

## Pamyua's Akutaq: Traditions of Modern Inuit Modalities in Alaska

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*Abstract: This essay positions the award-winning band Pamyua's "Afro-Inuit" soundscapes and business acumen as characteristic of Inuit modernities, interrupting static notions of cultural music and questioning what "Native" can mean at this moment. I situate Pamyua's personal and musical alliances along a historical trajectory of circumpolar Inuit transnationalism to illustrate the ways in which the group's musical modernities are uniquely rooted in each member's familial and socio-cultural soundscapes. I also explore the development of "Pamyua, Inc." and Arctic Voice Records as a means to subvert what I call "sound quantum" politics through the revisioning of music industry practices using Inuit knowledge.*

*Résumé : Cet essai présente les paysages sonores « afro-inuits » et le sens des affaires du groupe primé Pamyua comme caractéristiques des modernités inuites, rompant avec les conceptions statiques de la musique culturelle et interrogeant les significations possibles du terme « autochtone » aujourd'hui. Je situe les alliances personnelles et musicales de Pamyua sur une trajectoire historique du transnationalisme circumpolaire inuit afin d'illustrer les façons dont les modernités musicales du groupe sont enracinées dans les paysages sonores familiaux et socioculturels singuliers de chaque membre. J'explore également le développement de « Pamyua, Inc. » et Arctic Voice Records comme moyens de subvertir ce que j'appelle les politiques de « quantum sonore » par la transformation des pratiques de l'industrie musicale sur la base de la connaissance inuite.*

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[Our] well-mixed sound re-interrupts what cultural music is all about. We're creating a sound that has its own culture - it's African - it's Inuit. We have created a sound that will make you believe that there is an actual musical tradition for our mixed heritage.

— Pamyua (<http://tribalfunk.wordpress.com>)

*Akutaq* is a metaphor commonly used throughout circumpolar Inuit communities that literally means “mixture” (from the Central Yup’ik verb *akute*, “to mix, to stir”) and refers more specifically to a mixture of berries, sugar, seal oil, and shortening (and sometimes boned fish or meat) known as “Eskimo ice cream.”<sup>1</sup> In her most recent collaborative work on contemporary Yup’ik drum-dance performance practices in Alaska’s Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region, anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan describes several layers of mixing through dance as analogous to *akutaq*. The drum-dance layers to which she refers include mixtures of content (stories and forms), location (inter- and intra-village, as well as rural and urban spaces), temporal simultaneity (past, present, future), regalia (traditional and modern clothing), participation (men and women, youth and elders), and purpose (social and sacred, profanity and prayer) (Barker and Fienup-Riordan 2010: 3, 6, 14-15). While she gives passing mention to the mixed genres featured at many traditional dance festivals – most notably, country-western style “fiddle dancing” played by amplified violins and guitars to accompany two-step, waltz, schottische, and line dancing – the *akutaq* metaphor has not been extended into the realms of mixed performance idioms, mixed worldviews, and mixed modes of cultural production as I will do in this study.

This essay utilizes the *akutaq* metaphor as a lens through which to examine the artistic output and business acumen of the award-winning Anchorage-based band Pamyua. Pamyua was formed in the mid-1990s by brothers Stephen *Qacung* Blanchett and Phillip *Kill’aq* Blanchett, who were joined soon after by *Aassanaaq* “Ossie” Kairaiuak and Karina Møller. The group has used the *akutaq* metaphor themselves when speaking of their musical mixtures (Alban 2010), and their sound has been variously described as “Yup’ik Doo-Wop,” “Eskimo Soul,” “Tribal Funk,” and “Inuit Fusion.”<sup>2</sup> Stylistically, Pamyua’s sound has been built primarily around the quartet’s arrangements of traditional Yup’ik and Inuit *drumsongs*<sup>3</sup> featuring close four-part harmonizations, in both *a cappella* and instrumental accompaniment formats. Their self-promotion as an “Inuit World Music” band is accentuated through their bi-hemispheric mixtures of traditional, popular and world music instrumentation – including a four-piece rhythm section with Yup’ik *cauyaq* (drum), African djembes and Australian didgeridoos – and vocal styles such as rhythm and blues, jazz, funk and gospel inflections, and Inuit and Tuvan throat singing.

The first part of this essay illustrates how Pamyua’s modern modalities are unique to the individual experiences of its members. Drawing on interviews and conversations with Stephen, Phillip, Ossie, and Karina since 2008, I begin by outlining their personal and musical alliances in order to show how their particular version of musical *akutaq* is shared with and rooted in familial

and communal relationships – old and new, immediate, extended, adopted, and fictive. Aspects of their histories also highlight an important theme of what George Lipsitz has described as a “universalism rich with particulars” (2011:186) that characterizes the multiply situated identities of Alaska Native people, past, present, and future.

The second part of this essay explores the development of Pamyua, Inc. and Arctic Voice Records as a business strategy aimed at subverting what one might call “sound quantum” ideology. Sound quantum parallels the politics of racialized or ethnicized understandings of what “counts” as Native music that is endemic to blood quantum ideology – a pseudo-scientific measure of one’s Nativeness – that is preoccupied with who legally “counts” as a Native person. As their histories illustrate, Pamyua members represent what Alaska Native people, according to stereotype, are not supposed to be: modern, educated, urban, and “mixed-blood.” The stereotypes are the legacy of colonial subjugation, still reinforced by contemporary mainstream media in which Natives or “Eskimos” are presented as uneducated, anti-modern, tragic, and isolated).<sup>4</sup> Given the absence of arctic Indigenous musicians in the established music industry – and possibly under-representation in the Native American music industry as well – Pamyua founded their own record label in order to take creative control rather than accept a precarious position inside existing channels. This business strategy destabilized conventional industry protocol, and the group also challenges common notions of tradition and modernity by revisioning music industry frameworks to employ their own Yup’ik and Inuit worldviews and modes of presentation. Through an Indigenization of music business apparatus, Pamyua controls the representation, compensation, and distribution of their art.

## Theoretical Background

This essay joins a body of work examining Native North American artists performing popular musics (Diamond 2002; Keillor 1995; Hoefnagels and Diamond 2012; Samuels 2004; Diamond 2005) by theorizing emanations of what ethnomusicologist Beverley Diamond, among others, calls “Indigenous modernity” (2007). Diamond offers an “alliance studies model” to encourage studies of music as expressions of relationships (to people or land, for instance) and “music practices as theory, not as objects to which we might apply theory” (2007). My *akutaq*-centered approach raises questions about the productive tensions in Pamyua’s modality of mixture. As a theory of mixture it can expand the discussion of processes of differentiation and alliance central to Diamond’s

conception of “Indigenous modernity.”

I am especially interested in theoretical intersections between alliance studies and *Yuuyaraq* (the way of the human being), a governing worldview for everyday processes and protocols for CentralYup’ik peoples, from whom three of Pamyua’s members descend. The lateYup’ik scholar *Angayuqaq* Oscar Kawagley explained how the difference between *Yuuyaraq* and Western worldviews lies in their respective “holistic” versus “incremental and componential” ways of thinking (1995:111-112). *Yuuyaraq* advocates for sustainability and balance between human, natural, and spiritual realms – a set of relationships that is best understood as multidirectional – and acknowledges the simultaneity of spiritual constancy and temporal flux – a cyclical understanding embedded within numerous cultural forms, such as naming patterns, marriage patterns, and ceremonial observances (Kawagley 1995; Napoleon and Madsen 1991; Fienup-Riordan 1990:63). A *Yuuyaraq* approach is both ecologically and socially conscious and embodies a highly developed sense of responsibility and reciprocity.

The dual and often simultaneous processes of differentiation and alliance are crucial to *Yuuyaraq*. Toksook Bay elder Chief Paul John describes how ancient Yup’ik cosmology honors “the essential unity of humankind coupled with respect for cultural difference” (John and Fienup-Riordan 2003:xxxviii). Chief John explains that God, the creator, made all humans the same, but gave each “tribe” – a designation he extends to all ethnicities, including “the *Kass’at* [white people]” – their own customs, languages, and lifeways, or what he calls their “inherited ways.” In this wayYup’ik cosmology views ethnicized identities as comprised of inherited lifeways informed by alliances or social relationships. Fienup-Riordan adds, “Yup’ik people today strive for simultaneous recognition of their shared humanity and their special place in history. On the one hand they work for recognition of their similarity with members of the human race ... [A]t the same time, YUPIIT actively seek recognition as different – possessing sovereign rights to their land, a special subsistence economy, their own language, a unique view of the world” (1994:366).

