Towards an Indigenous Theology of Worship in Alaska: A Study of Recent Efforts to Self-contextualize the Art of Yupik Eskimo Dancing

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Presented September 16, 2017
Evangelical Missiological Society
Dallas, TX

I. Introduction

This study will explore the issue of the *yuraq*, or “Eskimo Dance,” in the Yupik Eskimo church, and specifically two recent efforts made by Yupik believers to self-contextualize this historically important cultural form as an indigenous expression of worship. Early missionaries forbade the *yuraq* due to associations with shamanism, with very real ties to demonization. Today, as indigenous church leaders continue to emerge, there has been an effort to apply missiological principles of contextualization in their own communities, resulting in a strong argument for a Christian form of *yuraq* as an act of worship.

This is a descriptive (as opposed to prescriptive) study that will evaluate the work of two recent Yupik seminary graduates in light of Paul Hiebert’s four steps of critical contextualization.¹ In other words, my purpose is not to tell the Yupik church how to

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worship, but rather to describe current trends in Yupik theology in light of an established and accepted missiological paradigm.

The study will begin with a historical overview of the topic of the *yuraq* from both anthropological and missiological perspectives. Consideration will also be given to the question of contextualization in general within northern indigenous contexts. Once these foundations are established, attention will turn to the work of two specific individuals, Cynthia Pete of Stebbins and Dale Smith of Mekoryuk, who have argued specifically for acceptance of a contextualized form of *yuraq* within their churches. To conclude, suggestions for “next steps” or further consideration will be offered, not in a paternalistic sense, but rather in recognition that contextualization must be practiced relationally as part of a global hermeneutical community that can provide important checks against bias and syncretism.2

II. Historical Overview

A. Anthropological Accounts of Yupik Dancing

Drum dancing is common to Inuit people groups across the North American Arctic. In Alaska, this includes the Yupik and Inupiaq peoples. Though regional variations abound, the same general form is recognizable throughout Alaska: a line of male drummers at the back of the stage provides the beat for the dance. Each holds a frame drum in one hand, beating it with a mallet held in the other. The drummers also sing the accompanying lyrics. In front of the drummers and singers stands a row of female dancers, who sway their

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2 Hiebert 1994, 91.
bodies and follow a series of elaborate hand and arm gestures to "act out" the lyrics that are being sung. There is generally very little motion of the legs or feet involved. Male dancers, if they are present, usually kneel in front of the female dancers and act out the same motions, often in a more exaggerated fashion, with their hands and arms. Anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan describes the technical features of the music and dance in detail:

Each song consists of two parts: a verse sung in 2/4 time to the increasingly rapid drum beat, and a chorus which is accompanied by an irregular drum beat. Both chorus and verse elicit highly stylized dancing gestures, but whereas the verse gestures tend to be more abstract and are danced along a formal AABACA repeating pattern, those of the chorus are often realistic imitations of animal and human behavior, and follow no set pattern. Each verse is danced through twice between choruses.3

The subject matter of the dances focuses on daily life in the Alaskan village. Many describe subsistence activities such as hunting or berry picking, as dancers pantomime the actions of the hunters, the animals, or the berry pickers. More recently-composed dances can describe aspects of modern technology.4 Cynthia Pete, a Yupik dancer from the village of Stebbins, describes it as “telling stories with your hands.”5 The dances are composed by members the older generation and “given” to a specific younger individual, often to signal a

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4 Fienup-Riordan 1983, 317.

coming-of-age. Popular dances are repeated and incorporated into the community's repertoire, thus contributing to the oral history of the community.

In addition to informal recreation throughout the year, dancing was featured in many different festivals and ceremonies that would vary from village to village. Despite this regional variation, anthropological accounts agree on two major feasts that were common throughout the Yupik region: the spring Messenger Feast (or *Kevgiq*), and the winter Bladder Feast (or *Nakaciuq*). An understanding of these two basic ceremonies is important to the question of contextualization.

1. **The Messenger Feast (*Kevgiq*)**

Throughout Yupik territory, the Messenger Feast was held annually during the spring. Steve Langdon describes the basic cultural form:

two villages of closely-related people took turns in hosting a large celebration of feasting, dancing, and gift distribution. The name came from the practice of sending a formal messenger to a village to present the invitation and indicate what special products the invitees should bring.7

Marie Meade, a Yupik elder from the village of Nunapitchuk, describes the basic cultural function of the dance, calling it “a spring festival for sharing and bringing communities together.”8 She elaborates further on the meaning that it carried for the villagers:

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6 Fienup-Riordan 1983, 317.
People worked hard throughout the year, gathering plants, furs, and harvesting food, and Kevgiq was a time to distribute some of what they had earned to others. Parents were especially proud if one of their children had contributed to the family’s effort for the first time—a son who brought home his first game or a daughter who picked her first berries or caught a pike through the ice. Those events were recognized as rites of passage that meant the child was beginning a lifetime of providing for kin and community. By giving away food, skins, tools, and other goods at Kevgiq, a family ensured the future success of its children and the prosperity of the whole group; the principle is that if you give, you will get back.\textsuperscript{9}

The Messenger Feast, then, can be understood as having a primarily social function that brought neighboring communities together to share their resources. It provided an important forum in which the next generation’s coming of age was recognized, family ties were strengthened, and social norms were enforced.

