



## The “Eye of the Drum”

Past and Present of *qilaujjarniq* in the Canadian Central Arctic (Nunavut)

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**Abstract.** – Today, the art of drum dancing is reviving in Nunavut. Drawing on various ethnographical experiences with a group of elders, this article approaches *qilaujjarniq*, drum dancing accompanied by people singing, putting forward not the audio but the visual code. I argue that the drum allows the drummer to see the deceased, this connection being strengthened by the *pisiit* (songs), which can bring the drummer to a state of joy as he reached another dimension in time and space. Finally, drum dancing offers a suitable context for the performer to express his personal style, which contributes to maintain the great variety of drumming traditions. [*Inuit, drum, deceased, cosmology, songs, visual*]

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### Introduction

Drum dances belong to the very old traditions of the Inuit and they are present in all the circumpolar regions. In Greenland, in the Disko Bay area, archaeologists excavated 4,500-year-old drums. In Canada, the oldest preserved drum was found on Bylot Island (Nunavut) and it is of about 1,000 years old, coming from the late Dorset culture.<sup>1</sup> But in the last century, drum dancing has been declining at a great speed due to Christianization and assimilation.

In 1997, when Herve Paniaq, an Iglulik elder, was invited by the Nunavut Arctic College in Iqaluit to be interviewed by a group of Inuit students, he pointed out that *qilaujjarniq*, drum dancing accompanied by people singing, was disappearing in his north Baffin community. Paniaq stated,

I do not know about the events in the qaggiq. I didn’t see drums for a long time either. I’ve never been to a qaggiq. The only time I saw drum-dancing was when my uncle wanted me to accompany him to Naujaat to the Catholic mission, and I saw a drum-dancer (Oosten and Laugrand 1999a: 30).

At some point, Catholic missionaries indeed thought to incorporate drum dancing in the liturgy but the Inuit opposed, considering that both music could not be mixed. Victor Tungilik, an elder from Naujaat who had been initiated to shamanism, made a similar statement about the disappearance of drum dancing, just a few months before the creation of Nunavut,

The people of Naujaat don’t use the drum anymore. Here we are just about to have Nunavut. We are preparing for it and they want people to hang on to this because it was an Inuit tradition. Because it was something the Inuit had done in the past, among the Nattilingmiut. The Aivilingmiut also used it but only occasionally (Oosten and Laugrand 2001: 87).

<sup>1</sup> In Alaska, drum fragments were dated from about 2,000 years. Drums are thus very old but made out of wood they cannot be preserved. See Grønnev (2012).

Today these statements might be surprising but they illustrate well how much drum dancing was on the verge to disappear at the end of the 20th century, especially in Baffin Island. About twenty years after, drum dancing performances are resuming in many regions of the North, including in Nunavik where they were never observed in the past. Drum dancing traditions remained much stronger in the Kivalliq and Qitirmiut areas, as well as in the West. But today drum dance festivals are multiplying everywhere. They are integrated into cultural celebrations and feasts such as the Inuit Summer Game Festival in Kivalliq and the Toonik Tyme Festival in Iqaluit. The young generations of Inuit are clearly taking over and as such drum dancing is an excellent example of Inuit creative and dynamic traditions.

Not too long ago, a society called Qaggiavuut was launched in order to “strengthen, promote, advocate and create space for Nunavut Performing Artists with a focus on Inuit” (<<http://www.qaggiavuut.com/en/about>>). The society hopes not only to support the local artists but also to broaden connections throughout the circumpolar world in order to develop and nurture the performing arts. Thanks to this society, workshops on drum dancing, among other activities, are delivered in different communities, giving elders and artists the occasion to train new makers of drums and valorize their performances.

Nowadays, drum dancing is even taught in schools and colleges, including in Ottawa, at the Nunavut Sivuniksavut. There, David Serkoak, an Ahirmiut elder and former teacher and principal, is well-known for his ability to teach this art to the young Inuit but also, occasionally, to non-Inuit, as a way to celebrate and express joy. Elders are extremely happy to see these new developments as well as a revival of drum dancing but they are aware of some dangers. Two examples are instructive. Mary Anautalik, from Arviat, stated that the songs performed with the dances were full of meaning and that these *pisiit* were to be known, not only the *ajajaa* songs which are largely predominant today,

[d]rum dancing, for example, it is good to have a happy time, to celebrate together, but this is also disappearing. The *pisiit*, the drum dancing songs, were whole but they are being cut because we are not learning them. It is not just an *ajajaa*, there is a story right there in the song. It is not called an *ajajaa*.<sup>[2]</sup> There is a story in drum danc-

ing songs. It can be about giving thanks, it can be about respect or happiness or about getting an animal or getting something good. It is to enjoy, to make you happy in your life. That's what the drum dancing songs are all about. When somebody helps you, you make a song about it. To make the drum dancing songs whole again we have to try and understand the terms. The language in the song is important (Oosten and Laugrand 2010: 62).

