

# Eskimo Music: A Comparative Survey

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## RÉSUMÉ

Il s'agit d'une revue des études faites sur la musique esquimaude entre 1911 et 1975, accompagnée d'une évaluation de leurs principaux résultats. Les théories de la diffusion et d'autres approches courantes sont critiquées à la lumière de données anthropologiques récentes. L'auteur recommande une approche plus anthropologique à l'ethnomusicologie dans le domaine de la musique esquimaude, la conduite des études sociomusicales dans leur contexte culturel et la coordination méthodologique de la recherche actuelle sur la musique esquimaude.

Since Thuren and Thalbitzer's pioneer work in 1911, numerous substantial analyses of Eskimo music bear testimony to the continued search for comparative data on the subject. Leden followed Thalbitzer into Greenland during the years 1910-26, and subjected his collection to substantial analysis in 1952. The collections of Roberts and Jenness during the period 1913-16 were analyzed by Roberts in 1925, and again by Béclard-d'Harcourt in 1928. Estreicher, utilizing the field work of others, made an extensive analysis of Caribou Eskimo music in particular (1948) and of Eskimo music in general (1950). Ingstad's collection from the Alaskan interior during the period 1949-50 was analyzed by Groven in 1956, though it should be borne in mind that the Nunamiut population of the interior, 97, is by no means representative of the large Eskimo population of the southwest regions, 17,000. Svensson (1956) elaborated upon Groven's findings. Olsen collected Greenlandic material in 1961 and subjected it to melodic and structural analysis (1963, 1967, 1972). Collaer (1967) attempted a summary of Estreicher's and Olsen's analyses. Koranda collected Alaskan material 1964-72, publishing a limited

analysis (1972). Binnington carried out a limited analysis of north Alaskan Eskimo music in 1973. Several substantial studies are at present in progress, including those of Walcott (University of California) on Alaska's Nelson Island, Ager (Ohio State University) in Alaska, Binnington and Liang (University of British Columbia) at Coppermine, Charron, Nattiez, Harvey, and Beaudry (University of Montreal) on Baffin Island, Hauser (University of Copenhagen) in Greenland, and Paquet (Sorbonne), on the recordings of Hauser.

The objective findings of these various studies are urgently awaited, for too often the musical reports on which ethnomusicological analyses have been based have been mere appendages or afterthoughts to ethnographic investigations, and too often there has been lack of a comprehensive design. Such a design would surely have included, for instance, Alaskan Eskimo music. Fortunately, liaison work and the scholarly exchange of information within the framework of the Society for Ethnomusicology promises to ensure coordination of future studies.

The search for comparative data on Eskimo music parallels that for, and ideally should be related to, comparative data on Eskimo social and economic systems. Until recently the latter has to some extent been lacking. For a long period, the ethnographic literature characterized the various circumpolar Eskimo societies as ones in which the members were almost universally nomadic, egalitarian, ate raw meat, built igloos, rubbed noses, swapped wives, and indulged in female infanticide. For instance, Mead's textbook on the anarchistic individualism of the Angmagssalik Eskimo (1937) — a description which has been reprinted several times in recent decades — is now widely considered to have been grossly overdrawn.

In fact, while Alaskan Eskimos possessed the permanent ceremonial house, with its integrative, multiple musical function and involvement with the social and prestige system, Eskimo societies to the east did not. While Alaskan Eskimos observed a ceremonial cycle requiring a considerable outlay of goods and much musical formalism, many others did not. While Alaskan Eskimos featured the cohesive whale-hunting crew drawn from the male sibling group, and their musical lodge with its own songs and dances, many others did not.

Many Eskimo cultural differences are due to regional ecological variation. The Iglulik, for instance, had no major rivers emptying timber into the sea, and hence were deficient in wood with which to construct the large boats necessary for hunting walrus in the open water during summer, and hence did not focus on boat-crew organization and its potential for hunting-lodge music.

Eskimos of the Barren Lands hunted caribou, while those to their north, the Netsilik, hunted seal. Eskimo hunters at Port Harrison in eastern Quebec Province traditionally have never been involved with either caribou or walrus (those of them who were resettled on Ellesmere Island had to be taught the relevant skills).

