

North American Indian Dance*

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There is no single entity called American Indian Dance. The several hundred indigenous nations of the USA and Canada each have their own distinct traditions. The Apache Crown Dance (Gauanteaume 1992, Perry 1992), Tewa Buffalo Dance (Sweet 2004 [1984]), Kiowa Black Leg Society dances (Meadows and Palmer 1992), and Yupik Bladder Feast (Williams 1992), are as different from each other as classical ballet is from hip-hop. It is the position of dance as ceremony as well as performance and the inclusion of spiritual practices that distinguish the tremendous variety. Some are strictly ceremonial in purpose, others are more social, but all honor the sacredness of the dance circle.

People organize and participate in seasonal dances, feast days and fiestas, life-cycle, agricultural, healing and honoring ceremonies; family and clan events, special tribal religious ceremonies and medicine rites. These occasions assure the continuation of ancient lifeways, honor deities and each other, celebrate family and friends and affirm Indian identities. Dances, along with music, oratory, poetry, drama, and visual arts, are symbolic manifestations of spiritual power — re-affirmations of relatedness (Heth 1992). The dances of American Indian peoples are embodiments of indigenous values: a vital means of cultural survival in response to difficult historical circumstances. They are powerful expressions of survival.

During the colonization of indigenous America, Christian missionaries, government agents and Western educational systems tried to suppress American Indian practices, notably, performances of music and dancing. For colonizers, the dancing Indian body signified the antithesis of all things “civilized” (Farnell 2006). Indigenous ceremonies were viewed as time-consuming pagan practices that ran counter to Christian work ethics and the “civilizing” goals of assimilation. Native dancing, intertwined with spiritual practices became a punishable offence, subject to a series of prohibitions by the late 19th century Federal government (Farnell 2006).

Many Native American communities hid their ceremonies, holding their dances in conjunction with Anglo celebrations such as 4th of July and Thanksgiving. In 1934, when the Indian Reorganization Act signaled the end of forced assimilation, the US government lifted its ban and dance activities resumed in the context of changing reservation life. Despite considerable losses of ceremonial knowledge in many communities, indigenous music and dance performance were subsequently openly embraced, publicly celebrated, and accompanied by substantial revitalization.

Traditional practices are not static. They incorporate a historical continuum subject to innovation over time. Some events grow out of older practices and spread to new contexts: e.g. the annual summer Sun Dances of the Plains tribes are ceremonial complexes of sacrifice, thanksgiving and renewal. They

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were widely disseminated across the Plains region in the 18th-19th centuries, with marked variations in form. During a period of revitalization in the 1980s, communities whose Sun Dance ceremonies had ceased, turned to neighboring tribes and anthropological records for assistance with re-creation (Archambault 2001).

The most public ceremonial and social dance complex is the "pow-wow." The word derives from a Narragansett (Algonquian) term for curing ceremonies and was used by European settlers to refer to any Indian gathering. The contemporary pow-wow originated in the warrior societies of the Omaha, Kansa, Ponca and Pawnee tribes of the Plains. The "Omaha dance" (a.k.a. the Crow Belt Dance, Hot Dance, Grass Dance and War Dance) spread through inter-tribal contact. As warrior societies declined at the end of the 19th century, events became more social in nature, allowing women and children to take active parts. Since World War II, the specific styles of competitive pow-wow dancing, singing and regalia have diffused throughout rural and urban Indian communities. Modern pow-wows are intertribal celebrations of family, community, nation, and Native identity. In addition to competitive dancing for cash prizes, pow-wows incorporate occasions for honoring relatives and other individuals through naming ceremonies and give-aways of blankets, star quilts and other household goods. Northern Plains pow-wows differ slightly from those on the southern plains, each tribe adding its own traditions, styles of dress and dancing (See Young 1981, Zotigh 1991, Browner 2002, Meadows 1999, Ellis, Lassiter and Dunham 2005).

Tribal dances have been transferred to Western stages for Non-Native audiences. The American Indian Dance Theater, formed in 1987 by Barbara Schwei with Hanay Geigamah (Kiowa), collected outstanding dancers nationwide to present abridged, staged versions of pow-wow and other tribal dances. Recording artists such as Robert Mirabel have incorporated pow-wow dances in elaborate multi-media stage and TV productions.

Some American Indian dancers have performed in Western idioms: two of America's famous ballerinas were Maria and Marjorie Tallchief. Of Osage descent, both became remarkable technicians and interpreters of classical roles in the Paris Opera Ballet and the New York City Ballet in the 1940s and 1950s. Later, innovative performing artists, e.g. Valenzuela (Yaqui), Belinda James (San Juan Pueblo), René Highway (Canadian Cree) and Rosalie Jones (Blackfeet/Pembina Chippewa) blended American modern dance with Indian dances and dramatic themes (See Jones 1992). These pioneers of new generations of performing artists represent new senses of "native" and "modern" selves in creative dance works that strive to connect both worlds.

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