*Yuuyaraq* is also understood in both micro/specific or macro/general terms. On the one hand, *Yuuyaraq* is undeniably Yup’ik, “drawn from having lived the life of a Yupiaq and having been tutored by the people who embody it” (Kawagley 1995:12). Yup’ik author *Kanaqlak* George P. Charles notes that Indigenous stories, remembrances, songs, and artists’ impressions should be understood as specific to the life experiences of the groups and individuals from whence they came (2009:57). On the other hand, Indigenous people’s alliances must also be taken into account. *Yuuyaraq*-oriented communities share certain values with other Indigenous communities, such as an ecological

emphasis on maintaining reciprocity, harmony, and balance among the human, natural, and spiritual realms. Cross-cultural comparisons thus may augment our understanding of *Yuuyaraq*. In terms of fashioning musical selves, Yup'ik scholar-practitioner Theresa Arevgaq John explains how learning and performing drum-dance songs in a local, familial context serves as a mode of socio-culturally specific instruction (2010:3-4). To be sure these processes of social construction and instruction are experienced quite differently depending on the lived realities of individuals and communities, leading some to articulate an experience that is akin to constant negotiation and renegotiation while others may experience it as a continuum of tradition (i.e., not emphasizing the breaks in the same way renegotiation does).

John also discusses how Yup'ik drum-dance songs are intertwined with *Yuuyaraq* in that they play “a functional role in organizing and maintaining various societal infrastructures” (2010:iii). The subject matter of Yup'ik drum-dance songs ranges from stories about the environment, hunting and gathering, kinship systems, and ceremonies, rituals, and legends – all aspects of *Yuuyaraq*. For this reason Pamyua members' upbringing and strong relationships with their families and home communities enable them to perform traditional Yup'ik and Inuit songs in non-traditional contexts in ways that are immediately recognizable to Yup'ik communities as well as to global Indigenous audiences.

Although the field of Alaska Native performance studies has grown substantially over the past two decades, all full-length studies of Alaska Native music and dance concentrate on traditional musics, with little or no mention of popular musics. Even Craig Mishler's *The Crooked Stovepipe: Athapaskan Fiddle Music and Square Dancing in Northeast Alaska and Northwest Canada*, a landmark study of contemporary Alaska Native musical and choreographic culture, marginalized as “non-traditional” an emerging type of Gwich'in music, “the electronically amplified rock and roll being played by adolescent bands since the 1970s” (1993:6, 8).<sup>5</sup> Mishler's division exemplifies a trend in Alaska Native and Native North American music studies to privilege “traditional” or rural musics at the expense of seemingly “non-traditional” urban musics (rock, folk, R&B, hip-hop, and rap).<sup>6</sup>

This study is among the first to consider the importance of Alaska Native performing arts and knowledge production coming from urban spaces. An *akutaaq* approach is equally important when one considers the fact that Pamyua members live in Anchorage, often called “Alaska's biggest village” because it has served as a “Native hub” (Ramirez 2007) for the diverse cultures of Alaska's Native people since the middle of the twentieth century. American Studies scholar Renya Ramirez (Winnebago) explains that “the hub offers a mechanism to support Native notions of community, identity, and belonging *away from*

*tribal land bases*” (emphasis mine, 2007:1) by acknowledging the realities of rural-urban mobility. This mobility, Ramirez argues, suggests a political vision for transformative social change. As I will show, Pamyua’s version of *akutaq* amplifies the “audible entanglements” (Guilbault 2005) of ongoing Alaska Native self-determination movements with the longstanding dynamics of cosmopolitanism and transnationalism across circumpolar Inuit communities.

My association with Pamyua began as an audience member in the late 1990s, and my research path brought me to them in 2008 after a chance encounter in Boston, Massachusetts. The band was invited to perform at an Alaska-themed banquet as part of the 26<sup>th</sup> Annual International Boston Seafood Show which I attended as a guest of my sister, who had helped organize the event. Although this performance took place almost 5,000 kilometres away from our home state, I was struck by how their contemporized and engaging performances of Yup’ik drum-dance songs rendered the music accessible to the largely non-Native audience. For example, when the “invitational” song was sounded at the end of their performance, as is the tradition at nearly every Yup’ik gathering, Alaska Native attendees and seafood industry professionals alike took the chance to dance “Eskimo style.” The values expressed in invitational songs break down barriers between performers and audience, or “us” and “them,” and instead encourage mixtures (or *akutaq*) of interpersonal and cultural encounters.

Thinking deeply and teaching others about how to best thrive in the world is nothing new to Indigenous communities. Pamyua members Stephen, Phillip, Ossie, and Karina emphasize that their music “shares who we are” as opposed to “sharing our culture” (McLean et al. 2005). While it is not deliberate, the diverse heritages of Pamyua members happen to represent three common identity paradigms in Native American studies: “Full-Blood” Native (Ossie); “Black /Native” (Stephen and Phillip); and “White/Native” (Karina).<sup>7</sup> Phillip once remarked that he never felt that he had to choose between his African American and Yup’ik heritages: “I felt so honored to be a part of both backgrounds ... I’ve always marked myself on applications as black and Alaska Native” (Williams 1999:13). I use Choctaw/African American scholar Robert Keith Collins’s “kinship principle” to account for processes of self-identification that are negotiated through socially- and culturally-based identity formations and inherited from home communities and family (immediate, extended, adopted, and fictive) (2002).

Pamyua members practice Inuit worldviews based on an ethic of respect, responsibility, and reciprocity toward families, communities, and audiences. The Yup’ik word *pamyua* is typically translated as “tail” or “encore” in a performance context, but it also can mean “obligation.” Pamyua’s inclusive ethos advances

alliances across lines of ethnicity and nationality. “Pamyua as entertainers and as artists are able to flourish because of our positive message. Everyone can accept it and reap its benefits,” said Phillip (Perea 2011:236-37). By developing a modality that reflects *who they are*, Pamyua members demonstrate the multivocality of agency and community-based ethics, and how music comes to be defined as “Native.”

Thus Pamyua’s modalities draw attention to the need for new theoretical frameworks that account for diverse views of tradition and innovation, and where they intersect and coexist. The past two decades have produced an impressive number of Indigenous researchers and Alaska Native scholars whose works and methodologies are overturning conventional practices in many disciplines (Kawagley 1995; Mihesuah 1998; Smith 1999; Kovach 2009; Womack et al. 2008; Denzin, Lincoln and Smith 2008; Wilson 2008; Villegas, Neugebauer, and Venegas 2008; Williams 2009; Barnhardt and Kawagley 2010; Webster and John 2010). This essay contributes to a growing body of Native North American popular music studies conducted by Native researchers who endeavor to bridge current thought in ethnic studies and music studies in order to cultivate a more musical Native studies and more Native music studies.<sup>8</sup>

Due to misplaced assumptions in Alaska Native and Native North American music scholarship, and ethnomusicology studies in general, little scholarly attention has been paid to popular music genres such as rock, country, reggae, funk, and rap. A divide has arisen between studies of “traditional” and “non-traditional” performance practices, which in effect invalidates the latter by ignoring its efficacy in self-determination efforts to heal intergenerational trauma wrought by colonization. For example, Steven Leuthold suggested “Native identities in the future may be more tied to [popular music] expressions rooted in other subcultures than to a sense of cultural continuity with precontact Native traditions” (1998:192). Views that dismiss Alaska Native and Native North American popular music as “non-traditional” are both curious and misleading, and show a lack of scholarly engagement with musicians and musics heard as different from “precontact Native traditions.”

Instead of viewing Native American popular music as a departure from traditional cultural production, Diamond suggests that “a research emphasis on alliances – both the ones these artists make and the ones in which they are implicated – rather than on the distinctiveness of identity, can take us closer to understanding the vision of modern Indigenous people and the patron discourses that need to be dismantled for that vision to be realized” (2007).<sup>9</sup> My research applies this concept as a vital corrective to the misplaced assumptions surrounding Alaska Native musicians engaged in popular genres by illuminating the ways in which we have always been modern, cosmopolitan,

and transnational. This framework allows for moments of difference and alliance to coexist as a type of *akutaq*, which I argue is crucial and necessary for liberating popular understanding about what it can mean to be a Native person and to perform Native-ness in modern times. Pamyua's particular "indigenous articulation" (Clifford 2001) offers a means through which Alaska Native and Inuit people have reshaped and reaffirmed their perceptions of self and culture by reimagining a traditionally-grounded self within a modern world. To borrow the words of musician-scholar John-Carlos Perea (Mescalero Apache), Pamyua demonstrates the many ways in which "it has always been traditional for us to be contemporary" (2012).

### Stephen Qacung and Phillip Kill'aq Blanchett

Stephen *Qacung* (b. July 10, 1972) and Phillip *Kill'aq* (b. November 27, 1974) were born in Fairbanks and Bethel, respectively, and from an early age became accustomed to traveling the literal and figurative distances between their parents' cultures. Their mother, Marie *Arnaq* Meade [née Nick], was born and raised in Nunapitchuk (forty-six air kilometers north of Bethel), a small tundra village in southwestern Alaska located near the Kuskokwim River and home to her ancestors for generations. After graduating from Bethel Regional High School in 1968, Meade moved nearly 885 kilometers northeast to attend the University of Alaska, Fairbanks (UAF), where she began her career as a Yup'ik language specialist. In 1970 she was chosen to initiate and direct the first elementary-level bilingual program in Bethel, which at that time was administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). After a year teaching first-graders, she returned to UAF to continue her education and work for the Eskimo Language Workshop in the fall of 1971. It was then that she met David Blanchett, a young African American man from Philadelphia who had been stationed at a Fairbanks area military base.