2. **The Bladder Feast (Nakaciuq)**

The Bladder Feast, or *Nakaciuq*, was the dominant wintertime ceremony held by the Yupik. It, too, revolved around dancing. Meade describes the form that this feast took:

Shamans made carvings or masks representing animals—walrus, caribou, seals, and others. When the masks were danced in the *qasgiq* (men’s community house), it was a petition for those animals to return in the spring. During Nakaciuryaraq, the Bladder Festival, the bladders of seals that had been taken by hunters during the

\textsuperscript{9}Ibid., 116-117.
year were returned to the sea through a hole in the ice, allowing those seals to be reborn into new bodies.\textsuperscript{10}

Essentially, the feast focused on the seasonal subsistence cycle, as people celebrated the current year’s seal harvest and looked ahead to the next. In Steve Langdon’s analysis, the feast “demonstrated their respect for the seal and sought to insure that seal populations would be abundant.”\textsuperscript{11}

Meade, however, emphasizes that the festival went beyond a mere demonstration of respect: “The winter celebrations honored the yuit, or inner persons, of the animals, and the dances were a kind of prayer that asked for these spirits to give their physical bodies to meet the needs of the community.”\textsuperscript{12} The Bladder Feast had significant animistic components, and the shaman’s role was central. In addition to creating the masks, he was responsible “to leave the festival and travel to the home of the seals to see if they had been satisfied with the human efforts.”\textsuperscript{13}

The shaman’s journeys were much more than a simple hike down to the bay to check on the local seal population. Fueled by the spiritual power behind by the masks, the shaman would enter a spiritual realm beyond the physical world.\textsuperscript{14} Fred Savok recounts one such “journey” as relayed to him through the oral traditions of his father John Savok, who was born in 1881:

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\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 117.
\textsuperscript{11} Langdon, 60.
\textsuperscript{12} Meade, 117.
\textsuperscript{13} Langdon, 61.
\textsuperscript{14} Emily Johnson, “Yup’ik Dance: Old and New,” The Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement, vol. 9, no. 3, 131-149, 140.
\end{flushright}
In the darkness, the Shaman sang softly a special song made for the purpose. In the darkness, song and dance seemed to turn the demon power on, and completely took over the action of a man in the center of the room. While dancing, the person seemed to sprout wings. The listeners would hear flapping sound. Soon the dancer would begin to rise from the floor. Up, the noise went, right through the ceiling of the *qasgi*. The listeners follow the singing, looking up in the dark, as it went higher, higher, and higher until they could not hear the singing any longer. One of them, their friend, had taken off on a trip to the sky somewhere.\(^{15}\)

It is clear through accounts like this that the supernatural power and the animistic significance of the Bladder Feast dances must be acknowledged and taken seriously.

3. The Worldview of the Dance

So the Messenger Feast served a primarily social function, carrying meanings that emphasized the interdependence of arctic communities and individuals for survival. The Bladder Feast’s function was to ensure a successful subsistence year, and the dominant meaning conveyed was that the spirits of the seals must be appeased, allowing them to return for the next hunt. Observing the strong dissimilarities in function between the two events, Western anthropologists have tended to make a secular/sacred distinction between them. Langdon, for example, labels the Messenger Feast as a “social celebration,” and the Bladder Feast as a “religious ceremony.”\(^{16}\)

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\(^{16}\) Langdon, 58.
Cultural insiders, however, can be more hesitant to push such a clear distinction. Harold Napolean suggests that this Western dichotomy between “sacred” and “secular” was unknown to the ancient Yupik. Every act of life was carried out on a spiritual plane of existence, and was understood to have spiritual as well as “natural” ramifications:

To the Yup’ik, the land, the rivers, the heavens, the seas, and all that dwelled within them were spirit, and therefore sacred. They were born not only to the physical world of the Bering Sea, the Yukon, and the Kuskokwim rivers, but into a spirit world as well. Their arts, tools, weapons, kayaks and umiaks, songs and dances, customs and traditions, thoughts and actions—all bore the imprint of the spirit world and the spirit beings.\(^\text{17}\)

The point being that, though the Bladder Feast certainly bore more external forms that were directly connected to the spiritual realm, the dances of the Messenger Feast, too, were seen as spiritual acts with spiritual ramifications. As Landgon himself points out, “Through the drum, the heartbeat of ellam yua [the Creator or ‘Great Spirit’] was felt and it joined the heartbeats of all participants in the ceremonies through song and dance.”\(^\text{18}\) All dances were spiritual activities as well as social.

