Worth a Thousand Words: Visual Collections and a Long View of the North

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Worth a Thousand Words:

Visual Collections and a Long View of the North

Part of the special volume of Arctic Science: Arctic Museum Collections – documenting and understanding changes in biological and cultural diversity through time and space

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Abstract

Historical film and media collections in the North contain an essential, indelible message for the future - that cultural knowledge is perishable and impermanent. Throughout the world as bearers of traditional culture pass away, much of their knowledge is lost. Film and audio collections can play a critical role in preserving living knowledge, allowing us to observe, experience, and study singular, irreproducible moments of a culture’s past. As time passes, these unique recorded moments take on a vital function; they become new conduits of knowledge, a visual and aural stand-in for real experience. This paper discusses the role of museum film and audio collections in preserving cultural knowledge and the challenges of extending this resource to the classrooms of remote communities throughout the North. The paper also discusses the collaborative cultural filmmaking initiative of Sarah Elder and Leonard Kamerling, their work with partner Alaska Native communities over a period of two decades, and their setbacks and successes in producing “authentic” records of Alaska Native life in the 1970’s and 80’s, records that are now part of the Alaska Documentary Collections at the University of Alaska Museum of the North.

Key words: Museum cultural film collections, ethnographic film, collaborative community filmmaking, Alaska Native film and audio
Something Like Memory

Long ago, before school teachers, before they knew the white man, the first people used to talk about strangers coming from out of nowhere. The prophet Manillaq spoke of people who would come with a different language, who would live easy. He said that from that time on, everything would be changed.

Inupiaq elder Joe Sun (Elder and Kamerling 1978)

In the fall of 1976, two filmmakers from the University of Alaska Fairbanks (Sarah Elder and myself, Leonard Kamerling) filmed Inupiaq elder, Joe Sun, at his fish camp on the Kobuk River in Northwest Alaska. Joe Sun spoke about the legendary Inupiaq prophet and healer, Manillaq, who foretold the coming of Europeans and the new ways of living that they would bring. He spoke about the vanished world of his grandparents and the extraordinary changes he had witnessed in his long life. The recordings we made in Joe Sun’s cabin over forty years ago may be the sole existing visual and aural records of his knowledge and wisdom. They are a part of hundreds of hours of film, video, and audio materials from Yup’ik, Inupiaq, Aleut, and Athabaskan communities that make up the Alaska Documentary Collection at the University of Alaska Museum of the North. These diverse materials depict community events and ceremonies, conversations with elders, subsistence activities, portraits of a changing northern environment, and the uneventful, ordinary, everyday moments that speak most eloquently about any culture. The Collection is the product of collaborative ethnographic documentary productions with Alaska Native communities over a period of more than forty years. They contain an essential,
indelible message for the future – that cultural knowledge is perishable and impermanent. Throughout the indigenous world as bearers of traditional culture pass away, much of their knowledge is lost.

When an elder dies, it’s like a library has burned. Traditional knowledge is a deep practical common sense based on teaching and experience. It is knowing the country, the environment - snow, ice, weather and the relationship between things. It is an authority system. It sets out rules governing the use of resources - respect, an obligation to share. It is a kind of wisdom and truth gained through experience.

What is Traditional Knowledge?
(Alaska Native Science Commission web site)

Film and audio collections allow us to observe, experience, and study singular, irreproducible moments of a culture’s past. As time passes, these unique recorded moments, like Joe Sun’s reflections on Inupiaq history, take on a vital function; they become new conduits of knowledge, a visual and aural stand-in for real experience. More than any other medium, the psychological realism of film most closely resembles real experience (Adorno 2004). Film looks like our memories and dreams - so much so that it’s not uncommon for people to confuse events observed in photos and films with real memories. In her book, On Photography, Susan Sontag notes that photography has become one of the principal devices for experiencing events, or for giving an appearance of participation. “Photographs,” she says, “are not so much an instrument of memory as an invention of it, or a replacement for it“ (Sontag 2011).

The Alaska Documentary Collection is focused on a critical period in the evolution of indigenous culture in the North - a span
of roughly forty-five years, from 1970 to the present that has seen transformational economic, cultural, and environmental change. The Collection’s ethnographic film and audio materials and the completed titles they were originally produced for, detail the relationship of Alaska Native peoples to the land, sea, and natural environment, as well as to the changing social, educational, and political environment that defines this period.

