



A large crowd (left) gathers in the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History to watch as Sivuqaq dancers from St. Lawrence Island perform their traditional songs and dances near the stuffed remains



of an African Bush elephant. The ornate marble halls and walls (right) created an unusual dance setting for the Alaskans.

PHOTO BY ROB STAPLETON

Sivuqaq Dancers perform at Smithsonian

By Martha Upicksoun
for the Tundra Times

The setting was incongruous, a bit out of the ordinary. Twelve St. Lawrence Island Eskimos, known as the Sivuqaq (Gambell) Dancers, performing under a stuffed bush elephant in the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in

Washington, D.C., drew more than second glances. They drew crowds of the puzzled, the admiring.

In mid-June the Sivuqaq group stepped off their remote island home and journeyed to the nation's capital for a two-week visit and their national debut.

According to one of the group's spokesmen, Jerry Tungiyan, 45, the drummers and dancers, who double as arts and crafts demonstrators on this trip, will contribute to two Smithsonian exhibitions: "Celebration: A world of Art and Ritual," which shows the art and activities that are a

part of celebrations around the world; and "Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo."

Over 100 years ago Smithsonian naturalist Edward William Nelson travelled to remote regions in western and northwestern Alaska, including St. Lawrence Island. He collected 10,000 objects, 600 of which

make-up the "Inua" exhibit.

In order to tie past to present, Smithsonian officials decided to import a touch of living Bering Sea Eskimo (or Yupik/Chupik) culture, the Sivuqaq Dancers.

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Dances offered combined old and new

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The islanders, who range in age from 15 to 70, consider themselves lucky to have been

chosen.

But theirs was not exactly an idyllic sojourn. Not only did the time change, six

hours from Bering Sea to Eastern Daylight Time, take its toll, but the high temperatures and humidity exacted an uncom-

fortable price of their own.

Add a hectic schedule, unfamiliar food, the necessity of wearing heavy, traditional-style clothing and foot gear during performances, and cooperation becomes a key element of success as a dance group.

Group cooperation and consensus, according to Tungiyen, are no problem, what with most of the members being closely related. In fact, says Tungiyen, "the family ties make us feel more comfortable and we understand each other. And," he adds with a smile, "it's easier for them (the younger group members) to listen to us."

The dances themselves are an ingenious blend of the old and the new. "Snow Bank," which depicts the women dancers shovelling snow and growing tired, has a near universal appeal — it crosses all language and cultural barriers and fires up the imagination.

The "Invitation Dance" also was performed at the "Inua"

exhibit opening, and the lack of widespread participation (so taken for granted in Alaska) caught some of the Sivuaq group by surprise.

But rather than feel let-down, Jerry Tungiyen opted for an optimist's view. "I think some of these people who are watching us would like to dance," he explained, "but they don't know how."

The whys and wherefores of why someone danced and why someone didn't dance didn't capture dancer Vivian Iyakitan's attention.

The dance itself did. Iyakitan finished the invitational, ambled away from the stage, and declared to this writer: "That's a halfway dancing." Does she mean "half-hearted dance," I puzzled? Before anything could be asked, though, Iyakitan laughed at her still unspoken afterthought — "Between white and Eskimo," she added a good second later, and then went about her merry way.