

Kaltag hosts yearly stick dance festivities

Editor's Note: Shirley Madros was born and raised in Kaltag, the site of this year's Stick Dance which will be held the night of April 20 after a week of preparatory activities. Shirley wrote the following story for the 1975 issue of Theata, a publication by University of Alaska Native students.

By Shirley Madros

There are many Athabascan dances performed in Alaska, some for special occasions and others just for fun. One of these dances is the Stick Dance, which is held every other year in March or April in the Native villages of Kaltag and Nulato, both located on the middle Yukon River.

One of the reasons for having this feast is to hasten the reincarnation of the soul of the dead person. Another, to pay, in a way, the person who took care of the funeral arrangements. This includes washing the

dead person's body or, if a person drowned, the person who found the body would most likely be "dressed" for the feast. The feast takes place in the presence of the hi'o (stick).

About a year before the Stick Dance takes place, the family of the deceased goes to a close friend to ask if he or she would like to represent one of the family who has died, by exchanging a dish (ti'oak) of food. If the friend accepts the offer, he will return the dish. After that, the family brings the "dead" person a dish every month, and the "dead" person returns it the next day. This exchanging goes on until the night of the Stick Dance.

Throughout the year, the men are busy hunting, and the women cut and dry salmon, whitefish, and sheefish in preparation for the potlatches held during the week of the Stick Dance.

Knitting and sewing are also done by the women. The finished mittens, socks, parkas, mukluks, gloves, and hats will be given to friends of the deceased during the "dressing."

About three nights before the Stick Dance, the men practice the songs they plan to sing. The whole village attends these practice sessions and the women participate by dancing. A

potlatch is usually held on these nights.

It is an exciting and busy week for the villagers, since a lot of visitors come into town to partake in the ceremony. (See KALTAG, Page Eighteen)



BUDDING WILLOWS, an early sign of spring.

—Photo by Harold Schetzle

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mony. Chartered planes buzz over the village and the sound of a sno-machine can be heard across the river, coming into town from the other villages.

On the night of the Stick Dance, a potlatch is held. Large pots of moose stew are carried in by the men and boys. Dried salmon, shieefish and whitefish strips are also brought in. Kettles of tea and coffee are kept warm by the hot stove. Cakes, cookies, breads and Indian ice cream with berries are set on a long table

in a corner of the hall, which is where the Stick Dance takes place. After the adults have eaten, the children are served.

After the potlatch, the men sit on a bench and begin singing the traditional 13 songs. The songs are usually about the deceased and what he or she accomplished in life. They are all sung in the Athabascan language.

The women and girls stand in rows of 10 or 11 facing the singers, sitting on the floor or on benches.

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They stoop over a little and without moving their legs or feet, swing the upper part of their body and their arms with a twisting motion. In their hands they hold either a scarf or a thong of leather. Dressed in brightly colored garments, they make a beautiful scene.

After the 13 songs have been sung, the stick is brought in by the men. Colored ribbons are wrapped around it from top to bottom. The people dance around the hall with the stick chanting the hi'o. It is

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then erected in the middle of the floor, and tied to a beam by a man on a ladder.

People chant and dance around the stick all night. Blankets, bolts of material, knitted gloves, socks and scarves are brought in, carried around the stick a couple of times, and put in a corner for the "dressing." Otter, wolf, beaver, marten and mink pelts are tied to the top of the stick by some lucky trapper.

Towards the end of the Stick Dance, the stick is stripped of its ribbons by people keeping them for souvenirs. The pelts are put in a corner, too.

Around eight or nine o'clock in the morning, the stick is taken down and carried from one end of the village to the other. Finally, it is broken in front of town and thrown over the bank into the river. Those who stayed up all night dancing now retire to rest for the "dressing" that is to be held that night.

After the potlatch, the "dressing" takes place. A partition is put up behind which the people representing the dead strip down. The people who are giving clothing as gifts, dress them in a new wardrobe.

They wear fur parkas of rabbit or beaver skins, beaded calfskin mittens and mukluks made of calfskin or beaver. The clothes are put in printed bags which they carry out with them. After they are dressed, gifts are presented to the people who are close to the deceased. These are the blankets, bolts of materials, gloves, socks and hats that were brought around the stick the night before. The people receiving gifts leave them outside of their homes during the night. It is said to be bad luck if left inside after receiving them.

The next day, the people representing the dead walk around town, shaking hands with all the villagers, saying the final good-bye to the dead person.

On the last night of the celebration, a Mask Dance, or more commonly called "Washtub Dance" is held. The Mask Dance refers to masks which should be worn by both men and women when placing their food behind the partition. Because the men used to hit a stick against a washtub covered with plastic, the second name was given to the dance. A partition made of canvas is put in the hall. While the men sing, the women put various foods behind the canvas. They are expected by all to dance. The movements made are much like those of Eskimo dancers, although the songs are all in the Athabaskan language. Two people sit at the ends of the canvas, keeping time with the music by waving a stick in the air. After all the women have come in and danced, the men leave and then return, laden with food to place behind the canvas. They are also expected to dance.

The food is then passed to adults by some men. Usually soft drinks, candy and cookies are given to the children.

Now that the week of celebrating is over, the visitors return home and Kaltag is a peaceful village again.