The Alaska Documentary Collection contains unedited 16mm film materials from completed productions, film negatives, video masters, and digital originals in most every format since the introduction of VHS tape in 1976. It houses over four hundred reels of audio on ¼” magnetic recording tape. These are perhaps the most culturally valuable materials in the collection because they contain the original, real-time, unedited audio from all filming sessions. The cost of producing 16mm films in the 1970’s required a focused economy of production. Budgets were thin and the ratio of film shot to final product was small. Cost conscious filmmakers of that time would not have considered filming an entire one-hour interview. The cost would have been prohibitive. Instead, the camera was turned on and off at intervals to film pieces of the session. Audio tape, however, being relatively inexpensive, allowed the recording of every interview, regardless of length, in its entirety. Today, these audio recordings contain hundreds of interviews, events, and environmental soundscapes, with their original, real-time integrity preserved. The full-track ¼” magnetic tape recordings are of remarkable fidelity and have survived for decades with little loss in quality. They are a repository of traditional knowledge – the collective intangible heritage of Alaska Native communities over the last forty years.
Authenticity and Collaboration

In observing recorded culture, how can users judge its authenticity? Does it represent a perspective shaped by the film’s subjects or is it the product of a filmmaker’s imagination? In the early 1970’s, filmmaker Sarah Elder and I hoped to address these issues by producing films in a framework of collaboration with Alaska Native partner communities. Our approach grew directly out of our personal experiences living and working in Native communities. Observing the reciprocity of social life, subsistence, and governance in these communities made the idea of cultural research based on shared decision-making an inevitable path to follow. When we first began our experiments in cross-cultural filmmaking there were few models to turn to. Traditional anthropology, which regarded ethnographic film with some suspicion, offered little encouragement. Our early commitment to a “shared anthropology” as an ethical foundation for cross-cultural research, anticipated by decades what now has become a constitutive part of anthropological and ethnographic film research.

Our first effort at collaborative filmmaking was in the Yup’ik community of Tununak, in 1971. We hoped that the film would be authentic and representative (as we understood those terms at the time) and we had the notion that an attempt at collaboration would automatically make this so. The working methods of this effort, however, was too informal and therefore often chaotic. Democratizing the decision-making process was our goal, but to
get there someone had to facilitate the project and be in charge. We discussed what the film might accomplish with the village council. Elders wanted to have a record of daily life for their children. They wanted the film to document the traditional skills that young people were not learning. Community members would informally make suggestions about what they thought should be included, but we failed to develop specific arrangements for clearing or refining suggestions with the wider community. Nor did we identify a group or individuals as authorized to represent the community. We learned from these mistakes and in subsequent projects incorporated these critical components in our approach. Did we succeed in our goal to make a film that the community judged authentic? For most people it was the first time they had seen a film about their own culture, in their own language. The power of this cannot be underestimated. For the community of Tununak the film has earned a special place as an irreplaceable record of cultural knowledge and of the esteemed elders that possessed it.

In subsequent projects we were more realistic about the limitations of working in collaboration and were more skilled in using the informality of the process to our advantage. We applied this experience to our work in the Siberian Yupik community of Gambell, on St. Lawrence Island, where we produced a body of materials that resulted in four films. An important element in the community agreeing to a filmmaking partnership was the fact that they had seen our previous work and could evaluate how other Native groups had been represented. As a whaling culture, they wanted the film to be about subsistence whale hunting and to present a positive view. Most of the responses were requests to show the things that reinforced community identity as Alaska
Natives: memory of and the practice of traditional ways, subsistence skills and the cooperative traditions of living that have made it possible to prosper in the North. Therefore, it is not surprising that our early films focused on subsistence activities. But our concentration on these themes indicated more than our collaborators’ desire to put their best foot forward for the camera. It also reflected the extent of their ideas about the collective educational needs of their communities and the role the films might play in fulfilling them. That these needs were deeply resonant for future generations is demonstrated by the longevity of the films, still widely distributed in Alaska and frequently screened in educational settings and Alaska Native communities.

Over the years we had become more confident as filmmakers and more able to trust our intuitions and the vagaries of our collaborative process. These factors made us better able to understand where the threads of a single request or suggestion might lead and how it might be used as an element of structure in building a cohesive film. As filmmakers, we saw ourselves as facilitators of a process of shared decision-making with our subjects, not as authors. As such, our task was not to provide either a cultural inventory or a catalogue of social issues, but rather to create a singular record of a particular time and place in the life of a community, guided by a relationship of trust with our subjects. In this sense, we understood ethnographic film at that time to be a kind of cultural advocacy. Our films do not claim objectivity and they eschew responsibility for explaining everything. They also resist the temptation to claim particular authority in what they do explain. Film researcher Nico de Klerk writes:
It is obvious and inescapable that these (Elder and Kamerling) film records could not have been obtained without intimate knowledge of the villages and extended interaction with the village members appearing in the films. But what strikes me most is that despite their richness of detail, the filmmakers emphatically refrain from taking up an omniscient position. It leaves open the questions that in more traditional ethnographic and documentary filmmaking practices would have been answered in a more authorial, if not authoritarian mode, by explanatory printed titles or a voice-over commentary. The films, then, evince a modest position; they do not hide the fact that the knowledge they convey is imperfect (de Klerk 2005).

