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Traditional Ecological Knowledge

Told by Robert (Bob) Aloysius

Written, and paraphrased by Amy O’Brien AOB

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Robert Aloysius better known as Bob was born July 29, 1935 and born in Iinruq, which is located between Russian Mission and Holy Cross on the map it is known as Piamiut.

Piamiut was originally located in the mouth of a tributary, or slough. Arularguaq is in the valley. The people moved across the river to Arulargumak on higher grounds due to flooding’s which occurred every spring but the name Piamiut followed the people even if they no longer lived in the slough. Iinruq where I was born means medicine or spirit and that is whom I am known as, Medicine man or Spirit man.

Understanding of Traditional Ecological Knowledge or TEK, that don’t mean nothing to me or to elders. TEK what is it? The way I would interpret that is Indigenous knowledge about ecological and environmental changes. Us, we are Indigenous people. There is no such thing as Yupik lifestyle; we have a way of life dictated to us by the seasons. Spring we experience regrowth, in summer we do certain things, fall time we do different things, Wintertime you take a rest, and regain your energy and start over in the spring, and it is a way of life, not a lifestyle.

If you look at it realistically, spring is like when life begins. That is when you prepare for the summer. Your whole being is renewed, your spirit, heart, mind, and body. You renew just like the land. In the springtime, everybody pack all their belongings and move to the spring camp, and we stay there anywhere from 6 to 8 weeks depending on when the ice will break up. First thing you notice when the ice melts is little, little shoots growing, and you wonder what they are going to be. Maqtallratun (It is like they are waking up.) When I was a small boy, I would try to guess what the waking up of plants are going to be. It was fun to go back and see what the buds grew up to be. Spring is when regrowth begins, when the earth is reborn, resurrection begins at that time.

Springtime is very uplifting when the birds come back they lay eggs, and we gather the eggs. Everyone hunt the birds, and the muskrat were always there. Everything else that happen is always there, but you experience regrowth, rejuvenation, during springtime. To me that is enlightenment, reborn. I do not know how to say it in English, but it is Unguvalria ayuqlartukut. (we come back to life). Everything changes. Everything melts; the snow, slough, lakes, and river. At fish camp you notice all the changes going on and how you take advantage of the new things. You get new protein, first from the birds that come, fresh greens from the lakes and tundra, then come the salmon to add to the old protein, the fish that are still in the creeks. You set traps for the new fish. Moreover, you take your wire muskrat trap, and turn it in the other direction for the fish that are coming up stream, whereas the muskrat swim downstream. I always took time to listen to the ptarmigan laughing. Just a joyful the sound the laughing ptarmigan make. Babar babar, babar babar, babar babarrr. Just to remind you that, ‘Hey, life goes on.’

Then you prepare the things that you need to before you go for fish camp. However, before that we asked the old people, “How do you know when it’s time to go to fish camp?” The elders told us to sit and listen. Then they could hear the ice moving sounding like thunder from as far away as 15 miles. The movement of the ice is very clear, loud bumping and grinding. Then the water level would rise in the creek when there is an ice jam down river. Cupuq. When the water level go back down the elders would say, “Assinrillenuq.” (It has gotten better now). At which time the whole village once again pack all their belongings, and make their way down to the mouth of the tributary. Where the slough meets the Yukon River. When the ice jammed further down river we move to higher ground, a place called Tunumikullik, which was a tributary of Discovery that is a long lake. Maybe a mile and a half long. We camp mostly on the wooded side of the lake. The wood consists of big timber Alder, Willows, Cotton wood, Birch. The other side is tundra.

After the men set up fish camp, they trek to the end of the lake and go up to Louis Creek just to see what was up there. Once Uppa Sam caught a moose, with a 22. Uppa Sam hit the moose in the throat area with one shot. The moose dropped. Which is surprising because a 22 is such a small caliber gun. After Sam bled and skinned the moose, he left it there because it was too large for him to move by himself. When he got back to camp, he told the youngsters that they would be packing a moose the next day. I was eight years old at that time but joined five families to pack and haul the moose back to the campsite that took the whole day. All they had was a quarter inch rope to tie the arm of the moose to my back. At eight years old the moose arm was heavy. But step by step I got that arm of the moose to the boat. We always did things like that. If someone was in need, nobody hesitated to give assistance.