As the majority of Stephen and Phillip's early childhood was spent in Bethel, the region's main trading hub, it is not surprising that two of their earliest musical influences are unique to southwest Alaska: traditional Yup'ik *yuarutet* [drum-dance songs] and Russian Orthodox church music, particularly hymns and songs performed as part of *Selaviq* Christmas celebrations. Growing up in Bethel in the 1970s, Stephen and Phillip benefited from a cultural and political environment in which Alaska Native people worked tirelessly to reclaim and revitalize Native languages, cultural traditions, subsistence practices, and ways of life.<sup>10</sup> The musical consequences of a late twentieth-century Alaska Native Solidarity movement included the increased visibility of traditional Alaska



Native music and dance, most significantly in public schools as a result of national Indian Education reform initiatives and innovative programs such as those directed by Marie. The effects of these reforms are illustrated by Stephen's memories of learning *yuarutet* in kindergarten and first grade. Educators have long recognized the effectiveness of songs as teaching tools, and in southwestern Alaska *yuarutet* both introduce students to Yup'ik language conventions and pass on culturally specific stories. These songs also highlight themes and activities associated with the lifeways of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta – from recounting historic events and subsistence hunting to eating Eskimo ice cream, chewing bubble gum, and drinking soda. During live performances, Pamyua jokes about how their set lists read more like cultural inventories or “menus” (Alban 2010).

Marie's family and home village of Nunapitchuk were among those which maintained ties to Russian Orthodox customs, especially *Selaviq*, or Russian Christmas. Stephen especially remembers the feasts – particularly how Halloween paled in comparison to *Selaviq* in terms of the large amounts of candy for children – as well as the communal spirit that energized the singing of carols and hymns. As he explained:

My family was Russian Orthodox, so we have this thing called *Selaviq*, which was Russian Christmas, which is huge back home, and there's a lot of singing. So that was my first experience with singing and it was all in Yupik. So I've been singing in Yupik since I was basically born. (Perea 2011:187)

*Selaviq* singing is polyvocal, blending *kolyada* (Ukrainian folk carols) and Orthodox church hymns. Priests introduced both genres to southwest Yupiit villagers during the last few decades of Alaska's Russian period (ca. 1840s), and the songs have since been sung in Slavonic and Yupik languages. Villagers fluent in Yugtun had varying degrees of success translating or relating to the meaning behind the Eastern European language and texts. The Blanchetts and their many cousins, for example, took pride in the fact that they could perform the difficult harmonies of Russian hymn singing, even though they did not understand what all the lyrics meant (Perea 2011:188).

Fienup-Riordan reports a comparable preservation of *Selaviq* songs evident in a 1989 celebration in the village of Kasigluk, noting that “only a handful of the congregation, including the priest and readers, knew the full meaning of the Slavonic songs. Yet they were faithfully transcribed and memorized by the dozen men and half dozen women who made up the church choir” (1990:99). The Blanchett brothers did not realize how much of the Russian missionary culture they had absorbed until Pamyua began touring

internationally. The Central Yup'ik Language uses nearly three hundred Russian “loan words,” such as *kass'aq* (white person, or “Cossack” in English) (Jacobson and Center 2009:678). As Stephen said, “we didn’t realize how much Russian we spoke until we went to Russia” (Perea 2011:188). Pamyua members were also surprised to find how much they shared with Siberian Inuit. Ossie said, “when they fed us, it’s like I never left home: frozen white fish, raw white fish and caribou stew . . . the only thing missing was seal oil!” (Perea 2011:189).

In 1978 Marie and David divorced; both remarried, and in 1982 Marie took Phillip and Stephen to live in Seattle, where their new stepfather attended law school. This was the first major relocation for Stephen and Phillip, who were ten and eight years old at the time, and it greatly affected their development as musicians. They were exposed to urban life for the first time and had easier access to American popular culture and music, namely hip-hop and rap, via Top 40 radio stations (also referred to as “contemporary hit radio” format), and the cable network Music Television station (MTV). Phillip explained:

[Stephen and I] would listen to all the underground hip hop stations, or rap stations, and record as much music as we could . . . kind of knowing that we would be going back to Alaska, so when we went back to Bethel, even Anchorage and Wasilla, we would have pretty current, hip music. And so that was really important to us because we just liked it and it was something we identified with, I think, as black culture . . . when I was younger and I would hear older music, like R&B roots music of Motown, of course I would identify, and even jazz music, I was like, “that’s my culture’s music.” And so I think that recording that music at that time was “this is my music of our generation.” (Perea 2011:190)

It was during this time away from their father that the brothers developed a strong affinity with a sound culture defined almost exclusively by African American musicians. Stephen explains:

The first album I ever bought was Grandmaster Flash. I was into rap and R&B, and my dad was really into R&B stuff, so I listened to Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway, all these old cats that are just really funk-music-oriented music, Sly and the Family Stone, you know, just really cool music. So that’s why you hear that music in ours. It’s definitely the influence from funk and soul . . . later on I started listening to a cappella music, harmony singing oriented, stuff like Jodeci, Boyz II Men, Take 6, Bobby McFerrin – musicians

that focused on the voice. (Perea 2011:192)

After four years moving between Anchorage and Seattle with their mother, in 1986 Stephen and Phillip moved to Wasilla, Alaska, to live with their father David and his new family. According to Stephen, an important bonding activity in the Blanchett household was singing together as a family: “We sang a lot of doo-wop songs ... every single night we sang doo-wop songs before we went to bed ... we would sing sometimes for hours” (Perea 2011:194). They also supported David and his wife Martha’s involvement with the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, in which they are both ordained ministers.<sup>11</sup> Even when their children were the only ones in the congregation – which was quite often – David and Martha carried on and worked to ensure that each sermon was more polished and enthusiastic than the last. Stephen and Phillip learned that church choirs vary in size and grandeur, and few are like the gospel choirs portrayed in Hollywood films. However, the Blanchett family made occasional trips to black churches in Anchorage, where Stephen and Phillip experienced some great musical moments when religious conferences came to town. David and Martha’s endless dedication taught the Blanchett children the importance of giving your all in every performance. David once commented, “I do good sermons, but Steve is just an amazing impromptu speaker” (“A Portrait of Pamyua” 1996). After ten years of service at Wasilla’s AME Zion Church, the Reverends Blanchett moved to the Episcopal Diocese of Alaska.

After Stephen graduated from Wasilla High School in 1990, he attended college in South Carolina for two years in order to be closer to David’s extended family on the east coast. Meanwhile, Phillip transferred to Bartlett High School in Anchorage in order to live with his mother (who had just returned from Northern California) and to re-immense himself in the Native community. He took part in the Native Youth Olympics, a program that trained young Natives to compete in the annual World Eskimo Indian Olympics, and in the Greatland Traditional Dancers, one of Anchorage’s traditional Yup’ik drum and dance groups.<sup>12</sup>

After graduating from high school in 1992, Phillip enrolled at the University of Alaska, Anchorage, and Stephen returned home to Alaska to attend Matanuska-Susitna Community College, just outside of Wasilla. Two years later, in the spring of 1995, Stephen was about to be married, and he wanted to prepare a cultural performance for his wedding celebration:

I was getting married and Phillip had been dancing with [Kicaput] in Anchorage, and I hadn’t danced since I was like in kindergarten or first grade ... I wanted a dance at the reception at my wedding,

and so I had [Phillip] teach me some songs. And on one of the songs he was teaching me, I threw a harmony up on top of it and we were just like “whoa, that sounds kinda cool.” So we just kept doing it. (Perea 2011:192)

The brothers did not sing their new harmonies at the wedding, but their dancing was an absolute success. Phillip remembered the moment as “an awesome experience, especially to see our elder aunties see us dancing (hard) for the first time. Our Grandma’s sister was even inspired to jump up and show her moves” (personal communication, 11 January 2012). Given the oppressive tactics of some missionaries sent to southwest Alaskan villages to end traditional Native culture, Phillip noted how revolutionary the mere performance of a traditional drum-dance song was for his family.

The brothers continued to experiment with harmonizing traditional Yup’ik songs and performing them in popular (African American) vocal styles, and ended up creating something extraordinary, something that reflected their family’s mixed Yup’ik/African American heritage (McLean et al. 2005). Their first experiments were done with a well-known “Igloo Building Song” from the Barrow region, and after they had worked out harmonies through the entire song they shared it with their father. David encouraged them to take their invention to the next level by developing a repertoire for professional recording, revealing in the process that he once worked as a music producer as a young man in Philadelphia. Soon after that they gave their first public performance at a reception hosted by the University of Alaska, Anchorage Native Student Services program to honor Alaska Native graduates. The Blanchetts continued to receive invitations to perform across the state, and spent the summer of 1995 expanding their repertoire in preparation for their first tour: ten concerts at ten regional elementary and high schools in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District, beginning with Stephen’s alma mater, Wasilla High School. During this time they performed periodically with several other young Yup’ik men, but soon realized that their cousin *Aassanaaq* Phillip “Ossie” Kairaiuak was the obvious choice for a third permanent member.

