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# The Wood of Alaskan Masks

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## Summary

The Eskimo peoples (Yup'it, Siberian, Inupiat, Alutiiq) of coast of Alaska and Chukotka made numerous wooden tools, utensils and objects including masks used for rituals and ceremonies. Living in a treeless environment, their main source of wood was driftwood, logs that for the most part originated in interior Alaska and drifted on rivers and seas before ending up on beaches. This paper presents how Yup'ik people perceived and classified the wood they found on their shores and transformed into objects and masks and how this way of knowing and using wood is shared across the Arctic. Wood used to make masks is said to have come from the stump and roots of spruce and cottonwood trees and logs, however, systematic analysis of the large existing collections of masks is needed to determine potential patterns of wood use and the way by which pieces were transformed. Indeed a preliminary examination show that wood was differentially oriented to obtain specific effects and to enhance certain traits of the various representation of human and animal faces.

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, until the catholic and protestant missionaries succeeded in forbidding their use, wooden masks were made and worn during festivals and rituals throughout Southwestern, Northwestern and Northern Alaska <sup>1,2,3)</sup>. Interestingly, only a handful of wooden masks (mostly maskettes) are known from archaeological contexts along the Alaskan coast in spite of the good wood preservation of many sites <sup>1,4)</sup>. Thus many researchers tend to consider that mask making and their use in dances and rituals is a later phenomenon, late 1700 to mid 1900 AD, and that this active period of mask making illustrated by hundreds of masks in Museum collections across the US and the world is due to a conjunction of events, i.e. the end of territorial conflicts between groups that followed initial Russian exploration and subsequently, an increasing access to metal for the blade of carving tools <sup>1)</sup>. However, the reasons for this florescence of masks are not clearly understood. Ceremonies and festivals such as the messenger feast were performed by different groups of Yupiit and Inupiat across Alaska and by some Athabascan groups living close to Eskimo territories such as the Deg Hit'an (formally known as the Ingalik) who borrowed this tradition of mask making from their neighbors <sup>1,5)</sup>.

Paradoxically, Yup'ik, Inupiaq and Alutiiq peoples lived, for the most part, along the treeless coast of Alaska and had only limited access to trees of the interior boreal forest. Despite their treeless environment, wood was a critical and essential raw material and was used in most activities from hunting and cooking to celebrating – in the form of masks and drum rims. In this context, their main source of wood was driftwood, logs of spruce (*Picea glauca*, *P. mariana*), poplar (*Populus balsamifera*) and willow (*Salix* spp.) that the large interior rivers of Alaska - such as the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers - carried to the ocean every spring and summer and that storms, high tide and wind delivered on beaches <sup>6,7,8)</sup>.

For the last 10 years, I have analyzed archaeological wooden collections from northwestern and northern Alaska and conducted oral history interviews among Yup'ik and Inupiaq carvers of southwestern and western Alaska about wood selection and woodworking. In this paper, I report on how Yup'ik and Inupiaq carvers selected, classified and named different types of wood available to them in spite of a low number of species to choose from. I then discuss the selection of wood for mask making and why more work is needed on this topic.

## AVAILABILITY OF WOOD ALONG THE COASTS OF ALASKA

Today (as in the past), driftwood distribution along the coast of Alaska is highly variable. Many areas known to have been rich in driftwood in the past were depleted during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century following the introduction of wood stoves <sup>9)</sup>. Driftwood stocks however have not replenished along the North Slope where wood is today only used occasionally for picnic fires or fish racks.

The general understanding of the driftwood cycle <sup>6,7)</sup> and recent observation of spring break-up and driftwood coastal delivery allow to argue that differential distribution of driftwood along the coast and sudden influx of river driftwood and subsequent coastal delivery have played a role in a groups' decision to settle at specific locations <sup>10)</sup>.

In short, areas close to the mouth of the main rivers receive plenty of driftwood every spring and summer. Norton Sound is the best example being directly north of the Yukon River delta, the main "wood-producing" river of Alaska. However, even in these areas, coastal configuration and most of all the direction of the wind at the moment when wood reached the sea have been determining and critical factors in whether or not wood reaches a given coastal location <sup>7)</sup>. As a consequence, renewal of the wood supplies was never guaranteed and the possibility of bad wood years always loomed. Driftwood was hold in the same capacity as living matters such as seals and salmon that were essential for the group's subsistence and well-being. Agnes Aguchak from Scammon Bay, on the coast of the Bering Sea recalls:

"Long ago they used to have dances and songs in supplication for wood (*Equguaq*), singing songs. Some would be granted with wood. (...) Whether they have some wood or not, it is said that they had an *equguaq* (a singing for the wood) to be granted driftwood when they wanted to use driftwood. And from way far up, the driftwoods that they desired float down and float down and stop in front of the people that wanted them."