So many things happen at spring camp. I always like to start in the spring because that is when New Year begin, and new life begins. We come from the Creator, we are born. The first five years of babies’ lives determine what they are going to be. The old people after they were born and after they live their lives, they come back to the beginning of life, that is when they are closest to the creator. They come full circle. Therefore, the closest people to the Creator together are the Elders and the newborns.

The Elders always feel it is their responsibility to teach those young infants how to be human beings during the first five years of the babies lives. It is a shame we do not have that anymore. The education of infants was taken over by the school system preschool, and head start, and they do not know anything about life and why we are born. Now a day, they go to school and learn how to play with paper, material things, and they never learn anything from the spirit. The spirit is the most powerful of our being. We have a spirit, heart, mind, body, and everything revolves around the spirit.

Modern society call the Creator, “God”. In the old day, we called him or her Ellam Yua. Spirit of the universe. Ellam Yua. Each of us are given that Yua (Spirit). Everything on earth has spirit. One thing we learn early on is that we must respect all of life, because all of life has spirit. Even today, I am not as excited about hunting anymore whereas when I was a young man I did not give that Yua too much thought. I only wanted to be like any young man, a great hunter, trapper, fisherman, good at everything, and in order to be good at everything you have to block out that teaching. Now in order to live, I have to take an animals spirit.

When your hunting, fishing, trapping, gathering; you always have that sense of gratitude for something giving itself to you. Moose, bear, caribou, now a day we have bison and musk ox, all the meat giving animals, all the fur baring animals, including all the fish, and game; everything that we gather for our survival. Too many times we never give thanks. That’s the one thing that *really* gets me is we quit being thankful. We have quit giving thanks. We have no gratitude anymore. That teaching got lost to us, lost to the young.

We think, well, I am just going to take this or that. We are paying for it right now, because we forgot to give thanks, and be grateful. The Creator made all these things to give themselves to us. In the springtime, all the migratory birds come back and they supplement the food that we get…our Native food we have, ptarmigan, grouse, fish. It is always good to taste fresh ducks, geese, and all those birds, and salmon all these that return in the spring and supplement out Native food. One thing we would always remember is to give thanks. And that is what I teach my children and grandchildren. Always be thankful. There is no greater gift then when something gives itself to you so that you may live.

Then in the summer time after break up. The first thing we do is come out of Discovery. We go to the Kuskokwim, head up river to our fish camp, and look at the conditions. If it is still mucky from the flood, then we go to Aniak and wait for the campsite to dry out. After it dries out, we come back and clean everything out from the spring flood, anything that drifts, always collects around fish camp.

Next things to do at summer fish camp is gather different types of wood. There is smoke wood, and wood to cook with. First is dry wood for cooking, like spruce. Then wet wood like cottonwood, willow, or driftwood to smoking the fish to come. Wintertime the old people made nets, and in the spring they repair what they have. Then wait for word from downriver. How they hear when the fish are coming is beyond me. Because when you are a young kid, your busy running around then you do not pay attention too much to anything.

Long time ago there was communication even if we did not have technology. The old people would travel and brought information from up and down river. But we anticipated the words from down below, “The fish are coming”. So the people set their first net where you know you will catch fish. Than someone would get the first fish, everybody would get a share. Everybody got a piece of the first King salmon. If there were ten people, nobody was ever left out. You can even have five families like up river, there is a place called Luke’s Island. Everybody gets a piece of the first catch. Nothing goes to waste.

Then we celebrate the coming back of the salmon. So we have a thanksgiving feast, and sing songs of thanksgiving. Everybody sing songs, and we sing a little song that goes like,” We treat you right, so tell your people, the salmon people to come, tell them that these people will treat you right.” And every salmon, the King, the Reds, the Chum, the Coho, the Silvers, the Pinks, there’s six salmon that come up the river. Each of them are treated a different way. You cut them in a certain way. All different types of fish are handled in different ways. You always have ultimate respect for how you take care of all the different types of salmon that give itself to you.

