

## Arctic Survival—

## Season's Over, Now Comes the Great Kaqruq

(Reprinted from the Tundra Times June 3, 1963)

By HOWARD ROCK  
Time Editor

The whaling season at Pt. Hope has now drawn to a close. Moments of high excitement and spine-tingling, hard, precision pursuits for the great bowhead whale are over for this year. The time of anxious waiting, watching, hoping, sighting, the chase are gone along with the drama of the hunt and its violent action. Now, the first week of June, the people rest and prepare for whaling festivities. Whaling has been rewarding to some villages that hunt whales. Others were not so lucky. Hunting conditions, more than anything else, gage the outcome of a season. When weather is unfavorable, it limits the takes; when favorable, it is an assurance that some will be taken.

**Moderate Success**

Due to adverse hunting conditions, the village of Pt. Hope had only moderately successful season this spring. Heavy gales and south wind closed the leads and hampered whaling. Pt. Hope whalers got three whales; all small ones, in the neighborhood of 30 feet long. In this village, this take is an ample reason for the inhabitants to stage the exciting celebration of the Kaqruq, a festival at the end of each successful whaling season.

**Tradition**

Kaqruq is an ancient tradition established by the whalers of long ago. In their struggle for survival they learned to whale. And having found it good, they established the Festival of the Kaqruq, a celebration to commemorate a bountiful spring whale hunt and to honor the whaling god who dwelt on the moon.

In the present day the festival is much the same but most of the people have become devout Christians and thank God for a bountiful season.

Around the end of May, the sea ice gets rotten from the warming of the weather and is no longer safe. It is time for the whalers to debark their camps, terminating the month and a half long whaling season.

Each crew takes down its camp on the ice and loads up its gear into an umiak that had been equipped with a special low sled for transportation. The crew, following more solid ice, makes its way toward the beach near the village. Upon reaching the beach, those who have failed to get whales during the season put their whaling equipment away for the season.

But the crews of the successful whalers, according to custom, place their umiaks on anchored ice just off the beach and elevate them on hummocked ice. There they are left until the beginning of the festivities.

**Ancient Ritual**

On the first day of the celebration, a centuries-old ritual is performed. The crews of successful whalers on both sides, the Ungasasiquaaq and the Kaqmaqtuuq, begin to pull their umiaks ashore over the beach and on to solid ground.

Ungasasiquaaq, the south side, and Kaqmaqtuuq, the north side, are two ancient organizations that have been formed to provide and sustain a friendly rivalry among Pt. Hoppers as they hunt whales. Each side tries to outdo the other in catches.

Once the umiaks are on the ground the men elevate them about two and half feet on low sleds turned on their sides. The paddles are then placed upright

with the flaring angle of the sides of the umiak over the gunwale with the end of the handle of the paddle wedged behind the brace that runs along the length and middle of the umiak frames. The blades of the paddles are placed verticle to the length of the umiak.

On the prow, a pole is placed on which an American flag has been strung. Thus the craft of the whalers are staged to denote their success during the season just passed. The flags fly night and day because the sun never sets during this time of the year in the Arctic. If there were three successful crews on the north side, they are staged side by side all in the same manner.

**Thrilling To See**

There is something quietly thrilling to see whaling boats put up in this manner. They look fragile and small, but they personify the whaling captains and their crews who go after the great bowhead whale with daring and nerve.

The flags that fly over them reflect the love of the people for their country and the land from which they reap the bounty for their livelihood.

To the people of the village, the whaling umiaks elevated on their sled platforms with sprays of paddles angling skyward and the flags waving above them are thrilling and significant reminders of the Festival of the Kaqruq to take place the first or second week of June.

**Preparations**

In the meantime the women of the village, especially the wives and daughters of the successful whaling captains, begin to make preparations for the festival. Ornate clothing, parkas, and fancy mukluks are sewn for the members of their families. Kaqruq, to them, is an auspicious occasion, a deep-seated tradition established centuries before for the observance of a bountiful whaling season.

When the men complete staging the whaling umiaks the wives of the whaling captains take mukluk and meat to them. This includes mikiq, whale meat that had been cured to a tangy taste especially made to feed the men and other people on this particular ritual and the whaling feast two days later.

