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Honoring the Gift: Celebration, Ceremony, and Community in Tikigaq, Alaska

Abstract: “Honoring the gift” is a phrase that was said to me by Steve Oomittuk of Point Hope (Tikigaq), Alaska. He described all of the ceremony and ritual in Tikigaq as an effort to honor the gift of the whale, which gives itself to the people. After spending time in Point Hope over the Christmas holidays, and during the summer whale feast of Kagaruk, I have focused on filming game playing and its connection to whale hunting. This film presents the idea that the sacrifice of the whale is akin to the sacrifice the people make of themselves when they play these ancient athletic games. The role of “preparing for the spring hunt” as is often noted as cause for the games, is really just a footnote in Point Hope. Why people play the games is unknown to many of the people there who play them. What is known is that they are to give the best of themselves in this fierce competition, and not be afraid of personal sacrifice. When you win a game, your entire clan wins. When your clan wins, you can feed the other clan, and renew the bond of community. You cannot receive if you do not give. This is how the gift itself is honored.

These ideas and themes repeat themselves throughout the film I shot in Point Hope. I hope that this film will offer an insight into this unique and inspiring community, and give back to Tikigaq a small part of what it has so generously given to me.