**B. Missiological Perspectives on Yupik Dancing**

Though Russia claimed the entire Yupik territory as part of its empire, the bulk of its economic, political, and religious influence was exerted in the resource-rich coastal territory to the south. This changed with the United States’ purchase of Alaska in 1867. As

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\(^{18}\) Langdon, 59.
the new colonizers sought to bring the region under their control, missionaries were mobilized not only to evangelize, but also to “civilize” the inhabitants of the new territory.\textsuperscript{19} Facilitated by the efforts of Sheldon Jackson, the region was divided between the major denominations under an informal “comity plan” to prevent overlap or conflict.\textsuperscript{20} A brief consideration of these missionaries’ response to the practice of dancing is necessary in order to understand the present-day climate in which contemporary Native leaders operate.

1. **Roman Catholic**

   The Roman Catholic Church took responsibility for the villages along the lower Yukon River and its delta, and this region became the site of a significant Jesuit outreach. The writings of Bellarmine Lafourtune, who served from 1903-1947, and Francis M. Ménager, who served from 1927-1953, provide insight into their interactions with the dance ceremonies.

   Similar to contemporary anthropologists such as Langdon, the Jesuits observed a distinction in the function and meaning of various ceremonies. Lafourtune reported, “When their dances were not mixed up with superstition, they were very innocent.”\textsuperscript{21} Ménager described in detail what was meant by “superstition:"

   I found the Eskimos buried in superstition and devil worship. Many of them, under the leadership of the medicine men, were truly devoted to the devil. Their idea

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seemed to be the following: it is true that the Great Spirit made us, and everything, but God is far away in his heaven, and the devils are all around us. If we want to get along we must propitiate the devil, offer him gifts, carefully observing different taboos, and stage some dances in his honor.\(^\text{22}\)

Though he did not name the ceremony, it is clear that he had in mind activities such as the Bladder Feast, in which the shaman was heavily involved in the process of accommodating the spirits of the seals, which Ménager understood to be “devils.”

On the other hand, Ménager also described what were understood to be the “innocent” dances:

The innocent dances were mostly what was called “chickeutem yorchiyarak,” or gift dances. These were simply dances performed when people from the different villages would meet, exchange gifts, have plenty to eat, and enact a variety of pantomimes with special songs, which they composed.\(^\text{23}\)

These “gift dances” that Ménager described fit the description of what anthropologists later labeled the “Messenger Feast.” The lack of masks or shamanic involvement and the external focus on social interaction made these dances acceptable to the Roman Catholics.

Continuing in the strong Jesuit tradition of cultural engagement that dates back to the ministries of Matteo Ricci and Francis Xavier, the Catholic missionaries did not ban dancing entirely. Ménager summarizes the reasoning:

Realizing that dances can be expressive of goodwill and that these natives must have some recreation during the long winters, the Catholic missionaries, although


\(^{23}\) Ibid., 28.
forbidding their converts to participate in any and all superstitious and devilish practices, approved of the gift dances. Often the missionaries would be present during the gift dances.\(^{24}\)

Essentially, the Roman Catholic response was to forbid dancing that directly involved the shaman or spirit worship (such as the Bladder Feast), but to encourage and even participate in the “social” dances (such as the Messenger Feast).

2. Protestant

The major Protestant denominations serving in the Yupik region were the Moravians, who took responsibility for the Kuskokwim River delta, and the Evangelical Covenant Church, who worked on the coast of Norton Sound and Nunivak Island. The Protestant groups responded to dancing quite differently than the Roman Catholics. They did not dichotomize between the “sacred” and “secular,” and taught that dancing of all forms must be given up upon conversion to Christianity. When Jacob Kenick came to Nunivak Island as an early missionary with the Evangelical Covenant Church in 1936, “His first decrees were the prohibition of mask making, dancing, singing, and ceremonies.”\(^{25}\)

Interviews with Native elders from the region reveal that there was no attempt to distinguish between “spiritual” and “social” dancing:

They were told that dancing was sin and they couldn't do it anymore...You have to have joy, something to be joyful about and work together to have fun. All the dances were made for that. Just for that to gather and help each other. This was something

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 28-29.

to look forward to do in the wintertime. The missionary didn’t realize that dancing was a meaning for survival.  

The written reports of John Kilbuck, pioneer Moravian missionary who served in the Kuskokwim delta region, reveal a similar perspective: “they will often take up their drums, and sing their heathen songs, while someone performs one of their heathen dances.” Speaking of the entire annual ceremonial cycle, Kilbuck observed, “These Festivals are [all] semi religious, being celebrated to propitiate the spirits.” He made no distinction between sacred and secular, perceiving religious undertones throughout the cycle.

