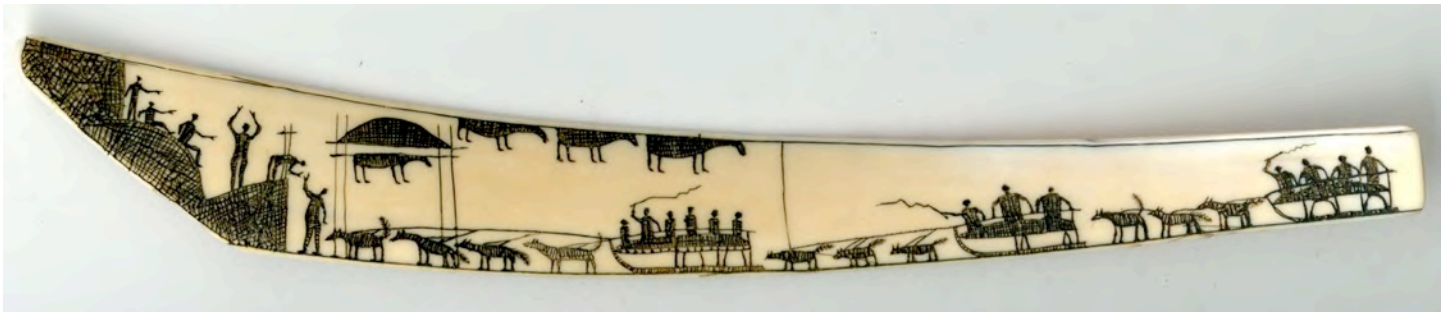
ENGRAVED IVORY STORY KNIFE



This ivory plaque with exceptionally fine engraving is most likely a story knife judging by its shape, although it lacks the carved “handle” usually found on ivory story knives, that also have rather minimal decoration. One side shows drummers at the right, dancers and the audience standing and sitting on the wood benches along the four sides of a Qasgi (Alaskan communal men’s house, usually square and constructed of logs and sod; see below). Especially notable is the inventive manner in which the figures on one side of the Qasgi are fitted into the limited space for the composition, with their heads at the bottom of the frame and their lower legs and feet wrapped around the back of the knife to appear at the top. The other side shows several dog sleds carrying people, a caribou skin on a drying rack, and five Eskimos standing on top of a Qasgi and sod houses. Probably late 19th century. 23.9 cm.

Story knives were used by young girls in southwestern Alaska to illustrate stories, usually on a smooth, moist mud surface, or sometimes on snow (Oswalt, 1964, and page 3). For ivory carving and engraving, the ivory was usually softened by soaking in urine (sometimes repeatedly), and the engraved portions were blackened using a mixture of gunpowder and blood (Nelson, 1899, p. 196).

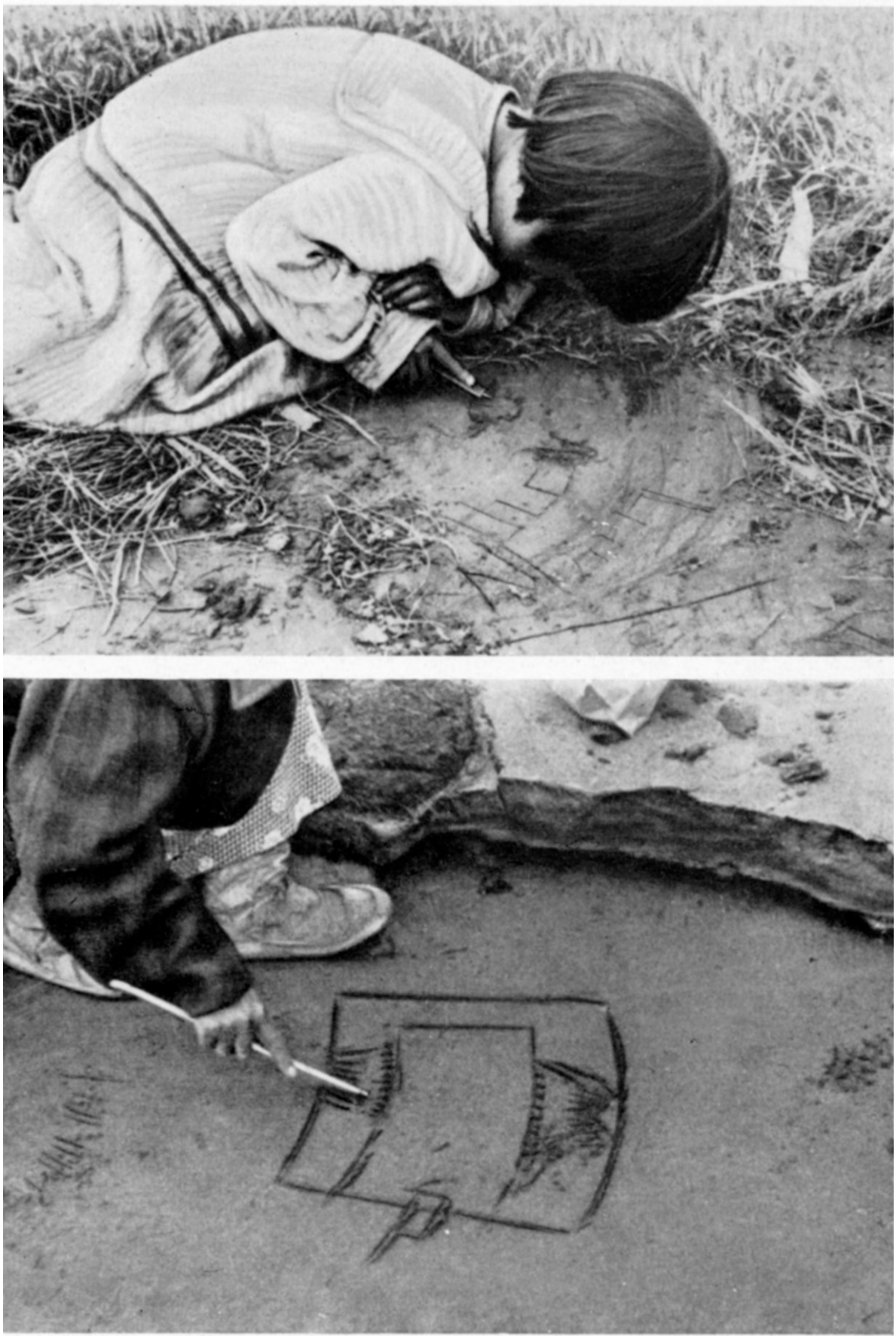
Literature:

Nelson, E.W. (1899): *The Eskimo About Bering Strait*, Annual Report, Bureau of American Ethnology, Washington, DC.

Oswalt, W.H. (1964): Traditional storyknife tales of Yuk girls, *Proc. Am. Philosophical Soc.*, 108:310-336.

Two men and a boy seated in a qasqi in the early 1900s. (Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, PA)

Model of a dancing scene in a qasgi (Sheldon Jackson Museum, II-H-46)



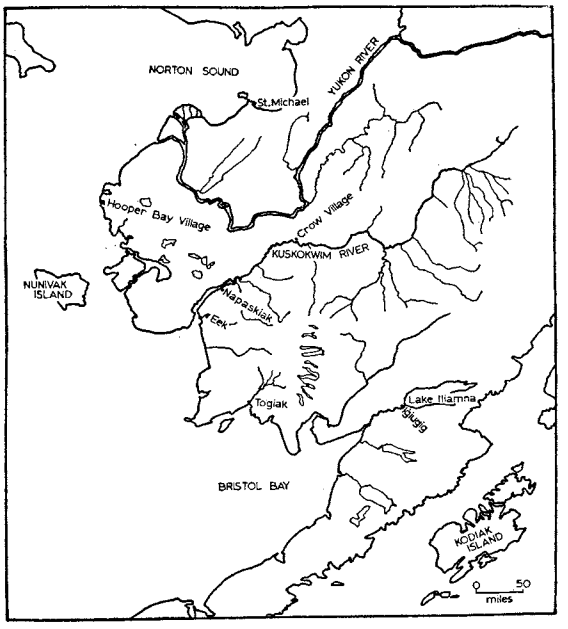
From Hans Himmelheber: *Eskimokünstler – Ergebnisse einer Reise in Alaska*, Erich Röth-Verlag, Eisenach, 1953

TRADITIONAL STORYKNIFE TALES OF YUK GIRLS

WENDELL H. OSWALT

Assistant Professor of Anthropology, University of California, Los Angeles

IT is not surprising that ethnographic descriptions involving children and collected from children are rare. This fact is significant because it is during childhood that many adult attitudes are instilled in the individual. The anthropological literature concerning children usually focuses on adult attitudes toward children or descriptions of observed childhood behavior. Seldom do we learn in detail the way a child in another society comes to understand the world in which he is growing up. The lacuna does not exist so much from a lack of topical concern with the subject by ethnographers as it does from the difficulty in working with children and obtaining systematic information from them. With a general interest in childhood behavior and with the hope of obtaining meaningful data about children from children, I began a year-long community study of the Eskimo (Yuk) settlement of Napaskiak, a village located along the lower Kuskokwim River in southwestern Alaska.



MAP 1. Southwestern Alaska.

The most significant reflection of the child's perspective proved to be storyknife tales. It was found that Eskimo girls at Napaskiak have a culturally and socially defined means of expressing a world view. They tell each other stories frequently and illustrate each story with "storyknife" drawings. I came to realize that these stories and their accompanying illustrations are a very vital childhood interest. The pervasive nature of the storyknife complex led to a systematic collection of the texts and drawings in an effort to understand better not only the form of the complex but also the meanings of the stories.

