

# THREE SONGS FOR THE BLADDER FESTIVAL, HOOPER BAY<sup>1</sup>

by

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An important celebration was the Bladder Festival held each year to honor and appease the spirits (*inua*) of all the animals taken in the hunt during the past season. The Eskimos believed that the bladders would enter the animals of their kind, be reborn again, and return, bringing continued success to the hunter. (*Hawkes, p. 26*). The festival was held over a period of several weeks, starting usually in late November and concluding about a month later. During the course of this festival the bladders of the first animals taken by the young boys were honored. While there appear to have been several minor differences in the rites performed by various villages in their local Bladder Festival, the Eskimos of the Hooper Bay area from whom this information was obtained, carried out their ceremonies in this manner.

The animal bladders were saved, dried, and then blown up. These were fastened to harpoons and hung in the *karigi*, the ceremonial house. When the time for the Bladder Festival arrived, the members of two rival *karigis* began practicing, in complete darkness, three new songs. Lantis also (*1960, p. 6, p. 45*) reports the composing and practicing of songs for the Nash Harbor Bladder Festival in complete darkness. These new songs were used subsequently at festivals and celebrations throughout the year until new ones would again be composed. The first team to master three new songs signalled the rival team and the village by beating loudly three times on the floor. At this signal, lights in the *karigi* and the village were lit.

The women then brought the men's plates to the *karigi*. Then the men gathered, formed a long line, and circled the village

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<sup>1</sup> This material was recorded, transcribed and edited by the author under the terms of a grant given to the Alaska Festival of Music by the Loussac Foundation. The music has been copyrighted by the Alaska Festival of Music, 1965.

about five times with their plates, asking food at various homes. This they took to the karigi and ate, first pretending to toss bits of food to the bladders to appease them.

Essential to the celebration were stalks of wild parsnip, gathered by several young men, which would be burned later to purify both the bladders and the people. Hawkes states that four men, a number significant in Eskimo superstitious belief, gathered the parsnip. Hooper Bay informants specified five participants. (*Hawkes, p. 27*). A very significant song was sung on the evening before the young men went out for the plants. Accompanying this song, for which there were the words, “Go toward the land where there is parsnip,” was an extremely tiring dance that was done by the five young men holding their arms high over their heads. This is the wild parsnip song from Hooper Bay.

### WILD PARSNIP SONG

i yungung ah yi yee yah ung ah ung i yungung ah yi  
 yee yah ung uh ah ay yah ung ah ay yah ee yah ah  
 PASTORAL  
 hung ah i yah ung ah hung yah hungah ee yah yah  
 hung ah ah eh yah eh yah yah ah hung ah ah —  
 eh yah ung eh yah ee yah ah hung ah ah ah ung ah  
 ung ah hah ah ah ee  
 >

With the stalks of wild parsnip in place, the traditional dances were performed. Among the first was the Dance to the Bladders. A young boy in gut rain parka danced this while the bladders, tied to the harpoons, were held low before him.

SONG TO THE BLADDERS

Hung i ee yah ee yah yay ee yah eh H' ah ahng ahng ah haayah  
 H'yahng i ee yah ee yah yeh yah ah H' ahng ah ahng ahng heeyah  
 H' ung ah yah H' ee yi ay H' ah ah ah ah ah

Another tradition of this festival was the Jump Dance. A young man performed this lively dance, jumping repeatedly with both feet held together, while acting in pantomime the hunting scene described by the song. "He is hunting the caribou. He is hunting a fawn. So swift is his arrow that he cannot see it."

JUMP DANCE SONG

Strongly accented

Tu tu su l'vay m' Kway yah KohwahKee yay Tahgahnuk'feh'k wah  
 m' shinahmohKah muh s'ahm mohKah H'gay yah H'gay yah  
 ung i eh yah ah eng ee yah Kee ah Kwah ah ung Kwahy eh yah  
 ah ah iee!

After several days of festivities it was time to return the bladders to the sea. "They must not be kept too long," warned one old hunter, "or the spirits will become angry and bring sickness and death to the people." To prepare for this rite, the dried parsnip stalks were burned in the karigi to purify the bladders.

Then the bladders were removed from the karigi, the burning parsnips were taken to the river bank and the bladders were passed through the smoke. The people, also, walked through it. The bladders were pierced to release the air, and both bladders and burning parsnip were placed in the water. Thus, the animals were honored. And their spirits, having been appeased, would insure success in the hunting seasons to come.

These three Bladder Festival songs were repeated at Hooper Bay for the Festival to the Dead. The informants were reluctant to discuss the latter festival, except to say that the same songs performed at the Bladder Festival were used at other festivals during the year, and until new ones were composed for the next Bladder Festival.

The characteristics of these songs may be compared to those previously discussed by the author (*Koranda*, p. 17-32). Note these particularly salient features:

1. Wild Parsnip Song

Meter Alternates  $\begin{matrix} 3 & 4 & 3 & 4 & 3 & 2 & 3 \\ 4 & 4 & 4 & 4 & 4 & 4 & 4 \end{matrix}$

Tempo changes, and meter becomes regular at measure 8 in a "refrain." This type of construction is comparatively rare.

The "Eskimo Theme" is heard in measures 2 and 7. Note the long repeated-note final cadence. (*Koranda*, p. 17-32).

2. Song to the Bladders

Meter Alternates  $\begin{matrix} 4 & 3 & 5 & 4 & 3 & 5 & 4 & 5 \\ 4 & 4 & 4 & 4 & 4 & 4 & 4 & 4 \end{matrix}$

Ornate grace note may have some special significance, since these songs are of ritual importance.

3. Jump Dance Song

Strongly marked rhythm indicates the nature of the dance.

The range is wider than normal,— encompassing one full octave. It must be pointed out, however, that the lowest tone (G) is heard but once. Essentially this is a

song of only 6-note range. The final cadence is a repeated note.

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