3. Current State of Yupik Dancing

As a result of these various missionary approaches, dancing no longer exists in its pre-colonial form. In the many Yupik villages evangelized by the Protestants, dancing was eliminated altogether. Evangelical Covenant historian Arden Almquist writes, “The [annual church] conference had by [1930] come to replace the annual pagan feasts and dances, filling the Eskimos’ need to congregate and visit and feast.” In the Roman Catholic villages of the Yukon Delta, dancing has continued in a modified form. Festivals with heavily “spiritual” components are no longer observed. These “masked” dances live on only in the oral tradition, as elders today remember back on the “old ways.”

26 Ibid., 64.
28 Ibid., 23.
31 Ibid., 307.
32 Meade, 117.
Messenger Feast, however, continues to be celebrated as before. Meade reflects, “The dancing and gift giving represent the same values as in the past, even if some of the items are store-bought goods from Wal-Mart. It is about giving generously to others and celebrating the success of the subsistence harvest.”

In recent years, efforts have been made to restore the tradition to Protestant communities throughout the Yupik region. The Cama’i Dance Festival, held annually in Bethel since 1984, has become a major regional forum for cultural preservation and celebration. Harold Napolean has suggested that this revival is an important part of recovery from the cycle of depression, alcoholism, and domestic violence that afflicts today’s Native communities, which he suggests is a direct result of the population collapse and cultural repression that followed the arrival of the Westerners. Indeed, many of today’s Native youth find that by connecting them with their nearly-forgotten past, dancing provides a source of cultural identity and pride. It is this contemporary resurgence that has prompted the Native leaders of today to revisit the question of dancing in the church from their own insider perspectives.

C. Evangelical Approaches to Contextualization in Alaska

The publication of Charles Kraft’s Christianity in Culture in 1979 initiated a shift in Protestant perspectives on contextualization in Alaska. Readings from this volume were, for a time, incorporated into the “Missionary Development Program,” a joint venture that

33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Napolean, 30.
36 Meade, 117; Johnson 148.
provided missionary training for all of the major Evangelical mission organizations operating in Alaska. To date, Gary Ridley has provided the primary evangelical missiological voice on the topic of contextualization in Alaska. As president of Alaska Bible College, Ridley evaluated Kraft’s pioneering approach in his 1990 dissertation. Ridley ultimately concluded that Kraft’s argument for “dynamic equivalent” contextualization based on receptor-oriented communication and the concept of an ongoing revelatory process that continues into the present day fell short of the high view of inspiration that is shared by the Evangelical mission agencies operating in Alaska.37 In his current role with SEND International, Ridley has promoted Paul Hiebert’s four-step process of “critical contextualization” as the preferred model for contextualization among northern indigenous peoples.38 The present study accepts the groundwork that Ridley has already laid for the Alaskan field, and will evaluate the self-contextualization efforts within the Yupik church in light of Paul Hiebert’s four steps.

III. The Contextualization Process

The focus now turns to two contemporary efforts within the Yupik church to self-contextualize the yuraq. The proponents of these efforts are Cynthia Pete, a 2016 B.A. graduate from Alaska Bible College, and Dale Smith, a 2011 M.A. graduate from North Park Theological Seminary. The role of these institutions in the spiritual and theological formation of these individuals should be noted. Both represent traditional institutions of


theological education, founded by major missionary groups still operating in Alaska today. Alaska Bible College represents the nondenominational approach, founded by what is today SEND International, which continues to operate in Alaska as one of its largest fields. North Park Theological Seminary, located in Chicago, serves the Evangelical Covenant Church throughout North America, and is therefore the seminary of choice for many Alaskans from that denomination. Through their training at these respective schools, Pete and Smith were exposed to contemporary developments in missiological thought, and were challenged to apply these principles in their own communities.

A. Exegesis of the Culture

Paul Hiebert labels the first step of his “critical contextualization” framework as the “Exegesis of the Culture.” This involves “uncritically gathering and analyzing the traditional beliefs and customs associated with some question at hand...The purpose here is to understand the old ways, not to judge them.”

The fact that both Pete and Smith are cultural insiders is quite beneficial to this step. Hiebert emphasizes that when outside missionaries attempt to “exegete” traditional practices, there is the risk that “the people will not talk about them for fear of being condemned.” As insiders, these individuals are able to discuss the true meaning and importance of dancing with others in their communities without fear of rejection or dishonesty.