### Aassanaaq Phillip “Ossie” Kairaiuak

Ossie was born on October 8, 1968 to Maria *Naivkuk* and Hilary *Kairaiyuaq* Kairaiuak. The Kairaiuak family lived in *Cevv’varneq* (Chefornak), a small coastal village on the Bering Sea. Whereas the more inland, Bethel-based Blanchett family grew up practicing Russian Orthodoxy, Ossie’s family practiced

Catholicism. It is important to reemphasize that the cultural encounters between Yup'ik people and Christian missionaries varied greatly, and that the encounters were not always negative. By the time Jesuit priests reached Chefnak, they had changed their anti-Native tactics: as Ossie explained, the priests found that “the best way to convert us to Christianity was to teach us in the local language, so we were allowed to speak our language” (“The State of Native Music” 2009). Priests encouraged the continuance of most Native customs and languages, often translating Bible passages and homilies into Yup'ik. Despite the Kairaiuaks' service in the local Catholic Church – Hilary served as an usher for many years, and Ossie as an altar boy – Ossie's parents taught him that there was more to life than what was bound by the church's walls. Yup'ik was both Hilary and Maria's first language, which allowed them a direct connection to ancestral knowledge and expression, and they ensured that this was passed on to their children.

Along with church hymns, Ossie's earliest musical memories involve his father, who led Chefnak's traditional Yup'ik dance group. Hilary was also renowned for making beautiful skin *qayaq* (kayaks) and sleds, a skill perfected over the course of his life. Ossie described his father's work as “meticulous and methodical,” adding, “I learned from the best ... [he's] who I try to emulate in everything I do” (Perea 2011:195). Even though Hilary did not make drums, Ossie credits his father's devotion to his craft as his inspiration for learning to make *cauyaqs*, or Yup'ik drums. Ossie learned from his father's patience and soon became a highly skilled drum maker, a vital skill given that Yup'ik *yuarutet* are always accompanied by a *cauyaq*.

As well as building drums, Ossie learned the importance of maintaining drum and dance repertoire. For him, maintaining Yup'ik ways of knowing or *Yuuyaraq* (the way of the human being), is an intergenerational responsibility that falls on elders and youths alike. Speaking about his nephew Vernon John, who received his cultural and musical education from grandparents on both maternal and paternal sides, Ossie identified a triumvirate of components underlying *yuarutet* as understood by his family:

There's three components to a song and dance. Number one being the most important is the voice, 'cause the voice is telling you the story ... Second is the beat, the tempo, it creates a mood or atmosphere. The third, last but not least, are the dancers. The dancers are the ones painting pictures for the story being told ... and if the conditions are right, as they say, our ancestors from the other world will join us, making it feel like home, so to speak. (Perea 2011:196)

Through observation and participation, Ossie internalized the components of traditional Yup'ik drumming, singing, and dancing particular to his familial setting, as opposed to the Blanchetts' more generalized public school context. Given Cheforak's remote location, Ossie admittedly experienced a fairly sheltered childhood: "When I was growing up dancing, I thought the entire planet danced Yup'ik, just like the way we did" ("The State of Native Music" 2009). By the time he reached high school, a time when earlier village youth had been sent away to boarding schools, *Chaputnguak* High School, home of the Shamans (their school mascot), had been built.<sup>13</sup> This meant that Ossie, the youngest of thirteen children (ten of whom are still living today), would be the only Kairaiiak sibling not forced to leave home and face re-education practices that dissuaded the use of Yup'ik language or culture – the loss of which overwhelmingly marks previous generations. Although Ossie was fortunate, he did have to contend with post-contact sociocultural hardships felt across rural Alaska, especially low self-esteem brought about by high rates of suicide, alcoholism, and domestic violence. Ossie did not experience these problems in his immediate family, but the traumas affected the overall wellness of his small community. Phillip explained, "we have many elders and children in the villages who speak our language as their first language, but within that stronghold, everybody recognizes the impact that modern society and culture has directly in the villages. And that's reflected in the number of suicides and all the different social challenges we have" (McLean et al. 2005). Given these challenges, Native politicians and educators advocated for the creation of programs to support Native student achievement. One program was the Rural Alaska Honors Institute (RAHI, founded in 1983), a summer program that helped college-bound students make the transition between village high schools and the University of Alaska, Fairbanks (UAF). In 1985, the summer before his senior year, Ossie was mentored as a member of the program's third cohort, and he enrolled in UAF in the fall.

With the support of his parents, Ossie relocated to Fairbanks, majored in art with an emphasis in sculpture, and received his Bachelor of Arts degree in the spring of 1991. That fall he moved to Anchorage and got involved in the urban Native community. He established himself as an artist and playwright, and he joined the Kicaput Dancers and began performing together with Phillip Blanchett and Marie Meade.<sup>14</sup> He was soon offered a leadership role in the group due to his distinction as one of the few fluent Yup'ik speakers in Anchorage – a recognition that was significant for Ossie and the community, especially because of his young age (he was only twenty-three at the time). Maria Williams's research found a direct correlation between Native language retention and

traditional drum-dance repertoire: groups with a high level of language retention have larger repertoires and tend to compose and choreograph new songs and dances, whereas groups with a low level of language retention have smaller repertoires and do not tend to compose new songs or choreograph new dances (1996:196). Ossie took his leadership position seriously, and started developing his skills within two primary Yupiit composition processes. He began paying closer attention to the standard forms and structures of Yup'ik traditional drum-dance songs, such as those outlined by Theresa *Aregvaq* John's exemplary research (2010): and he began speaking with Yupiit elders about the more embodied aspects of song writing, or how one "receives" a song. In a 1996 interview with Williams, he said:

John Pingayak, who is a very well respected man from Chevak, told me how he comes up with songs. You listen to mother nature, it's like these spirits that go through your body and speak to you ... I have ideas, some ideas. But I really haven't [written songs yet]. But that's where those songs come from, in terms of the spirit world. William Tyson briefly told me when I was listening to him one time he said that with songs, when an idea strikes, it's like a dream. It's like the *caquq* ['wings'] they go [makes the sound of wings] and that's why they pick up music in the songs. (Williams 1996:252-253)

Ossie's knowledge of traditional Yup'ik *yuarutet* was highly valued by Kicaput members, especially Phillip. The Blanchett brothers wanted Ossie for their new harmony-oriented project, especially because they wanted to augment their drum-dance repertoire.

Speaking about their tribal funk stylings, Ossie said, "there has to be room here for different interpretations of music in our culture. The Elders are happy with this, for we [contemporary] groups carry the culture. We carry the young with us, and that is a traditional Yup'ik value" (Berardi 2001). On writing songs, Ossie and Phillip say that their original compositions draw upon each member's experiences and issues facing their Native community. Moreover, their composition process does not differ greatly from earlier generations of Yupiit songwriters. Many of the historic song forms are kept intact, and the texts intone themes of humor, love, celebration, and storytelling.

After their tour of regional high schools, Stephen, Phillip, and Ossie were invited to Juneau where they sang at the Governor's Mansion, at the 1995 Governor's Awards for the Arts, and for the Alaska State Legislature. The latter performance was recorded and broadcast on the television program "Gavel

to Gavel,” on Juneau’s public station KTOO (available statewide via satellite). Journalist Teri Tibbett recalled seeing the trio perform:

The first time I saw Pamyua they were still teenagers. They came to Juneau in the late 1990s to perform at the Alaska State Legislature, singing and dancing in one of the conference rooms there. I remember them being bright-eyed, enthusiastic and happy, with a lot of confidence and wonder. Men and women stood around in suits and watched with the same kind of wonder. These boys from Bethel brought something many hadn’t seen much of – rural, Native, hip musicians. (Tibbett 2008)

It is curious that Tibbett identified Ossie, Stephen, and Phillip as teenagers, when in late 1995 they were 27, 23, and 21 years old. The contrast between the Juneau government employees in suits and Pamyua as “bright-eyed, enthusiastic and happy” performers from Bethel is also interesting, particularly the insinuation that Pamyua defied expectations of rural Alaska Native musicians by being “hip.” But, while one might take issue with Tibbett’s observations, it is more instructive to consider how Ossie, Stephen, and Phillip chose to present themselves to this non-Native audience. From their very first performances, these cosmopolitan young men demonstrated their willingness to play with rural and urban stereotypes – a tactic that Pamyua continues to employ as urban-dwelling Natives performing “urban” musics.