Peter Suvaksuiq, from Arviat, stressed on the value of words, referring to the memory of the past,

[t]here are a lot of stories in the drum dancing songs about caribou, because a lot of people were able to save their lives because of caribou meat. Our ancestors, our grandfathers, didn't have any written materials. Because of that they used to tell stories in songs. The stories are in the songs. If they saved another person's life they would tell it in a song. A long time ago that's how these stories were told because we didn't have any paper. They were in their minds. It was a good way to keep the memory alive by making a song. There are different stories in song, about starvation and death (Oosten and Laugrand 2010: 68).

These views are important as they do not focus on the dance itself but on the words and the connections involved. These elements are at the basis of the power of drum. Such a power is not always clear for people, but when the drum is brought outside of the community, its power becomes stronger. Thus, the drum is now brought in jails, where many Inuit are sent for long periods. For more than 6 years, a few days a week, former Nunavut Commissioner Peter Irniq visited more than half a dozen Ontario federal prisons and penitentiaries to visit Inuit inmates and perform the drum with them, allowing them “to be Inuit again” for a short period of time, giving them a chance to connect with their group (Gregoire 2014).

Focussing on the drum dancing traditions of the Eastern Arctic (Nunavut), I will argue here that if the audio code is obviously very significant in the performance, there is more to it. Drum dancing is not only sound and body language, it also has to do with vision. It creates a context where the drummer, thanks to the singer and to the words pronounced, can see and foresee things – people and animals – and connect to the ancestors. As such, the visual code offers a key as it is the case with shamanism, the shaman being able to see when his eyes are closed. Here, it applies for the individual dances of the Eastern Arctic, the drum dancing traditions being very different in the Western Arctic. There these

2 For Inuit from other communities, *ayaya* songs are similar to the *pisiit*. Thus Kendra Tagoona gave Paula Conlon a similar comment than Mary Anautalik stating that, “Ayaya singing is mostly an expression of personal experiences that people have passed on through the ages, telling stories of their Inuit

culture, their family, celebrations and emotions, hunting and fishing stories, or songs about their environment and weather” (<<http://www.native-dance.ca/index.php/Interviews/Tagoona>>; consulted on June 11th, 2017).

performances are more collective to the extent that the dancers often perform like in Alaska, without handling the drums that are played by the singers.<sup>3</sup>

In this article, I will focus on the Central Arctic. I will use an anthropological approach inspired by M. Mauss’s classic study (1979) of the regional diversity of Inuit society. Closely related areas are considered to be linguistic and cultural variants linked by transformations in time and space. The close cultural relationships between the Kivalliq, the Iglulik, and Qitirmiut areas are well attested to, and these areas are considered together here as an anthropological field of study. The ethnographical material was recorded between 1997 and 2014 during various workshops held in different communities from these three areas: Igloolik, Rankin Inlet, Arviat, Baker Lake, and Kugaruuk. The verbatim accounts have been published by the Nunavut Arctic College, but no analysis has yet been provided. Additional information comes from the ethnographic literature as well as from personal participant observations during many community feasts. Elders are named on their demand, assuming that they are the ones who keep Inuit knowledge alive and pass it on to the next generations. Our work concentrates here on elders’s views and perspectives. In this article, I will first discuss the relationship between drum dancing and shamanism as this debate remains often discussed. Then I will focus the role of the deceased, and finally deal with the cosmological dimension of the drum.

### Drum Dancing and *angakkuuniq* (Shamanism)

In the Canadian Arctic drum dances have been studied extensively by ethnomusicologists and anthropologists who recorded many songs, mostly in the Iglulik and Kivalliq areas.<sup>4</sup> Pelinski focused on the Kivalliq traditions whereas Conlon mostly worked in northern Baffin Island, in the communities of Arctic Bay, Pond Inlet, and Iglulik where she stayed in 1964–65, 1976 and 1977, respectively. From these studies it is not clear, however, to what extent drum dances were part of the shamanic séances, or not.

According to some early Western observers from the 19th century such as Father Gasté in the Kivalliq or Rae, the shamans they met were often operating before or after a drum dance. In a preceding article

we have emphasized this aspect in details (see Laugrand and Oosten 2008), but the question has still to be solved.

