

Once "asleep," he sees Eskimo culture with fresh eyes

By Bill Hess

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Tommy Ongtooguk describes himself as an Eskimo Rip Van Winkle who slept for 20

years. Ongtooguk is wide awake now, is seeing his world with fresh eyes, and wants to share his vision with anyone else willing to look and listen.

Ongtooguk is working as a photographer for Maniilaq, the non-profit arm of NANA, documenting Inupiat life in Alaska's Northwest Arctic. He has

been working on the project for almost six years, and expects to continue for as long as he lives.

He has shown his slide show, "The Changing World of the Northwest Alaska Eskimo," to students, politicians, civic groups, participants at the last Alaska Federation of Natives convention, and to other interested parties. Ongtooguk narrates the show in a soft but expressive voice as images of boats on the Noatak River, children swimming at Kotzebue on an unusually hot day, blizzard conditions at 90 below zero and an unheard-of fence blend with images of freeways and other signs of development from the Lower 48.

Ongtooguk has developed a unique perspective of the contrasts between his Native Arctic, as well as the implications modern development holds for his Inupiat people. Born in September of 1922, Ongtooguk viewed life in his birthplace of Teller and other Eskimo villages with a sense of permanency. "There was a feeling of belonging," he explains, "That it would go on like that forever." Then, in 1951, Ongtooguk joined the Air Force, and became part of the Strategic Air Command.

The next 20 years of Ongtooguk's life were spent outside the borders of the great land; 10 years in the Far East, and 10 in the Lower 48. "When I came back to Alaska, it was really different," he remembers. "Before I left, there were villages that had gotten mail only once a month, or even once every six months, by dog sled. Now in Kotzebue they get the mail every day! Money had become a large part of Alaska. Many things had begun to die. If I had not gone away, I would not have realized these things the way I did when I returned."

Ongtooguk found changes in himself as well. His Native language had become hard to speak. "My mind was speaking fluently, but my tongue was clumsy," Ongtooguk remembers, noting that his tongue has since become agile, and he speaks his Native Inupiaq language with the ease of his childhood. Ongtooguk does not regret his years on the outside. "I received a world-wide education, which textbooks could never give."

Chief among those observations was the idea that roots and culture are essential to the well-being of any individual. "The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act has really brought a challenge to our people," Ongtooguk explains. "Now, our leadership realizes that if we just have money and economy, this is not enough to hold us together! It is our Inupiat spirit which holds us together!"

Ongtooguk points to 15 Inupiaq values, identified by what has become known as the Inupiaq Spirit Committee which he says have sustained

his people in the past, and which can hold them together in the future. These values call for the preservation of the Inupiaq language, close family ties, respect for all people, hard work, belief in a spiritual power and other traditional values.

"These are what will hold us together as we face 1991," Ongtooguk refers to the year when special protections of Native lands and corporations will end under ANCSA, opening up the possibility of non-Native takeovers.

"If our young people do not have pride, they might be tempted to sell!" Ongtooguk stresses. He feels that past programs designed to educate young Natives to the ways and lifestyles of the western world have done so without giving their own culture enough consideration.

"They are not accepted in either culture," Ongtooguk explains. "They have lost many of their old ways, but have not become part of the other world. They're in limbo; No man's land. This is an awful place to be!"

Ongtooguk hopes his work can help young people find their roots. He believes it already has. "One high school girl, after seeing the show, came to me when I was sitting there, cooling off the projectors. 'This is awesome,' she said. 'I didn't know our lifestyle was that awesome!'"

Thus far, Ongtooguk has focused his work on the positive aspects of Inupiat life. These have too often been overlooked in the past. Once he feels the people are adequately comfortable with his work, then Ongtooguk believes he may tackle some of the tougher issues, such as trash pollution in the Arctic. Or noise pollution.

"When I was nine years old, my dad wanted to take me on a three-day hunting trip. I went to get my .22 rifle. 'No guns,' he said. I wondered what kind of trip it would be without guns. 'I am going to teach you how to see; how to listen.'" The experience was one of the most valuable of his life, Ongtooguk said. His father taught him how to find where the loon lay their eggs, as well as to watch and listen to the lifestyles of other birds and animals. He taught him how to find natural foods.

Now, many young people are not learning this sensitive skill, and Ongtooguk feels they should. He envisions a slide show where he will begin showing a Native, perhaps on the river with an outboard motor. Gradually, the sound volume will increase, expanding through home scenes with rock and roll music, blaring television commercials, up to roaring jets.

"Louder! Louder! Louder!" Ongtooguk stresses. "Then I will cut it off completely. There will be a nature scene. It will be silent. Then one bird chirping. That will show you impact!"



Tommy Ongtooguk explains his purpose in photography after showing his slide show recently in Anchorage. Ongtooguk has been documenting the Northwest Arctic and its people for the Maniilaq Association.