



Dancing Dreams, Drumming Life: Winter Dances on St. Lawrence Island

by James E. Williams

In 1967, shortly after I started to study wildlife biology and anthropology at the University of Alaska, I temporarily set aside my academic studies and spent the winter and the following spring living at Savoonga, one of the last traditional Siberian Eskimo villages on St. Lawrence Island.¹ I had just turned eighteen years old, and it was a powerful experience being "called" by some mysterious inner force to live in a world where everything was borrowed from nature and yet nothing was free except one's innermost feelings—and even those were often public knowledge.

One of the unexpected highlights of spending the winter at Savoonga was being able to attend the traditional communal dances that were being practiced there openly again, after surviving a long spell of repression by both church and state. To the isolated St. Lawrence Islanders, dancing was more than ritualized drama or creative release from the boredom of the endless Arctic winter nights. It was a sacred gathering of power—a direct expression of the hidden spiritual and unfathomable being of life—invoked through drumming and chanting, and made manifest by dancing. To experience traditional Eskimo dancing (*aghula*) is to take an inner journey directly to the roots of original expression and collective memory.

Partly in support of the indigenous rights of Natives and partly for my own enjoyment, I participated enthusiastically in the traditional ways, not only during the dances but in daily life as well—hunting walrus, eating raw seal meat, and cutting blocks of snow for water. I was always touched by how willing my new friends were to share their lives with me. Maybe it was because I was young and I didn't pose a threat; maybe it was because I wasn't a researcher trying to analyze them or take something away from them.² Whatever the explanation, I found the Savoonga Eskimos to be a people of generous spirit, who nourished a love of life born from the dangers of living in a rigorous environment. I will forever remember that

year, and I feel privileged to have been allowed to so intimately experience their traditional culture.

In the 1960s, the St. Lawrence Islanders still lived in two distinct, yet related, worlds. One was the world of daily tasks, primarily revolving around hunting, and the other was the world of power, spirit, and magic. The Eskimos moved easily between these two worlds—the mundane and the magical—often blurring the boundaries. Both worlds were equally real, and they were intimately interconnected. What happened in one profoundly affected the other. During my short stay at Savoonga, I came to understand that what held the two worlds together was the human emotions and feelings which emanated from the heart, and that the sound of the drum—the heart beat of the inner world—created the passage that linked the worlds to each other.

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As I soon learned, traditional dancing on St. Lawrence Island was an integral aspect of existence—as basic as hunting, sexual interaction, birth and death, and the changing of the seasons. Dances were held once or twice each month, and they were usually planned several days or weeks in advance. Good weather, a remarkable hunt, or a change of season were all cause for a dance, and it seemed there were many times when dances were held just for sheer pleasure and enjoyment. However, the dances were never casual affairs; the drummers routinely practiced several times a week, and to prepare for an important dance, they might practice daily for weeks.

On the night of a dance, the drummers arrived separately at the chosen house or the community hall, ceremoniously carrying their drums wrapped in furs or sealskin cases. Greeting each other with reserved smiles and multiple nods of their crewcut heads, the drummers avoided conversation or direct contact with the other participants. They even spoke very little to each other and then only in whispers. During the dances,

they were custodians of the past, caretakers of the sacred realms, so they kept separate from the mundane.

The drummers sat in a row, usually on the floor but sometimes on folding chairs, with the oldest, most respected drummer sitting on the left as one faced them. After settling into his assigned place, each drummer carefully unwrapped his drum and began the process of waking and dedicating it. Brown, weathered fingers softened the drum's skin by barely wetting it with water and gently rubbing in the moisture for resilience. Then, tapping the skin, the drummer tested the sound while the drum warmed. This tuning process took at least a half hour, during which the dancers and other participants arrived.

The skin drum—*saguyak*—was a most valued possession on the island.³ Made from the stomach of the walrus, the giver of life, the drum was a symbolic tool. It was round like the world, flat like a calm sea, white like snow, and translucent like ice. When played, it sounded like a heart beating, like ocean waves against the shore, like summer thunder from the sky.

One by one, the drummers finished preparing their drums and then closed their eyes, with their drums resting—almost floating—on their knees. Soon, the room full of people hushed in respectful anticipation. We heard the ever-present wind whistle outside, as it sculpted the curved mounds of hard-packed snow around the village houses. At some invisible cue from the lead drummer, the drummers raised their drums, in perfect unison, to chest height and poised their drumsticks above the now-taut skins. Then, with a powerful surge of drumming, the ceremony began.

The cadence of the drumming was basically a one-two beat, with choreographed downbeats occasionally varying the otherwise steady rhythm. The skill of the drummer brought to life the throbbing sound emanating from the taut skin, but each drum had a power of its own. The drums looked



as if they were flying, floating, lifting up on their own—as if the drummers were only guiding their movements so that they didn't fly away.

Although both men and women danced, only men drummed. Moreover, all the drummers were respected, older men who held positions of authority in the community. These men had reached a stage of life that allowed them to channel the natural spiritual energy needed to master the power of the drum.

