

Title:

Throat Singing in Inuit Culture

Word Count:

609

Summary:

Introduction to ancient throat singing in the Inuit culture in Arctic Canada. Describes recent revival of this entertainment form.

Keywords:

inuit, culture, arctic, canada, throat, singing, music

Article Body:

Originally, Inuit throat singing was a form of entertainment among Inuit women while the men were away on hunting trips. It was an activity that was primarily done by Inuit women although there have been some men doing it as well. In the Inuit language Inuktitut, throat singing is called katajjaq, pirkusirtuk or nipaquhiit depending on the Canadian Arctic region. It was regarded more as a type of vocal or breathing game in the Inuit culture rather than a form of music.

Inuit throat singing is generally done by two individuals but can involve four or more people together as well. In Inuit throat singing, two Inuit women would face each other either standing or crouching down while holding each other's arms. One would lead with short deep rhythmic sounds while the other would respond. The leader would repeat sounds with short gaps in between. The follower would fill in these gaps with her own rhythmic sounds. Sometimes both Inuit women would be doing a dance like movement like rocking from left to right while throat singing. Sounds produced can be voiced or unvoiced and produced by inhalation or exhalation. Both Inuktitut words and meaningless syllables are used in Inuit throat singing songs. However, when words are used in throat singing, no particular meaning is placed on them for a song. When meaningless syllables are used, they are often portrayals of sounds the Inuit hear in their natural environment such as animal sounds or even water running down a creek. Popular Inuit throat singing songs are usually identified by the first word or sound that is produced in each song.

Inuit throat singing is a skill that has to be taught and developed. Inuit throat singers try to show their vocal abilities in a fun competitive manner and the first one to either run out of breath, stop or laugh is declared the loser

of the game. Each game usually lasts from one to three minutes. In a group of Inuit women, the overall winner is the one who beats the largest number of her competitors in this fun filled activity.

Unfortunately, there is no written record of when the Inuit first developed their form of throat singing which differs from the type found in Mongolia and other parts of the world that has some form of throat singing. The Inuit did not keep any written records and history was simply passed down from generation to generation orally. It was reported that at one point in time, Inuit women would actually have their lips almost touching while using each other's mouth cavity as a sound resonator. This technique is not used anymore.

Inuit throat singing was actually forbidden by Christian priests for almost 100 years but since this religious ban was lifted, there has been a resurfacing of this traditional activity in the Inuit communities during the last 20 to 30 years. Interestingly enough, there has been a lot of interest among the younger Inuit generations in this revival in addition to the Inuit elders who are trying to bring throat singing back as part of present Inuit culture. Many of the young Inuit women who have taken up throat singing claim that it is a way for them to express their Inuit identities in the modern world where many Inuit traditions have already been lost. The revival of Inuit throat singing has been so popular that in September of 2001, the first throat singing conference was held in Puvernituk, Nunavik where different types of Inuit throat singing from different Arctic regions of Canada were demonstrated and shared. There has even been a small number of Inuit throat singing CDs produced.