Other regional variation is due to the disparate social effects of Moravian, Catholic, or Anglican missionization, and to differential economic change, such as that incurred in some regions when the fur trade radically enhanced hunter autonomy and weakened the communal basis of traditional musical performance.

Regional differences in the ecology affect social structure, which in turn partly determines musical behavior. For example, a present-day whaling lodge in a rich maritime environment, possessing six drummers and a rehearsed dance team of fifteen to thirty dancers at one time, calls for sociomusical prescriptions, formalized musical routines, and tighter musical organization than that needed by a small, nomadic hunting band migrating seasonally between coast and interior, possessing but a single drum and emphasizing a solo drum-dance tradition (Johnston 1974, 1975).

Regional variation in kinship relations carries important implications in the realm of musical performance. The unilineality in Eskimo populations around the Bering Sea region in Alaska and Siberia is almost nonexistent in Canada, where bilaterality prevails, and this has bearing on song inheritance, dance partnerships, the namesake song tradition, and musical lodge membership.

The search for comparative data on *change* in Eskimo music parallels the search for reliable data concerning sociocultural change. The latter is inevitably followed by musical change, but not necessarily acculturative musical change. The coercive national

policy of assimilation in Siberia discourages the use of overt symbols of ethnicity, of which traditional music is perhaps the most obvious. The permissive, bicultural national policy prevailing today within the United States not only permits ethnicity, but, by delineating cultural boundaries such as the Native and the non-Native right to Land Claims, fosters separate group identity and the flowering of a cultural renaissance in traditional music.

Inevitably, the currents of sociocultural change and the new values of a changing world are permeating the Eskimo lifeway. The present emphasis upon carving takes away from hunting and increases dependence upon imported foods, which in turn makes the hunter's song and the thanking dance redundant. Earnings from carving are being pooled by the Netsilik, in order to purchase motorized whale-boats, which in turn become the focus of a modern "*umiak*" group unknown in the days when the Netsilik were mainly individual seal-hunters. Following some future cultural and musical renaissance, the Netsilik boat-crew might well function as the basis for a community hall musical unit.

The Iglukik, formerly without boats, now purchase wooden boats with earnings from trapping, and harvest the walrus herds. This new integrative group activity is not without its effects upon the pattern of musical performance, which generally tend to adapt to subsistence roles and seasonal occupations. Greenlandic male hunters, traditionally disdainful of shark-hunting, have been persuaded into this occupation by artificially raised cod liver oil prices and by the local use of shark liver as coinage, which in turn speeds up local economic development and hastens the demise of the ancient musical traditions connected with seal-hunting. In fact, the overall emphasis throughout Greenland, for retraining the Eskimo population for a commercial fishing economy, is bringing about a de-emphasis of those musical forms associated with older hunting pursuits.

Of the various aspects of sociocultural change which affect traditional Eskimo musical performance in Canada, one of the most prominent is the government's policy of relocation and resettlement. While some studies indicate that social cohesion and such communal activity as musicking may survive and even flourish increasingly, other studies indicate that numerous social problems are incurred.

On Southampton Island and at Pelly Bay, where not only Eskimo inter-tribal confrontation but religious sectarian confrontation is a latent source of social conflict, role confusion exists not only among the mixed Eskimo inhabitants but also among the White residents, and the resultant urban polyglot possesses no common musical reference.

While, in the small hunting bands of former times, social interaction with any known individual was possible, today modern township residents must perforce be selective in their interpersonal relationships — the old musical mechanisms for integrating strangers into the system via dance has largely been lost. In place of the social and behavioral parameters circumscribed by the extended kin group with its proprietary songs, many communities are now characterized solely by coresidentiality, endogamy on a religious basis, and the independence of the nuclear family, emphasizing a musical repertory culled from northern radio broadcasts and from hymnals.

New Eskimo leaders are emerging, their prominence based upon language facility and Western vocational training. With leadership and prestige now hinging upon such contact skills, traditional pursuits such as song composer and dance leader are falling into disrepute, being considered emblems of cultural backwardness. In Siberia, a recent Soviet publication emphasizes that the Soviet system ensures the betterment of the material condition of Eskimo life and the "liquidation of cultural backwardness;" on the other hand, a British anthropologist writes of the Siberian Eskimos that, if they have gained materially, they have lost spiritually.