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39 Hiebert, 88-89.
40 Ibid., 89.
1. **Cynthia Pete**

Cynthia Pete grew up in the village of Stebbins, which was one of those originally evangelized by the Roman Catholic Church. Though she herself is a member of the Assemblies of God, which came to her village later, dancing was a regular part of her life from an early age. The distinction that the early Catholic missionaries made between “superstitious” and “innocent” dancing is evidenced in Cynthia’s own exegesis of her culture. She certainly acknowledges the shamanic rituals of the past, quoting her father’s oral recollection of this history. But she responds, “This was not always the case, though. The Native peoples of the village used the dancing as a way of entertainment, a simple way to tell the stories of old and present.”

As a product of contemporary Yupik culture, Cynthia does not concern herself with the shamanistic rituals of the past. The dancing that she describes from her own experience is a clear example of the Messenger Feast:

The village would spend all year composing and practicing songs. Once the celebration was ready to be presented, the Chief of the dance group would call to the neighboring village telling them to prepare to come and join. ... Everyone looked forward to this time of the year because it brought together families from near and far. Laughter and fun filled the atmosphere and people caught up with each other. Homes are filled with people from visiting villages and the population nearly doubled.\(^1\)

\(^{41}\) Pete, 1

\(^{42}\) Ibid, 7.
Reflecting on the significance of the dance to her people, Cynthia identifies four major functions that the form serves. First, dancing is a form of entertainment: “In the early days people had no TVs, radios, or any kind of entertainment. Their entertainment was dancing.”43 Second, dancing serves a social purpose in connecting distant relatives and neighboring villages: “It is what brings people together to celebrate life, stories, joy and laughter. Neighboring villages come to join in on this beautiful celebration.”44 Third, it provides a forum to recognize a “coming of age” as youth are inducted into the art of dancing. She reflects on her own introduction to dancing:

The song that was made for me was all about fireworks. My great uncle, Anatole Bogeyaktuk saw me as one of those, a little girl who was always blabbering, happy and full of light. So, he made me a song about fireworks. I can remember him coming to my house every other day to sing the song to me so that I can get to know the words.45

Finally, Cynthia understands her village’s dances as a means of cultural preservation and transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next. She writes, “Dancing is an expression, an expression of life stories told from the passed [sic] and present. Songs from old that are passed to today, telling us the stories of our ancestors.”46

So for Cynthia Pete, dancing today provides entertainment, creates social connections, recognizes rites of passage, and transmits oral tradition in very much the

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43 Ibid, 6.
44 Ibid, 3.
46 Ibid, 9.
same way as the Messenger Feasts of 100 years ago. Notably, any religious or spiritual connotation is completely absent from her perception of modern-day dancing.

2. Dale Smith

Dale Smith writes from a completely different perspective, having been raised in the Protestant tradition of the Evangelical Covenant Church. He writes, “My upbringing in Mekoryuk proved to me that the ‘old traditional ways’ had ceased to exist. I didn’t see any...dancing.”

He describes how his exposure to dancing came much later in life, when something similar to the Messenger Feast was reintroduced to Mekoryuk:

The first revival of the traditional dance in 2000 was headed by two cultural preservationists. They organized volunteers to practice traditional dancing, primarily by watching a video recording of a deceased Cup'ig [a Yupik dialect] elder who sang and performed several dances. From this recording, the dance group practiced and was able to perform at the first dance festival; several villages from the surrounding attended and participated.

Faced with the question of dancing as such a brand new development, Smith and his community do not share the same 100 years of cultural conditioning that allowed Cynthia Pete to disassociate this dance from its original ties to the animistic worldview. Therefore, as he grapples with the tension between his identity as a member of the Evangelical Covenant Church and his cultural heritage of dancing, he emphasizes the religious nature of the dance:

\[47\] Smith, 67.

\[48\] Ibid., 69-70.
Worship entailed traditional dancing, primarily for giving thanks to the creator for food provisions throughout the year. It is said through oral Cup’ig tradition that they acknowledged a higher being called Ellam Cua, the creator and provider of sea mammals, fish, and birds for daily sustenance...Ellam Cua, translated as the “universe being” or “spirit of the world,” was the greatest being known to the Cupig people, the protector and controller of the entire universe. Dance festivals were held during the winter season to give thanks for spring, summer, and fall provisions from Ellam Cua.49

Smith acknowledges that dancing does serve “entertainment and cultural purposes.”50 However, for him, even the simple Messenger Feast carries a much deeper spiritual significance of thanksgiving and praise to the Creator.

**B. Exegesis of Scripture**

The second step in Hiebert’s model is the “Exegesis of Scripture,” or “Hermeneutical Bridge.” In this step, “the pastor or missionary leads the church in a study of the Scriptures related to the question at hand.”51 Though Hiebert indicates this is the task of the pastor or missionary, Gary Ridley suggests that it may be more appropriate, where possible, for indigenous leaders to be trained in Bible study methods so that they can undertake this step on their own.52 Again, here we see the value of theological education as it relates to the question of self-contextualization. As indigenous believers who have been trained in

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49 Smith, 65.
50 Ibid., 70.
51 Hiebert, 89.
52 Ridley 2016, 8.
hermeneutics, Cynthia Pete and Dale Smith are qualified to exegete Scripture for their own people.

