



THE ART OF THE GAMES

DENE HAND GAMES HAVE A LONG TRADITION. BUT NOTHING TELLS THE STORY OF THEIR ENERGY AND INTENSITY LIKE WATCHING UP CLOSE.

> Photography and text by Peter Mather

MY PASSION FOR HAND GAMES BEGAN IN 2017, WHEN ROBBY DICK OF TU ŁIDLINI (ROSS RIVER, YUKON) INVITED ME TO JOIN HIS TEAM OF KASKA PEOPLE FOR A TRIP TO THE NWT COMMUNITY OF BECHOKO FOR A TOURNAMENT. HAND GAMES IS AN ELIMINATION-STYLE DENE GUESSING GAME PLAYED WITH SIX TO EIGHT PLAYERS AND DOZENS OF TEAMS IN WEEKEND-LONG TOURNAMENTS. THE GAMES ARE KNOWN FOR THE ENERGY THEY BRING, WITH PLAYERS BOUNCING ON THEIR KNEES TO THE BEAT OF A SMALL ARMY OF DRUMMERS, WHILE HIDING A TOKEN IN THEIR HANDS. THE BECHOKO TOURNAMENT TOOK OVER THE TOWN, WITH THE POPULATION MORE THAN DOUBLING. I WAS INVITED AS A SPARE PLAYER, A SUB, IN CASE SOMEONE WAS INJURED OR DISAPPEARED. IN THE END I ENJOYED IT THROUGH THE LENS OF MY CAMERA AND CONTINUE TO DO SO. IF YOU GET A CHANCE TO PLAY OR WATCH, JUMP ON IT. YOU WILL NOT REGRET IT.

> **HAND GAMES** ARE ACTUALLY A BIT OF A MIND GAME, AS PICKERS TRY TO GET INTO THE HEADS OF THEIR OPPONENTS.



> **THE TU LIDLINI TEAM** WITH ROBBY DICK, COWBOY, TAVIS TRAPPER SMITH, AND JOSH BARICHELLO AT THE YUKON CHAMPIONSHIPS DRUMMING ON THEIR TEAM. (BOTTOM); > **AN OFFERING** OF TOBACCO IS GIVEN INTO THE SACRED FIRE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE BECHOKQ TOURNAMENT.





> **THE INTENSITY** OF A GAME IS ASTONISHING WITH PLAYERS LOSING POUNDS OF WATER THROUGH SWEATING DURING GAMES. (BOTTOM); > **DRUMS** MADE FROM UNTANNED ANIMAL HIDE ATTACHED TO A BIRCH FRAME WITH BABICHE. THE DRUMS ARE HEATED OVER FIRES THROUGHOUT THE DAY TO KEEP THEM TIGHT. IT REQUIRES INCREDIBLE TIMING AND STAMINA AS PLAYERS SPEND HOURS EVERY DAY BEATING THE RHYTHMIC DRUMS. ㊦