Descriptions of the *tivajuut* winter feast indicate that the *angakkuut* (shamans) were definitely using drums before organizing wife exchanges. Rachel Ujarasuk remembered witnessing this ritual, just before she converted to Christianity performing *siqqitirniq*,

[t]here was a qaggiq, a big iglu. It was a very large iglu made of snow. There was also drum-dancing. There was a very high platform made of snow inside the qaggiq. Two people came in through the entrance and jumped over this pillar of snow. One of them had a whip. One of them had a stick. I remember seeing those two. The person who was drumming had really long hair and he wore a band to keep his hair out of the way. The people who were singing were towards the back. Their hoods were over their heads in front of them. They were sitting on a platform. Those that did not have their hoods over their heads had a mitten placed on their head. That was what they did. This memory I had was just before we went through *siqqitirniq*. It was a time of happiness, of celebration. It was after that, in the spring time, when they turned to religion (Oosten and Laugrand 1999b: 123).

But not much can be found about shamans using drums. The conclusion of Kleivan and Sonne (1985: 25) stating that the drum was not part of the shamanic complex in Canada as it was Greenland (see Gessain et Victor 1973) is partly true. Yet, such a conclusion might be too quick and not consistent with some ethnographers and elders’s views. Franz Boas (1901: 154), for instance, observed with respect to shamanic activities, that a drum was sometimes used: “In these incantations a drum is used which is made of a large wooden hoop covered with deer-hide.” Further West, among the Innuinait, Diamond Jenness (1953: 5f.) reported the use of the drum for the *ilimmaqtuqtuq* ritual quite explicitly,

[o]n another occasion the same shaman sat down in the middle of the dance-house, beat his drum and ordered the people to extinguish the lights and to tie him up. They lashed him with stout cords of bearded-seal hide, fastened a noose around his neck and drew him up towards a rafter until his feet were several inches above the floor and his head dropping on one side as though he were dead. After a few minutes they heard his drum beating again and his voice bidding them relight their lamps. When the lamps were relit he was sitting quietly on the floor beating his drum.

More recently, a few elders shared congruent views. According to Ujarasuk, from Iglulik, “the shamans used to drum” (Ujarasuk 2003: 264). Si-

3 A contemporary dance performed by the Ulukhatok Western Drummers and Singers can be watched on YouTube (see Devlin 2013).

4 See Pelinski et al. (1979); Pelinski (1982); Cavanagh (1982); Nattiez (1988); Dewar (1990); and Conlon (1992).

las Putumiraqtuq, from Qamanittuaq, reported that *tuurngait* could not resist to the sound of the drum: “Dès qu’il y a une danse au tambour, les esprits chamaniques entrent dans le corps des chamanes pour se réjouir. Et lorsque les chamanes se joignent à la danse au tambour, les esprits se joignent à eux aussi” (in Mannik 1995: 23). Mary Kakee (in Komangapik 1999: 60) even connected the drum dance to *ilisirniq*, sorcery and hexing. No wonder that Okpik (McComber 2005: 222) later indicated that for many Inuit, drum dance was “the Devil’s work.” Armand Tagoona from Qamanittuaq also connected the drum to shamanic performances,

[d]rum dancing ... in the olden days was not just drum dancing. It always had something to do with the spirits. Oh yes, during the dance the dancer did it for fun and sang his own song or sang with others. But by doing this he was telling others through the song things he could not tell them just by talking. As long as he’s moving around and hitting the drum and dancing on the snow floor his shyness cannot be seen, and usually the singers closed their eyes too. Most of the time, the dance took place because the *angakkuq* was going to do something for the good of the camp and for the Inuit in that camp (Tagoona 1975: no page numbers).

Tagoona’s statement reflects the Anglican view on drum dancing as this Church was for a long time deadly against it. But the notion of spirit might probably refer to the deceased rather than to the *tuurngait*, the shamanic helping spirits. Yet, his statement shows that the visual code not only applies to the dancer but to the singers as well as they also close their eyes.

Another testimony from Rachel Ujarasuk, who belonged to the Anglican Church, illustrates how this church severely condemned the drum. Fortunately, Ujarasuk had found another solution.

When I was a small child, there was no qilaujjarniq. It was only when I went to the Iglulingmiut area that I saw people drum dancing. While we were over there, when we got religion, we were told that whether they were *angakkuq*’s chants, or drumming, or singing *pisiit*, they were no longer to be practised. It was when I became old enough to go visiting that I heard a person singing a *pisiq*. It would come into my head that my parents never sang that kind of song. It was when I would go visiting that I would hear it. When my parents seemed to be asleep and I was old enough to go visiting on my own I would hear the song. At first, I would sing it in my head. Then, I would quietly start singing. My father would tell me we were not to sing those songs any more. These songs belonged to those who were not religious. Now that we had religion, we were not to sing those songs any more. I became quite embarrassed that time, and I stopped doing this. We did not qilaujjaq over there (Oosten and Laugrand 1999b: 131).