1. Cynthia Pete

On one level, Pete and Smith offer very similar approaches to Scripture. Both perform what appears to be a basic topical study on the word “dancing” in Scripture, looking for any indication whether the basic idea ought to be viewed in a positive or negative light. In doing so, Cynthia Pete finds plenty of support for the idea that dancing in and of itself is not only permissible, but encouraged in Scripture. To this end, she cites Ecclesiastes 3:4 (“a time to mourn and a time to dance”), 2 Samuel 6:14 (“David danced before the Lord”), Psalm 30:11 (“my mourning into dancing”), Psalm 149 (“praise his name with dancing”), and Psalm 150 (“Praise Him with tambourine and dance”).

The discerning reader will note that these texts alone do not adequately address the question at hand. Pete offers no comparisons between Yupik and Hebrew dancing, assuming that they are basically the same in function, if not in form. In his guidelines for applying Hiebert’s model, Gary Ridley warns against this tendency to look for “proof texts,” and encourages exegetes to look “more broadly for how the issue fits what the Bible claims about the nature of God, man, sin, salvation, etc.”

Thankfully, Pete does not leave us with proof texts alone. Beyond the verses that specifically mention dancing, she points to Scriptural teaching on the basic doxological purpose of human existence:

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53 Pete, 11.
54 Ridley 2016, 9.
God created His people to represent a part of Him. In the book of Genesis, He says that we are created in His image. Looking at the world, we see that we have a very artistic Creator. He created the mountains, the valleys, waters, skies, stars, planets, sea and land animals... When He created us, He gifted us with talents, and these talents are what make us unique. These talents include constructing, singing, the ability to make and create music, the ability to make things useful to our everyday needs, and dancing.\[55\]

The human creativity that dancing reflects, Pete argues, is a basic aspect of the image of God in humans, and this ought to be celebrated as a means of glorifying Him:

Worship is a lifestyle that we live to glorify God in every moment of our lives. Romans 12:1 says, “And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice – the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him.”

Every aspect of our being should be to glorify the One who created us, whether it be in prayer, service, or movement of the body.\[56\]

In the end, it is Pete’s biblical theology of Christian worship that provides her most relevant Scriptural insight to the question of Yupik dancing. All human creativity, including dancing, must be seen by believers as an opportunity to worship God.

2. Dale Smith

Like Pete, Smith offers several proof texts related to the general idea of dancing, including 2 Samuel 6:14 and Psalm 150. He concludes, “I have searched the Bible and could

\[55\] Pete, 2-3.

\[56\] Ibid., 11.
not find any scriptural references that dancing is wrong." However, Smith, too, seems to realize that this in and of itself does not answer the question.

Since Smith understands dancing to be a spiritual activity, and not just a neutral form that can be used for good or for evil, he focuses on the object of worship rather than the form itself. He finds answers in the biblical teaching on general revelation. Examining Paul’s discussion of the “unknown god” in Acts 17, Smith argues that Ellam Cua, the supreme Creator being that was recognized and worshipped by the ancient Cup’ig through their dancing, is the same Creator God that they now know and understand more fully through the Scriptures. He points to Romans 1:18-20 as further evidence for this position.

C. Critical Response

Hiebert’s third step is the “Critical Response.” In this step, the indigenous believers “critically evaluate their own past customs in the light of their new biblical understandings and...make decisions regarding their response to their new-found truths.” Hiebert suggests six different responses that believers can take as they encounter Scriptural truth. Of these six, three can be seen in the responses offered by Pete and Smith: keeping practices that do not conflict with biblical teaching, rejecting those that do, and modifying some by giving them Christian meanings.

57 Smith, 70.
58 Ibid., 68.
59 Ibid, 69.
60 Hiebert, 89.
61 Ibid.
1. **Cynthia Pete**

In reading Cynthia Pete’s attempts to respond critically to the question of dancing in light of Scriptural truth, one gets the sense that she is sincerely wrestling with the issues. As an insider, she is treading on thin ice—she does not want to betray her culture, but she also wants to be faithful to the Word of God. Looking into her history, she struggles with the complex legacy the missionaries left behind:

The missionaries saw it [dancing] as evil and inviting to the evil spirits. Which was true to some extent, but the value behind it was something that was precious to the people. It was known to bring people together and reunite the community. She quotes her father, Francis, as sharing this struggle. He is quick to distance himself from the practices of the shamans, which he calls “idol worship,” but of dancing he says, “I don’t remember any of it being evil, all I remember is it being fun and being a part of something that everyone can participate in with joy and smiles on their faces.” Of course, according to the model of critical contextualization, social value alone is not enough to legitimize a practice if it conflicts with a biblical worldview. Struggling with this tension between shamanistic ties and social benefit to the community, Cynthia concludes, “The missionaries were part right when they saw it is as evil because some of the practices were to call on the animal spirits, which was shamanistic.”

