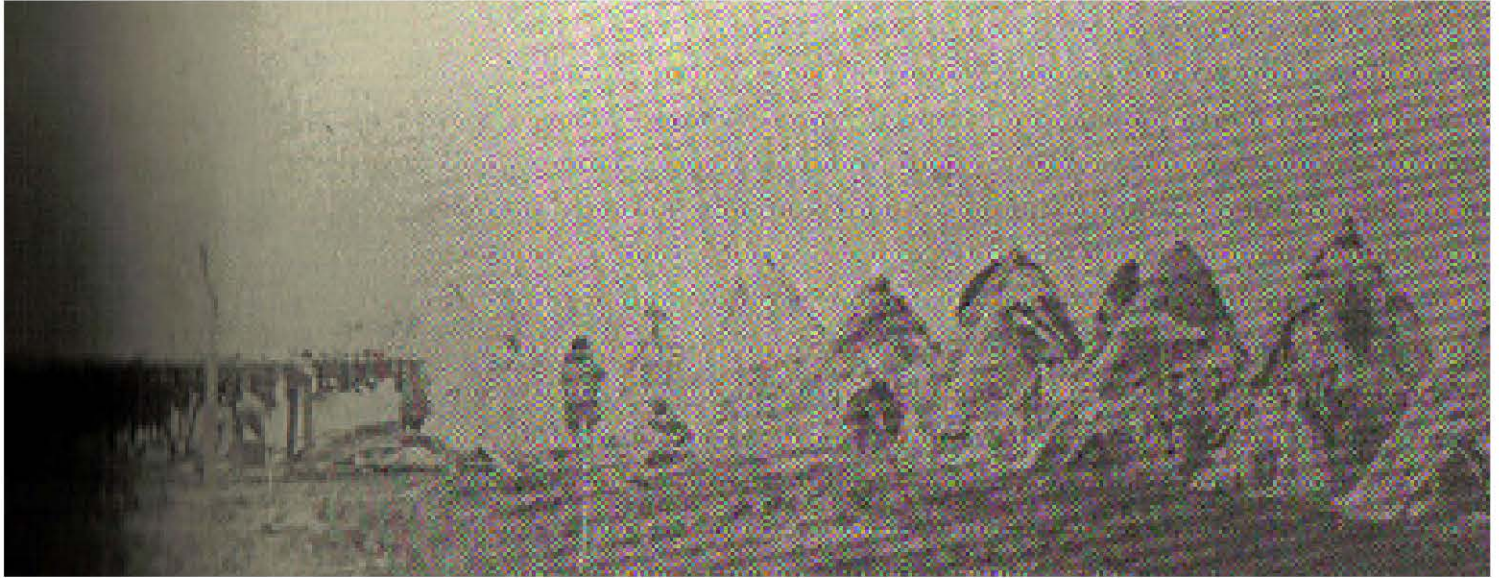




Qatnjut: The Trade Fair



In the late 1880s rows of tents lined the Sisualik beach for nearly two miles. Racks for drying fish were set up to the left of the tents. People traveled here from the Kobuk, Selawik and Noatak Rivers, the Seward Peninsula, Tikigaq (Point Hope), the Bering Straits, and even Siberia to participate in the fair. Photo from the Healy Collection, from Burch 1998:207.

Each summer the Iñupiat from many nations of northwest Alaska and beyond gathered at Sisualik, a spit of land in the Kotzebue Sound for trade, dancing, socializing, athletic competitions, feasts, and sharing of knowledge and news.

Tribes at Qatnjut

Sisualik lies in the middle of Qikiqtagrurmiut (people of the peninsula) land. Every summer, shortly after the break-up of sea and river ice, when travel by skin boat was possible, other tribes were allowed to freely travel through Qikiqtagrurmiut land on their way to Qatnjut (kut-ngut). Iñupiat from the Upper Noatak traveled 300 miles to reach the fair and were among the first to arrive. Next came several families from the Kobuk and Selawik Rivers. People of the Kotzebue Sound arrived next. Finally, Iñupiat from further flung places including the Bering Straits and Siberia arrived.

Sisualik is an especially good place for a gathering as both coastal and inland tribes could easily travel to the event because three major rivers enter Kotzebue Sound nearby. Plenty of fish, particularly salmon, pass by Sisualik in the summer time to feed a large gathering.

There was no set start or end date to Qatnjut, but it generally lasted two to four weeks in July and August. Each tribe of Iñupiat had their own designated camp along the Sisualik spit, but would mingle for trading, dancing, and other social events.

Trading

In Iñupiat culture at the time, there were two distinct types of trading. *Niuvigíaq* allowed for trading between long-established trading partners of different tribes. *Taqsigíaq* is open trade between individuals without a previous trading relationship. Only after trade had occurred with one's established partner could an Iñupiat trade with someone else.

Because so many different nations were present at Qatnjut, all kinds of items were available to trade. People from

inland brought caribou, furs, birch bark, spruce gum, and jade. People from the coasts brought whale and walrus, ivory, and the highly-necessary seal oil, which was used for light and heat in sod homes. Long before Western ships arrived, Siberians brought items such as tobacco and beads from as far as Central Asia and Europe.

