

The History of the Stick Dance

The Stick Dance held in Nulato last weekend was the biggest and most successful in memory. Thirty-six people were "dressed" for the occasion and nearly 1,000 people crowded the little village to celebrate.

John Sackett, a senior at Alaska Methodist University, recently wrote a paper explaining the event and Tundra Times wants to honor the event by printing it.

Because of the length of his article, this will be the first of a two part series.

By JOHN SACKETT

*Koyukon
Feast for the Dead*

"How the stickdance originated as our grandmother Mrs. Stickman used to tell us; Once there lived a family of a man, his wife, and seven sons. One winter they were completely wiped out by some kind of disease and just the husband survived. Late in the evening, after putting them all away he was crying in the kashim and then he started singing. Then a thought struck his mind, 'Why am I all alone? I should go out and at least bring in a stick that would keep me company.' So he went out and brought in a pole, stuck it in the middle of the kashim and started dancing and singing around it. This continued till the sun started coming up, and this was the beginning of the stickdance."

—Mrs. Poldine Carlo

HISTORY

Within the cycle of man, from his initial birth on through his manhood and to his eventual death, the greatest respect given by the different Native cultures in Alaska has been to man's death. Throughout each culture, once a death occurred in a family, a great amount of sorrow and a lengthy process of commemoration followed. Without exception, the Athabascan Indians of Interior Alaska followed these traditional ways and felt a necessity through religious ceremony to honor, commemorate, and lie at rest the life of the departed person. The lower Koyukon Indians' ceremony is the Feast for the Dead, commonly referred to as the "stickdance".

Feasts for the dead were a common part of Eskimo, Indian, and Aleut cultures, and anthropologists have found this practice ranging from the Prince William Sound areas on up through the Kuskokwim, Yukon, and northern coastal areas. Eye witness accounts were recorded at various times in the 1800's by persons such as Dall, Jette, Edmonds, and Nelson. The central theme running through each of these ceremonies was a commemoration of the dead person.

In an era with major transitional influences of the western culture bringing changes in the lives and beliefs of the Native people, the only existing truly religious ceremony performed today by any of the native groups in Alaska is the stickdance at Nulato and Kaltag. It is my belief that because it is a religious ceremony it should be given all the respect that other religions have today, and should not be relegated to the level of being a "tourist attraction" with the prime purpose being the satisfaction of the curiosity of people that do not care or understand.

The stickdance continued as a part of the Indian culture at Nulato and Kaltag until the 1930's when the Catholic Church came in and abolished it as "pagan and sacrilegious" ceremony. This was indeed an unfortunate practice of all the outside religions of that period and probably this can be expanded to encompass all the values of the western culture that were both forced upon the natives or were desired by the groups. The native groups tried to change in order to be able to accept the White Man's values while at the same time being at a loss as to how to include and continue their own customs. In some areas of the transition we have been very successful in combining the two cultures into a compatible life; however, in other areas we have not been so successful.

The attitudes towards native groups has changed considerably since the 1930's and it can be stated factually that the attitudes of the native groups towards themselves has also changed positively so that today there is a genuine pride in being native. Consequently, there is a move for retention of existing customs. It was in light of this attitude that the stickdance was observed again after approximately 30 years and it has become one of the major ceremonies of the Athabascan culture again.

The stickdance ceremony serves two functions: one, stemming from the belief of overt and extreme reverence for the dead and the

need to have the deceased rest at peace after death; and two, as a method of repaying particular persons who gave assistance in the burial of the deceased through the ritual of dressing them in new fur clothing. The ceremony performs all of these functions.

THE CEREMONY

The ceremony lasts for approximately one week however its origins begin a year earlier. The person being dressed must give his or her consent upon request made by the closest relative of the deceased. Upon affirmation, the honored person is given a dish containing all the items of food that the deceased liked and the honored person is required to eat these foods. In this manner, the deceased is being fed, in essence, and the spirit of the deceased will gradually get used to the food. This act is continued at various times throughout the year.

