

A potlatch in St. Michael brings joy

by Luci Washington

Chukchi News and Information Service

ST. MICHAEL — About 350 adults and children packed the Stebbins Community Hall for our traditional annual potlatch. As I entered the building, I stopped for a moment to gaze at what was before me.

"Wow, am I really going to perform before all these people?" I thought.

I scanned the room, looking for people I recognized: elders, adults, children and infants. Most of the people at the hall were Natives, but a couple of blacks and a few white people mingled among the crowd, too.

The elders were talking in their Native tongue. The sounds of laughter and babies crying filled the hall, and I heard someone calling out a name.

All the Native drummers wore t-shirts and faced the crowd. Three pitchers of water were perched in front of them to quench their thirst.

The leader gave the signal, and the singers began chanting a Yupik song in a soft tone, blending in with the stroke of the drums.

A drummer pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket to wipe away oozing sweat.

A 6-year-old, with both her great-grandparents at her side, stood on a beaver skin in front of the crowd, bending her knees to the beat of the drum. She smiled at the crowd in a bashful way.

Their kuspiks matched identically, each made with pink material, with red hearts sewn on the bottom of the skirts and on the front pockets. Their headdresses were made of wolverine skin and reindeer whiskers and were trimmed with Eskimo beads.

Their fans were identical, too, made from reindeer whiskers and woven grass.

The girl danced to the song her great-grandmother made up for her. The song in English was, "As I'm growing up."

The smell of cigarettes floated into the hall as the doors were opened to circulate the heated air. The various smells of perfume, shaving lotion, body odor and the smell of new soles on mukluks certainly didn't mix, but the cool air was a pleasure as it went by.

There were 20 dances scheduled for the night. As gifts were passed out between the dances, young children ran around among the crowd to get attention.

Once the dancing began, the elders who came into the hall with the aid of a cane or crutches were no longer helpless. The arthritic joint was forgotten.

Instead, their minds were drifting to the past, lost in the chanting and beating of the drum. Their arms were swaying as fast as the drums were beating.

Someone hollered a happy tone, bringing the dancers to life. Tiny beads of sweat formed on their foreheads.

They wore mukluks made of sealskin, with bleached shoe laces and beaver tops.

One group, the Comedian Dancers, were all dolled up with bright red lipstick, rosy cheeks and blue eye shadow.

This dance was dedicated to a distant relative, a man whom the dancers teased to come down and dance with them.

As the dancers continued to tease him, he only hollered, "Bumyuq!" which meant they had to do the dance all over again. This continued until the dancers were exhausted.

Yupit Kanlautlat The Way Eskimos Talk

OPINION

*Happy tears
formed in my eyes.
A tear dropped for
my late grand-
mother who wasn't
there to watch me
dance.*

It just so happened that my dance was the last one for the night. I stood before the crowd, a little nervous, sweat seeping out on the palms of my hands. The chanting started out low and slow, my knees bending to the beat of the drum.

My headdress was unique, with old beads sewn to the wolverine skin, and my kuspuk was made from a light blue material, with red and blue rick-rack trim. My Yupik name, *Nacuguniatq*, was sewn across the pocket with blue rick-rack.

My dance fans were made from caribou whiskers and woven grass, also with my name written on them. Three yards of material rested on my right arm, which I would use to dance on since I didn't have a skin to stand

on.

When the signal to dance was given, I dropped the material to the floor and began dancing, slowly at first. Gradually, the beat got faster.

As I danced harder and faster, the fear and nervousness disappeared; instead, happiness and excitement flowed within me.

Happy tears formed in my eyes. A tear dropped for my late grandmother who wasn't there to watch me dance. The dance got livelier and faster. Then, the singers and drummers stopped for a while, and my friends and relatives joined in the dance.

Before I knew it, the dance was over. A part of me was everywhere, sharing happy moments with old friends.

I walked up to one of the elders I liked and gave the material to her. Then, my family helped me pass out gifts to the public. I glanced at the audience one last time. I knew they were happy. So was I.

Luci Washington, a Yupik Eskimo, currently works as an educational aide in St. Michael while attending college part-time in hopes of becoming a bilingual teacher. She grew up in a family of 12 children who were raised traditionally on the land. She wrote this piece in an audioconference writing class offered by the Kotzebue based Chukchi Campus of the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

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