

# American Indian Dance: Steps to Cultural Preservation

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## Abstract:

*Dance has been pivotal in providing American Indians with a method of cultural preservation, a religious connection, and a community function. Out of the traditional ceremonies of the past have grown the various styles of powwow dancing; other traditional ceremonies have been revived and are currently being practiced on the reservations. What follows is a discussion of the origins and modifications of some of those dances that have been resurrected and reformed to better suit the current lifestyle of American Indians. Pan-Indian powwows continue to gain popularity throughout this country, with powwow dancing being used as a cultural instructional tool by public schools in one large western city. Dance, in its many forms, continues to provide a cultural bridge for American Indians.*

## Introduction

Ceremonial music and dance have always been an integral part of the Plains Indian culture. The Sun Dance, Gourd Dance, and Feather Dance are only a few of the many dance ceremonies American Indians have used to maintain harmony in their world. Before Euroamericans arrived on the North American continent, the tribes practiced their religious rites and ceremonies in the customary fashion. That situation changed drastically as white settlers began moving into the land that had been home to the indigenous people of the continent. Along with the take-over of the land, the buffalo were also being slaughtered. Through these major changes, the Natives relied heavily on their religious beliefs to give them strength. Because their customary religious ceremonies, including song and dance, were very strange and threatening to the newly arrived white population, some were eventually banned by the United States government.

Fortunately, the American Indian population was not ready to give up their colorful ceremonies. After some ceremonies were banned, the natives fought back, maintaining their cultural roots through other dance ceremonies. Some dance ceremonies, such as the Sun Dance, were taken underground in order to prevent further retaliation for their practice. Later, as the bans were lifted and the ceremonies were reintroduced, some did not resume their precise original form. For example, the Gourd Dance retained its tradition of warrior participants, but is now used frequently as an arena blessing ceremony rather than a victory celebration.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,

the white population assisted in the perpetuation of the American Indian culture by their fascination with the Wild West shows of that era. Several of today's powwow dances originated as a part of those shows. Today, traditional tribal ceremonies are being practiced on the reservations, while Pan-Indian celebrations, those which do not identify specifically with a particular tribe, are maintaining the cultural lifeline for both rural and urban Indians. Dance ceremonies have been very instrumental in preserving the culture of this indigenous people.

## Prominent Plains Dances of the Pre-Reservation Period

As more and more of their territory was swallowed up by the invading white man, the natives were pressured to accept civilization and the white way. History tells the tale of their attempted resistance and the bloody trail left behind as the Indians were "Americanized." They were subject to slaughter, prejudice, and forced relocation; their children were sent to white boarding schools where they learned to be "civilized." However, even as they were being confined to reservations in the most desolate sections of the United States, American Indians were falling back on their cultural roots as a means to preserve their lifestyle. The Sun Dance has always been a very important ceremony for American Indians. This dance, a religious revitalization ceremony that is said to have been invented by the Plains Algonquians or the Cheyenne, has been performed for over three hundred years (Jorgensen 1972). The focus of this dance is self-sacrifice, and may include three or four days of fasting, dancing, and praying. Most dancers are called to participate through a vision or a dream. While the

dancers are the most visible during a Sun Dance, the entire village participates in the preparation of the arena, the arbor, and the food. With the whole village involved, the dance becomes a social as well as a spiritual event. Partially because of the self-sacrifice and self-mutilation that was associated with the Sun Dance, the United States government banned the Sun Dance in 1890.

### **Ghost Dance**

Another significant ceremony which was banned was the Ghost Dance. The ban was the result of white paranoia and years of fear surrounding native religious ceremonies. Historically, the Ghost Dance movement began in 1870, with the prophecy of Tavibo and later, Tavibo's son, Wovoka. The prophecy predicted the removal of the white population and the return of all dead Indians and the buffalo. All that was required of the native population was to follow the tenants of clean living and to perform the Ghost Dance in the prescribed manner (Gibson 1980). White society believed the Indians were planning an uprising, with the Ghost Dance being used to work the natives into a bloodthirsty frenzy. The United States government effectively ended the Ghost Dance with the massacre at Wounded Knee on December 29, 1890. From that point on, all dancing was banned on the reservations.