Scholars have noted that the mid-1990s was a time of cultural revitalization for Alaska Native communities, broadly speaking, and for Yupiit communities specifically (Fienup-Riordan 1999; Williams 1996; Perea 2011). January 1996 brought the repatriation-turned-exhibit *Agayuliyararput* (Our Way of Making Prayer): *Kegginaqut, Kangiit-llu* (Yup’ik Masks and the Stories They Tell) to the southwest coastal village of Toksook Bay – an effort led in large part by Meade and Fienup-Riordan. In February, a few months after their Juneau performance, Ossie, Stephen and Phillip were invited to perform at the Arctic Winter Games (AWG) in Chugiak, Alaska, about 32 kilometers north of Anchorage. It was here that they met Greenlandic Inuit vocalist Karina Møller, who would become the fourth permanent member of Pamyua.

### Karina Møller

Karina Møller was born on November 27, 1967 in the small town of Qaqortoq, *Kalaallit Nunaat* (Land of the Kalaallit people), also known as Greenland, to



the late *Aqigssiaq* and Marianne Møller. During Karina's early childhood, her family lived for several years in Denmark, and then moved back to western Greenland, this time to the capital city Nuuk, which Karina considers her home town. Karina's earliest musical memories involve her parents' LP collection, which featured mostly American jazz and popular musicians. "My parents had LPs of Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong and Mills Brothers ... and I listened to them all the time. And when I heard of Stevie Wonder, Chaka Khan, Aretha Franklin, all that old school stuff, I really liked that" (Perea 2011:202). Karina said that her peers were not necessarily listening to the same music. In place of traditional drum and dance performance, Greenlandic Inuit musicians turned to rock music as a platform for their anti-colonial protests. Karina, however, did not necessarily relate to some of the separationist sentiments:

I enjoy [harder-edged music], but anything that has more aggressive energy and has the idea of saying them-and-us, separation from other people, I'm always very careful. Because I think it's good if you have pride as a human being. You can be proud of your culture but it's always dangerous to create separation. And if you are saying it's because you are so upset at the white people for what they have done, [creating separation] does the same thing ... so that's why I really like Ulali and Native Roots ... their music communicates that "it's not about separation." (Perea 2011:203)

Karina's father, a politician, warned her and her siblings against taking on the trappings of victimization and helped them instead to develop a strong work ethic and sense of self worth. He had been sent to a boarding school during a time when there was no Inuit presence in the ranks of the Greenland's leadership. Much like twentieth-century Alaska Native leaders, Karina's father and his contemporaries realized that they had to educate themselves in the Western way in order to make their social justice initiatives audible to Danish society. Supported by her father's life lessons, Karina pursued her true musical loves: jazz, soul, and other popular musics.

Karina returned to Denmark at the age of fifteen to attend a college preparatory school, where she excelled in music and mathematics. Although her mother is Danish, Karina remembers feeling shy and insecure around fellow European students because she was visibly Inuit. In 1991 she enrolled in *Aerø Højskole*, a Danish school for music and acting. An *Aerø* vocal teacher saw promise in Karina's abilities and encouraged her to attend the Grove School of Music and the Musicians Institute, both in Los Angeles, California. From 1992 to 1995 Karina developed her skills as a jazz and popular music vocalist

in southern California. In 1995 she returned to Greenland to begin a career as a musician and freelance artist, and worked for one season as an actress and dancer for *Silamiut* Theater, Greenland's only professional theater company.<sup>15</sup> A year later she was invited to serve as her country's cultural delegate to the 1996 Arctic Winter Games (AWG) in Chugiak, Alaska.

Since 1970, the biennial AWG event (held every other February) has hosted athletes from Western Canadian provinces and Alaska, who compete in indoor and outdoor sports ranging from cross-country skiing and snowshoeing to volleyball and curling. Following their original purpose – “to furnish the opportunity through sport for the social and cultural meeting of Northern peoples” – the AWG expanded in 1990 to include participants from Eastern Canadian provinces, Greenland, and Russia. More events, such as junior dog mushing and traditional Dene spear-throwing and stick pulling games were added.<sup>16</sup> Cultural events are part of the AWG, including singing, storytelling, drumming, dancing, and demonstrations of crafts. Karina's first performance in Alaska was the result of a serendipitous mishap:

The band I was supposed to perform with didn't make it on the charter flight, so when I saw Stephen and Phillip and Ossie, I said, “I want to sing with them!” So I asked them after I saw them perform, and they were like “Okay!” And as soon as we started singing together it was like “whoa, this is what I've been wanting to do.” It really felt right. They like the same kind of music I like. I like really traditional music, I like soul, funk, jazz and that kind of music, and they like that too ... there wasn't any doubt that, you know, that these were the people I wanted to work with. (Perea 2011:205)

The quartet performed to an enthusiastic crowd and was convinced that this was the start of something special. While Karina enjoyed a degree of success as a performer in Greenland, she always found it hard to meet like-minded musicians: “I never really connected with many musicians there. You know, I would hire some to play with me, but they didn't feel it – the kind of music I like to do – so I was really excited when I met Phillip and Stephen” (Perea 2011:205). At the insistence of Stephen, Phillip, and Ossie, Karina decided to extend her stay in Alaska, and she travelled with them to Bethel's Cama-i Festival, a three-day dance event held annually in March.

After an intense month of performing, Karina's stay turned into a few months as she continued performing with Stephen, Phillip and Ossie. In June of 1996, she went home to pack her things and returned to Alaska. As it had

been for Ossie, Karina's transition into the urban Anchorage community was easy: "I was welcomed right away by the whole community here, they didn't consider me as an outsider, they considered me as a cousin" (Perea 2011:205-206). Upon Karina's return, the group continued to build their repertoire, which was based largely on what they learned from Ossie's vast childhood experiences and Marie Meade's tenure with *Nunamta* (Of Our Land) – one of the first professional Yup'ik dance groups to tour internationally.<sup>17</sup> Although the quartet was unsure how it would be received by Native and non-Native Alaskan audiences, Phillip explains that their enthusiasm and cultural integrity were appreciated despite their inexperience:

We were lucky. Because of our family and our prominence, we already had a large support group. So immediately, even without doing anything, we knew that we already had that. So when we started, because we had the support of our Mom, who was the reason for that huge community, that immediately it just blew up, and then people just recognized that confidence, and so we're very, very fortunate to be able to have that family. (Perea 2011:237)

Ossie once joked with a reporter that "when we're learning a song, [Phillip, Stephen, Karina] look to me to make sure we're doing it right. I look to their mother" ("A Portrait of Pamyua" 1996).

From their first performances as a quartet in early 1996, Pamyua began receiving invitations to perform on local, national, and international stages. In order to manage the programmatic and logistical demands of an increasingly busy touring schedule, they developed a business strategy together with their emergent Inuit World Music aesthetics: they created Pamyua, Inc. as an "S corporation" and established their own recording label, Arctic Voice Records. As an "S corporation," Pamyua, Inc. can protect their intellectual property, as well as the intangible heritage of their home communities via copyright protections; they have legal control over the creation and distribution of their intellectual property and access to benefits such as special tax breaks that are not available to unincorporated songwriters (Krasilovsky, Shemel, and Gross 2003:355). While these two entities were new for Alaska Native musicians in the music industry, their creation falls in line with the experience of Alaska Native peoples since the mid-twentieth century. Stephen, Phillip, and Ossie grew up in the 1970s when Alaska Native Corporations (ANCs) were also coming of age, and much energy was spent coming to grips with a Western business model and the ways in which these corporations did or did not fit into

modern tribal life. Whereas ANCs conduct corporate-to-government business with the United States government, Pamyua, Inc. works with music industry entities on a corporate-to-corporate basis, dealing directly with wholesale distributors, product manufactures, booking agencies, entertainment buyers and sellers, and music marketers.

### The Business of *Yuuyaraq*: Pamyua, Inc. and Arctic Voice Records

A primary motivation behind the band's juxtaposition of Indigenous performing arts with a non-Indigenous corporate structure was their desire to destabilize the cultural and economic exploitation experienced by many Alaska Native performers, especially in the state's tourism industry. Phillip encountered exploitation first-hand as a member of Kicaput, an Anchorage-based traditional Yup'ik drum-dance group, whose skillfully crafted cultural presentations were often met with disrespect, meager compensation, or both. While Phillip understood the inherent value of continuing to perform, "because we're together, we're healthy, we're fine," he also developed a keen awareness of how "the cultural aspects of our intellectual property, such as Native stories, entertainment, and music, are so grossly taken advantage of and disrespected" (Perea 2011:225). As founding shareholders with equal stake, Stephen, Phillip, Ossie, and Karina approached Pamyua, Inc. as an opportunity to potentially support themselves as full-time artists. Stephen explained:



Figure 1. Logo, "Pamyua, Inc."

We have to take care of our finances, investments, retirement, and that kind of stuff. Most musicians don't even think about retirement, you know, they take their money and they spend it. But you've got to put your money into 401Ks ... otherwise, what are you going to do when you're older? (Perea 2011:225)

Although Pamyua members

joke about having a reputation as an expensive act to book, they are driven by a desire to harness business savvy to build the cultural and economic capital of Inuit, Alaska Native, and Indigenous musicians. For Pamyua, appropriate compensation is a key component of empowerment and a sense self worth in Native communities. Phillip said, “as Native people we need to start respecting ourselves ... I’m a fighter. I only did what I did with Pamyua because I believe that something needs to change” (Perea 2011:226).