For Pete and her father both, the contemporary forms of dancing that have endured to this day are to be accepted and celebrated wholeheartedly, because in their eyes the

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62 Pete, 8.
63 Ibid., 4.
64 Ibid., 8.
“evil” forms of dancing were eliminated with the shamans long ago. She concludes that in and of itself, dancing is a neutral form that can and should be used to glorify God: "How we choose to use these gifts that He has bestowed upon us is up to us. Some have been used for bad, some have been used for good. The ultimate goal is to glorify Him.”

2. Dale Smith

As Dale Smith argues from Scripture that his people were genuinely seeking after and worshipping God through their dances for Ellam Cua, he comes very close to placing his cultural heritage on the same plane as biblical revelation when he states, "I believe God’s word was already at work orally with the Cup’ig" (that is, prior to the missionaries’ arrival). Some might see here an error that Gary Ridley warns against in his application of Hiebert’s paradigm to northern indigenous cultures: “Distant Time Stories may reflect interpretations from general revelation but cannot be categorized as special revelation.”

However, we must note that Smith is careful to avoid the implication that this ancient knowledge was complete or perfect. He admits, “they did not know Ellam Cua is God until the missionary explained the connection...[and] the Cup’ig people were not aware of accepting Christ as their Savior until the gospel’s arrival.” Based on Acts 17 and Romans 1, Smith argues that the Cup’ig people were attempting to respond through dance to the limited amount of general revelation they had, which is consistent with Ridley’s guidelines.

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65 Ibid., 12.
66 Smith, 68.
67 Ridley 2016, 3.
68 Smith, 68.
“When the gospel arrived,” Smith emphasizes, “it was time to change the ways through Jesus Christ.”69 In light of the special revelation from Scripture, he argues that aspects of dancing must be changed: “Although I did not see my ancestors dance in their traditional style, I have a good understanding that many dances were created to show respect and reverence to Ellam Cua...I have also heard of shamanistic dances, and I believe they were demonic.”70 Like Pete, Smith recognizes that the demonic dances must discontinued in light of his people’s acceptance of Scripture. However, he takes issue with the Evangelical Covenant Church’s outright ban on dancing.71

Here we can observe one important distinction between Smith’s critical response and Pete’s. Both agree on the explicit rejection of shamanistic dances. However, where Pete argues for keeping the “social” dances as a spiritually-neutral benefit to the community, Smith argues for what is Hiebert’s third option: giving Christian meaning to the old practices. Dancing should not continue unmodified, but should be reinterpreted by the Cup’ig as “a way to give thanks to God.”72

D. New Contextualized Practice

The fourth and final step of critical contextualization is to “arrange the practices they have chosen into a new ritual that expresses the Christian meaning of the event.”73 As opposed to step three, which focused on the use of the form in the general culture, this final

69 Ibid., 69.
70 Ibid., 71.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid., 70.
73 Hiebert, 90.
step is focused on “baptizing” the form into the church. The final product here “will be Christian, for it explicitly seeks to express biblical teaching. It will also be contextual, for the church has created it, using forms the people understand within their own culture.”

Both Pete and Smith conclude with a vision for how their own local congregations can engage the yuraq for the Kingdom of God.

1. **Cynthia Pete**

Pete argues that the community dance festivals currently observed in her village of Stebbins are beneficial and should be allowed to continue. However, she does not stop here. Rather, she offers a vision for how her church can use the yuraq as a way to indigenize the Christian faith. She begins by observing the cultural gulf that many of her people perceive between their identity as Yupik and the message of the gospel: “How do we tell others that God is just not for white people? Some Natives in the community blame God for the actions that were brought upon them.”

She suggests that the yuraq could offer a solution to this problem: “How do we teach the people to use this dance to glorify God?”

Exploring this question, Cynthia asked one of her fellow dancers, Mariann Mike, “How do we glorify God by yuraqing?” Mariann’s idea, incorporated by Cynthia into her model, is ingeniously simple yet profound: “What I’ve done in the past was I took one of the Psalms, translated it into Yupik and created a tune. After I did that, I sang the song with the motions of my hands.”

