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Beyond the Ebb and Flow of the Powwow Dance Arena: Rekindling the Flame to Cultural Sustainability

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Background

At the Special Chiefs meeting of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), held from December 10-12, 2012, the commonly accepted term used by many of the Chiefs was *Indigenous people* or their own tribal specific nation identity. For this paper, I will follow the precedent of the AFN and use the term *Indigenous* or Anishinaabe, which is my nation. In the cases where the established term was *Aboriginal*, I will do so accordingly, such as the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) report.

This paper provides an investigative and theoretical assessment of a contemporary phenomenon of Indigenous people: the powwow. This research is a preliminary study for establishing an inquiry into cultural sustainability within the confines of the cultural concept of powwows. Powwow has provided an intersection for Indigenous peoples and Indigenous traditional and contemporary knowledge of the 21st century.

My position that leads to a level of inquiry is first as an Anishinaabe, as a single parent of three adult children, and as a *Nokomis* (grandmother) of seven grandchildren. Next, is the realization of the impact the intergenerational trauma of the Indian residential school (IRS) experience has had on the contemporary Anishinaabe family. Based on my life as a dancer and also being involved in cultural practices, an inquiry developed as to whether powwow could be a linkage to cultural sustainability. Finally, the inquiry is from an educator's standpoint, which is why I decided to take the powwow society worldview that I come from and present an engaged insight of the contemporary constructed cultural artifact (Demerath, 2002) of the powwow.

My research question is whether the contemporary cultural artifact of powwow can be an ontological approach to cultural sustainability. I approach my work from the position of a single parent mother; I raised my three children without their father. Fortunately, I had the support of my immediate family, albeit amidst typical oppressed family dynamics. Besides my immediate family, the powwow circle family provided support, wisdom, love, bravery, respect, honesty, humility, and truth—the essential values of the Anishinaabe seven grandfather teachings (Hart,

2002, p. 45). It is this worldview and philosophy of life that I aspire to share for my grandchildren. One could say that is how I seek the philosophy of the late Chief Dan George when he stated:

Keep a few embers from the fire that used to burn in your village,
Someday go back
So all can gather again and rekindle a new flame,
For a new life in a changed world. (George, 1974)

Powwow has been one of my greatest teachers. I thought it was just about the steps, the dancing, when I first started, but the dancing was just a very small part of it. I have powwow uncles, aunties, brothers, and sisters that I love like they were my immediate family; they are my immediate family.

My son Jesse also expressed this about his early teen years as a powwow dancer and what he learned: "I thought it was about the dancing, but the dancing is a small part of it." As a young 18 year-old dancer, he realized that "family" systems were the greatest triumph of the powwow circle. Based on my powwow experience and being in an urban space currently, I can assess the value of how the concept of powwow can be a nucleus of cultural sustainability and Indigenous knowledge mobilization, and an epistemological approach to a resilient sense of identity.

Powwow as a Wild West Show or as an Indigenous Epistemology

"[T]he 'new humanism' required today is one that brings forth into the future the ancient values of our traditional past and rearticulates them in a contemporary contact" (Harawira, 2005, p. 251). When I am dancing at a powwow, I am reminded of the resilience, valour, and highly principled ways of our people, and the epistemological foundations as a tribal person, an *Anishinaabe kwe* (Indigenous woman). It is the contemporary constructed cultural artifact of the powwow that I consider a pathway to the *new humanism* of Indigenous people in the 21st century.

Contemporary competition powwows became a mode of a contemporary created cultural artifact (Demerath, 2002) that reflected a "relationship between cultural production and social reproduction within the structure of capitalist society" (Gordon, 1984, p. 107), instead of the Willis interpretation of "capitalist society" (Willis, 1981, p. 69). We, as First Nations, have been creating a new type of society which has yet to be defined. Typically, powwow culture is spiritually or culturally defined. The intention of my research work is to critically assess the fundamental philosophies of powwow life beyond the dance floor, and beyond the glitz and glamour of the powwow dance performance.

