

SOME THROAT GAMES OF NETSILIK ESKIMO WOMEN¹

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Among the Eskimo oral traditions to attract recent attention from Canadian researchers, composers, and the general public are the women's throat games of the Eastern Arctic. These are short compositions of rhythmicized guttural and breath sounds, sung by two women who face each other at a very close distance. Added resonance and a blend of the two voices are sought and achieved in various ways in different communities.²

I learned, during a field trip in the Netsilik area in 1972, that throat games were commonly performed in the more easterly settlements of Spence Bay and Pelly Bay. However, few were recorded and little data gathered at this time. Since then, one entire research project by the "Groupe de recherche en semiologie musicale" at the Université de Montréal focuses on these games, and they have had widespread performances in southern Canada at such events as the Mariposa Folk Festival, the James Bay concert in Montreal, and the recent Native Heritage exhibition of the Ontario Science Centre in Toronto.

Field research for this paper was conducted in Gjoa Haven in May, 1975, sponsored by the Department of Ethnology, National Museum of Man, Ottawa. The corpus of games collected is small, consisting of twenty performances of ten identifiable varieties of throat games. The games are no longer an active repertoire as in Spence Bay and Pelly Bay.

It should be noted at the outset that the women's throat games are not considered a genre of "singing" in this area. Furthermore, since "singing" is the closest Netsilik concept to "music," perhaps these games should not fall into the realm of ethnomusicological study at all. However, as a unique variety of abstract expression in sound, they merit our attention.

The terminology used for the throat games is apparently variable from one region to another. Schneider³ and Charron⁴ indicate a generic term, "katadzaq," for communities of Richmond Gulf and Sanaikilug respectively. Peacock⁵, presumably referring to tapes collected by Asen Balikci in Povungnituk, uses the term "kataktatoq." In Gjoa Haven, however, each of the games has a separate name. They are described collectively as "games when you make noises with your throats." "Katajjaq" and "qattipaaqtuq," which could be the equivalents of the aforementioned generic terms, refer to one game only. Furthermore, this particular game is atypical in that it is

¹This paper is a revised version of a paper read at the Conference of the International Folk Music Council in Regensburg, 1975.

²Povungnituk women wear their parka hoods up to direct the sound streams into one another. Boulton (Folkways record, FE 4444) reports the use of an oil drum lid as a resonator. Gjoa Haven women customarily hold a bread pan to one side of their faces and direct the sounds into it.

³Lucien Schneider, *Dictionnaire Franco-Eskimo du parler de l'Ungavas* (Quebec: Université Laval Presses, 1970), p. 113.

⁴Claude Charron, paper presented to the Society for Ethnomusicology, San Francisco, 1974.

⁵Kenneth Peacock. "Folk and Aboriginal Music," in *Aspects of Music in Canada*, ed. Arnold Walter (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), p. 71.

performed by a single woman, rather than the usual pair, who accompanies the throat sounds with actions.⁶ This and every other game has a separate name which is, in fact, the initial word of each of their texts. The ones collected in the Netsilik region include:

1. qiarvaq (qiarpaliktuq), 2. umaqtuq, 3. illuquma, 4. qattipaaqtuq (haqalaqtuq?), 5. immpijuqtuq, 6. hiqnaqtuq, 7. aqittuq, 8. niaquqtuq (niaquingnaq), 9. mamaqtuq. The collection also includes examples of 1 and 2 combined.

The taximony bears an interesting relationship to the apparent origin and diffusion of the games. An eastern origin seems likely since the games are widespread in Northern Quebec, Baffin Island, and the more easterly Caribou and Netsilik Eskimo regions. It is not surprising to find more throat games in Spence Bay and Pelly Bay, for in other respects these two communities are also more closely aligned with eastern practices while Gjoa Haven has assimilated more western elements. Most of the Gjoa Haven performers have moved west from the communities of Back River and Baker Lake. Thus it seems that, at least in recent years, diffusion of the songs has been occurring from east to west.

The expansion of terminology for the naming and classification of the throat games as one moves west seems to be a reversal of the general tendency for specific terms to acquire more general meanings. More definite conclusions can be reached about throat game nomenclature, however, when more investigation of terminology in other communities has been carried out.