During the entire week of the ceremony, there is dancing and potlatch is held every other night, alternating with serving tea, cookies, dried fish, and crackers on the other nights. The dancing consists of the usual Athabascan type of standing with the upper half of the body bent forward, a scarf held between the hands, and moving the body to the rhythm of the music.

The music consists of only voices of the singers without accompanying instruments. The only musical instruments that will be used at all are two "clappers" which are two polished sticks approximately 10 inches long and 2 inches in diameter that are used during the singing of the thirteen sacred stickdance songs later in the ceremony.

All of the songs that are sung are made in the honor of some dead person and they vary in tempo from a very slow and sad type to an extremely rapid and intensive beat. All of the songs eulogize and praise the good qualities of the deceased and tell how they are missed by the living.

At the start of each dance in the evening, a period of time is allowed for the persons to sing any new songs that are made for the dead. After that, the older and slower songs are sung until demands are made by the audience for the faster and livelier songs. The most famous songs are "Gidlinna", "Yunnanna", and "UDL". As the week progresses, the excitement of the coming ceremony of the stickdance itself reaches everyone, and at times, the entire body of people in the community hall will be dancing and singing out on the dance area. At times, it has been stated that the participants became so excited that they have almost started the stickdance one or two days in advance.

On the night of the stickdance, everyone gathers at the community hall (kashim) at about 7:00 in the evening and there are always so many people that there is standing room only. The singers, usually numbering about six or seven, are seated at the back of the hall while the women, being the only ones to dance, line up in rows on the dance floor. They all face the door to dance towards the spirits and to allow them to enter the kashim. On the third song, they turn to the singers. All of the dancers wear native cloth parkas called mitsagha' hoolaan, and feathered headdresses consisting of either a band of feathers around the head or elaborate red-colored branches with feathers attached to them and held to the head by a headband. They are to resemble caribou horns and were originally a part of the ceremony of the upper Koyukon tribe and the caribou people (Midzeey ta hot'aana).

Once everyone is organized (and this takes some time as there is an extreme undercurrent of excitement, this being the culmination of an entire year of work) the singers begin the first of the thirteen songs. They sing each of them without interruption before the main dance. I refer to these as the sacred songs of the stickdance as they can be sung only once and must not be sung at any other time. Upon completion of the thirteenth song, a chant of "he yaa, he yaa, hee yaa haw" begins while waiting for the dance pole to be brought in.

The dance pole consists of a spruce tree as high as the community hall, stripped of all its bark except for a knob of boughs approximately two feet in length at the very top. The rest of the tree is wrapped in colorful ribbons now, however, at one time it was painted with black and red bands and had bunches of feathers attached to it. The persons who are going to be dressed are the ones who go out and get the tree, decorate it, and bring it into the hall.

As soon as the pole is brought in, it is danced around the hall and placed upright in the very middle. When this occurs, the dancers and singers immediately begin the stickdance song (a very rapid chant with a strong tempo) and begin to dance clockwise around the pole. The clockwise movement and the chant is not to stop at any time until the end of the dance. The dance usually lasts approximately 18-20 hours.

At various times during the night before the end of the dance, pelts of wolverine and wolf (the most respected and valued animals to the Indians) will be tied to the pole and the dancing continues around these furs. In addition, before the final act ending the dance, the pole is brought down, taken outside, and danced around the town. The chanting is continuously kept up during this portion of the ceremony. The act of taking the pole around the town is to bring luck to all the residents. The final act of the dance is to bring the pole out for the final time, break it into three or four pieces and throw it over the river bank. The elders state that the belief is that the next stickdance will be held whichever way the pole falls; however, the stickdance is not to be held any further up the river than Nulato.

Various anthropologists who previously observed the stickdance looked upon the stickdance pole as an object of luck that would bring the people good luck in their quest for food. While this may be partially true, I believe that its presence in the religion of the people symbolizes the antenna or life line to the departed person—an object by which all the feelings and work of the people are transferred. This belief is strongly enforced by observances of the participants dancing all items such as calico, clothing, furs, and food around the pole as these are offered in memory of the deceased, and, during a later part in the dance, raising your arms up to the pole as if in homage.

NEXT WEEK: Conclusion.