Ujarasuk thus practiced *tusaarruuq*, i.e., she played the *pisiq* she heard over and over in her head. From her story, it appears that drum dancing was condemned by the church not so much for its connection to shamanism but rather because the Christians were supposed to learn and sing other songs and Christian hymns,

[w]e were told that we were to turn our back on our old life and start a new life. We were to let go of anything that was old. That is the reason those of us from the Tununirmiut area, those who lived in Mittimatalik and Kangiq&ugaapik dropped our ajaajaa songs right away. It was only after I was taken to the Iglulik area as an adult that I finally heard and saw ajaajaa songs and drumming with the qilaut. In our area, we didn’t sing these songs (Oosten and Laugrand 1999b: 141).

Thus, ethnographic data suggest a possible connection between shamanism and the use of the drum. This spiritual connection gets stronger with the *pisiit*, the songs that sometimes allow the drummer to get overjoyed when he accesses another dimension in time and space. Victo Tungilik stated that he himself possessed eleven *pisiit* of his own, and that this enabled him to enjoy drum dancing (Oosten and Laugrand 1999b: 87).

Today, many Anglican are however taking another position claiming that drum dances had nothing to do with shamanism. In that respect, Meeka Arnakaq, from Pangnirtuuq, a leader of the new healing circles, is also using the drum in her ceremonies.

Catholics were not always at ease with such a practice either. In 1937, Catholic Bishop Clabaut reflected: “... de longs refrains en ya-ya ... feraient dans nos églises un effet pour le moins original. Mais on ne discute pas des goûts musicaux d’un peuple. ... Lorsque nous serons morts, peut-être les futures prêtres esquimaux se plairont-ils à faire chanter à leurs ouailles les louanges de N.-D. des Neiges, en les accompagnant de leurs ‘ya-ya’ nationaux” (Laugrand et Routhier 2001: 333). But the Oblate missionaries recorded many drum dancing ceremonies, made films and photographs of the drummers, and recorded many *ayaya* songs. In the Western Arctic, Father Métayer amassed an impressive collection of songs. However, at that time Clabaut’s idea of integrating drum dances within the Christian liturgy was rejected by the Inuit. Inuit thought that those practises were related to different contexts, and that things should not be mixed. Drum dancing was only to be performed when visitors from the outside would come into a camp or a community, or during Christmas, when game would be available for the feast, ingredients that allow the expression of joy. Catholic mass, on the



contrary had to be performed on a more regular rhythm.

Nowadays, Roman Catholic elders themselves do not agree on the connection that can be made between the drum, shamanism, and Christianity. Mariano Aupilaarjuk, from Kangir&iniq, stressed on the fact that one should not be mistaken and that the situation would vary depending on the communities,

*Qilaujjarniit*, songs that were sung with a drum, were mistaken as *sakajjutiit*, the songs of *angakkuut* (Saladin d'Anglure 2001: 13).

... I think in Iglulik they tended to celebrate more. In Natilik, when it was no longer winter, or when we were celebrating a first time kill, we would dance using a *qilauti*, a drum. The people would pretend to fight over the food, whether it was fish or meat (92).

... Maybe some *angakkuut* used the drum for shamanism, but for us that was not the case. A long, long time ago, when people would get together from different camps, they would get together in a *qaggiq* (2001: 92).

According to Aupilaarjuk, drum dancing was a way to celebrate and express joy and happiness, but not a shamanic practice. Originating also from the Natilik area, Ollie Itinnuaq, went even further stating, "[t]hose who are ignorant, think that people who dance with a drum are performing shamanic rituals, which is not the case at all" (Oosten and Laugrand 2001: 105).

But Job Murjungniq, an Ahiarmiut elder, expressed a slightly different view, connecting the *irinaliutiit*, shamanic formulas similar to Christian prayers, with the drum dancing: "I had a dream while I was sleeping. I was able to find power in my dream. I dreamed this drum dance song. I learned it in my sleep. You can look down at me if you want, but I have this *irinaliuti*" (Oosten and Laugrand 2010: 111). In fact, Murjungniq is not indicating that drum dancing belong to the shamanic activities but rather that it has a connection with the ancestors who communicate with the living through dreams. Yet, *irinaliutiit* are like prayers, they operate with the unseen.

In the 1920s, Rasmussen (1929: 228 f.) also suggested a connection between the *qilaut*, the drum, the technique of *qilaqtuq*, head lifting, and shamanism. In his description of Iglulik song festivals he reported,

[t]he one who is to lead off with an original composition now steps forward, holding the large drum or tambourine, called *qilaut*, a term possibly related to the *qilavq* previously mentioned: the art of getting into touch with spirits apart from the ordinary invocation. For *qilaut* means literally: "that by means of which the spirits are called up".

