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Weapon, Toy, or Art? The Eskimo Yo-Yo as a Commodified Arctic Bola and Marker of Cultural Identity

Abstract: The Eskimo yo-yo is a popular tourist art found in gift shops across Alaska. It is made in a variety of shapes, ranging from seals and dolls, to mukluks and simple balls. Many are plainly decorated; others display elaborate decorations, fine beadwork, and intricate details. Some shops carry only Native-made pieces, while others carry imitation pieces made in China. Though a true history of the Eskimo yo-yo remains “shrouded in mystery” (Ray 1977), Eskimos maintain that this game originated as an important and widely used hunting tool made simply with sinew and bones – the bola. The gun has replaced the bola as a hunting tool, yet, the skills required to use a bola (dexterity, speed, aim, coordination, strength and stamina) remain important in areas where people subsist off the land; as such, the Eskimo yo-yo remains an important link to the past and speaks to a subsistence lifestyle. Natives and tourists alike recognize it as a marker of cultural heritage. This thesis details the enigmatic history of the relationship between the Eskimo yo-yo and the arctic bola and explores the influences each has as markers of indigenous identity in Alaska.