



During an opportunity to peek inside Smithsonian collection drawers and examine artifacts made by Yup'ik ancestors, Albertina Cingyukan Dull speaks with Mark Miisaq John, CEO of Calista Elders Council.



# Epsalnguipagtat

How they weren't stifled by sewing

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LESLIE HSU OH  
FOR FIRST ALASKANS

**Jammed in a hallway** within a climate-controlled storage pod of the Smithsonian's Museum Support Center, three Yup'ik Elders giggle like school girls on one side of a square table. All around them, rows and rows of metal cabinets, filling a room the size of a football field, disappear into the darkness.

Martina Anguyaluk John, 77, from Toksook Bay, lifts her glasses from the bridge of her nose and admires with naked eyes rows of tiny teeth, some smaller than a grain of rice, embedded on a belt. An expert seamstress, she showcased her boots, parkas, hats, and gasperet (cloth parkas) the day before at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Indians (NMAI). On the side of the table to the right of the ladies, the eldest of her nine children and executive director of the Calista Elders Council, Mark Miisaq John, 58, explains to the non-Yup'ik speakers photographing and recording the Elder Council's first "woman's trip" to the Smithsonian collections "probably worn by the daughter of a great hunter that had resources."

Albertina Cingyukan Dull, 95, from

Nightmute and Umkumiut, warms her hands inside of her kuspuk pockets. "Piciatun-wa tua-i kegguteklikait cat. Ala-i epsalnguipaa! (They are probably teeth of various animals. Oh my, how they weren't stifled working on these!)"

"Ayuquciicetun augaumaluteng. (The [teeth] were removed intact.) They were taken off whole and just sewn in," says Mark John in disbelief.

Martina John says, "Temem'eggni uitaluteng. (They are attached to their gums.)"

Dull laughs. "Yuut-wa tua-i ilait umyuangayuameng. (Because some people were inventive/creative.)"

Martina John nods. "Ca-wa avani tamalkuan piksunarquralria umyuartequtektullruamegtegggu. (It's because in the past they put thought into everything that was usable.)"

This reminds Elsie Nanuruag Tommy, 91, from Newtok, about metal tobacco containers and how her relatives used to make them into instruments. Pulling her white knitted cap close around her ears, Tommy, known as not

only an expert seamstress but an eloquent orator, explains how her husband's father would play his tobacco container instrument in the evenings inspiring his parka to dance. She chokes on laughter for a few minutes. Then, she undulates her arms, demonstrating how the parka moved and how this frightened his wife. "Aipani tauna-gguq piciquaa, 'Imangeqatartut! Amci tauna taqiu!' (She said she would tell her husband, 'The [parka] is going to soon be filled! Hurry and stop playing that.')

Martina John asks, "Quill' imaileng'ermeng-qaa yuraraqluteng. (Would they dance although they were empty [no one was inside them]?)"

Tommy catches her breath, then





Martina Anguyaluk John, Albertina Cingyukan Dull and Elsie Nanuruqa Tommy (pictured from left to right) study a Yup'ik girl's Arctic red fox summer parka collected in the 1880s from Nelson Island.

answers, "Ii-i yuraraqluteng tauna tev-tev-aaturalra maligtaqluku. (Yes, they would dance following the tev-tev sound that that [instrument] made.)"

Dull says, "Yuut ilait yuraryukuneng apqitnek qac'akuneng, nangerrluteng iciw', tengruluteng. (Some people, when they feel like dancing and they become moved by the beat of the music or by watching others dance, qac'akuneng as they say, they stand, eager [to dance].)"

"Qaillun? (How?)," asks Mark John.

Standing up, Dull, the oldest person living today in Umkumiut, Nelson Island, moves

with the lightness and grace of a teenager. She dances and sings until everyone in the room is infected with laughter.

Seated on the side of the table to the left of the ladies, Ruth Angalgaq Jimmie, 62, from Toksook Bay, who is Martina's sister in the Yup'ik way as their mothers were sisters, and Elder-in-Training, shakes her head and says to the rest of us, "She has lots of stories."

#### **A woman's trip to the Smithsonian**

The stories are the gems of these collection visits. Alice Cucuaq Aluskak Rearden, 35, CEC's oral historian, transcriber and

translator, could not join the CEC staff that brought the sewers to Washington, D.C. However, she sparked the idea a few years ago when she applied for a National Park Service grant to gather Elder Yup'ik women to document how waterproof skin gut (rain) garments and boots used to be made.