This term for the drum, which with its mysterious rumbling dominates the general tone of the songs, is doubtless a reminiscence of the time when all song was sacred. For the old ones believe that song came to man from the souls in the Land of the Dead, brought thence by a shaman; spirit songs are therefore the beginning of all song.

This ambiguity between shamanism and drum dancing cannot be solved with the existing ethnography (Laugrand and Oosten 2008). Initially drum dancing might have been closely connected to shamanism (see Nattiez 1988 and Saladin d'Anglure 2001), it is however difficult to demonstrate. Moreover, these connections might have been lost with the adoption of new musical instruments after the coming of the whalers, and later, that of missionaries who often did not like these practices. But today, the power of the drum cannot be denied. Even if the drum is by no means a sacred instrument, it gives power to the extent that the dancer is no more alone but connected with his living family, with the animals, and with the ancestors. This interpretation is congruent with the fact that numerous Inuit carvings depict scenes where animals or shamans are handling a drum, or are in a dancing position, suggesting that a transaction operates at another level.

## Drum Dancing and the Role of the Deceased

We find no elaborate death or ancestor<sup>5</sup> cult in Inuit society, yet the deceased play an important part in social life and their descendants continue to depend on them. The significance of the dead is easily overlooked as they rarely dominate a ritual context, but there is hardly a ritual context where they do not play a part. Visits to the graves are beneficial to their descendants and namesakes. Small gifts to the deceased occurred in many contexts such as birth and death (Rasmussen 1929: 173). From the traditional death rituals it emerges that the dead are considered as givers of game, and that people share drink and food at graves with them so they may continue to give.<sup>6</sup> In the naming system the dead are represented in living people and these relationships are taken very seriously, as a deceased relative may be

5 Some anthropologists (e.g., Rasmussen) as well as Inuit use the term ancestors. Inuit use the term *sivullit*, those who go ahead or in front referring to the *inumariit* of the past.

6 See, e.g., Boas (1907: 486) who relates that at the third night after death the mourners visit the grave and take some food for the deceased, saying to the *tarniq*, "You were kind to the people when you had plenty of caribou-meat, plenty of seal, walrus, and salmon, and your soul shall send us plenty of game."

the only help you can get in times of need (Kolb and Law 2001: 96). Even today, we find many testimonies of Inuit women relating how deceased relatives visited them in their dreams during pregnancy indicating that they wished to be renamed in the unborn child.

The dead are always present in a double way: represented in their namesakes and supporting them at the same time. The descendants are largely responsible for the fate of the deceased who can turn in benevolent ancestors supporting their living namesakes, or evil *tupilait* intent on destroying those who did not respect them. Descendants and namesakes should honor the deceased by respecting them, observing the necessary rules and rename them in the children that are born. But people should not attach themselves too much to the deceased. Elders often emphasize that one should not grieve or mourn too much. Aalasi Joamie from Iqaluit stated, “You should not grieve for anyone you lose for too long. The deceased has a soul. The soul may end up roaming the earth if we grieve for them for too long” (Akisu Joamie in Therrien and Laugrand 2001: 245).

The names of the deceased should be remembered, and they live on in the stories and songs that are told about them. Through the songs, people connect to their ancestors. To some extent drum dances address the deceased and allow people to connect to them.

In the past, drum dancing and song feasts were usually celebrated in a large snow house, the *qagse* or *qaggi*<sup>7</sup> in the winter season, when food was abundant. Rasmussen (1929: 227 f.) related that feasts were only celebrated if there was an abundance of blubber and meat. A feasting house was built or the community assembled in the largest igloo.

Those taking part in a song festival are called *qag'ifut*; the poem recited is called *pisEQ*, the melody of a song *i'ŋERut*; and to sing is *i'ŋERta'rneq*; the combination of song,

words and dance is expressed by the word *mumERneq*: “changing about”; having reference to the fact that as soon as the leading singer has finished, another comes forward; he sings: *mumERpEQ*, plural *mumERTut*. The chorus, which must always accompany the leading singer, who beats time with his drum while dancing, is called *in̄jortut*: those who accompany in song.

Elders provided similar statements. According to Noah Piugaattuk (*Igloodik Oral History Database* n. d.: IE 189), from Iglulik: “When they were assured that the days ahead would now be able to provide them with their food ...” George Kappianaq from Iglulik (IE 155) recalled that the *qaggi* was usually held when hunters and their family came to a central location, for instance, when they made camp on the ice where they would hunt seals. This could be in January or even earlier. The location was usually a place on the ice where the hunters would have easier access to the hunting grounds. Kappianaq later described the feast he could remember,

[t]hey would all get together in one iglu. The women would be on the bed platform and the men would be on the floor. They would either make a *qaggiq* that had a sitting platform all around, or they would use the largest iglu and the women would sit on the bed. During those times they would have *qilaujarniq* contests, where they would be drumming and whoever won would be quite happy (Oosten and Laugrand 2001: 16).

