

# Stickdance: In honor of the dead

by Steve Kakaruk

Tundra Times

The Stickdance or Hiyo begins after the families have mourned for their loved ones. In preparation of the stickdance, hundreds upon hundreds of hours are put into it. Often beginning when the last stickdance is over.

Once a family of seven boys and a man with his wife lived happily. All died except the man who was lonely filled with grief and sorrow. He cried and thought as he sang to get a stick to keep himself company. He sang all through the night until he realized he sang until the next day. This is why the dance goes on through the night. In honor of loved ones.

Nulato, about 36 miles upriver on the Yukon from Kaltag last week held the stickdance. Nulato or Kaltag have the stickdance held in their community

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and it will be alternated depending on which community gets the stick. The stickdance is prepared only by the traditional men and women that have been passed the rights by their ancestors.

Tassie Saunders, Traditional Leader of the Stickdance said, "Gemalck, its about a stickdance. Two people from

Grayling came for a stick. They ran during the night to Kaltag and had a Maskdance that night and took the stick back." *Note: Grayling is just west of Holkachuck. Holkachuck is a descending community of the Innoko River Indian Tribe where the traditional language used in the 13 mourning songs came from. The songs and language represent a difficult language only elders are familiar with. Today younger generations listen to the recordings as the elders sing along during the ritual of singing the 13 mourning songs originating from the Innoko River area.*

Two men alternate the beat with sticks as the women are lined up dancing to and mourning as the sacred songs are sung. The songs cannot be sung at any other times. The language in the songs have been preserved within tapes as the elders sing along to them.

The stick is then brought in once the traditional stickdance leader signals when all the mourning songs have been sung.

The stick is erected in the center of the community hall where the week long potlatch has taken place. The stick is erected and the dancing goes on until the following day. Through the night the stick is decorated with the

finest furs. Material is brought in too that is hung on the wall. The dancers sing the Hiyo or the Ha-Ha-Ha Ha-hiyo chants. Two important chants sung thru the night. For good luck, someone would come in and sprinkle down feathers on the people and around the stick.

After singing and dancing all night the stick is taken down, walked thru the community, broken in four peices and thrown over the bank into the river.

A potlatch begins early in the evening the same day. During the potlatch if an individual is offered food, mittens, cigarettes or whatever placed in front of, he/she cannot refuse it. After the feeding the chosen individual to represent the deceased being honored is dressed in new clothes.

*Note: The person who dressed the person is fed and given a drink of water. Every month the dish is given with the best food about six months to a year later until stickdance time.*

The dressed person will walk thru the village representing the deceased's last walk as they go around the village. They must not look back at any time. When they have completed this the community center will see them as the individuals. In new clothes, relatives and friends are greeted as the person

introduces him or herself as the deceased person. A give-away by friends and relatives of the deceased has already been prepared while the people walked thru the community. When the giveaway is over the individuals take off their new clothes and put them in a bag. The new clothes are left outside of their homes. Representing that the deceased is to take their new clothes with them and at this time sent on their way for good.

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The next day the community is prepared to offer the individuals food as they must dress again in the new clothes and walk to all the homes and introduce him/herself as the deceased honored in the stickdance. That same evening an important thing is to take place. A maskdance is held in honor of the deceased. Eskimo songs are sung. The maskdance represents the offering their loved ones a final farewell.

Many younger generations (youth) do not know the meanings of the songs (13 songs) and have heard them on tape without understanding the language perhaps for the first time.

Elders know that the 13 songs language is strong in its pronunciation. "To teach the language to the young would be wrong, the songs are meant to be and sung only during the time of the stickdance," said one elder.

Sanders however said, "I know the songs and I could teach. Young people don't really understand and it's only fun to them when they dance around the stick yet in time they learn."

Arlene Manook, who works at the Anchorage Community College said, "I don't believe it would be right to teach them (13 mourning songs) since they can be sung only during the stick dance."

Tundra Times: When and where should the teaching take place?



The following day the stick broken in four, thrown over the bank into the Yukon.

photo by Steve Kakaruk



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Manook: The 13 songs are on tape and many young people don't speak the language and the songs are even more difficult because of the strong language. Since we can't sing the songs until stick dance the tape will be the only thing left once the elders are gone.

Tundra Times: What could the elders do to teach young people to have more respect and understand the stickdance?

Arlene Manook: Teaching could begin right in the home when children are young, then they could learn to understand it.

Poldine Carlo, Author of *Nulato: An Indian Life on the Yukon* said, "years ago it was real sacred and we took it

to heart."

Poldine has seen many changes in her time since the stickdance days of her youth. Carlo also said, "youth or the ages between 16-24, do have a more spiritual understanding and take it to heart."

"Elders today have no two ways about it, crying, the spiritual significance, it's wonderful," said Carlo. Carlo explained that years ago all the young kids that were seen participating this year were all at home in the old days. The different superstitions and the transfer that the dead go thru in them days always meant kids were to stay home.

Elma Madros of Kaltag said, "the stickdance is a wonderful and sorrowful time, together it is to dress one-person each in honor. We don't think of the costs to put it together, we want to dress the person and honor them and send the spirit on to heaven."



*The stick is decorated with ribbons, brought inside and in a clockwise direction carried around the hall. Dancers follow behind the stick as it's brought around singing, Hiyo Hiyo Hiyo Hey! Erected in the center of the hall the stickdance begins.*

photo by Steve Kakaruk

**C**L Cross-Lites says:

"Smile at someone you don't know...it may make their day"



*Furs of Wolverine and Wolf are tied to the stick. Later the furs will be cut into strips and given to individuals.*

photo by Steve Kakaruk