The Ghost Dance was rarely performed again. However, when the government lifted the ban on dancing years later, there was a resurgence in the performance of the Sun Dance. Currently, Sun Dances can be found on many reservations on the plains including those of the Utes, Shoshoni, and Lakota. The ceremony today is very similar to the ceremony that was done three hundred years ago, with the purpose still a search for personal holiness and power for the native people. This message continues to inspire a connection with a spiritual force that cannot be snuffed out or bullied away.

### **Gourd Dancing**

The Gourd Dance was popular among the Kiowa, as well as other Plains tribes in the early eighteen hundreds, according to Ellis (1990). He related the Kiowa legend, which tells of a victorious battle, fought on a field of skunkberry bushes, whose red berries were powerful medicine. The Gourd Dance Society, a warrior society, was formed shortly after this battle (Ellis 1990). Members of the Gourd Dance Society performed their special dance as a part of the Sun Dance ceremonies. Even though the United States

government banned the Sun Dance in 1890, the Gourd dance didn't suffer its decline until about 1927 (Powers 1990). Ellis places the decline in the same decade in his statement, "By the late 1920s, the Kiowa Gourd Dance Society had virtually disappeared" (1990:20).

After a nineteen year absence, the dance was reborn in 1946 with a single performance. The modern Gourd Dance was reinstated in 1957 with the reorganization of a new Gourd Dance Clan by descendants of previous society members (Powers 1990; Ellis 1990). The dance is not performed in precisely the same manner as the original; however, it is a definite tie to the roots of the Kiowa and other tribes. The president of the newly reorganized society claimed its purpose was to, "perpetuate our Indian heritage and to revive the Kiowa [Gourd] Dance as near as possible from the past original ceremonies" (Ellis 1990:21). Ellis (1990:22) connected warrior societies, the modern powwow, and the Gourd Dance, "Because it is directly connected to the modern powwow and uses song and ritual with a direct link to the past and to venerated warrior societies, the Gourd Dance reinforces, and is reinforced by, the positive and culturally invigorating aspects of the powwow [which is in itself a modern Pan-Indian phenomenon]." The Gourd Dance is often used as part of the arena blessing ceremony that preceded many modern powwows. The modern dance regalia consists partially of a red and blue peyote blanket worn over the shoulders; the red is said to represent the blood of the warriors who fought the battle, as well as the color of the skunkberries from the original battlefield. Since the original society was a warrior society, the Gourd Dancers of today are generally veterans (White 1996).

### **Modern Powwow Dances**

The modern powwow has become very instrumental in preserving the cultural heritage of the American Indians. The plains tribes have been holding powwows in some form since the late eighteen hundreds. Modern powwows provide Indians with an avenue for both social and cultural interaction. The events are generally considered "Pan-Indian" or intertribal, meaning participants come from various tribes. Benjamin Kracht (1994:322), in his article *Kiowa Powwows, Continuity in Ritual Practice*, says, "the common celebration of American Indian traditions in today's powwows has bridged history with future survival and the 'spirit' of the dancing tradition is sacred to many." There is a great deal of spiritualism associated with powwow ceremonies and dances. This is evident in the lengthy arena blessing that precedes all powwows and the reverence with which the dancers treat their regalia.

Eagle feathers are often part of the dance regalia. This is significant since eagles are considered direct messengers to the spirit world. Kracht quotes Linda Yardley of Taos Pueblo as she connects dance to the spirit world, "The spirit of the powwow is a continuum in Indian life...We live this spirit on a daily basis. It is why we have survived for so long. At one time we were a forgotten people, but I think we are getting stronger. From the powwow we gain strength as Indian people, individually and collectively, to go on into the 21st century" (Kracht 1994:329). The sacred aspect of dance can further be seen in the statements of James "Redblood" Adkins. He believes, "dancing is a way of carrying on and passing down traditions and reaffirming their identity... there are three things that hold our people together-praying, singing and dancing" (Contreras and Bernstein 1996:34). The powwow is a family event with many families traveling what is commonly referred to as the "Powwow Trail," attending powwows in various parts of the country for several months each year.