According to Rasmussen (1929: 240) people celebrated the feast in a circle with the men inside and the women outside. The women supported and accompanied their men who played the drum. “Every wife must know her husband’s songs, for the woman is supposed to be the man’s memory.” Men would act as hosts of the feast. Rasmussen (1929: 241) reported that among the Nattilingmiut, “[o]n the evening when any man of the village gives a banquet and festival in the *qag'e*, the following cry is used to call the people together: ‘*qag'iava*’, ‘*qag'iava*’, this is shouted about the place until all have heard.”

Usually the men and women dressed up in their best clothes. In a description provided by Rasmussen (1931: 130) of a feast among the Umingmaktormiut, he reported,

Both men and women deck themselves out in special garments that gleam brightly with all the pretty inlays of white belly-skin, let in as patterns. Over back and shoulders the men have skins of white ermines that stream like pennants during their movements, and great pains have been taken in embroidering the boots of men and women with red and white strips of skin.

The necessity to dress in beautiful clothing is still well respected today as elders and youth always

7 The institution of the feast house is widely spread over the Arctic. In the Canadian Arctic the feast house was usually a temporary construction for the organization of feasts and festivals. Whereas the *kinirvik*, the birth hut, was exclusively a female domain, and the igloo was shared by men and women, the feast house may have had strong male connotations as suggested by a story about the spirit of the feast house related by Rasmussen (1929: 224 f.) as well as the narrative of the origin of sun and moon. Thus Noah Piugaattuk explained, “[t]here were taboos that had to be respected, so there were times when woman were barred from participating in any of the large gatherings such as the *qaggi*. These included the women that had just given birth or advance pregnancies, or for those who might have had a recent miscarriage. These were usually the women that had to abide by the taboos with many restrictions” (*Igloodik Oral History Database* n. d.: IE 189).

perform with what is now called their "traditional clothing." This feature might be a way to show respect to the animals who provide the clothes but also to the deceased who are not visible but watch and enjoy the performances. It is also congruent with the fact that drum dances are supposed to take place only when there is a reason to celebrate and an abundance of food. On the contrary, a drum dance is not possible in bad conditions. Thus in Arviat, a drum dance with the Ahiaarmiut group was once cancelled in the context of our workshops, since as a hunter was still missing in the community, probably lost or stuck in the tundra because of the weather. The Inuit recommended waiting for his return before starting the drum dance.

### The Drum (*qilauti*) and Its Cosmological Dimension

The cosmic dimensions of the drum are illustrated in the Nattilik myth of the origin of thunder and lightning. Rasmussen (1931: 378) relates that they were a brother and sister. "They turned themselves into spirits of the air and rushed across the sky, the sister striking sparks with her firestone, the brother striking his piece of dried skin like a drum, so that the heavens roared (*qilauterpalulerlune*), and in that way they rose up to the sky." Thus, the heavens themselves resonated like a drum. The terminology is confirming such an interpretation since the term *qilak* not only denotes heaven but also the ceiling of a house and the palate of the mouth, connecting the various levels of the cosmos,<sup>8</sup> the house, and the human body (Therrien 1987). This association between the drum and the body, and particularly the eye appears with the middle part of the drum. Rasmussen described it for the Iglulingmiut, stating that before the song festival begins, the drum had to be carefully tuned up.

The skin, which is stretched on a wooden frame, sometimes quite round, sometimes oval in shape, is made from the hide of a caribou cow or calf with the hair removed. This is called *ija'*, the "eye" of the drum, and must be moistened with water and well stretched before use. Only thus will it give the true, mysterious rumbling and thundering sound (Rasmussen 1929: 229).

Today, drums are often not made with skin but rather with fabric, but the cosmological connotation of the drum is maintained since the shape remains

the same. Rasmussen described it when he met the Umingmaktormiut who stated,

Sometimes a ring forms round the sun; it is called *qilauta'*: the drum of the sun; for it forms a figure round about the sun just like the drum used in the festival house. We do not quite know what this means; some believe that, simply because it resembles the drum we dance to, the sun drum is an omen of something pleasant that will happen. If it is not a ring, but only an arc that forms round the sun it is called *nataineq*, which is thought to mean a part of the wooden rim of the drum. This, then, means that somebody has died (Rasmussen 1931: 23).

This last example suggests again that drum dancing is closely connected with the deceased.