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74 Ibid., 90-91.
75 Pete, 10.
76 Ibid., 11.
77 Ibid., 12.
2. Dale Smith

Dale Smith, too, shares his vision for how his church could engage the dance: "Traditional dancing could be used as a ministry within the village, since a majority of the activities are within the church setting. Using the dancing as a ministry would benefit the church." He does not elaborate, but he seems to envision the church hosting dances as a community outreach, since the church provides a common space for community gatherings. As Pete also suggested, endorsement of critically-contextualized dancing in the church could grant greater cultural validity to what has for some time been seen a "white," outsider religion.

Going beyond outreach, Smith also calls for dancing to "become a part of corporate worship." He does not give any suggestions on how exactly this would look, but perhaps Pete’s suggestion of translating the Psalms into yuraq could be helpful here. Smith concludes with a powerful and emotional appeal:

With Jesus as our Savior, I do not see any difference in worshiping Jesus through our God-given abilities. I believe we Cup’ig must harness our traditions and culture before our last elders leave this earth. We must keep our identity as God had intended throughout the generations. We must continue to praise him through our culture...Indeed we must praise the Lord through our traditional dancing!79

78 Smith, 70.
79 Ibid., 70-71.
IV. Conclusion

Coming from two different traditions of Christianity, having experienced two distinct personal histories in relation to the yuraq, completing two different seminary curricula in preparation for ministry, and working entirely independently of each other, Cynthia Pete and Dale Smith ultimately make the same argument for incorporation of the yuraq into the corporate worship of the Yupik church. Though they differ on the broader meaning that the yuraq carries within their respective communities, they both argue from the Scriptures that Yupik believers should be encouraged to develop Christian dances that praise God from the “heart” of their culture. If we take nothing else away from this study, this is a finding that deserves to be recognized and strongly considered by the entire Alaskan church.

Certainly, more work must be done. Pete and Smith have done the work of “pathfinders” for their respective communities, but the path does not end here.80 As a former instructor of Cynthia Pete, and as part of an organization working in formal partnership with the Alaska Conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church, I find myself in the role of “facilitator.” As such, I will offer here a few brief observations on the work that they have done, once again acknowledging Hiebert’s emphasis that critical contextualization must always be carried out as part of a broader interpretive community.81 I offer this critique in a spirit of humility that genuinely desires to support and encourage these pioneering servants of God.

80 A. Scott Moreau, Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012), 263.
81 Hiebert, 91.
I find both arguments to be valid and convincing in terms of Paul Hiebert’s model. Each author has faithfully represented the cultural background and contemporary understandings of their own community, and has used scripture accurately to propose a way that the church can engage the yuraq. That said, I see areas where their arguments could be strengthened, specifically in steps two and three (scriptural exegesis and critical response).

More can be done to solidly ground these arguments in the word of God, starting with the issue of proof-texting. Details regarding the form of ancient Hebrew dancing are scant, but Scripture provides much insight into its function and meaning. Although each author emphasizes that dancing is never portrayed negatively in Scripture, the ceremonial “raving” done by the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18:29 might be relevant to the discussion. A more thorough study on dancing in the Ancient Near East could shed more light on appropriate use of Yupik dancing. Scripture’s incorporation of pagan mythological themes into Hebrew worship as a polemic against Baalism (as seen, for example, in Psalm 74:12-17 and 89:6-20) might also be studied as a model for a Yupik polemic against shamanism.82

The arguments would also benefit from more clarity and boldness in their critical responses. Though they both suggest that the old shamanistic elements are incompatible with their Christian faith, they tend to “brush these under the rug” rather than openly discuss why they were incompatible and how they differ from today’s practices. Moreover, each appeals to the intrinsic value of human culture, but in doing so the lines between culture as general revelation and Scripture as special revelation are easily blurred. As

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Yupik church leaders continue this conversation, more precise terminology should be explored, and the question of what elements of dancing might be *inappropriate* for the church should be considered. For example, how should the church respond in the event that masked dances are reintroduced?

Where does the Yupik church go from here? Cynthia Pete and Dale Smith have offered a starting point—a vision for what the church *could* do. Neither is in a position to act on this vision alone. The vision is in seed form, and it must be nurtured by church leadership in order to grow into reality. The Evangelical Covenant Church is perhaps in the best position to lead in this regard. Denominational leadership could distill and circulate these indigenous arguments, and facilitate critique and discussion among local congregations. With denominational support, the idea of “*yuraq*-ing the Psalms” could begin to take root among church elders. Considering the emphasis on *yuraq* as a form of storytelling, narrative portions of Scripture might also be incorporated into dance. Alaska Bible College is in a position to support and encourage such a movement through its Ethnodoxology course, offered in partnership with the Center for Excellence in World Arts at GIAL. Perhaps one day soon, a psalm or Bible story might be performed as *yuraq* at the “Native Musicale,” an Alaska Native Christian music festival hosted annually by Anchorage Native New Life Fellowship. Through partnership, collaboration, and mutual respect, a truly indigenous Alaskan theology of worship may be within reach.