alaska Native cultures.

Kairaiuak feels that if the traditional values systems are maintained and used it will create an equilibrium between the two vastly different worlds.

Kairaiuak's concerns about village rights and subsistence issues have kept him very busy, and for the past several years he hasn't had time for his artwork. Recently, he became involved



with mask making again because he felt that it rejuvenated his spiritual ties — with the land and his people.

"It's what inspires me, motivates me, working with masks again has

reminded me a lot about who I am.

"My masks strengthen the identity that I have and the understanding of the complex and healthy systems that our people used to live under."