The activity of telling stories illustrated with a storyknife appears to be confined to the Eskimo girls living in littoral southwestern Alaska, with the exception of those on Nunivak Island. It is known also among Eskimo children living along the banks of the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers. The northern distributional limit is in the vicinity of the community of St. Michael (Martha Teeluk, oral statement), and the complex extends southward to and including the Bristol Bay settlements. The precise southern limits have not been established with certainty. It is reported in a modified form among the Eskimos at Igiugig at the western end of Lake Iliamna (Joan Townsend, oral statement); however, it is absent among the Eskimos of Kodiak Island (Fred Milan, oral statement). Thus, the storyknife complex seems to be limited distributionally to the core area of Eskimos belonging to the Yuk or Yuit linguistic family of the Eskimoan phylum.

The archaeological record for the Yuk area of today offers limited insight into the prehistoric distribution and the time depth of the storyknife. Five excavations have been carried out at sites of relatively recent age, in which we might expect to find the rather distinctive storyknives preserved. At Crow Village, an abandoned settlement along the north bank of the central sector of the Kuskokwim River, storyknives were recovered in the 1953, 1954 and 1963 excavations by the author. Tentatively this deposit has been con-

sidered to date from *ca.* A.D. 1800 to *ca.* 1900. The extensive Togiak midden, along the northern sector of Bristol Bay, was excavated in part by Markoto Kowta in 1960, but it did not contain storyknives (Kowta: MS.). Were these knives present in this site they most probably would have been recovered since the number of organic artifacts preserved was large. At the central Bering Sea coast site of Hooper Bay Village thirty-five identifiable storyknives were found in a midden deposit. The oldest one was recovered at the 72–78 inch level and has been placed in time as prior to A.D. 1690, by the application of tree ring dating techniques to wood from the deposit (Oswalt, 1952: 69–70, 80). In the archaeological survey for Nunivak Island by James VanStone (1957) storyknives were not recovered in spite of the fact that numerous recently abandoned midden and dwelling sites were examined and sampled. The only other excavated kitchen midden in which storyknives may be present is that of Nukleet at Cape Denbigh on Norton Sound, but most unfortunately these materials have not been analyzed with care. Summarily it seems that the storyknives themselves are limited to the western Eskimo area and only appear after about 1700.

Ethnographic accounts of the storyknife complex are surprisingly uncommon. E. W. Nelson (1899) in his ethnography of the Bering Strait area Eskimos mentioned that certain knives were employed to make illustrations, and these he termed "snow knives." Since this particular designation is well established in the current anthropological literature to refer to a distinctive type of knife for cutting snow blocks, it has been proposed that the term storyknife should be substituted when reference is to knives used in drawing (Oswalt, 1952: 70). It is appropriate to mention that in southwestern Alaska today the common English term for this implement is "storyknife." Nelson (1899: 345–346, pl. XCIV) describes and illustrates storyknives as being from four to fifteen inches in length, and made from ivory, bone, antler, or wood. All of the specimens illustrated by Nelson were from the area between the mouths of the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers, the same region in which storyknife stories are most often told today. Nelson (1899: 346) states that in the National Museum there are knives of this type from the southern limit of the Alaskan Eskimo area to near Point Barrow at the extreme northern tip of Alaska. Perhaps in this instance snow beaters, which are somewhat similar in form and from the more northerly area, were incorrectly identified as storyknives. In figure 1 are illustrated two ivory storyknives from the University of Alaska Museum ethnographic collections. In this collection there are no storyknives from outside the Yuk area of today.

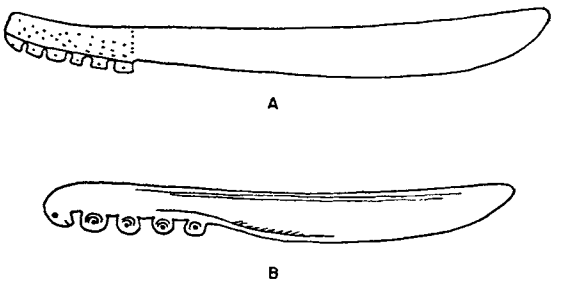


FIG. 1. Storyknives from the central Bering Sea coast of Alaska. A measures 12¾ inches in length, and B measures 11 inches in length.