Away from these areas close to the mouth of rivers, wood became relatively scarce and along the Chukchi Sea coast, north of Kotzebue Bay for example, it is found mostly caught in gullies and ravines. According to local informants, the best and largest logs are found east of Point Barrow where wood comes from the Mackenzie River in Canada, a large river that is known to carry huge logs of cottonwood and a great abundance of spruce trees <sup>6,7,11,12)</sup>.

The barren islands of Bering Strait, such as St Lawrence Island and King Island received wood mainly from the Yukon River, although other sources such as the Russian Anadyr River are mentioned <sup>6)</sup>. Because of the complexity of sea currents in that area, wood products are susceptible to have come from a variety of sources and according to informants in Chukotka and to the main direction of currents, wood could also have come from Kamchatka as well, carried to the sea by the Kamchatka River by way of the “Aleutian North Slope - Bering Slope - Anadyr waters (www. Ims.uaf/NPRBdrifters/bering\_chukchi\_map.png). On islands that did not have flat shores where wood could get stranded, hunters would be on the lookout to catch sight of logs floating high on the water <sup>9,13)</sup>.

In term of species, logs available on the northern and southern coasts of Alaska are in some respect a reflection of the trees that grow in the boreal forest of interior Alaska with the exception of birch (*Betula neolaskana* Sarg.). Although birch trees grow abundantly along the shores of Alaskan rivers, the low durability and resistance to decay of its wood, especially when enclosed in its strong and waterproof bark, result in bark being largely present and wood largely absent from coastal accumulations. Thus, white spruce (*Picea glauca* [Moench] Voss) and to a lesser extend black spruce (*Picea mariana* [Mill.] Britt.), poplar (mainly cottonwood *Populus balsamifera* L.) and willow (*Salix* spp.) are the main species found in driftwood accumulations of northwestern Alaska, respectively in the following proportion: 40 to 70% (*Picea* sp.), 20 to 30% (*Populus* sp.) and 6 to 23% (*Salix* sp.) <sup>7: Table 1)</sup>. South of Bering Sea, along the southern coast of the Alaska Peninsula and the chain of the Aleutian Islands, species are more diversified with logs originating in southeastern Alaska and including red and yellow cedar (*Thuja plicata* Donn ex D. Don and *Chamaecyparis nootkatensis* D. Don), hemlock (*Tsuga* sp. cf. *T. heterophylla* [Raf.] Sarg. or *T. mertensiana* [Bong.] Carrière), some pine (*Pinus* sp. cf. *P. contorta* Douglas ex Louden), some fir (*Abies* sp.) and red alder (*Alnus rubra* Bong.). Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii* [Mirb.] Franco) originating further south is also found in driftwood accumulations there <sup>14,15)</sup>. Once in a while, a red cedar log reaches Bristol Bay, past the Aleutian Chain, going sometimes as far north as Scammon Bay where people call it “perfume wood” <sup>16)</sup>. Apart from these southern areas that allowed a more diverse choice of species, inhabitants of southwestern, northwestern and northern Alaska used predominantly spruce wood for carving their everyday objects. However, Yupiit and Inupiat

inhabitants of the Alaskan and Arctic coasts distinguished different types of wood within these spruce logs <sup>17,18)</sup>.

#### TRADITIONAL CLASSIFICATION AND NAMING OF WOOD IN ALASKA

As mentioned above, supplication songs would be sang for all resources but particularly for those which return remained uncertain. From an ecological perspective, driftwood is a renewing but unpredictable resource which occurrence is strongly related to climatic and other ecological factors <sup>7)</sup>. This unpredictability is what makes the use of driftwood so specific and so different from the use of wood from forested environments. Except for extreme events resulting in tree uprooting or insect defoliation or for human deforestation and overuse, a well-managed forest is an insurance of an abundant and steady supply of wood. In the Arctic regions however, except for singing to the spirits, there was little people could physically do to positively affect the return of the resource. So Yup'ik peoples sang and danced and made a mask as a representation of the driftwood spirit <sup>1,3)</sup>.