Hughes (1965) has considered a list of the situational forces generating and/or constituting sociocultural change, and hence productive of musical change in the north. Among them he includes changing Eskimo demographic features, declining animal populations, conjunction of differing cultures, new reference cultures, new pattern of selective valuation, new types of rewards, discriminatory practices, unemployment. He also lists psychosocial features such as confused self-identity, self-disparagement, alienative reference group behavior, skills inappropriate to new world, role patterns emulating White culture. Hughes also lists positive elements such as constructive adaptation, peer acceptance, new

economic opportunities, and innovative institutions such as educational and medical facilities.

Ethnomusicologically, positive elements are to be perceived in the creation of new musical performing situations such as the pan-Canadian Eskimo Northern Games, the Alaskan Eskimo Olympics, university Native arts festivals, the Fairbanks Annual Potlatch, the Alaska Native Brotherhood dances, paid performances for tourists, ethnic radio broadcasts, television appearances, World's Fair appearances, command performances before the U.S. President, performance for professional film-makers, the Easter, July 4th, Labor Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Eve dances, performance for the Native Oral Literature Preservation programs, demonstration dances in rural schools, and performances for anthropologists and ethnomusicologists.

It is noteworthy that, in many cases, the work of the latter has stimulated Eskimo interest in their own musical product. Tapes, cassettes, and records often find their way back into the Eskimo communities originally responsible for the music, there to be used as mementos of the recorded singers now deceased, as funeral music for the singers' relatives who subsequently die, as the basis of newly established local folklore archives on the library shelves of the council meeting house, as program material for local broadcasts from school transmitters, and as source material for Native Arts and Crafts aides who teach dance and song in rural schools. There are thus multiple instances of unchanged musical form (musical form is a conservative element) within changed function (the social function of music is highly adaptive).

Regional variation in Eskimo musical behavior and in the social function of Eskimo music is apparent from the wide range of situational descriptions given for the various regions covered in the present study. Considerable regional variation exists in the *sound* of Eskimo music. In Greenland and Eastern Canada, the refrain-plus-verse form engenders a bipartite structure which lends itself to various call-and-response formats. In Alaska and Siberia, the refrain-plus-verse form is less common, the most popular form being a thirty- or forty-measure compact song which is sung first with vocables, and then repeated exactly using the real songwords. Within the song, sectionalized repetition is the structural base.

Some observers consider that, of all central Canadian Eskimo musical styles, that of the Copper Eskimo exhibits the most use of repetition and the highest level of predictability. In Greenlandic and Canadian Eskimo music, songs often consist of sequences of rhythmic values which defy organization at a level lower than sectional, while in Alaska and Siberia, a symmetrical rhythm, and hence the symmetrical placement of bar-divisions, is unerringly indicated by the regular beat of the large drumming ensemble. This beat usually consists of  $\frac{5}{8}$ ,  $\frac{7}{8}$ , or similar interesting rhythm stressed in combinations of strokes valued at either two or three syllabic pulse equivalents. Leden considers East Greenlandic Eskimo rhythm to be more complex than that of the Smith Sound Eskimos on the northwest coast of Greenland.

If Greenlandic and Canadian Eskimo musical material is divided into meter-like units on the basis of melodic contour, these units consistently exhibit varying length within any given song. In Alaska and Siberia, the stable strophe and exact repetition is common. The multi-strophed narrative song containing much recitative is common in the east and rare in the west. Everywhere, songs-within-stories are shorter than dance songs, and juggling game songs are longer than both.

The basis of dance song classification varies greatly across the circumpolar regions, from the *pisik/aton* dichotomy based on dance style (Copper Eskimo), to the *sayuun/atuutipiaq* dichotomy based on whether fixed motions have been assigned (northwest Alaska), to the *arula/pualla* dichotomy based upon dance style (southwest Alaska).