Coming together to trade allowed for not only the exchange of necessary and prized goods, but also for the exchange of knowledge.

Cape Krusenstern

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Cape Krusenstern National Monument



Athletic Competitions and Dancing

Athletic competitions sprung up throughout Qatjut. Individuals might challenge each other and then a call would sound for more competitors. Athletics included foot and kayak races, wrestling, spear throwing and archery, and other feats of strength specific to Iñupiaq traditions.

Events like the seal hop, one- and two-foot high kicks, and the stick pull simulate skills needed for hunting and other traditional activities. Today, these competitions are referred to as Native Olympics.

Other Trade Fairs in the Iñupiat World

Though Qatjut at Sisualik was the largest trade fair in the Iñupiat world, it was not the only one. Summer trade fairs were also held at Point Spencer on the Bering Strait, Sullivik at the mouth of the Utukok River, and Nigliq at the mouth of the Colville River.

Between late November and early January when there was little daylight, it was hard to hunt or fish. Instead, this time was a holiday for visiting with relatives and others in nearby settlements or tribes.

Messenger feasts were smaller gatherings of families from just two tribes. The festival began with athletic competitions and then people met together in a qargi (community house) for trading and feasts.

Western Impacts

Westerners began trading with the Iñupiat at Qatjut in the 19th century. However, Western ships were too large to reach Sisualik with its many pockets of shallow water. Instead, Iñupiaq traders visited the Western traders in umiat (boats) full of furs. In exchange, Iñupiat received beads, tobacco, metal, fabric, and other goods.

Beginning in the 1880s, Qatjut shifted to be held on the Baldwin Peninsula, first at Cape Blossom about 12 miles south of Qikiqtaġruk (Kotzebue) and then at Qikiqtaġruk. Here, Western traders were able to reach with their large ships. In addition to trade goods, Westerners introduced disease, alcohol and firearms, and Christianity, causing

Revitalizing Qatjut

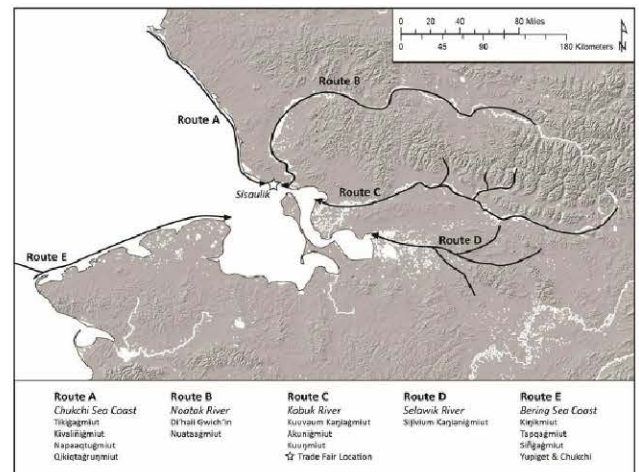
After many years without a gathering, Qatjut was revitalized in 1996 by NANA Regional Corporation and Maniilaq Association. Today, the trade fair is held every other year in Qikiqtaġruk for several days in late June and early July.

Qatjut still brings people together from all across the Iñupiaq world. For example, Chukotkans came to Qatjut in 1996, crossing the Russian-American border imposed by Westerners.

The gathering has shifted to focus mainly on dance and

Qatjut began with a day of dancing and feasts. Every time a new tribe arrived on the beach at Sisualik, another day of dancing and feasts occurred.

Iñupiaq dances vary as each tribe has different resources and specific traditions around hunting and gathering. For example, the people of Tikiġaq (Point Hope) have dances related to hunting whales, while inland communities do not. Dance groups also perform dances related to history and welcoming other tribes to their land.



Map showing routes travelled by the Iñupiat to reach the Sisualik Trade Fair (adapted from Burch 2006).

harmful changes to Iñupiaq culture. Disease decimated the Iñupiat population, significantly reducing the number of people who could be in attendance at Qatjut.

Missionaries used Qatjut gatherings to proselytize among Iñupiat. As missionary influence expanded, their efforts contributed to significant disruptions in Iñupiaq cultural practices. Quaker missionaries, in particular, actively suppressed traditional dancing, leading to its near disappearance in the Northwest Arctic for much of the 20th century. However, in communities outside the reach of Quaker missions—such as Tikiġaq—dancing traditions endured and later played an important role in the revitalization of Iñupiaq dance in Qikiqtaġruk.

cultural preservation. Dance groups perform multiple times each day. Events include a niqipiaq (traditional foods) potluck, fish cutting, and fashion shows of traditional clothing. People compete in Native Olympics with events like the one- and two-foot high kicks. A craft fair is held for the duration of Qatjut for local artists to sell their traditional works.

Qatjut continues to bring Iñupiat together for sharing knowledge, news and cultural traditions.