Rearden says, "Traditional ways of sewing is something that we are losing and it's very important to document those ways so that younger generations will learn about it and gain an appreciation for their ancestors who were very hard working and did such intricate work. Sewing is difficult work and it was and



## How to Visit the Smithsonian Collections

Anyone can visit the Smithsonian collections. To make an appointment, check out the following links:

National Museum of American Indian Cultural Resource Center  
<http://nmai.si.edu/explore/collections/visiting>

National Museum of Natural History Department of Anthropology's collections at the Museum Support Center  
[http://anthropology.si.edu/cm/visitor\\_policy.htm](http://anthropology.si.edu/cm/visitor_policy.htm)

National Museum of Natural History National Anthropological Archives at the Museum Support Center  
[https://www.mnh.si.edu/secure/anthroforms/archives\\_request.cfm](https://www.mnh.si.edu/secure/anthroforms/archives_request.cfm)



Back row: Sarah Jane Grace Owens (Mellon Fellow in Textile Conservation, National Museum of American Indian), Abigail Arnaquilluk Moses (CEC), Ann Fienup-Riordan (CEC), Ruth Angalgaq Jimmie (CEC), Landis Smith (Smithsonian Contract Conservator), Mark Miisaq John (CEC), and in the front row, Elsie Nanuruq Tommy (CEC), Martina Anguyaluk John (CEC), and Albertina Cingyukan Dull (CEC) celebrate three long days of visits to the Smithsonian collections.

still is a very important part of our culture. I wanted women's work in general, including processing of animals, fish and birds to be documented, and not just sewing. Women are so integral in our culture and their contribution to our living is often underestimated because they weren't always the orators or speakers, or were raised in the traditional qasgi, like males did."

About the same time Rearden began working with Calista Elders Council, in 1999, Mark John asked cultural anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan to help find funding for documenting traditional knowledge.

Seven years earlier, Fienup-Riordan had started to work for communities rather than studying about them when the late Andy Paukan of St. Marys and their city manager Tim Troll asked her to help them put together the renowned mask exhibit "Agayuliyararput: Our Way of Making Prayer," which opened in 1996.

Her ability to find funding resulted in Yup'ik delegation visits to collections as far away from Alaska as Berlin. (See projects and books published by the Elders Council at [www.yupikscience.org](http://www.yupikscience.org).)

Fienup-Riordan says she has the best job in the world.

"These have been the happiest, and I think most productive years of my life," Fienup-Riordan said. "It used to be anthropology was 'the study of man.' Then anthro became 'the study of humankind.' Today it's studying with people, not just about them. What a difference that makes. We think of projects together, we listen to each other, and through that collaboration and co-production we come up with books, exhibits, trips like the one to D.C., all much more meaningful because they are not the work of one person but of many."

After years of male delegations, the Elders Council staff was determined to put together an all-female delegation. First, they had to find sponsors like the Smithsonian Community Scholars program ([www.si.edu/ofg/Applications/NAP/NAPApp.htm](http://www.si.edu/ofg/Applications/NAP/NAPApp.htm)) and the Smithsonian Recovering Voices Program (<http://anthropology.si.edu/recovering-voices>), an initiative led by the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in partnership with the National Museum of American Indians and the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, that promotes the documentation and revitalization of the world's endangered languages and knowledge.

Second, the sewers were getting older and less mobile. Wheelchairs had to be purchased or borrowed. Smithsonian staff helped with transportation issues.

Third, it was the first time these Yup'ik Elders ever visited Washington, D.C. Coming from a village of 600, the ladies were overwhelmed by the lights, the tall buildings, vehicles that ran underground and the variety of foods. They packed ice chests full of salmon, seal oil and akutaq (Eskimo ice cream). On the evening I visited the ladies at their hotel, they munched on their hometown snacks and showed me how they moved all the chairs into one room where they sometimes ate dinner instead of going out. I felt as if I was right at home in their village.

Despite all the preparations, Hurricane

Sandy holed up the entire delegation in their hotel the first few days of their trip.

Fortunately, Abigail Arnaquilluk Moses, a 21-year-old from Toksook Bay, their social media guru, added a whole new dimension to this project by keeping folks at home posted on what these Elders were up to. Their blog ([www.yupikelders.org](http://www.yupikelders.org)) features a photo of Martina John with the caption: Ella assillkan Martina-q Piluguliurtuq. Carkaat nangyuitut. (Since the weather's bad, Martina is working on skin boots. There's always work to do.)