Greenlandic and Canadian Eskimo song range is generally about a fifth or sixth, an exception being the Copper Eskimo who, according to Roberts' transcriptions, utilize a range of an octave or even a tenth. In Alaska and Siberia the range is commonly a twelfth, with the exception of the Lower Yukon, where it is frequently limited to a fifth or sixth. This is shown by the studies so far available.

Pentatonic and tetratonic scale use is common among all Greenlandic and Canadian Eskimos except the Copper, where hexatonism, heptatonism, and even considerable chromaticism appear. In Alaska and Siberia pentatonism prevails, with some use

of two further scale members as auxiliary and passing notes. Everywhere there is additional use of accented grace-notes, glissandi, and elaborate microtonal pitches occurring within specific musical and verbal contexts, and affecting musical meaning. From the Copper Eskimo westward, songs occasionally exhibit a form of modulation or abrupt change of tonal center.

Everywhere, dance songs frequently commence with a short incipit of vocables on the reference tone. Melody is often arch-shaped, terminating in gradual descent and note-prolongation. In Alaska a common ending is prolonged repetition of the second lowest tone employed in the song. Large leaps of an octave or more may occur in the west, of a fourth or fifth in the east. Ascending and descending fourths appear as an integral part of melodic contour.

Everywhere, singing tone is nasal, strident, shrill, and in dance songs is accompanied by throat restriction, glottal pulsation, and diaphragmatic pulsation. In Alaska and Siberia, the latter two are matched to the pattern of the drumbeat of the drumming ensemble. Tempo is around MM 90-110 in Alaska and Siberia, slightly slower in the east. Nowhere is speech-tone significant as a factor in musical composition, and everywhere speech-rhythm is treated with a remarkable degree of musical unconcern. Everywhere songwords are concerned primarily with Eskimo interpersonal relations, and secondarily with the environment (the two are necessarily linked in the singers' perception of subsistence roles).

In most Eskimo dance songs, game songs, and songs-within-stories, the songwords function as an outlet for creative fantasy, commonly revolving around a hunter's success story. Use of the rhythmic vocables *a-ya-yanga* is circumpolar in distribution.

Extensive song diffusion is common in all regions: Jenness tracked and documented the diffusion of one Point Hope song all across northwest and north Alaska within the space of one year, and Nielson has found songs from East Greenland in West Greenland. Today there is much exchange of songs across even language barriers, such as that between the Yupik-speakers and the Inupiaq-speakers of Alaska. This song diffusion does not necessarily result in stylistic synthesis; the borrowers possess skills of mimicry, and



revel in demonstrating song-styles other than their own. Where genetic intermingling has occurred, stylistic synthesis is present, and Fredericksen reports the presence of Danish elements in certain Greenlandic Eskimo song material. Olsen maintains that musical compartmentalization is the more usual reaction to prolonged and extensive contact between Eskimos and Whites.

Estreicher's substantial comparative analysis of Eskimo music suffers from the weakness that only six Alaskan examples are given. All are atypical, none show drum accompaniment, and none possess the  $\frac{5}{8}$  rhythm so common in Alaska. Too many investigators rely solely upon scale patterns and ignore difficult-to-transcribe rhythmic backgrounds. In many non-Western musics, the rhythmic accompaniment is a prime element without which the melody is meaningless. Estreicher postulates that Padlermiut Eskimo music is the purest style, being the 'simplest', and uses this as a basis for comparison with other Caribou Eskimo musics and with all other Eskimo musics.

Estreicher considers that while Caribou Eskimo music and, to some extent, East Greenlandic Eskimo music has been little influenced by the various waves of cultural diffusion of recent centuries, West and North Greenlandic Eskimo music together with Alaskan Eskimo music represent a second stage, one in which Paleosiberian and American Indian elements are found. A final developmental stage commenced with the Copper Eskimo and diffused to Alaska. Estreicher considers that, melodically, Copper Eskimo music exhibits some features of the first stage, but that rhythm and meter are more developed. The music of the Central and Smith Sound Eskimos exhibits a *mélange* of stylistic elements. In the case of both West Greenland and Alaska, Estreicher additionally perceives European influence. This assumption is probably justified in the case of the former region, where interbreeding has occurred for several hundreds of years. In the case of Alaska the assumption is unsubstantiated; all present evidence points to strict musical compartmentalization.