From a technical perspective, driftwood presents both the advantages and disadvantages of a wood that has gone through a series of processes: from near waterlogged in rivers and at sea, to having gone through several cycles of drying/wetting episodes, to being full of grit, to freezing in the ice and to being deposited and left to dry or desiccate in an ultra dry environment. All these processes result in the “production” of many different types and quality of wood that are recognized by traditional carvers <sup>8,17)</sup>. Some of them may be perfectly seasoned, other too dry, too waterlogged, too rotten, or bearing too many splits. These types of wood are named and are part of a system of classification based on a precise knowledge of the material and what it can be transformed into.

Between 2002 and 2007, a colleague and I conducted ethnographic interviews in southwestern Alaska and interior Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers, mostly with men for woodworking has been traditionally a men's activity that took place in the men's house, the *qasgi*<sup>a</sup> <sup>8,16)</sup>. Today, Yup'ik carvers still carve driftwood with their traditional tools, the adze and the crooked knife. However, we also heard several stories of old women working wood and met and interviewed a few women who owned a crooked knife that they used in making their craft. With a few

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<sup>a</sup> Yup'ik orthography all through the text follows Jacobson, S. A. 1894 Yup'ik Eskimo Dictionary:757 p.

exceptions, most of the 89 hours of interviews were conducted with individuals between 60 and 90 years old. We systematically recorded and photographed the various Yup'ik names given to the different types of wood together with what the name referred to and what it was used for. As much as possible, corresponding wood samples were collected. It quickly appeared that the names given to wood used in woodworking activities referred to wood types within a single species (quality, size, location within the tree) rather than different species.

As building material and material to make implements and utensils, Yupiit of southwestern Alaska used mainly spruce driftwood, and most significantly white spruce that they found stranded on the beach (*Picea glauca*). This large use of spruce had been recorded for coastal Alaska before <sup>19)</sup> and happens to be also a characteristic of inhabitants of forested areas such as the Deg Hit'an of the mid-Kuskokwim/Lower Yukon <sup>20:p.432</sup>.

In the Yup'ik wood terminology, there are words that designate trees and words that designate wood types <sup>17,18)</sup>. The spruce tree is given the name *kevraartuq* or *pilugpigaq* and as Yup'ik carver James Gump of Hooper Bay states it: *Pilugpigaq... it's the original wood*".

Thus, most wood types refer to spruce but are distinguished on the basis of the physical characteristics of the fragment (grain tightness, presence of defects), the state of the wood (whether rotten or fragmented), where it came from within the spruce tree (trunk, root, branch) and what it was best used for. Thus, these names do not literally mean spruce although the fact that the wood is from a spruce tree is implied by the given to the wood type. However, when the root part of a species other than spruce is used is it called differently.

All the carvers we interviewed made reference to three main types of wood (within which variations exists) that are the basis of wood classification and selection:

- *mimernaq* is the wood of a spruce stump or root. It is sometimes called *talliruaq*, although some carvers specified that *mimernaq* was more like the stump proper while *talliruaq* was more specifically the large roots. This wood is a "softwood"; it said to be light, easy to carve and to not crack. It is best for items such as ladles, bowls, adze handles and masks.
- *unarciaq* is the wood of a spruce trunk, mostly the lower part of the trunk that bear few or no branches. It is said to be straight grained, with no knots, easy to splits and light, it is good for making shafts and anything that is straight like fish traps, long sled and boat parts.

- *teggaq* is the hardwood, it is though, hard but also somewhat pliable. It corresponds to the compression wood of the spruce tree. It is best for making hunting bows, sled runners, pegs, ulu handles among other objects.

The concepts and knowledge of the wood's characteristics behind the words given to the different wood types we recorded in the central Alaska Yup'ik language are found in other Eskimo languages of northern Alaska and eastward in Greenland <sup>21)</sup>. This has led us to conclude that Eskimo cultures across Alaska and the Arctic shared a deep technical understanding and knowledge of the wood resources that were available to them. I have subsequently used this classification and perception of spruce wood to revisit archaeological collections I had analyzed previously. I was able to draw strong parallels that suggest that this way of using driftwood is at least 1000 years old <sup>17,22)</sup>. In spite of the small diversity of species and their low availability at times, coastal Alaskan and Arctic people made definite choices and selected specific wood pieces for specific objects.