Today these conceptions might remain at an unconscious level but more research should be done. In all cases, drum dances clearly vary considerably from one place to another. According to Luke Anrna'naaq, from Arviat, each person has his own style of drumming, and this is probably an old feature.

Each has his own unique style of drum dancing movement. Why is this so, I cannot tell. Some don't do the knee bending motion, they just stand still while they beat the drum, some move around in a circle without ever uttering a sound. Some appear to struggle with the drum but eventually seem to overcome, while still in a drum dance procession ... Some are so good in their motions that they move back and forth gracefully. Others run back and forth while some to jump from one place to another in successive moves (Bennett and Rowley 2004: 109).

It is quite interesting today to see, how the dancers indeed develop their personal styles and become known for these differences. In our workshop, for instance, Luke Nulijuk from Gjoa Haven was considered as an exceptional dancer.

In the 1920s, Rasmussen (1929: 229) was impressed by the style of drumming of the Iglulingmiut, and he described very well,

[t]he singer stands in the middle of the floor, with knees slightly bent, the upper part of the body bowed slightly forward, swaying from the hips, and rising and sinking from the knees with a rhythmic movement, keeping time throughout with his own beating of the drum. Then he begins to sing, keeping his eyes shut all the time; for a singer and a poet must always look inward in thought, concentrating on his own emotion.

Here, the closing of the eyes suggests that it is now the eye of the drum that matters. The individual vision gives precedence to the vision generated by the drum. The skin of the drum, its eye, is never hit. According to Rasmussen (1929: 229 f.)

<sup>8</sup> The cosmos itself has the connotations of a house. The universe rests on pillars that will be destroyed by Sila at the end of time (see Rasmussen 1929: 37, 252; 1931: 230 f.).



[t]here are very precise rules for the use of the qilaut. The skin of the drum itself is never struck, the edge of the wooden frame being beaten instead, with a short and rather thick stick. The drum is held in the left hand, by a short handle attached to the frame, and as it is fairly heavy, and has to be constantly moved to and fro, it requires not only skill, but also considerable muscular power, to keep this going sometimes for hours on end.

Thus, the rules of drum dances often changed, but everywhere the drum was never hit on its central part, on this eye. According to other elders, the drum could also start talking after some time. Rosie Iqallijuq, from Iglulik, reported:

When Ivaluarjuk would drum he would get really caught up in it. The drum seemed to say, “Uluunngu-jaq, uluunngu-jaq, ainaa ainaa.” Ainaa is an expression you use when you are scared. When the drum started to say ainaa, the first Ivaluarjuk fell forward and died. The people in the qaggiq could clearly hear the drum saying ainaa. The woman who told me about this had a cousin whose name was Pavvat. He also carried the name of Ivaluarjuk. Pavaat and Ivaluarjuk would try to outdo each other. They would say whoever really carried the name would lose his mind first. Both of them lost their minds and it was said that their atiq had caused this. The one who was called Ivaluarjuk was the winner because he lost his mind first. The time he was drumming people became scared because he was saying, “Ui, ui, ui, ui, ui.” He was spinning and going around the room. The people stopped him because they thought he was going to die. After they stopped him, he regained his senses. I have also heard my great aunt telling this story to her daughter. They were just drumming; they were not performing saka (Saladin d’Anglure 2001: 175).

This testimony is strong but illustrates well the state one could get in during a drum dance. If not a competition between two persons, drum dances were performed following different rules. Among the Pallirmiut, a hierarchical order was followed according to Ootooroot, “[t]he oldest man drums first, then the next oldest, and so on, with the young lads drumming last” (Bennett and Rowley 2004: 109). It is not clear if this rule was also true for the Iglulingmiut and the Nattilik. Another rule was that a drum dance had to be completed which again refers to this cosmological dimension of the drum and its connection with the deceased. Donald Suluk from Arviat related,

[L]ong ago, drum dancing was a very big part of the Inuit way of life. This is reflected by an extreme example: if a person died while dancing, others would take up the dance and continue until it ended; only then would mourning begin. The bereaved relatives of the dancer who had just died would be suffering, but they would continue dancing because that was the traditional law. If there

weren’t many relatives, others would help in the dance because the effort to be glad would always win out (citation from Bennett and Rowley 2004: 110).

Today drum dances are often celebrated in community halls, gyms, or elders’ centers.<sup>9</sup> From what I could observe in the Kivalliq region, the usual pattern is that a senior elder picks up the drum, while a small group of women takes care of the singing. Along our workshop, we were lucky to have seen many elders performing, and these performances were always impressive. Usually a dancer begins slowly, gradually building up a rhythm, until at the height of the dance he seems almost carried away by the music and expresses himself in short exclamations that have no meaning but seem to emerge from great depth. Abe Okpik (McComber 2005: 230) pointed out the ability of some dancers who are good at it, stating about an elder from Kugaarruuk who often participated to our workshops: “When Angutinnurniq drum dances, I think he goes into some kind of a trance; you could see it in his eyes.” Again the eyes are marked as able to reveal the state of the dancer.