There were about a dozen drummers in Savoonga, and usually five to seven drummers played at any one time. If one got up to dance, another drummer or an apprentice would usually step in to take his place. The drummers played with exuberance, grace, and great vitality, animating the room with a tangible presence of spiritual power. They played with such force—using their whole bodies, lifting their feet and legs in unison with each beat—that sometimes I expected the drums to break apart in their hands.

Unlike their distant Yup'ik relatives on the Alaskan mainland, the Savoonga dancers wore no special attire, adornments, or masks. For the most part, they dressed in loose-fitting everyday clothes. Some individuals wore traditional ceremonial sealskin boots, beaded around the top with colorful geometric designs, but external decorations played no significant role in their dances.

Although dancing was usually initiated by the older men, there was no particular order to who would dance. Some men danced alone, while others danced in pairs or in groups of three or four. Even though I knew that some dancers had been dancing for forty, fifty, perhaps even sixty years, the fluidity and spontaneity of their styles were extraordinary. There was no particular right way to dance, yet everything had a meaning. Some dancers used ritualized patterns, called *sayugh*, which required very complicated sets of choreographed movements—full of subtle nuances lost on outsiders. Others improvised new dances on the spot.

The men's dances were created out of their hunting exploits, out of the village's reliance on an abundance of animals, and out of thousands of years of survival amidst the mysteries of the ice. The older men sometimes enacted shamanic teachings received from dreams and visions, usually about how the animals had taught humans to survive. As the main source of food, shelter, and even transportation (the boats were covered with the skin of the female

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walrus), the walrus often figured prominently in their dances.

In contrast, the women appeared to dance from direct inspiration and spontaneous trance states. Despite the different themes and forms of the various dances, once one understood the meanings behind the appearances, one saw that all the dances were connected to the unbroken circle of life.

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The dances were always special occasions for me, and I looked forward to attending every one. During the cold, dark winters, people tended to stay in their homes, and if they went outside, they covered themselves with furs and parkas. The dances provided some of the few occasions where I could actually watch and interact with large groups of people in one place, and it didn't hurt that everyone genuinely seemed to appreciate my attendance.

As an anthropology student, I was especially interested in learning about the old ways, and almost all of Savoonga's old people came to every dance. The old ones were all very sweet and kind, and their mannerisms fascinated me—especially the way the old couples lovingly cared for each other. Some elders were too weak to dance, but even they listened attentively and respectfully to the drumming and moved their feet and hands in the dark, keeping pace to the rhythm of the drum.

The people who interested me most were the older women, who stayed in a group off to one side. All of these women had intricate, clearly visible tattoos on their faces, necks, and hands. In the dim light, the concentric blue-gray lines, circles, and other geometric patterns etched into their cheeks, noses, foreheads, and necks turned these women into strangely beautiful otherworldly beings. Curious, I asked often about the

significance of the tattoos, but I was told that their meanings were long forgotten. The tradition seemed to be dying out. None of the middle-aged or young women had the extensive facial tattooing of the older women, although many had small tattoos on the backs of their hands and knuckles.

Kora, the elder woman of the household in which I lived, was extensively tattooed on her face, chest, and upper back. She also had tattoos on nearly every joint of her body, including her wrists, fingers, ankles, and toes. Whenever she stood to dance, the concentric circles of her tattoos seemed to come alive. Often, as I watched the hypnotic movement of her spinning, spiraling tattoos, my consciousness would begin to drift into another, more dreamlike and timeless state.

Sometimes, during the dancing, the drummers would punctuate their songs with guttural, staccato shouts of "*O-huck*"—an exhortation, also used during hunts, which meant "to get going" or "to put everything you have into it." As in the hunt, every participant was expected to give his or her all during the dance. Anything less than one hundred percent was not good enough.

From time to time, the dancers or members of the audience shouted, "*O-huck*," encouraging the drummers to push the beat—escalating the adrenaline, beating the drums harder and faster—*kallegneq, kallegneq*. The rhythm remained consistent, but as the sound rose and fell in speed and intensity, the pulse of the drums took on a life of its own. The women swayed entranced, while the men vigorously stamped out hunting exploits with powerful but graceful strutting movements, arching their necks and backs, using sudden twists and turns of the waist and ritualized or improvised foot movements.

Although well into his sixties, Piikkaq, the captain of the boat I hunted on, was still an active and skilled hunter. He was also one of the lead drummers and one of the strongest, most impressive dancers. A stout man with close-cropped white hair who dressed in traditional sealskin pants and cotton tunics, he thoroughly enjoyed dancing out his hunting exploits, and whenever he danced, he dominated the floor space with the grace of a polar bear. Pounding his broad feet on the wooden floor of the community building with such force that echoes were heard along the walls, he would move first forward and then backward. Suddenly, he would spin and turn to face his quarry, flashing an exaggerated look of surprise.





Then, with intensely focused concentration, he would raise his arms overhead and sink his harpoon into the heart of the sacrificial walrus. Sometimes, he and his best friend, Iya, would dance together in perfect synchronization, made possible by years of hunting and dancing and thousands of performances.