### **Contest Dancing**

While many dancers, such as Crow dancer Lee Ann Bruised Head dance only to pass on their traditions, powwow contest dancing has become quite a sport within the American Indian community (Contreras and Bernstein 1996). There are various dance categories for powwow contest dancing. The men compete in categories such as Grass, Northern Traditional, Straight, and Fancy, while the women compete in Fancy Shawl, Jingle, Southern Cloth, and Buckskin. The regalia and dance styles have evolved over the years and are very distinctive for each dance.

### **Men's Dance**

One of the original powwow dance was the Grass Dance; it has its roots in pre-white contact American Indian culture. Legend has the name Grass Dance originating from the early days when the dance was used to flatten the grass in the powwow area. Another story recalls the custom of "tying braids of sweetgrass to the dancers belts, creating a swaying motion" (Southern Native American PowWows 1999). The primary feature of the Grass Dance regalia is yarn that is attached to the dancers shirt and pants. Many strands of colorful yarn sway with the dancers movements, creating the appearance of prairie grass moving with the wind. The movements of this dance are fluid and very athletic.

The less athletic men's Traditional Dances are

divided into two categories, Northern Traditional and Southern Straight. Traditional dancing is one of the oldest form of American Indian dance. It is based on dances done by successful hunting or war parties returning to camp; the movement is said to represent the motion of searching for the enemy. Christopher Pierre Sam Sanchez, a Ktunxa Blackfeet Northern Traditional dancer and Jerry Ward, Comanche Southern Straight dancer, both indicate the dances are often referred to as War Dances (Contreras & Bernstein 1996). Dancers often wear a porcupine roach on their head, a ribbon shirt, and a breastplate. Dancers may also wear knee or ankle garters with bells. A Traditional dancer can generally be identified by a single u-shaped bustle of feathers worn on the back. Many dancers carry objects in their hands such as a fan or a pipe bag. Of the two styles, the Northern Traditional is more active than the stately Southern Straight (White 1996).

Neither style of traditional dancing is as active as the Fancy Dance, which is the most physically demanding of all the men's dances. Julia White (1996) dates the Fancy Dance to the time when spectators were first admitted to powwows; the colorful clothing and lively dance steps were developed to please the white spectators. Southern Native American Powwows (1999) indicates that the dance may have originated as a Fancy War Dance in Oklahoma in the 1920s. The Fancy dancer can easily be recognized, not only by the bright colors of his regalia, but by the double bustles worn on the back, one over the shoulders and another anchored at the waist. Headdresses topped with moving feathers are an important part of the regalia. Because this free-form dance style is very fast and athletic and is it not for the old and infirm, it is generally performed by younger dancers.

### **Women's Dance**

Many young female dancers participate in the Jingle Dress Dance. According to a American Indian legend, the idea of the jingle dress dance came to a sick Ojibwa tribal elder in a dream. He received instructions on how the dress should look and the type of dance that should be done. He was instructed to teach the dance to four young women in his village, with the understanding that if they wore the dress and performed the dance according to his vision, he would be made well. Everything in his vision came to pass and American Indians have been dancing the Jingle Dance since the late nineteenth century (White 1996). The regalia for this dance consists of a cloth dress, which is adorned with hundreds of jingles, which are made from

the lids of snuff cans. As the dancer performs her steps, the cone shaped lids bounce into each other creating a sound much like rain on a tin roof. Jingle dancers also wear silver conch belts, beaded moccasins, and leggings.

Another women's dance with an interesting origin legend is the Fancy Shawl Dance. The legend states that a woman lost her mate in battle and withdrew into mourning, enclosing herself in a cocoon. When she was finished mourning and was able to dance again, she emerged from her cocoon in the same way a butterfly emerges. The movements of the dancer's shawl represent the wings of the butterfly upon her emergence from the cocoon (Contreras and Bernstein 1996). Other research indicates that women used the dance as an opportunity to show off their new trade-goods shawls while dancing (White 1996). The regalia of this dance consists of a skirt, a blouse, and a shawl made of lightweight, colorful material. The shawl, which represents the wings of the butterfly, stretches from the left fingertip to the right fingertip and is adorned with fourteen to eighteen-inch fringe, tied very close together along the bottom of the shawl. Dancers may also wear a beadwork yoke. The footwork for this dance requires grace and agility, with the dancers feet seeming to literally fly over the floor.