Pamyua was approached early on by two of the leading independent Native American record labels, Sound of America Records (SOAR) and Canyon Records, but Stephen said that issues of representation led the band in a different direction:

Sound of America Records and Canyon Records talked to us and wanted to sign us, but we didn’t feel like we’d be represented by them. They really push Indian music from the “lower 48” and that’s their thing ... there was no label that represented Northern music, Inuit music ... so that was one of our side dreams to represent, record, and find artists, starting with Alaska first and then spreading out to Canada, Greenland, Russia ... [we’d] create a database that people can go to and find Northern type of music, even Saami music. (Perea 2011:226)

To be sure, SOAR and Canyon are well respected in Native American music circles. The latter even signed an Anchorage-based Indigenous band called Medicine Dream, who describe themselves as “an Intertribal group representing many nations ... the members of the group are as diverse culturally as they are musically, representing the Athabascan, Apache, Aleut, Choctaw, Inupiaq, Mi’kmaq, Yaqui, Yup’ik and European nations” (“Medicine Dream” 2006).<sup>18</sup> Medicine Dream is stylistically unlike Pamyua and has more in common with “lower 48” intertribal rock and blues musicians featured in Canyon’s catalogue. Pamyua saw a lack of arctic and subarctic representation, and so rather than channeling their work through an already established record label they took control with their own record label.

Bolstered by the creation of their own space inside the music industry, Pamyua has been cultivating their Inuit World Music aesthetics for nearly two decades now. Their debut album *Mengluni* [The Beginning] (1998) (Figure 2 below) features arrangements of traditional Yup’ik and Greenlandic Inuit songs and two original compositions by Stephen and Phillip Blanchett. It highlights the quartet’s musical relationship with Danish pianist Kristoffer Jul Reenberg, with whom Karina performed in Europe in the summer of 1996.

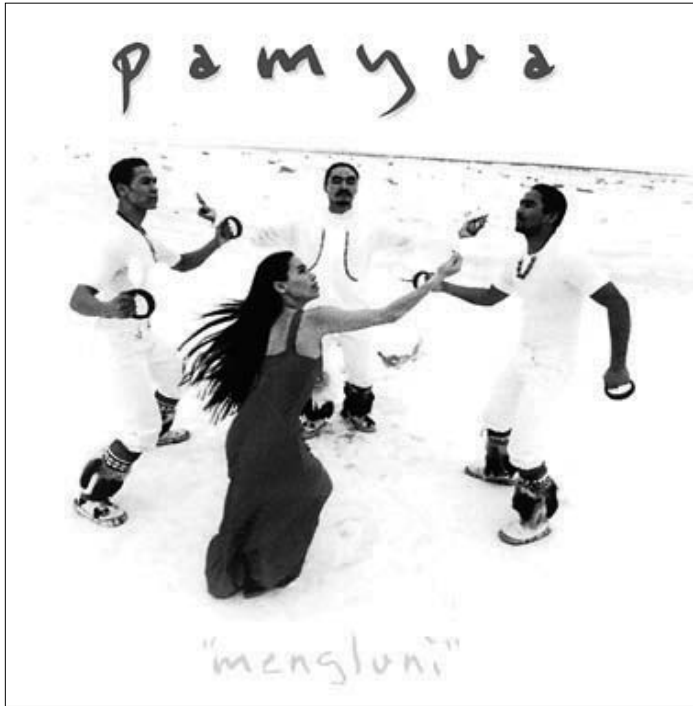


Figure 2. Front Album Cover, Pamyua *Mengluni* [The Beginning] (1998)

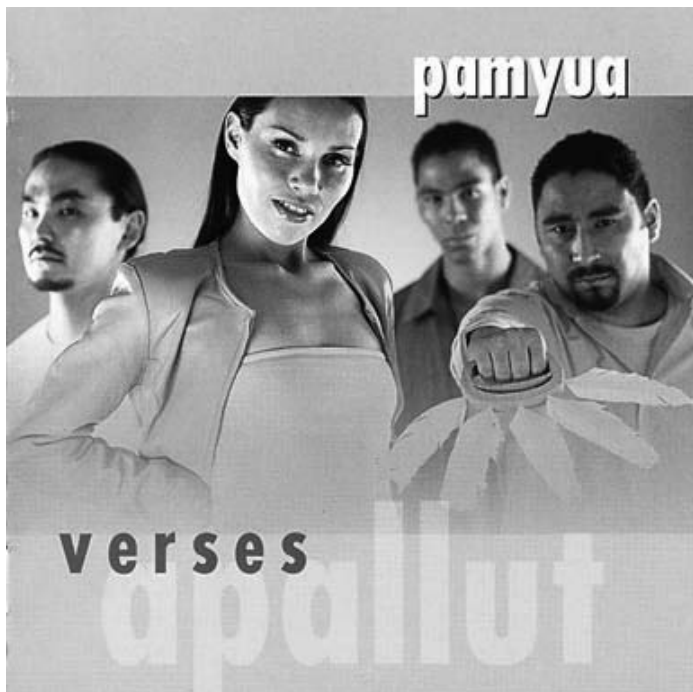


Figure 3. Front Album Cover, Pamyua *Apallut* [Verses] (2001)

Stylistically, Phillip envisioned Pamyua's musical contributions as allied with hymn-inspired *a cappella* part-singing, such as South Africa's Ladysmith Black Mambazo, who came to mainstream attention through their performance on Paul Simon's 1986 album *Graceland*. Phillip said:

I like R&B music and American music, of course, but when I hear African music I have the same ties to it ... In listening to more African music I got to hear Ladysmith Black Mambazo ... it's like this integration of Christian hymns with their own cultural African style, and I thought, "that's like *nunat* [villages]!" where they sing Christian hymns in Russian and then in Yup'ik and English. (Perea 2011:217)

*Mengluni* highlights vocal styles inspired by the Blanchetts' experience singing Yup'ik drum-dance songs and Russian Orthodox hymnody while growing up in Bethel, and their later introduction to doo-wop and gospel music as adolescents living in and around Anchorage. *Mengluni* was also their first foray into protecting intellectual property by incorporating songs composed by others. Pamyua was careful to obtain permissions needed in order to perform traditional repertoire or personal songs from other families, as the bulk of their repertoire is comprised largely of songs learned from their associations with Kicaput and Nunamta.

ArcticVoice Records allowed Pamyua to control where their albums could be distributed, which became increasingly important as they developed their Inuit Fusion aesthetics. Their second album *Apallut* [Verses] (2001) prominently features world music-influenced instrumentation, including African djembe and Aboriginal Australian didgeridoo alongside the Yup'ik *cauyaq* (Figure 3 above). Stephen explained how they came to include instruments like djembe and didgeridoo: "We went after it. We found those musicians. We wanted to be tribal. We wanted to stay tribal. We wanted to express Indigeneity" (Perea 2011:218). Phillip said, "the didgeridoo itself is very vocal. It's a very earthy sound and very rhythmic, and it really blends well with the style of music that we do, especially with our world music songs or world grooves" (Keeker 2005). Recordings like *Apallut* resist easy categorization; as Diamond points out, the technological, economic, and sociopolitical developments of the 1990s contributed to a surge of Native American popular music which can defy typical conventional genre categorizations, complicating both their physical location (as in record stores) and discursive location (popular, traditional, world, folk) (2005:118).

Stephen noted how Arctic Voice Records could help bring arctic and

subarctic people together, given that the extreme distances between villages and towns make it difficult for people across the North to connect. Guidelines for their logo contest reiterate their mission:

Our target audience is the music industry, i.e., radio, wholesale distributors, internet and print media, television stations, music festivals, etc. ... Our more general target audience comprises regular folks interested in traditional indigenous music and musical fusion interpretations of cultural music ... Our artists represent our company image represented by innovative people with a mind for using northern indigenous thought to communicate with the rest of the world, including ourselves. (“Arctic Voice” 2012)

In terms of local outreach, Arctic Voice Records has produced several recording projects in Alaska, notably in collaboration with the Alaska Native Heritage Center (ANHC) Dancers on *Drums of the North: Traditional Yup'ik Songs* (2005) and a CD titled *Generations: An Alutiiq Music Collection* (2007) for the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository in Kodiak, Alaska. Stephen said, “we’re excited to do more [recording projects]. We’ve been investing in our own studio equipment and getting more experience producing, so we want to start working on essentially preserving Alaska Native languages and culture through multimedia production and audio CDs” (Keeker 2005).

Stephen, Phillip, and Ossie have cultivated a close working relationship with the ANHC.<sup>19</sup> All three of them have served as directors for the semi-professional ANHC a group comprising primarily ANHC staff and high school students from the Center’s after school program (a free program through which Native students earn credit for classes in Alaska Native art, leadership, technology, Native games, and dance). This mentoring relationship can be heard on *Drums of the North* (2005), with Stephen and Ossie leading twelve singers and three drummers from the Alaska Native Heritage Center Dancers (Figure 4 below). *Drums of the North* is the first strictly traditional Yup’ik album produced by Pamyua’s Arctic Voice Productions label; it won “Best Inuit Traditional CD” at the second annual Aboriginal Peoples Choice Music Awards in November 2007.

