

The Significance of Inuit Drum Dance

Patricia Dewar

University of Alberta

The significance of Inuit drum dancing (or sport) may simply be stated as being important because they are presentational forms in society. 'Doing it right in dramatic time' implies both reason and passion. More specifically, participants engage in performance by building certain kinds of relationships which are governed by group norms. These norms are in turn varied with a wide range of individual inputs and constraints. The gestalt of any performance study must therefore investigate: the social context that imposes referential meaning, the structural properties of the form being studied to examine how the parts hang together to provide its own relational meaning, and thirdly, the performer's own set of premises or specific rationale that translates 'theory into practice.'

In terms of a historical perspective it is well known amongst observers of the North that the salient forces of social change did not unfold gradually. The complex issue of traditional Inuit generally refers to a period of history prior to the 1920's or '30's, or before the accumulated effects of the Big Three: the missionaries, the Hudson Bay trading posts (implying the increased European, white fur (fox) market), the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and later the steady advance of government intervention policies in the post War II era.

In general, early stereotyped descriptions of Inuit as a pan-Eskimo culture have created more inaccuracies than truths. Different groups of people provide a wide range of behavioral patterns since they adapt to vastly different ecological niches. Therefore, one finds certain characteristics in one place that one does not find in another. Drum dancing in the Western Canadian Arctic is distinctly different from the East. Within the East slight variations in social context and dance styles therefore arise.

Contrary to romantic myths, the Inuit today are a thoroughly modern people. It is obvious that traditional function/purpose describing social use through extended kinship of song/dance partnerships (or special relations providing a survival support system), as well as its religiomagico function no longer exists. In brief, drum dancing has to do with a reality implanted in history. The aesthetic appeal is closely tied to the intensely personal nature of song and dance, or high identity characteristic of increased communal involvement associated with low scale societies.

Today the import relates to the feasibility or popularity of drum dancing being promoted as a form of ritual theatre. In some communities, ritual setting is preserved in the sense that participants re-enact drum/dance/song for the purpose of transmitting 'Inuit Ways.' In other communities, drum dance performance orientates towards attenuated ritual, or performance geared to the increased complexity of media and social/political events. The latter form of cultural theatre may be viewed as restored ritual or, more explicitly, "restored for whites."

Investigation examines ritual theatre in terms of a general traditional rationale, i.e., function/use, as well as a specific rationale associated with the performer's own purpose or set of premises. The latter enables historical relevance since the arduous activity is practiced or valued according to promoting a stance that may be viewed as either a competitive or non-competitive ethic.

In general, the single genre of traditional Inuit drum dance provided universal themes of social educative function implying (1) social control and conformity associated with competition, and/or, (2) cathartic release themes, associated with self-generative process and religiomagico function. These themes are, of course, common to sport, games and play.

What is significant is that in different societies in different historical times, in certain circumstances and with particular forms, that is, specific 'kinds' of games and dance, a predominate theme will emerge. What is articulated, therefore, is a value system or an aesthetic preference in performance that orientates towards a continuum of a competitive or non-competitive ethic. The continuum relates to both sport and dance and to the changing socio-cultural conditions inherent in historical time and place.

Finally, two key informants, Noah Puigaattug of Igloolik and the late Donald Suluk of Eskimo Point, must be recognized as central to this presentation. They gave of their knowledge without reservation and with sincere interest, in order that traditional Inuit culture might be understood through perspectives gained in traditional drum dance. The increased understanding arises not only from identifying a particular (i.e., Inuit) culture or dance form, but that in the process roots of western culture are unconsciously identified. In brief, a consideration of Inuit drum dance illustrates how dance serves as a vehicle for understanding the social-historical context.