**Time Machine**

The cultural nuances embedded in film and audio collections take on different meanings for different users. Contemporary Alaska Native users may be a generation or more removed from the recorded events. Whether viewing them as collective cultural or personal history, these users re-signify the events portrayed, creating new meaning and a new contemporary cultural context (Nordic Anthropological Film Festival Panel 2016). Researchers can look to archival images as a baseline for thinking about modern trends in culture. For Native students, film images and recordings of previous generations can be incorporated into contemporary family narratives, or fill the gaps in an envisioned cultural history. For example, in *Uksuum Cauyai: The Drums of Winter*, a film about traditional Yup’ik dance, viewers can observe in great detail the hand motions, facial expressions, physical attitudes, and social context of the dancers – as practiced in the 1970's. Yup’ik educator, Dr. Walkie Charles*,
who grew up in the community depicted in the film, commented, “What we see in this film, that’s my culture - the way it used to be, the way it should be.” For non-Native students, viewing these film materials may be their first (and only) authentic experience observing life in an Alaska Native community. This is the extraordinary power of the moving image, to re-create the experience of unique, irreproducible cultural moments from the past.

Recently, a group of Yup’ik college students visited the Alaska Documentary Collection at the University of Alaska Museum of the North to view archival film footage taken in their Lower Yukon community a generation before they were born. They were expectant and excited to see images of the venerated world of their parents and grandparents. The students were from the community of Emmonak, where we produced *Uksuum Cauyai: The Drums of Winter*. They were most interested in seeing the material not included in the final ninety-minute version of the film. The unused footage consisted of scenes of everyday life in Emmonak in the spring of 1977, seasonal subsistence activities, traditional dance, a community potlatch, and extended conversations with elders. One student listened to an interview with a revered relative who had passed away before he was born. It was the first time that he had heard his voice. Another commented on the landscape of the Yukon Delta, which had changed dramatically since the film was made. Together, they watched an interview with a young woman filmed in 1980 (today a well-known and respected elder) talking about performing her first public dance in the presence of the entire community.

> When I first danced, I remember it was on a weekend, on a Friday. I was in school that day and I was very excited. I felt really
special because the older folks during that day would look at me and said, “You’re going to be very nice tonight.” I was nervous, I was excited, I couldn’t wait for the night to come.


_Uksuum Cauyai: The Drums of Winter_ was made over a period of ten years and was completed in 1988. This year, 2017, marks the fortieth anniversary of the original production of the film with the Yup’ik community of Emmonak. In the intervening years elders have died, traditions have been replaced or lost, and Native languages have been under increasing pressure from English. The everyday fabric of life in Native communities has been transformed over time, making our film “snapshots” during a decade of rapid change irreproducible and irreplaceable. The importance of this material to our collective cultural heritage was recognized in 2006 when _Uksuum Cauyai: The Drums of Winter_ was named to the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress.** Alaska anthropologist, Ann Fineup-Riordan, notes in her book, _Freeze Frame: Alaska Eskimos in the Movies_, the place that the film has earned as a critical record of intangible Yup’ik cultural heritage:

Nothing that has been written about Yup’ik dancing comes close to the power of the Yup’ik commentary contained in THE DRUMS OF WINTER. Nor does any previous film treatment of Yup’ik dancing communicate so well the historical and contemporary context of dance. The combination is extraordinary, accomplishing much more than either the written word or the unnarrated image in isolation. The result is an example of the best that ethnographic film can offer. (Fienup-Riordan 2003)

The combined film, video, and audio footage from our
productions with Alaska Native partner communities adds up to hundreds of hours of film and tape. As time passed it became obvious that this material had significant cultural and historic value that increased over time and that it should be preserved, documented, and made available to the public. It became a curated collection of the University of Alaska Museum of the North in 2000.

Documenting both the media and the context in which it was produced are critical parts of insuring that any visual collection survives and remains useful. We can only speculate what the film archive of the future will look like and how it will function. Because physical media is perishable and only a fraction is migrated forward in digital form, it is possible that in the future only the documentation may survive. The Northern media archive of the future should as much as possible be an extension of the classroom. An exemplary film archive that has embraced this future is the Isuma Collective in Igloolik, Nunavut. The Isuma mission to “preserve, deliver, teach” is a paradigm shifting model. They have designed one of the most progressive and innovative internet-based, classroom focused media archives anywhere. In addition to streaming their own collection of locally produced Inuit programs, they provide downloadable lesson plans to help teachers make the most efficient use of the films. Isuma filmmakers have produced a forty-year body of self-reflective media about Inuit culture that stands as a model for indigenous community filmmaking. Their trilogy of Inuit language, Inuit produced dramatic films, Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner, The Journals of Knut Rasmussen, and Tomorrow, have earned world-wide recognition, including the coveted Palme d’Or Award at the Cannes Film Festival for Atanarjuat in 2001. The
international success of these locally produced Inuit films has been a beacon of encouragement and hope for indigenous filmmakers around the world.