Pamyua’s musical mixtures have broadened their appeal to a global audience and garnered them several invitations to tour internationally, including a performance for the 45<sup>th</sup> Annual Grammy® “Celebration of American Music” concert at Times Square Studios in New York City. The performance was just before the release of their live album, *Caught in the Act* (2003), which won Record of the Year at the Native American Music Awards



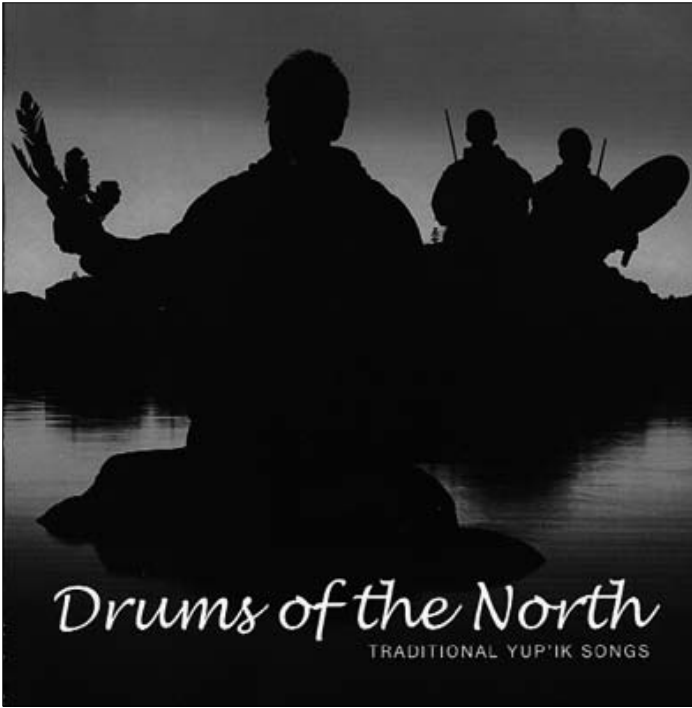


Figure 4. Front Album Cover, Pamyua with the Alaska Native Heritage Center Dancers on *Drums of the North: Traditional Yup'ik Songs* (2005)



Figure 5. Front Album Cover, Pamyua *Side A / Side B* (forthcoming 2012)

(the award is also known as a Nammy). Since 2007 Pamyua has used an array of social media such as MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, *Vimeo*, and a blog (<http://tribalfunk.wordpress.com/>) to post updates, videos, concert footage, and promotional shorts – all of which have built a sizeable following.<sup>20</sup>

Pamyua are set to release their third studio album *Side A/Side B* (fall 2012, see figure 5 above), which is their first double album juxtaposing their two primary streams of influence: Inuit drum-dance songs and global popular music. Disc one honors traditional Inuit instrumentation in that it features only vocals and drums. Disc two casts the same songs in a different light through their trademark *akutaq* of world music instrumentation and popular music grooves. They aim

to remind listeners to embrace relationships with honor, humility and tolerance. Pamyua hopes to inspire others to honor relationships between people, animals and ideas. The Inuit drum-dance tradition celebrates these relationships and works to respect the natural world for all of its majesty and mystery. (Pamyua 2012)

Prior to producing *SideA/SideB* Pamyua were collaborating with Alaska Native hip-hop and rap musicians, such as “Eskimo Flow” artists DJ RiverFlowz (Torin Jacobs [Yup’ik/Iñupiaq/African American]) and AKU-MATU (Allison *Akootchook* Warden [Iñupiaq]), all furthering their self-described “Afro-Inuit” sound. Warden joined the growing cadre of Alaska Native business-owners in 2008 when she founded Uyalunaq Productions. Like Pamyua, Warden sees her company as a vehicle to promote her original productions and develop new performances to share with the community of Anchorage and beyond. She explained, “Uyalunaq is the word for a specific type of rolling cloud unique to the Kaktovik area. It is like a fast and low rolling cloud that looks like a tube, or like intestines rolling right over you in a very fast way. It is a unique word and a unique term to the area of Kaktovik, the place where I have close ties to.” For most Indigenous musicians, concerns with visual and sonic representation in the music and entertainment industry are complicated by the stereotypes endemic to popular culture. From Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Shows to the Hollywood Western film genre, American Indian people have been subjected to a “savage/noble” binary – a binary with concrete implications for musical practices.<sup>22</sup> Diamond’s essays on contemporary Native American musicians show the musicians’ ambivalence about reinforcing stereotypes through sound production and studio discourse (2002; 2005:128-135). The “typical” Native American sound, for example, relies on the use of extramusical effects such

as reverb, animal noises, and water or wind effects to convey impressions of atmosphere or landscape. Dakota cultural historian Philip Deloria has studied the history of what he calls the “Sound of Indian,” which originates in false binaries and reinforces common expectations about what American Indians do or do not sound like (2004:183-223). He argues that American Indian musical practices are typically valued in terms of whether they conform to or defy mainstream expectations, yet another level of social control impeding Native musicians’ right to sound their sense of self-determination.

Of course Natives may choose to use natural sounds. *Drums of the North* features atmospheric or “keynote sounds,” to borrow R. Murray Schafer’s term (1994), found in the arctic and subarctic. Pamyua’s vocal mimicry of wild animals such as geese, sea gulls, walrus, and seals evokes the tundra and coastal village soundscapes of their childhood, and the wildlife found around their urban Anchorage homes. For instance, Phillip says that the *qalriyaraq* (the mating call of the large male bearded seal) “is our signature call” (Brand 2003). Pamyua’s aesthetic vocabulary is rooted in place attachment: “Our traditional songs ... are all connected to the lifestyle that we lead, in our relationship to our environment. A lot of it is understanding and respecting the natural environment that we’re part of. It’s an underlying theme that people can borrow from and appreciate” (Spielberger 2008).

Pamyua’s “aesthetics of place” reflects an Inuit perspective, as well as their home communities of Bethel, Chefnak, Nuuk (Greenland), and Anchorage. The group’s personal and musical alliances exist along a historical trajectory of circumpolar Inuit transnationalism across local, national, and global spheres, following Yup’ik scholar Shari Huhndorf’s conception of transnationalism, which refers to “the alliances among tribes and the social structures and practices that transcend their boundaries, as well as processes on a global scale such as colonialism and capitalism” (2009:2). In Alaska, a Native solidarity movement originated in the early twentieth century with organizations such as the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood, peaked in 1967 with the founding of the Alaska Federation of Natives, and continues to expand today with the First Alaskans Institute. The Inuit Circumpolar Conference, established in 1976 by an Alaska Native man, Eben Hopsen (Iñupiaq), is perhaps the best known international example of a political entity grounded in Indigenous networks.

On a transnational or circumpolar level, Pamyua can be compared to Canadian Inuit music companies such as Inukshuk Productions, Inc. (founded in 1994 but not Inuit owned). Politically speaking, Pamyua, Inc. was created with a mission similar to Canada’s first independent Inuit production company, Igloodik Isuma Productions, Inc., which incorporated in 1990 and became

famous for making the first Aboriginal-language feature movie, *Atanarjuat* (The Fast Runner) (2001). The stated mission of Igloodik Isuma Productions, Inc. is “to produce independent community-based media – films, TV and now Internet –to preserve and enhance Inuit culture and language; to create jobs and economic development in Igloodik and Nunavut; and to tell authentic Inuit stories to Inuit and non-Inuit audiences worldwide”(Isuma Productions 2006).

Pamyua, Inc., too, redefines what a “Native Corporation” can mean and do for Native people. At the time of this writing, it is a thriving music and entertainment company which is the parent corporation for a record company, an entertainment booking agency, a merchandise distributor and media consulting group. They have licensed their music for a variety of commercial uses, including radio spots (such as promotions for Target retail stores); television shows (such as Discovery Channel’s series *Flying Wild Alaska*); and movies (*Christmas in the Clouds* [Random Ventures, 2001] and *Dear Lemon Lima* [Phase 4 Films, 2009]). Pamyua has built on their successes while maintaining their unique modality of Indigenous modernity as cosmopolitan and transnational.

## Conclusion

Theorizing Pamyua’s *akutaq* as a modern urban expression of a *Yuuyaraq*-based practice performs an important task in terms of resisting conventional rhetoric and stereotypes that place Native cultures in the distant past. We must recall that our traumas are very recent, while at the same time assert the survivance of our self-perpetuating and life-celebrating Indigenous philosophies. Yup’ik activist Harold Napoleon was one of the first to write about *Yuuyaraq* in an attempt to address intergenerational traumas of physical and cultural genocide in Alaska Native communities (1991). Despite Native communities’ eagerness to forget or suppress the past through *nallunguarluku* (pretending it didn’t happen), Napoleon’s work demanded acknowledgement of our ancestors’ traumas, which still reverberate through our bodies and across our communities. *Yuuyaraq* stresses relationality and simultaneity, carving a space in the present to redress past wrongs.