It was mentioned that the names of the games are the first and sometimes only word of each text. The text on the other hand may be a rather lengthy (my examples include one fifty-word text) conglomerate of phrases from familiar legends or other songs, references to real-life incidents or activities, and made-up words with no standard meaning. Now the presence of a meaningful text is significant. Charron, Beaudry, and Harvey report that games they have collected at Sanikiluaq, Cape Dorset, and Payne Bay use only neutral syllables⁷. The Netsilik examples, however, have, for the most part, complete and partially comprehensible words. Comprehensible, that is when they are spoken. In actual performance, the manner of articulating the text purposely distorts comprehensibility for the sake of sound quality. Few of the texts contain logical thought sequences and many artificial words are created. Thus, the same discontinuity of thought is present here as in other game songs (e.g., juggling songs and songs for playing hide n' seek).

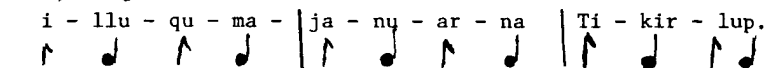
Two basic types of text setting may be observed. The first type includes games with long texts (e.g., "illuquma" and "qiarvaq") which are simply declaimed, albeit vaguely enunciated. In the second category, words are used for their phonetic potential only. That is, vowels, consonants, or whole syllables are extracted as the basis for an abstract sound. For both categories, the following features must also be considered: (a) patterns (i.e., sequence and rhythm) of voiced and voiceless articulation, and (b) patterns of

⁶The word "Qattipaaqtuq" means "wavy." The singer crouches and bounces from the knees while making up-and-down hand motions. Both the hand and body motions represent the textual meaning.

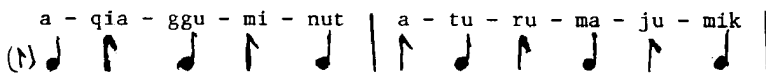
⁷Verbal communication.

inhalation and exhalation. Pitch distinctions are found in a few of the games⁸. Let us briefly consider two examples.

"Illuquma" is considered to be one of the simplest of the games in spite of its long text (23 words). The first four syllables determine the pitch contour (three syllables high, the fourth somewhat lower) of the lead voice. The chief complexity here is the fact that the two voices breathe in a ratio of 2:1. The iambic triplet patterns may be grouped "metrically" according to the predominant number of syllables per word. At the beginning of the game, most words fall into duple groups of four (or three with the final syllable lengthened) or eight,

(e.g. 

while near the end, the grouping switches to six syllables.

(e.g. 

Jose Kusugak, Director of the Language Commission of the Inuit Cultural Institute, Eskimo Point, has made a translation of this text which is more coherent than most. (Although different translations of the same text may be equally correct, this one should thus be considered preferable to a completely different, less logical, translation given for this game in an unpublished paper presented at the Conference of the International Folk Music Council in 1975.)

Singing to my illuq (i.e. a song cousin):

Putuguup killed Tikirlu's wife.

He remembers that.

He wanted to go out (for the dead one).

Aninnuit tipped over in the qajaq.

He was left behind.

Cry. Cry.

He was a great provider.

My teeth will not be used for food.

It looks hopeless.

An entirely different style of game is exemplified by "umaqtuq." The single word text may mean "she sews the seams of boots" but neither the meaning or the sound of the word itself could possibly be recognized by an unenlightened listener. The first participant begins on the syllable "um" (essentially just a voiced hum). She breathes in a steady rhythm, in and out on alternately higher and lower pitches (the interval is indefinite but is approximately a minor third). The second voice moves twice as quickly, also inhaling or exhaling alternately on each note, but the syllables "u-ma" are alternated, not on every note to coincide with the breathing pattern, but on every pair of notes. Additional throat noise is added to the "m" of "ma."

⁸ A broader system of categorization according to the predominant structural element (i.e., respiration, rhythm, pitch, timbre) has been developed by the Group de recherche semnologie musicale at the Université de Montréal. Their material, from northern Quebec and Baffin Island, is more diversified and complex than the Netsilik games.

