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**Notes: This is the second part of a conversation with Professor Tom Johnston about Athabascan music, Nulato Stick Dance along with songs from the Cook Inlet region. The second part of this interview is with Frank Buskel discussing ethnopoetics.**

**Transcript:**

Chinook: A warm changing wind.

Chinook Echoes: Looking back into Native heritage, how things are and how they got that way.

Chinook Patterns: Information; issues that effect the patterns of Alaskan life.

(1:08)

Paula Schuler (sp?): I don't suppose it is entirely correct to call this Stick Dance the Nulato Stick Dance because on alternate years this dance is held in Kaltag. What should we call it?

Tom Johnston: The Athabascan people in Nulato do have their own name for this dance: Hi'o [pronounced He oh]. Along with this dance they sing special songs, there are fourteen of these Hi'o Kalak'ha (sp?) songs reserved for this ceremony. This occurs every other year in the spring at one of these villages. Originally, this was called the Feast for the Dead, because it serves as a memory for people who have recently passed away. The families hold a weeklong potlatch for around 1,500 people.

(2:25)

Paula: Who comes to this potlatch? Just friends and family, or do more people come?

Tom: Friends and relatives come; this is more of a social gathering to renew ties and friendships. This ceremony has four main purposes: First, it lays the wandering spirit of the deceased person to rest. Second, this ceremony repays the obligation of those who assisted at the burial. Third, it reduces the lost by mystically replacing the dead people through the pallbearers. Fourth, it offers an emotional release.

(3:58) Here is an example of a Nulato Stick Dance. [Music and singing]

(5:22) In 1975 I was privileged to attend an Athabascan Stick Dance.

Paula: Did you tape that recording?

Tom: Yes. It is called a stick dance because a large spruce pole is erected and decorated in the community hall. People dance around it, and they also dance the gifts and food wrapped in calico cloth around this pole. An interesting aspect of this dance is toward the end of this they have a masked dance and they wear elaborately carved wooden masks.

(7:05) This next example is a privately owned song. It is a family song and the woman who owns it is singing. [Singing]

(9:06)  
Paula: That was a song from Koyukon region, now we will hear a song from the Cook Inlet region.

(9:46)  
Tom: The people who reside in the Cook Inlet region are called the Dena'ina. This is Shem Pete, one of the old chiefs, singing a Dena'ina gambling song.

(10:37) Linguist Jim Carey is good friends with Chief Shem Pete and together they have been working on the language and place names of South Alaska. Shem Pete is a famous hunter and he has told his story. He composed the last two Dena'ina funeral songs for his brothers when they died.

(11:20) Shem Pete is a good singer and here is a personal song he sung for his brother's funeral.

(11:32) When these people sing mourning songs they are remembering their loved ones. This native music serves a purpose, and these mourning songs clear the way through the underbrush for the spirit to pass on the way to the next stage.

(14:20)  
Paula: I would like to introduce you to a new word I learned while talking with Professor Frank Buskel. The word is ethnopoetics.

Frank: It is a new field of study, defined as poetry of the people. The root word ethnos meaning people, and poetry that which these people create for themselves to explain themselves to themselves. Also, being on the interface between poetry and anthropology. What ethnopoetics aims to do is retrieve oral literature in a way that makes sense to the native people group and their heritage.

(15:30)  
Paula: Did this come about because the native speaker storytellers objected to the way stories come out in translation?

(15:41)

Frank: I do not know if they have or have not, but they certainly should if they have not. This originated in the lower 48 states, and spread to the more “primitive” cultures of every kind. I use the word “primitive” with quotes around of course, only to say that it is unlike the cultures many people are familiar with.

(16:19)

Paula: How are those studying ethnopoetry going to have an idea of how the native speakers really feel?

(16:32)

Frank: Some students have already addressed this question and gone to live among the tribes. These people have performed for them and showed them the ways that are important to them. One such part is the aspect that is invented on the spot. This provides the framework for the storyteller to embroider in some way. Another huge step forward is the fact that dictionaries are being written in the native languages. Those who are writing the stories down are the ones who really know their heritage and have told the stories before.

(18:29)

Paula: It could even be that when a storyteller is telling their story to a non-native, they change it for the non-native, whereas the same story to a native would be slightly different.

(18:45)

Frank: This is an interesting example from Ron Scollon, of the Alaskan Native Language Center. He had gone into a village and a man told him a story. When the story was told in the original language, it automatically divided into four parts. But when translated into English, the story divided into three distinct parts: beginning, middle, and end.

(19:35)

Here is an example from the book, *I Breathe a New Song: Poems of the Eskimo* edited by Richard Lewis. This is compared to the poem *The Raven*. This is the same story, but two different perceptions.

(22:29)

These are some riddles from the Koyukon language, that were transcribed by Father Jules Jetté, who learned to fluently speak this language. Richard Dauenhauer, an ethnopoetic specialist from Anchorage, recently rediscovered these poems.

(23:39)

Ezra Pound wrote one of the more famous ones called, In a Station on the Metro. The native people had been writing imagism without knowing what it was. The person starts out the riddle, “Riddle me, riddle me” then he gives a definition, frequently a poetic definition. The audience is supposed to guess what he has in his mind.

(25:45)

Here is an example: “Riddle me, riddle me. We come upstream in red canoes.” That’s the salmon returning. Another example is, “Riddle me, riddle me. Like a broom I sweep the place around me.” This one is withered bunches above the winter snow. This last one is one of my favorites, “Riddle me, riddle me. We have our heads in sheepskin hats.” Snow, piled up on stumps. These riddles provide a sense of the life contained in the image.