The storyknife functioned mainly as a toy for children of both sexes according to Nelson (1899: 346), and he states: "The children play with them in winter, cutting up the hard, drifted snow, or marking thereon various fantastic figures representing mammals, birds, or other fancies." A few additional scattered references to the storyknife being used along the Kuskokwim River drainage have been located. The early Russian traveler L. A. Zagoskin (1847: 95) mentions women drawing on snow with implements made from tusks, while the Moravian Church official S. H. Gapp (1928: 47) and the Moravian missionary A. B. Schwalbe (1951: 69) comment on storyknife drawings and tales. A. Hrdlička (1943: fig. 172, lower) reproduced a photograph of girls making storyknife illustrations. M. Lantis (1946: 214–215, 223) states that the Nunivak Island Eskimo girls possessed a few storyknives although only one was seen in 1939. The Nunivak girls drew in the snow or sand a depiction of a villager's house or possessions and competed with one another in guessing which household was pictured. This game is unquestionably a specialized form of the storyknife tales of the adjacent mainland. The absence of the basic complex on Nunivak Island is supported by H. Himmelheber (1953: 47).

Himmelheber (1953: 44–47, 71–72), who visited the central sector of Alaska's Bering Sea coast in the 1930's, is the only ethnographer to have discussed previously the complex as it occurs on the Alaskan mainland. He noted that the girls

and women were intensive storytellers, and he outlined essentially the same pattern that is detailed in the following pages. Two significant variations are notable between Himmelheber's observations and those of the author. First, songs often were woven into the stories he heard but were absent from mine. Second, he observed girls stretched out on the ground telling stories, whereas I did not, although this trait is recorded in one of the stories to follow. Casual conversations with Eskimos from the central Bering Sea coast of Alaska and adjacent inland sectors, as well as Himmelheber's comments, clearly establish that there are many local variations in the texts of the stories, the ways in which they are told, and the styles of illustration, but no systematic comparative information is available.

The storyknife tales presented and analyzed in the present study were collected from girls or young women at Napaskiak [1] during the years 1956 and 1960. Virtually all references to the complex pertain to Napaskiak; the only stories from another area are those learned by a Napaskiak woman from an old woman who lived in the village of Eek at the Kuskokwim River mouth. The Napaskiak storyknife tales are related habitually by females. The principal storytellers are young girls ranging in age from about five to sixteen. Children younger than five may pretend to tell stories, but usually they cannot relate one in its entirety. Females over sixteen years of age seldom continue storytelling. Occasionally, however, an individual, such as Ella Steven, who was twenty years old in 1956, has an inordinate interest in the stories and can recall a great number of them. Other adult women occasionally tell storyknife stories to their daughters, while an old woman will tell her granddaughters stories sporadically. Most commonly an older sister, cousin, or girl friend relates stories to a younger girl, so that at present the tradition is being passed from one young female to another. Males virtually never tell storyknife stories. In 1956 a fourteen-year-old boy was considered by the girls to be a capable storyteller. He told humorous stories, seemingly of his own invention, and did so as an actor rather than as an ordinary participant. Four years later this same individual did not tell these stories nor was he interested in hearing stories. He was reluctant even to admit that he had ever told storyknife tales. None of the adult men ever tell the stories. The individuals asked about the complex were quite unaware of its form, nor were they interested in discussing the subject.

The stories consistently are told with accompanying illustrations executed with an old style storyknife, a modern, metal table knife, or stick. Currently (1960) fewer and fewer storyknives of the traditional form are used. Persons who own old or elaborately decorated ivory or antler storyknives keep them as heirlooms. Many girls own and use wooden storyknives that a male, most often a father or grandfather, has made for them. However, they seem to prefer a metal table knife for their illustrations. One of the frequent complaints in households which include young girls is the difficulty of keeping enough table knives for daily household use, because the girls lose so many. Whenever two or three young girls, particularly those between five and ten years of age, play together, one is almost certain to have a table knife for drawing story pictures.

The stories are illustrated on a smooth, moist, mud surface. In the summer, when most stories are told out-of-doors, the girls squat above the ground and prepare the dirt for story telling. Illustrating areas may be found in almost any sector of the village since the soil is a fine alluvium and ground cover is scattered. The bare earth is leveled and roughly smoothed into a drawing area some fifteen inches square. If the ground is dry, water is brought to the spot, trickled on the roughly prepared surface, and worked into mud with the blade of the storyknife. As a story is being illustrated, the mud will begin to dry, and the storyteller usually will spit on these spots and work the saliva into the soil. For stories told indoors during either the summer or winter, a board covered with a half-inch layer of mud is kept in the house. Stories also may be illustrated in the snow during the winter.

As an aid in interpreting the drawings that follow it may be helpful to explain the style of illustration and to figure, out of context, the more common forms that appear. When a girl is satisfied with the consistency of the mud, she begins to illustrate the initial setting, which is most often a household. The girls recognize three primary house forms, and the type drawn is a partial key to the temporal setting for the story. If the story is set during aboriginal times, a "mud"

[1] The Napaskiak field studies were supported by the Arctic Aeromedical Laboratory of the United States Air Force in 1955–1956 and by the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1960.