Other cultural media collections are making critically important contributions to the survival of endangered film, video, and audio materials in the North. The Alaska Moving Image Preservation Association (AMIPA) was established in 1986, a time of deep state budget cuts that compromised institution’s ability to protect their media materials. Through private donations, years of dedicated volunteer work, and a partnership with the University of Alaska Anchorage Consortium Library, AMIPA has rescued and preserved over 17,000 diverse historical and culturally significant items. Among these are the Alaska State Legislature’s deliberations on the formation of the Alaska Permanent Fund in 1974, the Father Bernard Hubbard collection of footage shot by missionaries in Alaska in the 1930’s, and the Delia Keats collection of videos documenting traditional Inupiaq healing practices, to name just a few.

The North Slope Borough Media Center in Utqiagvik (Barrow), Alaska has been producing regional media since the 1970’s. They recently embarked on a massive project to preserve thousands of video tapes for public access. In 1978, the North Slope Borough held a regional elders conference in Barrow. Elders were brought in from the surrounding villages to speak about what they hoped to pass on to Inupiaq youth. The conference was recorded on reel-to-reel, black and white video tape that totaled more than fifty hours. The original tapes were lost without a trace for over thirty years. They turned up in another state and were returned to Utqiagvik. The North Slope
Borough digitized and transferred the original tapes to DVD format as a first step in preserving this priceless, lost, and rediscovered cultural treasure.

The Northern media archive of the future must conserve and protect its irreplaceable film, video, and audio collections, but also deliver materials in innovative ways that transcend the distance between the physical archive and the most remote communities and schools. In this way we can make our collections of indigenous media and cultural films more available and relevant, and more directed to the real educational needs of potential viewers.

Sarah Elder and Leonard Kamerling Filmography:

1971, *Tununerimiut: The People of Tununak*, 30 min. (Tununak, Nelson Island)


1974, *Aghveghniighmi: At the Time of Whaling*, 38 min. (Gambell, St. Lawrence Island)

1975, *Upenghaam Sikugkeni: On the Spring Ice*, 45 min, (Gambell, St. Lawrence Island.)

1976, *From the First People*, 45 min, (Shungnak)

1983, *Every Day Choices: Alcohol and an Alaska Town*, 90 min. (Bethel)

1985, *Overture on Ice: The Fairbanks Symphony Orchestra Concert in Savoonga, St. Lawrence Island.*

1987, *The Reindeer Thief*, 15 min (Produced by Katrina Waters, edited from Gambell, St. Lawrence Island footage filmed by Elder and Kamerling in 1975)

1988, *In irgu’s Time*, 20 min, (Produced by Katrina Waters, edited from Gambell, St. Lawrence Island footage filmed by Elder and Kamerling in 1975.)

1988, *Uksuum Cauyai: The Drums of Winter*, 90 min. (Emmonak)


2015, *Uksuum Cauyai: The Drums of Winter Restoration Project*, the photo-chemical and digital restoration of the original 1988 film, produced with Summit Day Media, of Anchorage, AK

REFERENCES and NOTES


Elder and Kamerling 1978, English transcript for the motion picture film From the First People, Alaska Center for Documentary Film, Univ. of Alaska Museum of the North, Fairbanks.


*Dr. Walkie Charles is a professor of Yup’ik language at the Alaska Native Language Center, University of Alaska Fairbanks. He served as Language and Cultural Advisor on the production of* *Uksuum Cauyai: The Drums of Winter.*

** *Uksuum Cauyai: The Drums of Winter*, (1988) by Sarah Elder and Leonard Kamerling, was named to the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress in 2006. Librarian of Congress, James Billington, said upon announcing the 2006 films, "The annual selection of films to the National Film Registry involves far more than the simple naming of cherished and important films to a prestigious list. The selection of a film recognizes its importance to American movie and cultural history, and to history in general. The Registry stands among the finest summations of more than a century of wondrous American cinema."

*** The ethnographic filmmaking team of Sarah Elder and Leonard Kamerling produced films with Alaska Native communities from 1971 through 1989. The completed films and the unused media from those productions are part of the Film Archives at the University of Alaska Museum of the North. The produced titles are
distributed by Documentary Educational Resources, and can be previewed on their website (der.org).