Powwow evolved from ceremonial type dances (McNally, 2000), to the Buffalo Bill Wild West shows, to an "add-on" to Agricultural Fairs (Crow

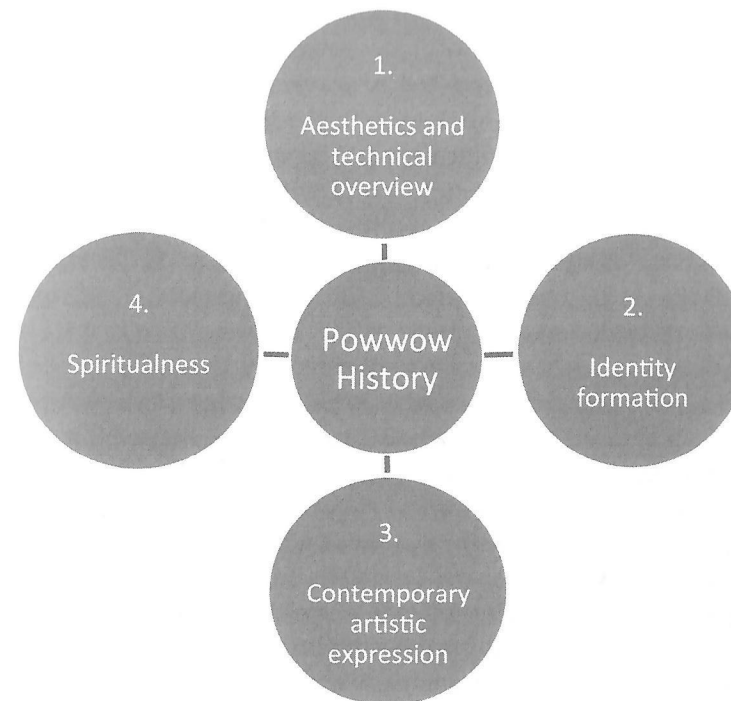


Figure 1. Four approaches to powwow.

Pair) and, due to the change in federal legislation, a return to First Nations cultural practices (Ellis, 2005; Elton, 1997; Heth, 1992; Laubin, 1977; McNally, 2000; Treuer, 2010; Vennum, 2009). The focus of my inquiry is *how, when and why* the powwow came to be in contemporary times. The most common definition of a powwow, according to Wikipedia, is:

A modern pow wow is a specific type of event for Native American people to meet and dance, sing, socialize, and honor their cultures. Pow wows may be private or public. There is generally a dancing competition, with many different types of traditional dances, music and regalia, often with significant prize money awarded. Pow wows vary in length from a one-day event, to major pow wows called for a special occasion which can be up to one week long. (retrieved June 30, 2018)

There are four specific approaches to powwow (Figure 1) that have been written about in the past fifty years.

1. Aesthetics and Technical Aspects of Powwow

The earliest books, such as Reginald and Gladys Laubin's *Indian Dances of North America* (1976), were done purely as hobbyist interest. This type of book sets the norm for many powwow books since. The focus of these

books is from an *outside or out of culture* perspective. Although a non-Indian couple, the Laubins did dance at powwows and were officially *adopted*. The Laubins are considered by powwow practitioners as hobbyist dancers. The focus of their book is on the aesthetics and technicalities of the powwow. They also provide a general introduction and review of other “sacred” types of dance such as the Sun Dance, Ghost Dance, War Dance, and a multitude of other dances of other nations.

The advent of high-stakes gaming, with casinos on all Ojibwa reservations, has changed the tribal landscape. With the increased wealth has come increased stakes in powwow participation. There are now many \$100,000 powwows. As prizes have grown to phenomenal levels, the spirit of challenge has grown, resulting in a drive to gain an edge on the competition. This push for competitive advantage has led to a gross exaggeration of dance moves, regalia, and songs. Old-time dancers now shake their heads and wonder out loud, “*What have we done to ourselves?*” (Vennum, 2009, p. 325).

Recently, I was forwarded a master’s thesis titled *Native Dancing in the Plains Culture Area: Yesterday and Today*. The title indicates its limitations. It surmises that powwow culture is only of the Plains. The thesis provided a limited overview of several powwow styles of dance and what age categories exist at some selected powwow events. Although today there are hundreds of powwow celebrations (Roberts, 1998), with at least a dozen on any given weekend during the summer, the study was completed based on three powwows attended. These two literatures, as well as several journal articles (Demerath, 2002; Hoefnagels, 2012; Landrum, 2012; Morgan & Warren, 2011; Taylor, 2004; Treglia, 2013; Williams, 2014) reflect a perspective shared by cultural outsiders who partake in powwow observations.