As the night wore on, I could see the old women gradually fall under the influence of the hypnotic beat of the drumming. Sitting on their knees or squatting—often with their eyes closed and the everyday world shut out—they swayed and twisted in rhythm with the drumming. Sometimes, the pupils of their eyes would roll upward, showing only white, as they moved entranced into another world—an inner world of magic.

One by one, the participants drifted into that other place—the world of animals and spirits. I could see by the expressions on their faces and by their rhythmic body movements that they had let go and entered into the mythical world under the sea. In the dim light, the dancers became the objects of their dances: whale, walrus, polar bear, swan, or owl. As I watched, I learned things about how the animals behaved. Traditional knowledge unfolded and myths were revealed. Walrus taught humans how to live in the barren north, giving its body so that the people could survive. Polar bears were formidable and dangerous competitors.

After the main traditional dances were performed by the older men, and after the younger hunters had their turn, the women would rise to their feet as if puppets pulled up by strings. The women's feet seemed firmly rooted to the floor, and their bodies and arms moved by themselves, animated by some ancient inner force. One by one, they came alive, dancing gracefully, drifting gently through the sky on broad, soft, white wings, like the swans that came to nest on the island every June. It was a dance of birth and beauty.

Guided by the primal rhythmic beat of the walrus skin drums, the dancers swirled into a world of dreams and power—dancing their dreams and the power of life. After several hours, the drumming became hypnotic. It became easy for me to fade in and out of consciousness. Boundaries slipped and the threshold of consciousness shifted. The dimly lit room was transformed into non-ordinary reality. The atmosphere became charged with a tangible pulsation that I felt penetrating my body, stimulating my heart to beat in rhythm with the drums.

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The power of the drum came directly from the heart of the land of the midnight sun, from someplace deep and outside the realm of time. The powerful beat kept reaching inside me, trying to find a seat of forgotten memories, an undefined center at the core of my being. Like stones thrown into a mirror-calm sea, each drum beat dropped into my blood, breaking the surface in patterns of concentric rings, stirring powerful emotions of awe and ecstasy. I was at one with the Earth, the sea, and the ceaseless, changing rhythms of nature—beating, flowing, ebbing, breathing, and renewing.

Unable to resist the pulse of the drums and finding it difficult to keep my eyes open, I eventually learned to let go. An amorphous but powerful feeling of energy would begin to move inside me, expressing itself in sound and motion—the bird must fly, the fish must swim, and humans are born to dance—so I would dance. Sometimes, I danced with the others. Sometimes, I danced alone, stamping out my own rhythm to the beat of an internal drum—on barren ice or snow fields where no one could see me, twirling around in the snow until I felt as if I could see and feel everything.

In time, I discovered that the cadence of the drumming provided me the means to move from one reality to the next. It opened the ancient inner doors of perception and empowered my dreams, letting me glimpse life as it had been before the coming of the White man. By allowing the drumming to enter my spirit and open me to the dance, I experienced a sense of emergence, a coming out while going within. It was a feeling that I would become more familiar with later—a sense of finding myself, only to forget about it or lose it in the next moment; a sense of awakening, only to fall asleep again. Seeing and remembering, then forgetting; finding,

then losing; living, then dying.

Once, I saw myself under the Bering Sea, moving with the strong currents, the ancient tides. I saw the dark, huge, smooth shapes of humpbacked whales—*aghveq*—passing by, gentle giants in the deep green water. I felt great peace, as I spiraled and plunged with them to the depths and then we propelled upward together, breaking the surface in great, graceful arcs.

Then, I was swimming with a pod of walrus—*ayveq*. They moved as one, diving and surfacing, moving swiftly toward some ancient destiny, the water bursting and frothing when they came up for air. Packed closely together, their bodies and flippers moved in powerful undulating movements like those of the dancers. The walrus were creating their own dance to life.

The whales were dancing, the walrus were dancing, everything was dancing. Now, I was seeing things as if I were a bird. I was *anipa*—the snowy Arctic owl—soaring above the cliffs, gliding over vast, white expanses of snow and ice. As I flew, I saw three polar bears—*nanuq*—running across the ice: two creamy cubs following their mother on relentless journeys.

I saw people hunting out on the ice, and I noticed how they followed the same flow of life as the whale, the seal, the owl, the polar bear, and the walrus. Everything possessed its own inherent sense of wild harmony, its own core of being. As all these beings moved across the winter wilderness, they merged with the rhythms of life beyond their control. None could survive without adapting to the ever-changing balance. The wind and the water; the animals and the humans; the moon, sun, and sky—all things were related to the others, each requiring the others.

Then, the lead drummer shouted, "*O-o-huck, O-huck*," and on one powerful last beat, the drumming stopped.

As my normal consciousness returned, I saw that many people had already gone home, and everyone was sleepy. The drummers had finished their last song and had begun to gather their parkas and wrap their drums. Thanking the drummers, I slipped into my parka, said goodnight to my friends, and stepped outside. As I closed the door behind me, I looked up at the night sky. Millions of stars speckled the infinite space above me. In the clarity of the Arctic air, the night sky was so thick with tiny spots of light, stretching from horizon to horizon, that there was almost no space left for the blackness of night. I wished that there was

