

# Stickdance: Honoring our deceased loved ones

by Ron Manook

*Ron attended the Stickdance Ceremony in Nulato the first week (3-9) of April this year. He was born in Nulato and lived there until he was five. He makes trips back home but presently lives in Fairbanks where he teaches Native Art at West Valley High School. This trip home to attend Stickdance was a highlight of the year for him connecting him to his Koyukon heritage and reaffirming for him the strong cultural and spiritual beliefs that still exist in the village of Nulato.*

On April 3, the Stickdance started in Nulato which is a dance held every two years in Nulato. It trades back and forth with the village of Kaltag honoring the people who have passed on and thanking the people who helped during the

time of death. It's a way that we release our feelings and show our love to the ones who have died. There were eleven people that were being dressed for this year. We landed there on Thursday and they had a huge potlatch that night. I couldn't believe the amount of food. I was so happy.

That night the people Indian-danced and the songs that were being sung were songs that had been made in the past for people who had passed away. The chanters were in front. And then there was a row of guys in front of the chanters that were dancing. Right behind there were probably a good 200 women wearing their mitsagha' hoolaan (cloth parkas) doing the wash tub dance. I hadn't been home for nine years and it was just the most beautiful feeling. The feeling I felt inside my

body just dancing made me feel so strong again. It was like I got my strength back after living in the city for so long. That dancing went on until 11:30 that night. I just really loved it. Later on that night they had a fiddling dance.

The next day people were getting ready for a big potlatch that was going to happen. People started coming into the hall around 4 o'clock. There was pickled beaver's tail, boiled beaver's tail, beaver feet; any type of fish you could name. There was moose, muktuk, anything that you can even imagine dealing with Native food. And then there was white man's food too like spaghetti, things like that. Moose head soup was what we were aiming for all the time. Everytime we went in there, we were looking for a pot of moose head soup. We

watched for who was bringing it in because we know the people who make the best moose head soup so we were eyeing them all the time; where they were putting their pot. My sister Karen and I would run over there and grab some of their moose head soup.

They had a big potlatch and speeches. It was really beautiful. The speeches went on for a good hour each night, people thanking people and the villagers thanking people and telling them what it was about. This year, they had a historical time when they explained what Stickdance was about and some of the expectations and the do's and the don'ts. I thought that was really neat this year. I think one of the reasons for it was the amount of people attending. The village of Nulato has a population of around 350-450. They said that over a thousand people were there at the time of Stickdance. In the dance hall, it was shoulder to shoulder. You couldn't move around in there, that's how packed it was.

Later that night, everybody

gathered in the hall again and all the chanters were up in front. There were women dancers. Some of these women had eagle feathers on, some had owl and other types of feathers on in head-dresses. They also had on their *mitsagha'hoolaan*.

During the thirteen songs, there's a group of women who are called the "Caribou Women". They wear headdresses that resemble caribou antlers. They are made out of wire and they're wrapped with red ribbon and they have eagle feathers and rabbit tufting. The women dance in a motion like caribou walking. It's just beautiful to watch. The art that goes on in this thing. Being a trained artist, I was just so fascinated by what I was seeing in there.

There's two guys representing the larger families that are dancing on either side of the women. This is probably the most serious and solemn part of the Stickdance. You just have to keep quiet. You have to have your head down and

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you listen to these thirteen songs that are sung. They say these songs come from the Innoko area, downriver. That's where Stickdance started. Right before the last song is about to end, the people that are being dressed bring in the pole which they have decorated outside with ribbon. It's just beautiful. The women start dancing clockwise around with the decorated pole. The feeling that you get – the chills that go up and down your spine – everyone starts dancing around the pole when it is finally anchored in the center of the hall. It's unbelievable, the power that you feel. It's such a beauty. I've been to Stickdance many times. I was with my sister this time and she had never seen it before. Just to watch her face, she was so overwhelmed by what she was seeing and witnessing.

There are two different chants that are done that I remember when they are dancing around the pole. Throughout the evening furs are brought in and placed onto the pole by the families that are dressing for the dead. And then bolts of materials are brought in by the families. The material is taken off the bolt and we hang onto the material and dance around the pole. Later, they gather the material and put it on the hall walls, sort of decorating the hall, making it look really nice. And then, the furs are hung onto the pole. This goes on for a long time.