Their Yup'ik Elders Facebook page has 256 likes beneath a photo of jokester Dull and Tommy sporting false teeth on Halloween day. Comments include "lol," "As I get older, I hope to be as healthy as they are" and "Tuaten atak anglirikuma ayuqlii. So cute."

My favorite: a YouTube video with 524 views and climbing called "Yupik Elders Gang," where Dull, Tommy leaning heavily on a cane, and Martina John strut down the hotel hallway to a heavy metal beat.

Hilarity aside, the advantage of these social media outlets is that the Yup'ik community can share and interact with the results much quicker than the final product which is usually a publication that can take up to 10 years to produce.

After Hurricane Sandy departed, the ladies got down to business. They spent two days at the Smithsonian's Cultural Resource Center and one day at the Support Center in Suitland, Md. The Resource Center houses the National



Museum of the American Indian collections (which number 825,000 objects, 1,500 linear feet of paper records, 324,000 photographs, and 12,000 items in the Media Archive). The Support Center houses the National Museum of Natural History's Department of Anthropology artifact collections (representing more than 2 million objects, including 144,375 ethnological catalog records, 292,791 archaeological catalog records, and over 1,300 works of modern and contemporary arts) and the National Anthropological Archives (which includes unpublished material from arctic researchers and archival photographs documenting traditional lifeways).

During the visits, the ladies sigh in admiration of intricate details or designs on seal blubber or esophagus, wolf chin, squirrel foreheads, caribou ears, eyes and belly skins. They ask Mark John to take photographs so they can try to replicate the techniques. Sometimes, an artifact is older than Dull causing her to exclaim, "Ala-i (Oh my)!"

Mark John says, "I was amazed with their knowledge and how particular they are with the way they do their work and recognize work of nearby villages. They can immediately identify the material, who the piece is made for (boy or girl) and what it's used for. The other thing that struck me was how they cut and prepare skins for use."

Fienup-Riordan adds, "On the day we were in the hotel because of the hurricane, Albertina was talking about how to cut a sea bird. She was drawing it with her hands.

Ruth said we need to go to Toksook and get a seabird and videotape her cutting it so young people can see it."

In the meantime, the Elders Council juggles many other exciting projects, such as their brand new website (<http://eloka-arctic.org/communities/yupik>), which features "The Atlas," an interactive map with 3,000 place names documented from the Elders of Kotlik, Emmonak, Alakanuk, Nunam Iqua, Newtok, Tununak, Toksook Bay, Nightmute, Chefornak, Kwigillingok and Kongiganak. The council hopes to work with communities to continue to add place names, which can be associated with photos, text, audio and video.

Soon, the council will document Yupitit Yuraryarait (song and dance ceremonies) and holding a culture camp in Umkumiut.

The highlight of the trip happened at the end, when the conservators brought out a men's hat made by Martina John's mother and collected by Fienup-Riordan in 1984.

"Ahh," the ladies exhaled together. Cameras flashed and everyone spoke excitedly. Jimmie said, "Beautiful."

Martina John stroked the squirrel fur affectionately. "Nunamiutaqapiarput waniw' un' nutaan. (This here is finally something that is really from our home area.)"

As a final treat, the conservators and collections staff opened several cabinet doors and pulled out trays of artifacts all made by Yup'ik ancestors. Even though they were in wheelchairs, the ladies were not shy about examining the depth of each drawer. They

carefully handled pieces that caught their attention.

The non-Yup'ik speakers had no idea what is being said, but hovered close, intrigued by the dynamic interaction.

Smithsonian Contract Conservator Landis Smith says, "Even without understanding everything, it's interesting to notice what the Elders focus on, and what they don't. A great deal of time was spent studying the stitching and construction of garments, some of the same things conservators focus on, so we share some common ground there. Also, the conservation of museum collections is now concerned with preserving intangible aspects of collections, and there is no other way to understand those intangibles than by working with experts such as these Elders who hold so much knowledge. The importance of language and its connection to the collections is inherent in this knowledge, and it is important to document this."

This is "reverse fieldwork" working its magic, where instead of anthropologists studying resident Natives, Natives are trying "to understand both collections and the collecting process so that they can use them for their own ends," something Fienup-Riordan once said in "Yup'ik Elders at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin: Fieldwork Turned on Its Head." ■

*Leslie Hsu Oh ([www.lesliehsuoh.com](http://www.lesliehsuoh.com)) is a frequent contributor. She may be reached at [lhsu@post.harvard.edu](mailto:lhsu@post.harvard.edu).*

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