Estreicher postulates a Mongolian origin for some elements in Alaskan Eskimo music, though he is by no means specific. Here he may be on firm ground, for, as Larsen and Rainey have pointed out, the centers of advanced cultural development in the Amur River region, Manchuria, and even North China lie closer

geographically to Alaska than do the ancient centers of high culture in North America. Swadesh (1962) argues convincingly for a relationship between Eskimo-Aleut and the Chukotan language in Asia.

In all, Estreicher's analysis appears handicapped by a lack of representative sampling and by his lack of personal experience in the field. Rather than emerging out of musical evidence gathered in social context, his diffusion theory appears to rely heavily upon a projection of Eskimo cultural origins made by Steensby (1917) and later modified by Birket-Smith (1929:219-233). The latter hypothesizes that the Caribou Eskimo is the modern representative of the Proto-Eskimo who, at the time of historic contact, had combined the essential features of the lake-ice hunters with recent borrowings from coastal peoples to become the Eschato-Eskimo. The Proto-Eskimo migrated north to the coast, adapted interior hunting techniques to hunting on frozen polar seas, and gave rise to the Paleo-Eskimo, who expanded east and west. Neo-Eskimo culture developed from Paleo-Eskimo culture and is found today in Alaska and Greenland. This hypothesis takes little account of the widespread Eurasian distribution of typical historic Eskimo characteristics such as skinboats, sleds, lamps, and ground slate. On the basis of these latter, Collins postulates a Kara Sea and Bering Strait movement of peoples from interior rivers to arctic seas (Collins 1937:361-83). Rudenko points out that since neither toggle harpoon heads nor Eskimo cultural remains have been found to the west of the Kolyma River mouth, and since the shallow coastal waters to the west are uninhabitable for sea mammals, Eskimo culture could not have originated in northern Siberia. Its origin should be sought to the south of extreme eastern Asia (1961:176).

Looking in another direction, Borden points out that, prior to Eskimo times, there were important ties between the interiors of western Asia and the area now occupied by Northwest Coast Indian culture. Siberian Neolithic slate forms around 5000 B.C. are similar to those recovered in the Fraser River area 1000-100 B.C. Eskimo ground slate tools become dominant around 100 A.D. (Borden 1962:9-19).

All of these and other archaeological and anthropological data must enter into any search for Eskimo musical diffusion across the

circumpolar regions. Music never travels by itself as an isolated tonal phenomenon, but follows the paths of cultural diffusion. The completion of several major regional studies of Eskimo music now under way may serve to support or weaken anthropological diffusion theories. This is ethnomusicology's chief *raison d'être* — it is a unique tool for social science.

In a comparative study of Eskimo musics, Roberts finds that Alaskan Eskimo music is of richer melodic construction, much faster, and more complex than that to the east. She states that Point Hope songs are short, bear a resemblance to Mackenzie Delta Eskimo music, and possess none of the features of the Copper Eskimo *pisiks*. Mackenzie Delta songs are seen as being characterized by rich melody, rapidity, brevity, the prolific use of small note values, and the lack of verses, refrains, and connectives. They feature a fine balance of five or six melodic phrases.

Roberts finds that Baffin Island Eskimo melody is of freer construction than in Greenland, principally because of the recitative character of the latter. In her opinion, Copper Eskimo music resembles that collected by Thalbitzer in East Greenland, and subjected to analysis by Thuren. Copper Eskimo music contains chromatics for nearly every diatonic tone; in fact, a form of 'modulation' plays a great part in the Eskimo music of Alaska and the Delta. Roberts states that, in the Coronation Gulf Copper Eskimo region, certain scale effects are found which occur in no other Eskimo region.

In a comparison with American Indian musics, Roberts comments that the feeling for a tonic does not appear to be as well established in Eskimo music as in that of the former. Copper Eskimo melody is instead characterized by interplay between *two* tonal centers, the main one of which appears as E when all of the songs are transposed into a treble staff without sharps and flats. Concerning Copper Eskimo intonation, frequent interplay between 'off-pitches' and 'true pitches' occurs. Roberts' assumption that pitch variance is due to the indigenous lack of musical instruments possessing stable tuning, is ethnocentric and probably incorrect. It is more often the case in non-Western musical instrument use, that instrument tunings are modelled after the established principle of communal vocal music, which, because of its social and integra-

tive function and importance, furnishes the pitch norms for other musical media.

