



Maggie Lind, a Yup'ik Alaskan, drawing with a story knife in 1936.

Cutting Both Ways

Snow knives and story knives in Native culture

BY MICHAEL ENGELHARD

PAIRED WITH “ESKIMO NOSE RUBBING,” THE HEMISPHERICAL “igloo” has long been shorthand for an entire culture, a cliché prevalent in ice cream ads and cartoons. However, the Inuktitut word *iglu* (plural *igluit*), “house,” designates a dwelling of many materials. Snow domes were traditionally built in northern Greenland and Canada’s central Arctic. Igloos elsewhere were whalebone and hide insulated with snow, or driftwood frames, sodded. In Alaska, they only ever became short-term refuges on the sea ice. Snow block components also formed hunting blinds, windbreaks, or storage platforms keeping food and gear safe from dogs.

Less famous than the women’s *ulu*—the ax-like blade for tasks from cropping hair to flaying fish—the *pana* or “snow knife” was a man’s tool exclusively. Undecorated, crafted from walrus ivory or traded steel, it worked as an ice-scraper, too. Rare Canadian specimens incorporate hammered copper blades or repurposed scrap iron from the doomed Franklin expedition’s ships. Another 19th-century *pana*, whittled from antler and spearhead-shaped, has a hole drilled through its handle. It could be worn on a rawhide thong around one’s neck—a splendid idea when you’re building in the dark in a hurry, winds whipping and your hands numb with cold.

Wind is an essential ingredient in igloo construction: Snow has to be compact to allow sculpting. Typically, slabs or blocks laid like bricks ascended in a spiral, for stability. The structure, narrowing as it rose, leaned precariously until the last piece—the “keystone”—sealed the cupola’s top. The builder trimmed each block with the *pana* for perfect fit after placing it. He’d cut an entrance into overnight shelters (habitations occupied longer had an entrance tunnel) and perhaps a skylight, into which he’d set an ice pane cemented with snow. Nowadays, blocks sometimes are quarried with a carpenter’s handsaw, because that is faster.

Even less widely known than the *pana* was the “story knife” or *yaaruin* in the Central Alaskan Yup’ik language. Girls sketched pictures with it on the ground, illustrating a story or song. Snow, mud, or wet sand served as canvas. For a performance, a girl might bring snow into the entryway of her family’s home, compressing and smoothing it. The explorer and naturalist Edward William Nelson, who began his career in 1877 as a U.S. Army Signal Corps weather observer on the Bering Sea coast, called the *yaaruin* “snow knife.” This conflates it with the Inupiaq and Inuit *pana* and causes confusion. Elegantly designed story knives—often scrimshawed, carved from antler, driftwood,

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A scrimshawed story knife made in 1890 of carved walrus ivory from Nelson Island.



walrus ivory, or a caribou rib—were as versatile as Swiss Army knives. The machete-style blade taught storied lessons to younger siblings. It challenged audiences with riddles, boosting verbal and abstraction skills. It blunted the impact of fears and scary events.

Viewers, in a Yup'ik version of Pictionary, tried to guess the subject as it took shape. Songs and the intricate glyphs employed in story-knifing could vary from village to village. Abstract tracings depicted humans; a hangman figure likewise did the job. Details hinted at a character's age, gender, or an activity in which it engaged, clues similarly present in Eskimo languages, which bond linguistic elements into complex, run-on clauses—hence the hackneyed “50 Eskimo words for snow.” A simple, quasi-cinematic reset separated scenes in a story-knife tale: As the action progressed, the narrator wiped the slate with the flat of her blade “as if turning the page of a picture book.”

Boys could only watch, and youngsters would crowd around a deft knife artist. “The story knives were our pencils,” said the late Neva Rivers (*Paniyagaq*), born in 1920 in Hooper Bay. In a pinch, even a butter knife or a wood stick would do. “We used [those] to try to copy our older sisters when they played using the *yaaruin*. We'd just scratch it out.” Stories were improvised or retold and

might convey some moral. Mothers and grandmothers sometimes wielded the curved blade to share their repertoire with eager children. When a knife's owner reached puberty, she'd pass on her treasured possession to a playmate.

Yaaruin still can be found in Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta villages, but together with string games, igloos, fish-skin boots, or neighborly visits, they appear to be moribund.

“They don't use it no more in our area, where it was really strong when we were small,” said Agnes Lewis David, an elder from Kongiganak, near Bethel, who tried to revitalize this tradition with a bilingual book of stories she heard growing up. In part, computer games and TVs are to blame for the decline.

Like the *pana* or *ulu*, the *yaaruin* is a symbol, an ingenious token that linked generations. These knives delineate male and female spheres, and the transition from childhood. The adults' knives speak of improvisation's role in physical survival, the youths', empowering girls, of the survival of language and histories. 🐻

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