Here is how an Anishinaabe writer, Drew Hayden Taylor, describes his experience of powwows:

Oddly enough, it seems that the majority of powwow-goers are non-native. Easily one-half to two-thirds of the audience are white, with a sprinkling of African-American, Asian and other bits of humanity. Why they come to powwows is a mystery to me. Is it to look at all the exotic native people? I hope not. To tell you the truth, we’re not that exotic. Whenever I’m on the reserve, I watch “Friends” and “Star Trek” while eating potato chips. Maybe they go to watch the dancing and listen to the drumming. I sometimes go for that. Yet I’m fairly sure that many of the people who are interested in native dance seldom go out to see some of their own uniquely cultural dances such as ballet, for instance. Granted, powwow tickets are cheaper, and at the risk of being accused of cultural bias, I would rather see some jingle-dress dancing than a production of *Swan Lake* (and I work in theatre). But that’s because I grew up with this kind of dancing. It’s home. It’s comforting. (Taylor, 2004)

Based on Taylor’s reflection, the best that I take from this is “It’s home. It’s comforting”; yet as Taylor suggests, perhaps there is a perception of “exotic native people.”

2. Identity Formation

Recently, I was teaching powwow dance at the local Indian Friendship Centre. I found that most of the attendees were bringing their foster and/or adopted Aboriginal children there to provide a sense of identity. From visits with urban Aboriginal people, I also find similar interests for those who attend or participate at a local powwow.

The writing about what constitutes identity “shows us clearly that dresses are much more than simple articles of clothing for Native Women—they are complex expressions of culture and identity” (Heth, 1992, p. 11). Others (for example, Horses, 2007; McNally, 2000; Vennum, 2009; Treuer, 2010) write about cultural retention, reclamation, and sustainability in keeping authentic tribal customs, practices, and protocols.

One of the periods of increased powwow events was in the midst of the civil rights period and the American Indian Movement (AIM) where, at many powwows, the AIM song became a norm of Grand Entry songs. During my time at a local public school, the “Aboriginal focus” school, they also had a powwow club where the intention was to bring a sense of cultural identity. Powwow clubs within schools both on- and off-reserve have long been a way to have a practical approach for students to gain a secure sense of identity.

3. Modern and Contemporary Artistic Expression

The period of the Indian gaming casino triggered the glam and glitz of the casino floor being brought onto the powwow dance arena. The dance prize became a primary focus (Treuer, 2010), leaving tribal authenticity and integrity to the sidelines. Although powwows are a public event, the levels of acceptance without one paying their dues are noteworthy. One cannot show up at a powwow with a Kijiji dance outfit and expect a place in the winners’ line-up. Another option that has worked well for some dancers is the mode of contemporary modern dance expression. Leading the way in Canada for this type of expression is the Banff Centre for the Arts’ Aboriginal dance program (Elton, 1997).

Next is the misconception that powwows are only a Sioux or Plains cultural activity. Generally, there is acknowledgement of the role that Buffalo Bill Cody played in the Wild West Shows, with Sitting Bull and other Sioux “warriors.” These are the most common representations, which also serve as common, stereotypical imagery of the *mighty savage*, created for romance novels. No citation is provided here, as I consider these novels so popular and common in society at large. As the late Rene Highway, brother of Thomson Highway, states:

Natives have already learned to express themselves in visual arts, through painting and sculpture. Now they're starting to express themselves through the performing arts ... the message is to use what we've learned and experienced and come up with a way of expressing ourselves. (Heth, 1992)

4. Spiritualness

The next theme with powwow is the *spiritual* connection approach to recover what was lost as a result of colonialism. Vennum's text, *The Ojibwa Dance Drum*, focuses on the spiritual and early history of the drum, and to the dance specific to the Ojibwe. There is no doubt that there was a period in history, after the change in the *Indian Act* in 1951, that Anishinabek were seeking ways to return to ceremonies. Although the *Indian Act* changed, communities were under watch. Powwows became the safe place for spiritual occurrences, in different shapes or forms. The concept of *spiritual practices* was a common theme within many of the texts I read (Ellis, 2005; Helin, 2008; Heth, 1992; Horses, 2007; McNally, 2000; Vennum, 2009)