Women's Traditional Dance replaces the agility required in the Fancy Shawl or the Jingle Dance with grace and poise. The two categories of Traditional Dance for women are Southern Cloth and Buckskin. As indicated by the names, the regalia is different for these stately women's dances. The Ladies' Buckskin regalia consists of beaded moccasins, a buckskin skirt, and a buckskin yoke, all of which may be heavily beaded and fringed. The women carry a heavily fringed shawl over their arm. For the Ladies' Southern Cloth, the outfit is made of cloth over which an apron and conch belt are worn. The dress may be decorated with beadwork, shells, or teeth. A breastplate, neckerchief, or choker may be worn, as well as a feather adorning the hair. There are two styles of footwork for women's traditional dances, and dancers are judged on their body motion and the resulting sway of the fringe.

### **Intertribals**

Open dances, known as Intertribals, are frequent occurrences at modern powwows. During an intertribal, everyone, even the non-Indian, is invited to the arena to participate in American Indian culture. An Intertribal is simply a group round dance with no particular prescribed dance steps. One need not be

dressed in dance regalia; however, it is appropriate for women to cover their shoulders with a traditional shawl or another item of clothing. Another dance in which all may participate is the Two-step; this is a fun dance in which couples form two lines that snake around the arena, separate and eventually come back together in the center of the arena. Both the Intertribal and the Two-Step are interspersed between the various contest dances.

### **Powwow Drums**

The drum is an integral part of powwow music. It is considered sacred and is treated with great respect by the drum groups. Buttrees (1930:192) says, "Music, especially the rhythms of his drums, supplies his prime instrument of order. The drum commands life, and shapes creation; it brings man into whatever communication his soul is set upon... a function of the drum rhythm is to lift a man out of the exigent hour, and place him upon the hill of meditation or the mount of vision." The drums are built by American Indians using specially prepared hides, which are then stretched over the circular drum form. "The tone of the drum is determined by the type of skin used and how it is laced to the framework" (White 1996:38). When the drum is not in use, it is generally set on its side and is considered to be at rest. A group of American Indian men, joined together for the purpose of drumming and singing at ceremonies or powwows, is known as a "drum." Drum groups are very actively involved in the cultural preservation efforts of American Indians since they train new singers and provide the music for the modern day powwows and other ceremonies.

### **Songs**

To someone unfamiliar with American Indian music, it would be very easy to claim that all the powwow songs sound the same; in truth, they are very different. Frequently, the songs performed to the drum are not sung using actual words, but using vocables; these are sounds used to replace the words, which allows tribes to sing together regardless of the language spoken. The songs are divided into short sections commonly known as "pushes." The use of vocables and the short duration of each verse or "push" can give the music the appearance of sameness. "Honor beats," which are hard drum hits, usually occur between the choruses of the songs and vary between Northern and Southern drum styles, as does the pitch in which the song is sung. Southern drums use three honor beats in the middle of each push and a low pitch, while Northern drums use up to seven honor beats within the

song and a higher pitch (Contreras and Bernstein 1996; White 1996). All the songs use a cascading style, whereby the song starts on a high note and flows down to lower notes throughout the push. Just as American Indian dances are constantly changing so is the music changing, as new songs are created and old ones modified. "The Redman never sings for the approval of an audience.... He does not sing and listen to songs; he lives them" (Buttree 1930). American Indians have always had songs to honor their warriors; modern warriors are no different in that respect. Many new compositions today are written to honor military veterans from recent conflicts in Viet Nam and the Persian Gulf.

### **The Powwow as A Learning Tool**

Cultural preservation of American Indian lifestyle in Denver, Colorado, received a positive boost with a partnership created between a local school district and a local Indian education group; the result of this partnership was a program designed to integrate an accurate portrayal of American Indian history with the school curriculum through instruction and reading. This state-mandated instruction was intended to correct the shortage of information being disseminated in schools and to ensure that the information given was accurate according to the American Indian perspective.