The presence of *Yuuyaraq* demonstrates the dynamism and fluidity with which contemporary Yup’ik peoples understand their alliances in relation to environmental realms: social, cultural, political, spatial, temporal. The combination of alliance studies and *Yuuyaraq* offers an approach to challenge the essentializing traditional-modern dichotomy by putting agency and social relationships at the center. The focus then shifts to contextually-defined standards of cultural continuity and cultural integrity.

Although artists, activists, and scholars working in Inuit communities in Alaska over the past few decades have focused on regionally specific cultural traditions and musical practices, their understandings of how music conveys meaning align in important ways. One meaning lies in the performers' and audiences' reverence for the innate power of drumming, singing, and dancing – in the health and welfare of the living people who engage in it, the ancestors who are evoked by it, and the future generations who will benefit from it (Barker, John, and Fienup-Riordan 2010; John 2010; Williams 1996; Kingston 1999; Fienup-Riordan and Meade 1996). Inuit music-making can comfort sadness, loneliness, mourning of loss and death; correct behavior through teasing and ridicule songs; accompany ritual celebrations, sharing and gift-giving; and promote healing, happiness, sobriety and recovery. Missing from the available literature is an acknowledgement of the power of musics that are considered “non-traditional,” or what I call musical modernities.

My work with Pamyua seeks to correct this imbalance by focusing on their individual and collective pathways and how their music-making illustrates both the diversity of contemporary Alaska Native musical life and the fluidity of contemporary Native identity formation. The poetics and politics of their modality arise from a distinctly pro-Indigenous *and* pro-modern performance aesthetic. Transforming familiar popular music forms such as blues, reggae, rock and roll, funk, and jazz, Pamyua challenges colonial narratives that champion “authentic” (or recognizably traditional) music styles as the sole means of Inuit cultural survival or revitalization. The band shows how mixture through cultural encounters has always been part of Yup'ik and Indigenous cultures. 🌸

## Notes

I want to extend a special thank you to Pamyua members Stephen *Qacung* Blanchett, Phillip *Kill'aq* Blanchett, *Aassanaaq* “Ossie” Kairaiuak, and Karina Møller for their permission to use the photographs and album covers

1. A note on terminology: Generally speaking, the multiple and diverse “Native” communities in Alaska have been grouped into three broad classifications of “Indian,” “Eskimo,” and “Aleut.” Although these terms are burdened with the cultural memory of colonial trauma, these European and American misidentifications were ultimately Indigenized for the purposes of Alaska Native social and political activism. “Indian,” “Eskimo,” and “Aleut” are still used by the Alaska Federation of Natives, the first statewide Native organization (established in 1967) to describe their constituents. To be sure, since “Eskimo” did not originate from within Inuit communities it is tethered to a colonial politics of representation by fields such as linguistics, ethnology, and anthropology. For a brief etymology of “Eskimo,” see David Damas’ “Introduction” essay in *Handbook of*

*the North American Indians* (1984). Yup'ik scholar Shari Huhndorf explains that "in 1977, participants in the Inuit Circumpolar Conference originally rejected 'Eskimo' and adopted the term 'Inuit' as the preferred designation for all Eskimo peoples. This decision was both a recognition of the politics of naming and part of a political platform aimed at self-determination" (2001, 79, n2). I follow Huhndorf's example by using "Eskimo" (as opposed to the more specific designations of Yup'ik or Iñupiaq) in instances where individuals or groups identify themselves as such, or when discussing historic media, both print and audiovisual, that employ the term. Moreover, it should be noted that Yup'ik people differ on whether or not they consider themselves Inuit. The Yup'ik language branch of the Eskimo-Aleut language tree is linguistically different from the Inuit-Iñupiaq language branch. For the purposes of this essay, I follow Pamyua members' self-identification as an Inuit World Music band.

2. Alban notes that in Greenland the word *akutag* means "mixture," as in a mixture of ideas or races.

3. It is important to note the switch in terminology from "drum-dance songs" to "drumsongs" – a deliberate move Pamyua has made with Side A/Side B in an effort to resituate "songs that support the dance" in contemporary performance contexts (personal communication, 26 August 2012).

4. One only needs to watch the local news channel for stories and images of drunk and homeless Native people while their non-Native counterparts are blurred out to protect their identities, or tune in to the National Geographic channel's "Alaska State Troopers" so-called "reality" show to witness clashes between Troopers and Native villagers.

5. Mishler identifies four types of traditional Gwich'in music, two of which derive from ancient Indigenous song and dance practices. The other two stem from mid-nineteenth century Christian missionaries (choral hymnody) and European and American fur traders and gold prospectors (Scottish, French-Canadian, and American fiddling): "An inventory of their musical resources reveals: (1) aboriginal-style monophonic singing including love songs, medicine songs, war songs, memorial tributes, and the like ... (2) heavily rhythmic choral singing that accompanies aboriginal style motion dances ... (3) melodic choral singing of Christian hymns first introduced by Anglican missionaries ... and (4) the old-time fiddle music first introduced by servants of the Hudson Bay Company and by white prospectors during the middle and latter part of the nineteenth century" (6).

6. To date, only one master's thesis addresses urban Alaska Native performance, albeit traditional song and dance practices in an urban Anchorage context: Lisa Kelly Gwynn, "Dancing in the Streets: Alaska Native Dance in Anchorage" (2010).

7. I specifically use slash notation for African American/Native to indicate the inseparability of one's inherited heritage. I do not hyphenate African American for the same reason that Native American is not hyphenated, i.e., a resistance to being known as a "hyphenated American."

8. Two recent dissertations on Native popular music by Native scholars are Mescalero Apache/Chicano/German/Irish American musician scholar John-Carlos Perea, "'Witchi Tai To': An Historical Acoustemology" (2009) and Luiseno/Maidu musician scholar Alan Lechusza Aquallo, "Without Reservations: Native Hip Hop and Identity in the Music of

W.O.R.” (2009). Since graduating, both Perea and Aquallo have accepted faculty positions in American Indian Studies departments, at San Francisco State University and Palomar College, respectively. Their appointments signal an important shift in Native studies from its historically law-centered emphases – which aimed to produce advocates for sovereignty-related issues – with a response to calls for disciplinary balance by reintroducing humanistic perspectives and approaches.

9. Diamond credits the concept of “patron discourse” to Van Toorn (1990).

10. For an outline of twentieth-century Alaska Native activism see Maria Williams’ “A Brief History of Native Solidarity” (2009).

11. Reverend Martha Blanchett was the first Yup’ik person to be ordained in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

12. Since 1994, Phillip has won numerous medals in the two-foot high kick event at the 1994 World Eskimo Indian Olympics (WEIO). Most recently he set a new record at the 2011 competition and served as associate producer for a documentary titled *Games of the North: Playing for Survival* (2011).

13. Ossie Kairaiiak, 43, was a senior at Chefnak in 1986 when the school decided to change its nickname, getting rid of Cobras. “I stood up and I said I think everyone should vote for Shaman, because it’s the coolest thing on that board” (Peters 2012). An ESPN poll designated Shamans as one of the most unusual sports team names in the U.S.

14. Kicaput (“Our Anchor”) is a continuation of the Greatland Traditional Dancers, formed in 1983 under the direction of Ben Snowball and *Nuyalran* David Chanar, both of whom were contemporaries of Marie Meade and Chuna McIntyre, the director of *Nunamta* [Of Our Land]. Greatland Traditional Dancers were supported by the Johnson O’Malley Program administered by Cook Inlet Tribal Council (a CIRI non-profit organization). The group changed its name to Kicaput in 1993 after *Umyauqlukek* William Tyson passed away (Williams 1996, 167).

15. *Silamiut* Theatre was established in 1984 by a group of actors and artists who trained at the *Tuukkaq* [harpoon head] Drama College located in Denmark. *Tuukkaq Teatret*, founded in 1975, was the first professional Greenlandic Inuit theatre group. See “About Silamiut,” <http://www.silamiut.gl/> (6 December 2010).

16. Instead of gold, silver, and bronze medals, miniature *ulus*, replicas of the traditional Inuit scraping knife, are presented to the winners (Hurcomb 1990).

17. For more information about Nunamta and biographical outlines of Marie Meade, Theresa John, and Chuna McIntyre see “Traditioning Cosmopolitanism in a Yup’ik Music Revitalization Movement” (Perea 2011, 117-181).

18. See also Janice Esther Tulk’s “Medicine Dream: Contemporary Native Music and Issues of Identity” (2003).

19. Since 1999 the ANHC has served as a community center for Natives living in Anchorage, as well as a seasonal tourist attraction for summer visitors.

20. See: <http://www.myspace.com/pamyua>; <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Pamyua/313810585056>; <http://vimeo.com/pamyua>; <http://www.youtube.com/user/Pamyua/videos>.

21. See also Browner 1995, 1997; Pisani 2005.

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