Later in umaqtuq, the first voice switches from "um" to "ma" and then there is a section alternating voiced and voiceless articulation, and finally a hocket-like section in which voice one reverts to the initial pattern but voice two retains the voiceless motive of the previous section.

ILLUQDMA

VOICE ONE (VOICELESS)	(TEXT)	— lu — gu — ma — ja — nu — ar — na — Ti — kir — lup
	(RHYTHM)	♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪
	(RESPIRATION)	△ □ △ □ △ □ △ □ △ □ △ □
	(PITCH) ²	H H H L H H H L H H H L
VOICE TWO (VOICED)	(TEXT)	u —————
	(RHYTHM)	♪
	(RESPIRATION)	□ △ □ △ □ △ □ △
	(PITCH)	HIGHER THAN VOICE ONE

* A = inhalation, □ = exhalation

** H = high, L = low

UMASTUA

VOICE ONE (VOICED)	ummm —————
	♪ ♪ ♪
	△ □ △ □ H L H L
VOICE TWO	u — ma — u — ma
	♩ ♩ ♩ ♩
	DA DA DA DA NO PITCH DISTINCTIONS

As well as being the structural basis of the games, the texts tell us something of their social meaning. The words frequently relate to women's activities around the camp. This is logical since these were most frequently performed indoors when a group of women gathered to pass the time while their husbands were hunting. They were definitely performed at other times as well. Many of the men know some of the games and perform them in jest causing much giggling among the women.

Possibly an even greater textual significance relates to the very obscurity which makes their meaning indiscernible to unenlightened ears. In order to explain this it should be noted again that there are other games (especially juggling) which also have textual ambiguities. Now these texts have baffled ethnologists since the time of Rasmussen and, it seems, have also mystified the Inuit themselves. It was explained to me that these game songs are like riddles. The words are suggestive of meaning but not explicit. This helps to develop the imagination and reasoning powers of a child (or an adult). These

imaginative and reasoning powers are termed "ihuma,"⁹ a word which frequently appears in the texts of drum dance songs as well. The development of "ihuma" is one of the major psychological functions of games whether they are accompanied by singing, dancing, string figures, or whatever. The throat games fit this function perfectly. There are not only ambiguities in the text once it is understood, but it is a challenge to one's ears and intellect to comprehend the sounds in the first place. It is also considered a challenge to memorize the longer texts. Hence the throat games are one of the most efficient and effective educative tools of the Netsilingmiut.

When I first heard the games I believed they consisted only of abstract sounds and were devoid of a meaningful text. I cannot help but contemplate that my earlier conjectures would be considered hilariously significant by the Inuit — evidence of a complete lack of "ihuma" among the white man. It is the kind of misunderstanding that would be great material for a mocking drum dance song.

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⁹In her study of Uktuhikhalingmiut emotional concepts Jean Briggs defines "ihuma" as that which "makes it possible for a person to respond to his surroundings, physical and social, and to conform to social expectations."

Résumé: *Beverley Cavanagh écrit au sujet de jeux provenant de la gorge de femmes Esquimaudes et donne des exemples qu'elle a pris en note auprès de femmes de Netsilik, au cours d'un voyage de recherches à Gjoa Haven en 1975.*

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recorder. Not jumping to conclusions, not admitting defeat or failure to understand something, but correctly transmitting the words, the information, as nebulous as it might at first appear. In my own collecting of information from my Indian chiefs, I must admit that I often did not grasp completely their meaning, but never the less recorded faithfully their exact wording. There lies a great danger if one does not understand words or meanings and tries to interpret oneself or lead one's informant. One needs a degree of humility in accepting the unknown as partly one's own failing.

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Résumé: *Dr. Ida Halpern explique la relation qui existe entre l'ethnomusicologie et l'histoire orale et souligne le fait que toutes deux ont le même but: préserver l'histoire d'une culture avant qu'il ne soit trop tard. Elle décrit ce qu'est l'ethnomusicologie et comment elle s'est développée et en fait un rapprochement avec sa collection personnelle de chants Indiens de la Colombie Canadienne.*