

The traditional Greenlandic drum

Everywhere I travel in Greenland I come across the traditional Greenlandic drum, qilaat. The drum is often depicted as an icon of the traditional Greenlandic culture and identity, but new drums are still produced, and maybe the drum song is getting a renaissance in spite of the intensive external influence on the Greenlandic culture in these years - or maybe because of it?

The drum songs originally had different roles: From the spiritual drum songs to the legal drum songs and the more entertaining drum songs.

Today the traditional Greenlandic drum song often is used on special occasions, and the rhythm of the drum is often accompanied by peals of laughter when the singer adds the rhythm of the drum and the movement of the body with a lyric with a subtle humour which is so common among Greenlanders.

The drum consists of a wooden frame on which there is stretched a skin of

reindeer or other arctic animals. The sound of the drum is produced with a small piece of wood which is stroked against the wooden frame.

It is physically demanding to make a drum song. The singer had to co-ordinate three different rhythms: The rhythm of the body back and forth, the rhythm of hitting the drum and finally the rhythm of the song.

After the introduction of Christianity the clergy tried to prohibit drum song, but they never succeeded. Today the drum song therefore also is a sign of faith in own strength and own identity among many Greenlanders.

The legal drum dance is a dispute between two parties resolved by the fact that each party is trying to sing against the other and get the laughter turned to the other party. This summer evening in Narsaq the drum singer Jens Fisker from Qaqortoq has no opponent, but he really evokes forth applause and laughter among his international audience.



The drum singer Jens Fisker
in Narsaq, June 2014