Nettl places Eskimo music within a broad musical classification labelled the Eskimo-Northwest Coast area, characterized by the use of rhythmic complexity and the use of recitative-like singing. The latter, however, occurs mainly in Greenland and Canada. In Alaskan Eskimo music, recitative occurs mainly in connection with songs-within-stories, and only briefly.

For the last several centuries, Alaskan Eskimos and those of the Canadian Mackenzie Delta have been in the unique position of being able to draw upon rich musical heritages from the south, west, and east. This is facilitated by their proximity to Northwest Coast Indian culture, with its rich subsistence resources and hence highly developed art forms in sculpture, weaving, and ceremonial music. It is facilitated by the receding of the winter ice during the spring break-up, permitting accessibility to the Siberian coastline and the rich conglomerate of ancient Asiatic cultural influences which abound there (it should be remembered that discrete Eskimo morphological traits such as the mandibular torus and the keel-shaped vault place these peoples within the major Mongoloid group). It is facilitated by the unique role of the Alaskan and Delta Eskimos as the aboriginal transmitters and subsequent periodic receivers of great cultural movements such as that of the Birnick culture, which spread eastward across the circumpolar regions shortly after 1000 A.D., carried by the Thule people, later to return to Alaska by the same route. The culture was characterized by permanent houses of stone and whalebone, summer conical tents, soapstone dishes, and, probably, a distinctive musical system.

The Siberian Eskimo benefitted from the same ancient cultural developments and exchanges. That there is little present-day musical evidence of this fruition is due partly to the construction of the trans-Siberian railroad, which brought the east within administrative distance of European Russia. Furthermore, the Soviet administration, anxious to achieve national solidarity in the face of international hostility to its regime, introduced an assimilative policy which ensured the decline of distinctive cultural elements such as Eskimo traditional music, which underline separate ethni-

city. The surprising exception to this policy of elimination of ethnicity was, for a long time, the Siberian Yupik language.

By way of contrast, the relative geographic isolation, late contact date, and benign governmental neglect in the United States facilitated the survival of many Alaskan Eskimo musical forms. White settlement in Alaska during the twentieth century, with its new social, religious, and economic values, wrought havoc with the activities of the shaman-drummer and with other aspects of the musical system. During the 1970's, and following a long period of self-searching, Native society in Alaska made a dramatic reversal of its social and political goals, from one of assimilation to one of biculturalism, represented most overtly by the enactment of legislation for territorial autonomy and for bilingual education, both of which engendered a renewed emphasis upon traditional musical performance.

The extensive cultural and genetic merging witnessed in West Greenland has given rise to new musical forms from which, in the opinion of many, the best qualities of Eskimo music — rhythmic complexity and tonal nuance — have been filtered out in favor of a rather bland copying of European folkmusic forms. The indigenous music of the region lives on only in the revivalism and re-creations of groups of interested folkmusic aficionados, in whose performances the most essential aboriginal element — that of functional and seasonal appropriateness — is absent. Distance and political considerations prevent the traditional hunters of Thule and of Angmagssalik from emulating the vital, exciting musical developments occurring in Alaska today.

A probable future stage in Canadian Eskimo music may be predictable from the Alaskan experience. Early manifestations are visible in the popularity and spread of such emblematic, unifying musical rallies as the pan-Canadian Eskimo Northern Games. For the Siberian Eskimo, knowledge of the very existence of such events is totally denied; the walrus hunters, reindeer herders, and fishermen all labor under the illusion that other Eskimo populations are undergoing either Soviet-type cultural amalgamation or various forms of imperialistic oppression. Soviet policy in the past has often reversed itself as the winds of reform sweep around the global village. The Soviet's involvement with the

Third World may stimulate afterthoughts concerning the validity of small but highly unique and illuminating cultures such as that of the Eskimo.

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