This ritual is the only event on the first day of the Kaqruq. According to custom, the second day is one of considerable activity, readying the Kaqruq grounds for the celebration. Tents and canvases, camp stoves pots and pans, caribou skins for mats or seat covers and whatever things that will be needed are brought to the Kaqruq area. Early on the third day the whaling captains and their wives and helpers descend on the grounds. The umiaks are taken down from the platforms and moved to celebration area and propped on their sides for wind shelter. Tents are raised for the cooks of the feast.

**Flukes for the Feast**

Whaling captains and members of their crews go to the siqlorqs (underground caches) and bring out the flukes or flippers of their whales, the main item in the course of the Kaqruq.

Around 9:30 in the morning the main body of the population begin to converge on the Kaqruq grounds dressed in their best fineries. The festivities officially start with an invocation by a minister or an elder of the church. Foods of all kinds are served, thereafter, caribou meat, berries, boiled bowhead whale tongue, mukluk, mikiq, Eskimo

doughnuts, sourdough hotcakes, homemade bread, and Eskimo ice cream.

Everyone sits down with friends and relatives to eat and visit. Presently, the successful whalers bring to the center of the assemblage the whale flukes and commence to slice them into half inch thicknesses. When a sufficient number of slices have been cut, it is time for the first whaling captain and his wife, from whose whale the flukes had been sliced, to come forward to the center of the grounds.

**Gifts for All**

The captain makes a brief address expressing his thanks to God for his success in the season just passed. He then picks up a slice of the fluke and calls out a name of a person, usually his best friend or crone, and says something like this, "Kakaimok a highly valued friend, over whose foot I tripped half a year ago and fell into the sea, I give this piece of avahrak (slice of fluke) for his enjoyment."

Thus the captain and his wife pass out the slices of fluke making remarks of appreciation for services rendered, calling a widowed woman and adding, "My wife will give you some mukluk and meat from out cache." But most of the time this ritual is a light-hearted affair with the captain and his wife making jokes and amusing remarks.

When the first captain and his wife are through, it is the turn of the second captain and his wife. To save time, couples sometimes perform simultaneously. When this is over, people settle down to eat more of the ample supply of food that is never allowed to run out by many women who cook for the occasion.

**Nalukatuk**

While the feast continues, the crews of the whalers begin to assemble the walrus skin nalukatuk, the tossing skin, looping had grips of thong or half-inch hemp rope. On the bottom of it they fashion a cradle of heavy with four long lines branching from it. Each one of these ropes are tied to each of the four tripods of whale jawbones. The nalukatuk is centered and the ropes are pulled tight and tied on the tripods. The tossing skin is thus suspended about three feet off the ground. This is done so the person tossed in the air may not touch the hard ground beneath and break an ankle or worse.

**Children Perform**

As soon as the men finished setting the nalukatuk, children from seven to thirteen years of age make a dash to do the nalukatuk. They are allowed to this for about a half hour or more. They have great and noisy fun in the process and always provide comical and amusing antics as they toss some young and unpracticed performer. As the youngsters are tossed they land on the nalukatuk in all positions, on their backs, upside down, and occasionally right side up.

**Adult's Turn**

The children are told to hand the nalukatuk over to the grown-ups who take their positions around it. If some of the whaling captains are young enough, they are sometimes thrown on the nalukatuk bodily and made to perform. They are not always the best and their ineptness usually provides a highly comical spectacle. This sets off a loud chorus of laughter.

When nalukatuk gets going in earnest, the best performers par-

ticipate. It is beautiful to see them tossed 20 feet in the air in an upright position and come down landing on their feet.

The best performers are usually women who seem to have a better sense of balance. One rule is not to look down while being tossed. If you do, the nalukatuk, ten feet in diameter, looks like a dime at the peak of the toss and you will wonder whether you will get back down landing in the middle of it.

**Erroneous Image**

There has been an erroneous image made of the nalukatuk by some authors, who says the reason for the toss is for the person to look for water leads on the ice. There is no need to do the nalukatuk to see leads. They are easily seen even from the ground level.

Nalukatuk at Pt. Hope is exclusive to the whaling celebration and is performed only at that particular occasion. It is a demonstration of exuberance and a tribute to the successful whalers. Where people in other area toss hats in approval and tribute, the folks at Pt. Hope toss people.

