

Arctic Survival

ESKIMO DANCE UPLIFTS SOUL IN HARSH FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL

By Howard Rock
Times Editor

The first heavy beat of the drums boomed and the aged dancer became suddenly alert. A pause and then the beat of the drums went into the rhythmic but varied tempo.

At the first beat, strength and vigor seemed to take possession of the dancer's body. His right foot stamped hard on the floor in time with the drums and his arms gestured vigorously but with precise, quick motions. His 79 years did not seem to be a hindrance as his energetic dance continued.

Drama of the Dance

As his head moved from side to side, up and then down with each dance motion, there was an expression on his face that seemed to project, not to the present, but to the past. There was pleasure, pathos, strength, and above all, triumph. This was the expression brought on by the intense concentration of the rendition of his performance. It ended abruptly with a dramatic movement of the arms and the upward motion of the body as the drums echoed the last vibrant beat.

Thus, Christopher Tingook of Point Hope, danced the way his ancestors had danced — the dance that expressed intricate aestheticism, the dance that expressed the spirit of his people, the Eskimos. His rendition was the way the Eskimo dance was meant to be performed — the performance that at once, gave his audience the feeling of pleasure, pathos, strength, and uplifting of the spirit. It was a triumphal dance of survival.

Unseen Tenseness

In the days when this writer was a small boy, there were times when hunting conditions became almost intolerable. Hunters came home empty-handed. Food supplies became low in the village and the people and their dogs began to feel the pangs of hunger.

Such a situation should have been a sufficient reason for dread and

gloom but it was not visibly apparent among the people of the village. People met, visited, smiled. Whatever tension there was among the villagers, it was hidden in their hearts. To allay this build-up, something would have to be done.

Calls Dance

An elderly man, sage and respected and one of the finest dancers in the village told three boys one early evening, "Go around the village and tell the people that there will be a dance at Kukoruk's house this evening."

The boys scattered on the run. Each clambered up the tunnel hallways up to the skylight of the sod igloos and hollered down, "There is going to be a dance at Kukoruk's house tonight."

The people in the house looked up to the skylight and answered, "Ee, naquumaruk, Taiqungakneak-tuqut unaakun!" (Yes, that is good. We will go there this evening!)

After eating their meager meals, the people began to converge on Kukoruk's igloo. It had been picked because it was the roomiest house in the village. In a short time the house was crowded until the people were tightly bunched together. About a 9-foot wide floor space was left for the dancers in front of the room.

Drums

Presently, six men sat down side by side along the 9-foot floor space in front of the audience. A man brought out a large bag filled with drums.

The drums were made out of a specially hard driftwood, looped into a 2-foot diameter circle. The loop was an inch wide and about 3/8 inch thick with a groove on the outside. The hand grip was made out of walrus ivory carved with indentations to fit the drummer's fingers.

The drumhead was from the bowhead whale liver skin considered the finest drum material by the Eskimos. It had more vibrancy and

prolonged drum tone than any other material. It was mounted on the drum with a long corded reindeer or caribou sinew.

The drummers picked out their drums. A basin of water was passed around to each drummer and he moistened the whale liver skin on each side. The moisture gave it more resonance and vibrancy.

Each drummer picked up his drum stick and tested his drum. He gripped one end of the stick with his right hand and struck the bottom of the drum sharply, taking care so the other end of the stick hits the bottom of the drum with about an inch and a half of the stick to spare. The sharp strike caused the stick to bend in the middle and the sharp impact slapped against the drumhead causing it to vibrate with a loud drum tone.

The Warmup

With the preparation done and the drums in proper working order, the drummers were now ready to commence the dance. One of the two center men started a chant and the rest of the drummers joined in and finally the audience.

The chant was of general character used usually as a warmup song. The drummers slapped their sticks lightly against their drums in time with the chant until the whole song was completed. On the second round of the chant, the drummers suddenly struck a booming roll all at the same time, a pause, and then a steady, loud boom of the drums until the song was over.

Leader

The next chant was a special song of the elderly man who had called the dance. At the start of the chant, he rose from the crowd and made his way to the dance area. Once on it, he started to keep time with the light drumming and the chant with his feet as he donned his gloves. He then commenced to gesticulate casually the basic motions to his special song. The chant was about a caribou hunt in the hills east of Point Hope.