We went home and laid down. Your house is always full of people coming and going. Most people get a little sleep and then go back. Around nine a.m., someone came in and said, "I think it's getting time. They're going to take down the pole." We ran to the hall and there must have been around 20 people standing around the hall and we stayed around there for a while. It was really nice. The sun was beginning to shine into the

hall. It was real special.

Finally, they started taking down the furs, around 10:30 a.m. People are going around trying to take the pole down. It's just part of the ritual they do. It's being shaken and shaken. Finally the pole is being taken down and the ribbon is taken off the pole. Everyone is jumping and trying to get a piece of the ribbon which is good luck. Then the pole is taken out into the village and people dance with it, the old site, the old village. And they dance

and chant and sing throughout the whole village. They went through the village once, brought it back into the hall and put it up and then took it down again and danced through the village. That was probably around 11:00 a.m. Finally, the pole was broken and it was thrown out onto the river. They say that wherever the stick points is where the next Stickdance is supposed to be. But they say it will be in Kaltag next year.

After that, they have snowshoe races across the river in front of Nulato. It's really neat to watch the people on the bank in such lively moods. It was really just beautiful down there too, sun shining. And then everybody goes home and gets ready for the next potlatch. And that night, Saturday, is the dressing.

The dressing is another very solemn time. The people that are being dressed represent the dead. The families put together gifts for years and those are brought in. Like my uncle, my auntie Bev was dressing someone for him. He had died forty years ago. It was finally decided to have Stickdance for him. The hall is packed with people and the gifts are brought

in. Furs upon furs, blankets. This year, there were TVs, snowshoes, dog sleds, fish, jarred jams, beads, Russian trading beads or old beads were given away. The amount of beadwork was just overwhelming.

The people that are being dressed gather at one end of the hall. A curtain is put up and the men dress behind that curtain and

another curtain is put up and the women dress behind that curtain. The people that are dressing them are back there helping them get dressed. They put their clothing that they had on into a

bag and they take this bag and sit down with this bag in front of them. These people are never supposed to look up. They are always supposed to keep their head down. This is the last time you will see these people walking alive, in that sense. They get up and single file out the door. They put the bags over their shoulders. They walk out with their heads down, never to look up. That says it's bad to look up and make eye contact with people. They are carrying the spirit of the deceased one with them at this time.

They go out to the bank and they hit the bag with a stick and they say it frees the soul of that individual. When these people are walking out, this is the last time you will see them and so the crying and things that go on as they are walking out the hallway is just unbelievable. It's actually eerie. It hurts. And then they file back into

the hall and they take off their ruff and everything is happy. It's still hard, but you're happy. That's when things are given out. My cousin Irene Silas gave me a suncatcher for her dad, Dennis Silas, and she said, "You hang this in your window and everytime you look at that thing, you think of me." And everytime I look at it, I think of Irene Silas now.

That's a fun time just to watch. People are passing just had a great time that night. Then they have a modern dance which was a lot of fun, people moving around being happy. Herbie Vent played Rock n' Roll. The next night after that, they have the mask dance and it's a dance where they dress up with masks. I guess years ago, they used to use the Eskimo masks. It's a dance in tribute of the Eskimo people. We Eskimo dance. What we do is the men go out and they knock on the door and we say, "Who's there? Nah, we don't want it. Who's there? Well come on in." All the men come in with a bag of crackers or cheese and put it on the other side of the curtains where there's singers. One of the singers has a drum. There's two

people with willow sticks with rabbit tufting on there and they're keeping the beat. This is the only time I see that they used the drum at home is during this Eskimo mask dance. We come in and we dance and if they really like you, they holler and applaud. It's a fun dance.

I think they had a fiddling dance, but everyone is so busy so that night we just went around and visited. We finally got to see people. I never hugged so much and kissed so much. It was really neat. I hadn't seen that many people in so long. It was just a beautiful time. The clothing people had on, the summer parkas people had on, the *mitsagha'hoolaan* people had on, the winter parka and the boots were really nice to see.

I'd really like to thank my auntie Amelia Demoski and her family who put up my family. I came back with a feeling inside of me that I've been through something that is so beautiful and I want that to be in my heart for a long time and it will.

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