

The Competitive Nature of Inuit Drum Dance: A Diachronic View

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Dance, like sport, is an icon of a culture's most important features. Accordingly, Inuit drum dance is informed with a full array of meaning. Discussion here, however, focuses upon examining the competitive nature of Inuit drum dance. Moreover, because my overriding aim is to provide an appreciation of Inuit drum dance (as it is practiced in the Central Canadian Arctic), the investigation remains broad.

Specifically, inquiry seeks to explain the indigenous perspective that "Inuit drum dance is not a real competition" (Suhrk, Arviat, 1986). At the same time, an Inuit trait, described by Rasmussen as a "penchant for rivalry", is recognized. In short, inquiry seeks to interpret how in drum dance event participants perceive the competition as strong, but perceive the ethos as play.

My approach is twofold. First, I identify the significant components that describe the dance form as a test in strength and endurance. Secondly, I examine how rules of reciprocity are embedded within the structure of the dance form itself; the ideals of a co-operative egalitarian society tested in every drum dance event. (Thus, the expressive form is not perceived as passive or a neutral reflection of ideas that exist in the social world, but rather as a "site/sight" (Blundell 1990-91) where ideas are contributed and contested, the experience structured in accordance with changing conditions and personnel.)

In general, the approach emphasizes an indigenous theme of 'cultural persistence', as opposed to the 1960s (EuroAmerican) prognosis of 'acculturation.' In other words, the critical understanding is that drum dance event does not represent a relic from the past, or that participants identify a society in transition. Specifically, in dancing out a unique cultural/historical heritage, the indigenous rationale is associated with articulating how relations, understood as co-operative and respectful, are as valid today as yesterday. Accordingly, the significance of drum dancing is characteristically described by Inuit as not a real competition since "success and happiness are to be shared" (Suluk, Arviat, 1986). Indeed, Inuit today strongly express the viewpoint that traditional values which define them as a people are not in conflict with concepts of modernity. In short, the future rightfully belongs to Inuit as much as to any other culture.

Not surprisingly, inquiry into expressive forms is diagnostic by nature. Forced to question our own everyday assumptions, discussion concludes by cautioning that in our haste to remedy past wrongs, we may again be guilty of advocating traditional dance and games within a paternalistic system. Specifically, if we adopt an attitude that is kind but not understanding, we are likely to adopt our own Euro American notions of competition that emphasizes a hierarchial structure, as opposed to the traditional Inuit perspective that orientates competition towards a horizontal structure.