The Story

The chant started with the hunter walking up a gentle hill, looking around as he went. He got up on a knoll and looked around shading his eyes from the sun. He saw caribou and quickly ducked behind the knoll. He began to sneak up on the animals and was soon within range of his bow and arrow.

He took aim and his arrow flew. It hit the mark and the caribou fell to the ground. He quartered the carcass, loaded his pack bag with meat and started for home happy with the game he had caught.

When the first stanza of the chant ended, the drummers hit the first booming roll. Precisely at the same moment, the dancer became suddenly alive. A pause, at which the dancer stood up to his full height, his legs set wide. His arms rose over his head in a dramatic gesture.

In the next instant the heavy drum beat resumed. The drumming had steady succession of beats, pauses, and off beats according to what the hunter dancer was doing.

Interpretation

His interpretation of the hunting story was done with amazingly precise timing with the beat of the drums. Although presented in semi-abstract manner, perceptive audience took in the entire story interpreted by the skill and art of the dancer told in two minutes. The dancer had captured the imagination and spirit of his audience. The dance was on in earnest.

After the elderly man finished his series of dances, other men in pairs, and threes, continued the motions dances. They were beautifully coordinated, thrilling and contagious. There were moments of laugh-

ter when some dancers made a mistake.

General Dance

After the special dances were completed, the general dance began. This was the dance in which anyone could participate, men, women, and children. Women bobbed with the bend of their knees in time with the chant and the drum beat, their arms gesturing in their own feminine way of dancing. Men gesticulated vigorously, occasionally issuing loud, triumphal sounds out of their mouths, their right feet thumping hard on the floor.

With the succession of dances, the floor became crowded with happy dancers. Children who were learning the dance, learned more.

Around midnight, the dance finally came to an end. An elder of the church stood up and said, "We will now pray." The crowd stood up, bowed their heads and said the Lord's prayer.

The people dispersed and each family wended its way to its igloo relaxed and happy. Whatever tension that had built up during the lean times was gone and in place of it was hope for a better tomorrow.

Spectacle, But Much More

The Eskimo dance is a fine spectacle to behold but to the people of the north it is more than just a dance. It is a deep expression of a way of life of a people. Its rendition is performed with emphasis on the light-hearted side of life. It is at once intricate and vigorous.

It is a dance that has been established with subtleties of psychology woven into it and these subtleties are interpreted through the art and skill of the performer, not un-

like the art and skill of a great ballet dancer.

A great dancer such as Christopher Tingook, interprets the spirit of his people. As he performs, the dance becomes an encouragement and a steadying force — a dance that had been established to ease the ever present pressure created by the great rigors of the north country.

Dance Discouraged

In being the way it is, the dance has been an intricately woven facet of culture in the life of the Eskimos. It is deeply woven into their lives. For this reason the dance of the Eskimos should never be discouraged and yet it is today.

Some religious denominations have discouraged the Eskimo dance calling it the work of the devil. Some of these denominations have successfully banned it. What happens when this comes to pass? It leaves a void in the lives of the Eskimos — a void that is not easily replaced.

The taking of this culture facet has led to some demoralization of the people. This is a great price to pay by the Eskimos who have lived intimately with the dance frowned upon by people who do not understand it; who do not fathom its deep meaning to the Eskimos who had embraced it as one of the most necessary outlets to the uplifting of the soul in their fight for survival down through the ages.

I believe in the sacredness of a promise, that a man's word should be as good as his bond; that character—not wealth or power or position—is of supreme worth.

John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

AN ESKIMO TALE:

Hunter, Surrounded by Enemies, Outruns Them, Gets Home Safely

By Paul Green
Nome, Alaska

Aknacheolook from Tigara was a small man. One summer, he went inland hunting caribou all by himself. He was husky and a healthy man. He was always watchful wherever he went.

When he made camp in the evening he made it in thick willows where no one could find him. In the morning after he ate his breakfast he started out and kept moving. During the morning he saw a bunch of caribou. He went toward them to sneak up on him at any time. In the close to them.