**The Chant**

During the children's nalukatuk, three or four elderly men sit down beneath the shelter of one of the umiaks with their drums and chant ancient whaling songs. The ancient chants and the rather soft beating of the drums in unison is most impressive. It lends an esthetic atmosphere heard in the background of hilarity and light-heartedness of the vigorous nalukatuk. The chanting is done throughout the performances of the children and adults.

**Victory Dance**

When it is over, the tossing skin is dismantled and placed in front of the chanters and drummers. It is then time for the chanters to sing a personal whaling song of one of the whaling captains. The captain in question comes forward on to the nalukatuk and begins his dance gesticulating almost casually, his right foot stomping lightly in time with the beat.

At the second round of the chant the drummers beat a heavy roll then a light one, then a steady heavy beat. At this the whaling captain suddenly becomes alive. His motions become vigorous, his right foot humping heavily on the nalukatuk skin keeping in perfect time with the chant and the drums. This is the captain's victory dance — vigorous and forceful! Subsequently, he is joined in the dance by his wife and relatives. Other captains take their turns dancing to their personal songs.

If the first celebration is staged at Kaqmaqtunq, the north side, the people will move to Ungasasiquaaq, the south side, the next day. The festivities will be repeated in the same manner. But when this one is completed, there will be games and contests between the two factions, starting with a tug of war. Ungasasiquaaq against Kaqmaqtuuq.

**Reverent Occasion**

Thus, the great Kaqruq is observed each year with all the seriousness and pomp it deserves. It is a deeply rooted tradition established by the Eskimo whalers of long ago. It is looked upon with both light-heartedness and severance.

In ancient times it was the reverent and grateful people who staged it to give thanks to their whaling god, Allingnaq, who dwelt on the moon, who to them, provided bountiful gifts

of whales that made it possible for them to survive.

The present-day Eskimos of Pt. Hope are devout Christians. They give their thanks to God.

**Words of Advice**

Perhaps the words of a venerable old man, Peter Koonooyak, a great whaler in his younger days, best describe the meaning of the Kaqruq. On Koonooyak's retirement, he said:

"People of Tigara, let us thank God for his great gifts. Let us thank our forefathers for establishing this, reverent occasion. In their ordeal of survival they have mastered the art of the great whale hunt that has made this occasion possible. As we live one, let us not fail them. It was they who made it possible for us Tigara, your forefathers have left you a rich heritage you should never forget. Keep whaling alive for your children in the future."

Columbia  
Runs Behind,  
Wick to Fill in

JUNEAU — The recently-sold state ferry Wickersham will remain in service until mid-June in order to minimize trip cancellations caused by late delivery of a replacement vessel.

Upon learning that Lockheed Shipbuilding Company is behind schedule at least a month on delivery of the new state ferry Columbia, it was stipulated in conditions for the Wickersham sale that delivery of the vessel to the buyer will be at the convenience of the state.

This will enable the Wickersham to make several sailings which otherwise would have had to be cancelled.

Alaska Marine Highway officials estimate these additional sailings by the Wickersham will save about 3,000 of an estimated 5,000 bookings jeopardized by Lockheed's late delivery of the Columbia.

Because of Lockheed's failure to meet the construction deadline for the Columbia, the state is pursuing legal remedies provided in the construction contract for regaining any revenue losses that occur.

"Unfortunately because of the uncertainties presented by Lockheed's completion date for the Columbia we are having to deal with this problem on a day-to-day basis," Captain H.J. Lockert, director of the Division of Marine Transportation, said.

"Even after the Columbia is turned over to the state by Lockheed we will require a two to three-week period for reassignment of personnel to the Columbia. They naturally will need a certain amount of time to become familiar with the new vessel. Also, Coast Guard inspections and drills are required before entering service."

"Therefore the mid-June delivery date of the Wickersham to the buyer is as advantageous to the state as could be desired under the circumstances. It would be to no avail to keep the Wickersham longer since this would present crew staffing problems."

"The unfortunate aspect is the late delivery date of the Columbia caused by Lockheed's failure to meet the contract construction schedule. If the delivery of the new vessel had been on time the required reassignment of crew and their familiarization with the new vessel could have been accomplished prior to the time that the peak tourist season was at hand."