While in the midst of my preliminary research, I wandered away to dance and exchange thoughts with my fellow dancers. One of the thoughtful engagements I had was with the traditional knowledge keeper/educator of the Saskatoon Public Schools system, Tim Eashappie. Eashappie is recognized as a cultural icon: not only as an accomplished dancer, but also as a ceremony person. His statement about the powwow circle was that "people get confused and think being a powwow dancer replaces our 'spiritual' practices; it doesn't, this is about song and dance, it is not 'our' ceremonies" (personal communication, summer 2015). Eashappie provided that statement from the dance arbour sidelines. One of my own Anishinaabe scholars sums it up this way:

Powwow itself is not new. It did not exist seventy years ago. It is a pan-Indian combination of Omaha grass dance ceremonies, Dakota war dances, Ojibwe dreams about the jingle dress and rodeo customs ... Participant abilities to sing and dance are highly valued, supplanting older cultural ideals of community cohesion, inclusiveness, and respectful generosity. The modern powwow is a welcome, healthy gathering of people from many communities. It is a joyous social event and source of community pride. But it is not a substitute for traditional Ojibwe religion or of ways of life. Powwow is the largest and fastest-growing part of Ojibwe culture today. It is everywhere. (Treuer, 2010, p. 2)

Apparently, one can create a dance outfit, find powwow locations, and sign up for your specific dance category and participate with an appropriate understanding of the essentials of a powwow. An understanding of the origins of powwow, enough to entertain and capture the interests of a powwow tourist with powwow tidbits of knowledge, can be gained from a limited literature research or a Google search, and watching some YouTube videos on dance. The reality is that until one lives a powwow

way of life, to truly understand the epistemological elements of powwow culture, then something is amiss. No doubt there is the presence of an *ember*, but to rekindle the flame of cultural sustainability in the 21st century involves more than aesthesis, a confirmed tribal identity, choreography, artistic expression, and a quasi-spiritual approach.

My Own Rekindling of the Flame

Traditional powwows, meaning those that were land-based initiatives, had a uniqueness to them that is indescribable. What does come to mind is the position of Simpson (2014) who states that, "A resurgence of Indigenous ... requires generations of Indigenous peoples to grow up intimately and strongly connected to our homelands ... our traditions ... diplomacy" (p. 1). For Simpson, one of the critical elements of cultural knowledge sustainability is the cultural concept of *visiting* or, as earlier mentioned, *having tea*.

My love of the powwow arena, in some respects, can be about powwow culture as a means to a "healthier" lifestyle (Treuer, 2010), or as a means of seeking tribal identity (Horses, 2007), or "as markers of identity" (McNally, 2000, p. 118). Yet, for myself as a child, I loved watching Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, and Ginger Rogers waltz across the dance floor. In my deepest desires, that is what I wanted: to dance. It was not so much the tap dancing or the ballroom dancing that I wanted. It was "our" own dance. As a child, there was no avoiding the John Wayne movies and the Buffalo Bill Wild West exposés. I knew instinctively that those were not our dance. I knew from seeing our annual home powwow that there was an intrinsic, profound element within the superficial aesthetics of powwow dance. That is what I wanted and what I have spent most of my life aspiring to capture and achieve. That is the side of powwow culture that holds me. As a classroom teacher and education advocate, I truly believe that somewhere beyond the dance arena, beyond the splendour of beads and feathers, is a "philosophical framework of Indigenous knowledge that can contribute to a resilient sense of identity that is within the powwow circle" (Burrows, 2015). The power within the circle, the empowerment felt from the singers who sing, the children who dance, and the Elders who complete the circle, rippled out to the powwow audience, time and time again, is an unspoken, undefined sense of empowerment to all who partake. The powwow circle touches all those present, from the drop-in tourist, to the vendors, to the powwow techies, and to all those beyond the powwow dance arena.

Conclusions

Recently, I shared with several powwow community members and my family that I was presenting my work (powwow culture) at an Indigenous

Scholars conference (March 2015). One of the responses I received back was, "May the force be with you ... people need to know about our way of life. It's not just about little traditional powwows and fry bread." In short, a misconception exists by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous that the contemporary expression of powwow dance through the creation of the cultural artifact of powwow are contemporary Wild West Shows.

I am not sure what my work will tell, but I know what I feel when I dance, when I come in Grand Entry, when I sit with my relatives and visit ... it's a powerful place for "alternative social change" (Espinosa, 1997). *Miigwech*.

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