In our experiences, we also observed that a man should never be lost in his song and the drum always be passed on, as if everyone should have a chance to dance. Once done, the last dancer would then put the drum on the floor and another elder would pick it up. Thus, each person will get a chance to play the drum. The drum appears to be an instrument that should be used by everyone, men and women, allowing them to connect to the ancestors, spirits, and animals. Young people take up drum dancing and at drum dancing feasts we noticed that even very young infants are taught the techniques. It is considered as a connection to the lifestyle of the *inummariit*, the true Inuit. Some young Inuit who practiced drum dancing stated that they envisioned their ancestors as watching them during the dance. Thus, the drum dance still seems to have retained or regained the crucial function of connecting people and ancestors.

On the side of the singers, people not only gave a voice to themselves but also to their ancestors, to animals, and *tuurngait*, who participated in the celebrations through these songs. The *pisiit*, therefore, also shaped relationships to nonhuman beings observing human society and becoming participants through the ritual actions.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, few performances by Kugluktuk dancers recorded by Tony Devlin in 2004 during the Gjoa Haven Drum Dance festival (Devlin 2007).



## Conclusion

In Baffin Island, the tradition of drum dancing declined rapidly whereas in the Iglulik area and especially in the Kivalliq and Natilik areas, it was retained much more. In South Baffin, the drum was replaced by newly introduced musical instruments such as the harmonica. Drum dances were also replaced by the square dances introduced by the Scottish whalers. But the situation might change in the early future.

Today, drum dancing is indeed revived, especially in the Qitirmiut, Kivalliq, and Iglulik regions. Many of the elders still possess the required skills. Modern drum dances are performed at occasions of celebrations. They are no longer connected to the song duels and wife exchanges of the past, though song duels can still be observed. But everywhere drum dancing is now considered by the Inuit as a symbol of their culture. To what extent the drum will now enter in the various churches is difficult to say.

Like in the past, drum dancing involves a complex interplay of husband and wife, the wife giving a voice to the man with respect to the song he has composed. The *pisiq* remains connected to a person, and after his death the song can only be used when his name is referred to. People live on in their songs as they do in their names. Guided by women the drum dancer reaches a point where he expresses himself in his breath without words. In the past, strict rules applied to the feast house. Women might not enter a house where song feasts were held during menstruation (Rasmussen 1929: 179) and song feasts were prohibited after a death (Rasmussen 1929: 199; 1931: 265). The deceased and the animals were aware of the feasts and would retaliate if the rules were transgressed. But today, most of these rules are no longer followed. Still, the song feast appears as a social context par excellence for men as well as women to connect to agencies such as namesakes and ancestors who participate in the feast through their namesakes and descendants. By singing the *pisiit* of their ancestors, people bring them to life again, just as in passing on their names to their children.

Thus the *qilauti* and the *pisiit* connect people to ancestors and nonhuman beings. Specific qualities, techniques, and skills are required. The practitioner should know how to conduct the technique and how to make and master the connection with ancestors and spirits. In the past, relations between human beings, ancestors, and animals were by no means the prerogative of the *angakkuit*, and the situation has not changed, except that shamans went underground.

All the drum dancing techniques still involve the use of sound or words, deriving their efficacy from an original inspiration, handed down by an ancestor or preferably acquired out on the land. Because these sounds and words derived their strength from a connection to these agencies, they also enabled people to make that connection again. But the preferred context for the expression of these words and sounds was play. The play was conducted in the context of a feast where food was abundant testifying to the generosity of the nonhuman agencies that provided the food and the human participants who shared it. The visitor, the opponent, the rival, or song cousin was drawn into a competition that invited the participants to excel in their skills. Conflict and tension could not only be resolved, but their expression in play could become a source of enjoyment for human and nonhuman participants in the feast. It benefited the players as well as the community. According to Rasmussen (1929: 244), "[t]here is also an Eskimo proverb which says that those who know how to play can easily leap over the adversities of life. And one who can sing and laugh never brews mischief." The feast was the most important ritual expression of the well-being of the community. It established relationships with strangers and visitors from other places whose arrival triggered the feast. The songs, sounds, and dances connected people to the ancestors represented in the songs, the music, and the names of the participants themselves as well as to the animals and other nonhuman agencies that observe human beings (Laugrand and Oosten 2008).

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