

Iglulik Inuit Drum Dance: Past, Present, and Future

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Inuit and Inuvialuit from east to west across the Arctic use drum-dance songs or *pisiit*, the term used by the Iglulik of Baffin Island. Another reference often used is *ayaya*, which refers to the syllables without dictionary definition heard as a refrain in drum-dance songs from Alaska to Greenland. This paper draws from a study of drum-dance songs collected from the northern Baffin Island communities of Igloodik and Pond Inlet (*Mittimatalik*) in 1976 and 1977 and Arctic Bay (*Ikpiarjuk*) in 1964 and 1985. Native people from this eastern Arctic area of Nunavut, Canada are called Iglulik Inuit.

Among the Iglulik, men traditionally composed drum-dance songs alone when they were out hunting. When they returned home, they taught their song to their wives, who in turn taught the song to the other women in the village. Many of the songs focused on hunting or the landscape, such as these examples collected from Pond Inlet and Arctic Bay:

The polar bear over there, I see it over there, ayaya
My harpoon, I suddenly want it now, ayaya
My dogs there, I suddenly want them now, ayaya. (Conlon 575)

I love the scenery when I'm going up the rough hill.
Do you think you are going to see me? ayaya
The ground is all covered with white, ayaya. (Conlon 292)

Song titles usually consist of the first line of the text. One of the most popular drum-dance songs from the Iglulik corpus is the song, "I'm so happy." Ethnologists collected eleven versions of this song from Pond Inlet (1976, 1977) and Arctic Bay (1985). In 1977, people in Pond Inlet still knew the identity of the composer, a man called Qargiuq, and why he made the song:

One winter, Qargiuq was really sick with TB, and he thought he was going to die... But he got better again, and when he was hunting seal, in springtime, he sang: "I'm so happy I'm going to live, to see the spring come again, ayaya." (Conlon 183)

The sunrise reference ("to see the spring come again") is a recurring figure of speech in various versions of the song "I'm so happy." This is indeed a happy time for the Inuit when the springtime sun arrives after months of darkness. The musical elements of this song are typical of many drum-dance compositions, with its strophic structure,

five-note scale, octave range, and three musical phrases, ending on a plateau contour sung to the familiar *ayaya*.

The composer of the drum-dance song accompanied his song by playing a frame drum, or *qilaut*, the term used by the Iglulik. Since the Arctic area is north of the tree line, in pre-contact times drum makers used a whale bone to make the frame and then bound the skin with sinew, also using bones to make drum handles and beaters. After the arrival of European ships in the 1500s that frequently became stranded on the ice, the Inuit used the wood and nails from the shipwrecks to make drums. The wooden drum frames were usually around a half-foot in diameter, but could be as large as three feet in diameter.

The drum was made by bending a piece of wood after steaming and soaking it, then tapering the frame and nailing it together in a circle. The maker bound the skin to the frame with sinew or string, and bound the drum handle with the same cord. He then shaped a wooden drumstick to fit his hand, and covered it with the skin of a seal. The drum was taken apart when not in use for ease of transport and to conserve space. In the eastern Arctic region, only one person played the drum at a time, so an entire community could share a drum. As nomadic people, the Inuit kept the size and number of possessions to be moved to an absolute minimum.

Drum dancers performed at song festivals that took place in a large igloo, or *qaggi*, which could hold up to 100 people. These events occurred principally in autumn or winter when extended families lived together. The evening began with a feast that provided a means of sharing food with the entire community. At the beginning of the festival, the communal drum was placed on the ground in the center of the igloo. Any composer could start. When a man picked up the drum, his wife began to sing his song, leading the choir of women who had learned the song from her. The composer *did not sing*, although he cried out from time to time. He would not actually strike the stretched membrane. Instead, he hit the wooden rim around the skin with the beater, striking alternately on the base and the top of the drum or on either side of the drum handle. Bent slightly over the drum, the drum dancer moved back and forth, shifting his weight from side to side in a rhythm roughly synchronized with the beat of the drum. When the first dancer finished, he returned the drum to the ground and another man took his place.

Drum dancers competed with each other, testing their endurance to determine the capacity of each dancer to “hold the beat.” The longer the song, the heavier the drum seemed to become, and the large size of the drums in the eastern Arctic made this task very difficult. Members of the community, often the elder men present, evaluated the merits of each performance, taking the number of songs known by each contestant into consideration. They announced the winner at the close of the dancing. Along with the prestige of being considered the best performer, the winner sometimes received tangible prizes such as a harpoon.

The competition could involve all the men participating at a festival or it could be specifically between song cousins, or *illuqiik*. Two men formed this relationship by mutual consent, signifying a strong friendship. Knud Rasmussen, the Arctic explorer who

wintered in Igloolik in 1921, pointed out that “Song cousins may very well expose each other in their respective songs ... but ... in words so chosen as to excite no feeling among the audience but that of merriment” (230).

These friendly songs contrasted sharply with the use of drum-dance competitions to resolve serious disputes, where social humiliation was the principal means of defeating one’s opponent. Rasmussen described the song duel: “Here, no mercy must be shown ... but behind all such castigation there must be a touch of humor, for mere abuse in itself is barren, and cannot bring about any reconciliation” (231). The song duel restored the social equilibrium of the village. Therefore the drum dance had a multi-functional dimension, providing entertainment during the long winter nights, drawing the people together, and easing tensions arising from daily living in a close-knit community.

Despite the inroads of white culture in the Arctic, elements of traditional song and dance are still apparent and modern-day *ayaya* songs exist alongside older compositions. Drum dancing has continued to be a part of spring festivals in the north, such as the annual Toonik Tyme in Iqaluit (Frobisher Bay) on Baffin Island attended by the author in May of 1987.

Contemporary Inuit singer/songwriter Susan Aglukark is in high demand as a motivational speaker and workshop facilitator. She uses her music to focus the public’s attention on social issues that Native people contend with worldwide. An excerpt from the text of her song “I Will Return” from her 2006 CD release *Blood Red Earth* is below:

Aya yaya aya yaya
 Traded in the river for the metal train
 Traded in the earth for the concrete plains
 Given up the silence for the sounds of empty gain
 Now I wonder what it is, that’s calling out my name
 Aya yaya aya yaya aya yaya

A powerful means of communication, drum dancing and its associated *ayaya* songs continue to provide a way for the Inuit to maintain a link with the past while passing on information about their history and traditional way of life to future generations.

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