He caught two caribou and started to skin them right away. He was watchful and alert at the same time because he thought an enemy might sneak up on him at any time. In the early days the hunters watched all the time when they were hunting. They didn't want to take a chance on someone who might kill them.

Finally, Aknacheolook skinned the first caribou and started to skin the second one. He looked around and was startled to see bunch of men starting to circle around him. The circle was not yet formed so he put his knife in his side case, picked up his bow and arrow and started off toward the open end of the half circle.

The Chase

One man started after him and he was running about the same speed as Aknacheolook. He knew he could not run his pursuer but he did not try. He looked back and noticed that

the man running after him was way ahead of the rest. Aknacheolook gradually increased his speed.

He looked back again and the man was gaining on him a little. Since the two runners had left the rest way behind, Aknacheolook allowed his pursuer to gain on him. After some time they were out of sight of the rest of the pursuers.

"Go ahead and run all you want to. You won't get away from me!" shouted his pursuer.

Aknacheolook knew a river with a high bank and he ran to it. He was not very far ahead of his enemy. When he got to the bank he jumped down and stopped right there and waited.

The pursuer, who had closely followed his quarry's trail, suddenly showed up over the bank. Aknacheolook shot him with his bow and arrow and killed him. He could not miss because his enemy was very close.

Safely Home

He began to run again for quite a distance and hid and watched for his other enemies. After a long while they showed up at the bank where their companion was killed. They crowded around their dead friend. Aknacheolook was surprised to see that there was so many of his enemies.

He began to run again on the beach out of sight of his enemies. He ran on and on. He made it safely home to Tigara.

Aknacheolook never did find out where his pursuers came from.

Gov. Approves Rural Project To Build Up Bank at Pt. Hope

POINT HOPE NEWS, September 26—Gov. Egan recently wrote Dan Lisbourne that he has approved the request for a Rural Development project at Pt. Hope. This is a project to build up the bank on the northwest beach by the village.

At an appropriate time, empty oil drums will probably be filled with gravel after being bolted together to strengthen the sea wall.

The village was heavily flooded on August 30, 1962, when the sea water was blown into the village by strong northwest winds. It has been flooded in the past, too. It is hoped that this project will give enough strength to prevent this from happening again.

A cultural exchange is taking place this year between the Pt. Hope school (Grades 1-8) and the North Shore Country Day School of Winnetka, Illinois. Grades 1-5 of that school are participating.

Personal correspondence takes place between teachers and pupils. School work is exchanged. Items of the different cultures are exchanged.

Interest is high both in Winnetka and Pt. Hope. Parents are interested too.

Andrew Tooyak, cook at Point Hope School, reports that the Toklat Kennels in Aspen, Colorado, would like to have an Eskimo dog-team driver. Andrew had that job until a few months ago when he returned to Pt. Hope to live.

Andrew said he was disappointed that he never got the opportunity to give one of the Kennedys a dog team ride.

Parents were told to help children remember to brush their teeth after eating. The October record chart will be distributed next week. A clean cloth can be used if the child has no brush. Soda or salt can take the place of toothpaste. It is also important the children

do not chew gum or eat candy other than at meal time. The dentist will be here in November.

Wristwatches will be given by the council to any school child with no new cavities since the dentist was here last year.

September 30—This village has heard that the Russians are now whaling off the Aleutian Islands of Alaska.

Mr. R. D. Hollingsworth, Area Field Representative for the Nome BIA District, has sent the following letter to the Point Hope Village Council. Dan Lisbourne feels the whole village deserves credit for any programs made and publishes the letter for the village to read:

Dear Daniel and Council members:

This letter is to congratulate you and the council for the fine job you are doing in administering the affairs of your village.

The voluntary work projects, your interest in preserving the old time interesting items, your concern in the various health programs and the sanitation and appearance of your village and many more items I could mention all point to a vigorous, alert and intelligent council.

With your efforts and attitudes, your village cannot help but be one of the outstanding ones of the area.

Again congratulations and keep up the good work.

With best wishes for the future.

Sincerely,

R. D. Hollingsworth

Area Field Representative

Encouragement in such a manner as this fine letter from Hollingsworth is greatly appreciated. It is easy to become discouraged at doing voluntary work projects when faced with problems of finance, weather, isolation, and the daily hard work of making a living in the Arctic.