

Eskimo Dance Uplifts Soul in Harsh Fight for Survival

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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 buildup, 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 tonight."

The people in the house looked up to the skylight and answered, "Ee, naquumaruq, Taiqungakneaktuq unaakunt! (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

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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, preceptive 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 laughter 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 unlike 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 of the uplifting of the soul in their fight for survival down through the ages.