To implement the state mandate, American Indian educators from a local university created a program which was tested at an inner-city middle-school. A select group of students, those with American Indian heritage and some who simply had an interest in American Indian culture, participated in a program entitled the 1st Annual Middle School Powwow. Students had the opportunity to meet American Indian community leaders who are actively involved in American Indian cultural preservation. The individuals participating were the authors of the school program, several local powwow committee persons, and a representative from a local Indian community center. This program taught the students about American Indian values and exposed them to the concept of dance and the powwow. The powwow was chosen as an educational vehicle because it is a colorful, eye-catching event and easily recognizable to many students.

The middle-school program consisted of a series of four class sessions and a powwow presentation. Initially, the students were introduced to the concept of the medicine wheel; through this concept, students connected the circle of life with the idea of dancing in

a circular pattern. Continuity of life and equality of people are two concepts that are also represented by the circle. Most American Indian dances are performed in a circle and the drum, the heartbeat of American Indian nations, is also circular. The students were told how the drums are built and subsequently blessed before creating ceremonial music. They met a panel of several American Indian dancers, some of whom wore their dance regalia. Panel members spoke about their background, their tribal affiliation, their powwow experiences, and answered questions prepared by the students. To learn more about American Indian culture, each student was required to read a book on American Indians from a select list and complete a reading sheet, which was discussed during one class session. The final session was a shortened version of an actual American Indian powwow, complete with drums, singers, and dancers. The following weekend, the children were taken on a field trip to a local powwow, where some students participated in the intertribal dances.

Program creators and participants believe the powwow is an effective tool for educating children about American Indian traditions and culture. By participating in educational programs and local powwows, these adults are keeping their culture alive within the community as well as within their own families. This event gave the students the opportunity to experience living, breathing American Indian culture first hand and to realize that this culture is still very much alive.

### **Cultural Preservation through Dance**

By participating in the powwows and other ceremonies, American Indians come together to celebrate their culture. "Shared identity, in part, hinges on the belief that maintaining these dance traditions is of the utmost importance" (Kracht 1994:334). For those who spend the majority of their lives in a city, powwows allow them to stay in touch with their heritage.

Historically, American Indian customs and traditions, including ceremonial dances, have been passed down orally from one generation to the next. Because of the cultural intimidation that took place during the reservation period and for many years thereafter, Indians who were familiar with the traditional ways were reluctant to share these gifts with the younger generation. Consequently, many of the old ways were forever lost. In recent years, there has been a significant effort to reclaim the proud heritage of

Native America by reviving dormant ceremonies and emphasizing those which are still being practiced.

Often the traditional ceremonies being performed today are not precisely the same; they may have been influenced by the inter-mingling of customs and people from other tribes. The result is the concept of Pan-Indianism, the inter-twining of various aspects of the cultures of two or more tribes. This blending can take many forms, such as religious or musical traditions or even the style of dance regalia. Anthropologists feared this melding of customs would result in the eventual eradication of specific native ways. Actually, traditions and customs have been kept alive by this resurgence of American Indian pride. According to William Powers, James Howard, a noted student of American Indian tradition, once feared that Pan-Indianism would mean the eventual total assimilation of the American Indian. However, in an article written in 1976, Howard revised his opinions. Powers quotes Howard, who was referring to the Gourd Dance when he said, "Native American culture is far from dead... and now and then some aspect of culture long considered lost and forgotten rises phoenix-like from its own ashes to confound those who see only a steady attrition of American Indian culture in the modern world" (Powers 1976:104). There is now a balance between Pan-Indian celebrations, such as the modern intertribal powwow, and specific tribal events taking place both on and off the reservation.

### Conclusion

The concept of cultural rejuvenation seems to be well accepted by many American Indians in cities across the country. Powwows can be found in large cities such as Denver and Los Angeles, in small-town rural areas, and on reservations across the United States and Canada. A representative from a community center in Denver believes that urban interest in American Indian culture is growing. This is based on the many young people taking dance, song, and drum classes in order to learn more about their heritage. People are being initiated into the dance arena through special powwows. For individuals who have either fallen away from their heritage or have never been exposed to it, participation in an initiation event allows them to experience and embrace the native way as their own.

The culture of the indigenous people of this continent has undergone many and drastic changes since the arrival of the first Europeans. Much to the credit of the American Indian population, they were able to preserve their culture in spite of the white efforts

to eradicate it. The Pan-Indian powwow and other dance ceremonies have been pivotal in the American Indian cultural revival that is occurring today.

### Notes

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