Long time ago there was no such thing as salt in bulk. We never had taryituk (salted/brined fish). We had to treat each fish very carefully so that the fish will not spoil. I even experienced seeing old couples living in the smoke house. They had their bed by the door, a small cook stove by the bed, and smudges in the opposite corners. So that the fish will be taken care of properly with a lot of ventilation to keep the smoke moving around, and to keep the blowflies out. Many people now mistake a smoke house as being air tight with only smoke inside, but a real smoke house is really a drying house and has a big gaps at the bottom so that the smoke can circulate from the bottom and exit at the top where more holes are. There is always movement so that the fish will dry. The smoke is really just to keep the blowflies out, also to give a little flavor to the fish. But mainly to keep the blowflies out.

The first egamaarrluk (partly dried fish boiled for eating) is something we look forward to after eating the first fresh King salmon. 3 to 4 days after cutting the salmon, the egamaarrluk is ready, which everybody takes part in, it is the best. Every day, every day after that there is always a platter made of wood with egamaarrluk on it. That was the best part of fish camp, nobody ever went hungry. I tell the young people that (with a laugh), “We had pizza, we just call it egamaarrluk.”



Fish camp was a glorious time. Little children old enough to pick up wood gathered twigs to start the smoke in the smoke house. The bigger kids would carry the slabs of cut fish to the drying rack, where the older boys and girls were waiting to hang the fish on the drying rack. 3 or 4 days later the older girls and boys, the unmarried ones packed these racks of fish to the smoke house, making sure the fish were not touching but hanging very close to each other. Everyone checked again to make sure the fish were not touching before the smoking began, and heating the smoke house on cloudy days so that the fish will not spoil with mildew, or rot from being too cold, also to keep the blowflies out. Everybody got a chance to work, everybody pitched in.

We always looked forward to certain kinds of dried fish. We could tell how they were going to be just by looking at the fish. I always liked the Dog salmon the best, because I am a Dog salmon. Ever since I remember, I was always eating Dog salmon. You are what you eat you know. People do not understand what that means. I love Dog salmon. They are the first ones to come up with the Kings, sometimes with a few Reds. But mainly the Dog salmon would come. And because they come early they have fat but not as much fat as the King, but just the right amount of fat.

Some people did not like getting King salmon because one King would stop the fish wheel. Sometimes one King would weigh 70, 80, 90, 100 pounds or more. The owner of the wheel would get annoyed when the fish wheel stopped, that prevented them from getting more fish. Because you see the people start the fish wheel only at night. In the morning they went to check the fish wheel. When they did not get a King in the fish wheel; the box would fill up or over flow. A full box would be a boat load, sometimes 2 boat loads of fish. The fish would then be transported across to the fish rafts. A fish raft consisted of 2 long logs opposite each other, and 2 cross pieces connecting. Sometimes that would be 4’ x 6’. And sometimes you would get 600 fish that needed to be divided into two different fish rafts.

The women. You have to respect the women. I have never seen women work so long and hard without stopping or resting. After the women ate breakfast, they went down to the fish rafts and stay in one position for hours on end just cutting those fish. All day long with one coffee break at 10AM. The big male fish have thicker meat, therefore are harder to cut. But the women made flay fish and hold the fish open with a stick.

A little later in the season, when the fish start getting teeth, the men would come in and cut the fish for dog feed. The process was gouging the head on a nail to hold the fish in place, then cut from below the gill to the end of the tail on both sides, then cut the backbone off. Most of the fish they use for dog feed are Chum salmon. They are called dog fish, dog feed. The men take care of them in a different way. They leave the head and the gill on the fish, and just dry them without putting them in the smokehouse.

At the end of the season, they take 50 fish at a time and bundle them up, packing the fish up as tightly as possible which was pretty average, 50 fish make 50 pound bundles. The men store them on top of the fish racks in the smoke house. And if they have over what they need. Say, if you have 10 dogs, you’re going to need about 270 fish for each dog, times 10 to feed those dogs for the nine months. And anything over that the men put them in a boat and bring to the store keeper in Aniak, which he bought for $5.00 a bundle, (chuckle) and turn around and sell them in the winter for $10.00 a bundle. (chuckle)