#### THE WOOD USED FOR CARVING MASKS

As mentioned above, the preferred material for making masks among the Yup'ik carvers of southwestern Alaska was (and still is) *mimernaq* or *talliruaq*, the wood from the stump and large roots of the spruce driftwood. However, carvers James Gump and Felix Walker also mentioned using the stump of cottonwood logs (*Populus balsamifera*) as a substitute for spruce. Cottonwood is known to be a light wood, soft to carve but lacking the finish of spruce. Yup'ik carvers interviewed by Ann Fienup-Riordan for the exhibit on Yup'ik masks of the early 1990's also stated that "Men sought stumps of both cottonwood and white and black spruce for carving masks (...) the wood had to be light and soft so that the carver could easily shape and the performer could comfortably wear the finished mask" <sup>3:p.151)</sup>. The early ethnographers literature of northern Alaska also mentions the use of cottonwood wood for the making of some masks <sup>22:p.368)</sup>. The use of cottonwood is also reported through the mythological story of the "Missing Child" from the Mid-Kuskokwim River, a forested area occupied by Yup'ik groups. According to Fienup-Riordan <sup>3: p.141)</sup> "the "legend of missing child" concerns a boy who would not mind his parents and was subsequently transformed into a cottonwood tree: "when people cut the tree down, it bled and they made powerful masks and charms from the wood. This use of cottonwood is however not mentioned for the Deg Hi'tan people, the Athabascan neighbors of the YUPIIT, whom made masks



strictly by using a suitable piece of green spruce even though it is reported that cutting a tree was extremely rare for these river inhabitants who would rather take advantage of dead or fallen trees<sup>20,23)</sup>.

“To make masks men go into the woods to acquire pieces of clear-grained green spruce which they then bring home and thaw [mask ceremony took place during the winter]. The next day it would seem that almost everyone is chopping and carving to create the necessary figures”<sup>23:p.81)</sup>.

The use of cottonwood for mask making is remarkable for this species is very seldom identified in archaeological collections of the last 1600 years in spite of its relative abundance in driftwood accumulations. Interestingly, the few maskettes from archaeological sites of the last 1500 years for which the wood is known are made of spruce<sup>24,25)</sup>.

Presently, Yup'ik carver Felix Walker explains that it is the wood that dictates what will be carved and how it will be transformed. The right piece of wood for a mask will present itself, and its transformation is dictated by the natural shape of the stump piece *mimernaq*, the root or the stump/root of cottonwood. In the past, faces and animals which were carved had to have appeared as a dream or a vision to a shaman that would either carve his own mask or have an expert carver execute his vision<sup>1,2)</sup>.

#### FUTURE WORD NEEDED ON ALASKAN MASKS

The difference noted above between whether the vision of the mask came first or whether the wood provided the vision for the mask would be worth exploring further. It is possible that in the past also, shamans and carvers adapted the vision to the shape, the grain and the form of the wood.

While it is recorded in the literature and oral history that most masks were made of the stump of spruce and cottonwood, the only mask I was given to work on, a mask that most probably originated from the Lower Kuskokwim, turned out to be made of half of a birch (*Betula* sp.). The mask had a large open mouth with inserted teeth that were made of spruce (*Picea* sp.)<sup>26)</sup>. The findings for this mask defied what is usually transmitted for masks and may illustrate the case of a mask that had been made to be sold to a collector rather than be used in ceremonies. Unfortunately, the wood of masks in museum and private collections has never been systematically identified.

Indeed, the numerous masks carved in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, collected by early explorers and ethnographers and published by scholars for the last 100 years<sup>1,2,22)</sup> have very seldom been examined in terms of the wood species, type and texture in which they were made. Visual evaluation is possible in the case of a series of masks from northwestern Alaska published by anthropologist James VanStone in the late 1960's<sup>2)</sup> and allows recording of the direction of the grain of the selected wood used. In many cases, the use of the stump is evident<sup>2:Pl. 1C, 2B&C, 3C, 5C)</sup> and the wood of most masks is flat-grained. When the masks represent faces with high cheek-bones, the wood pieces seem to have been systematically carved with the outer growth rings facing upward, while when faces do not have high cheekbones, the outer growth rings are facing downward<sup>2: Pl. 1A & 3A as opposed to Pl. 1D & 1B)</sup>. This resulted in very different rendering and representation of the various recurrent types of faces.

It is visible that wood carvers played and took advantage of the visual effect of the wood grain and texture. Exploring the relationship between the types of masks, their iconography and the various wood types, textures and growth ring orientations would certainly result in finding patterns that would, in turn, inform our general understanding of these masks, the way by which they were made and eventually the origin of a tradition of mask making in Alaska that is thought to have been relatively recent at the time of contact.

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