

Knowledge of Native Elders  
March 31, 1987  
Lisa D. Chavez

Last week we talked about ghosts. Margaret told us some more about them. There are two types of ghosts. One is called "iyoni" and this is the spirit after death. The other is called "gyiga" and this is the spirit of a person who is still alive. "Gyiga" is like a shadow.

Margaret said a young man of about 17 was electrocuted. They put his body in the church. In the church is a light like an oil lamp that burns all the time. During the night people noticed the light had gone out. The boy who took care of the church was afraid to go in the church by himself, so they went with him and relighted the lamp. After a little while, Margaret said she noticed the lamp was out again. So they went back and relit it. A little while later, it went out for the third time. This time, the boy who took care of the church refused to go back in. So they left it out.

This story is an example of <sup>ke</sup>"iyoni". The boy died of electric shock, so maybe he didn't like the light. Most iyoni are seen after people die a violent or sudden death.

"Gyiga" is when you see someone, often someone you know well, who isn't really there. For example, Margaret said she was working at the hospital and she went to the cafeteria with her co-workers. She came back to work ahead of the others. As she was coming in the room she saw one of the <sup>workers</sup>nurses standing at the <sup>counter by the table</sup>nurses station and she thought

"That's strange, I thought she was still at lunch." Then when she came in the <sup>she</sup>nurse disappeared. The same <sup>person</sup>nurse came back to work a little later. Margaret and the other ~~nurses~~ didn't know it at the time but that <sup>is person</sup>nurse was terminally ill. She died a few months later.

Eliza asked if the Ahtna people could understand the owl talk. Margaret said she did not understand what the owls said, but old people do. Owls tell the future. They say when someone will get hurt or die, or when an animal (like moose) will be killed. Eliza said she heard an owl say something, and she asked her sister what it said. It said that they would be crunching bones, which meant they would kill a game animal. But most people don't like to hear owls talk because they say bad things.

Someone asked about foxes barking, if that meant anything. Margaret said no. She said she didn't know about rabies when she was a kid. Eliza said she remembered being warned about foxes that acted tame, because they get bold when they have rabies.

Margaret then showed us a series of old photographs. They showed things like drying a moose skin, a cooking fire with wood to hang the food from, and women getting sap from a tree. Margaret said the Ahtna people get sap from cotton trees. They scrape it off in June. It has lots of vitamins and it tastes really good; it's sweet. She said people used to know what to eat to get vitamins.

## Birch and

Birch bark was used for everything: baskets, snowshoes, and even baby carriers. They put moss and fine grass in the baby carriers and then put a blanket and the baby in it. The moss served as a diaper; when it was soiled, they just threw it out.

To make a fire, people used to gather a black fungus that grows in trees. It was split and dried. People would use it as kindling, and then would start sparks with a drill. Or people would get special white rocks and rub them together. This had to be done in the dark, so the sparks could be seen.

Eliza said her people burned this same fungus to keep mosquitos away.

In the old days, marriages were arranged. After training, people would get married. They married out of their clan. The clans are caribou, crow and eagle. Margaret is eagle. Sometimes, parents would pick out spouses for their kids when they were very little, even still babies.

Margaret told us the story of where the caribou clan comes from. A long time ago her people, the eagle tribe, came from the Cordova area. They followed the Gulkana river a long way, up to Paxon Lake. They may have been following the fish. Anyway, when they got up there, they found a lot of caribou. In the midst of all these caribou was a man. They tried to talk to him, but it was hard to understand him. The eagle tribe called him caribou. This man went

back, and he came back with a whole bunch of people, so the eagle tribe called those people caribou, too. They don't know where they came from--maybe Canada. But the two peoples divided up the lake with a big pole. One part was for the eagle tribe. After awhile, the eagle tribe went back down the river. They went down around Kennicott where they found a lot of copper to make tools with.

Margaret also told us about how houses were made a long time ago. They were made of poles, and they were covered with bark. The steambath was in the back. The house was shaped like a rectangle, and there were benches along the walls. There was a hole in the top of the house to let smoke out.

Someone asked Margaret what her favorite native food was. She said maybe nuni; everybody likes nuni (porcupine). She said a long time ago when anyone got nuni they would share it with everyone. She said everybody did this, no matter what it was they got--moose, sheep, whatever. That's the way people used to do things.