

POWOW

"So you want me to choose between
going to powwows and being with you.
Well, I made up my mind. Come here
pretty darling, give me a kiss goodbye."

OJIBWE SONG BY PIPESTONE SINGERS

What is a powwow?

The word *powwow* is actually derived from a term for spiritual leader in the Narragansett and Massachusetts languages but was later misapplied to many types of ceremonial and secular events. Although Ojibwe drum ceremonies and traditional Dakota wacipi dances sometimes are referred to as *powwows*, today's events are commonly secular, not ceremonial, and are widely practiced all over North America. They usually last anywhere from one to three days, and they are open to people of all tribes, genders, ages, and races. Powwows are primarily dance events, where people wear sometimes elaborate beadwork, feathers, and other regalia and dance to a wide array of songs performed by numerous drum groups, each comprised of anywhere from five to twenty singers. The *powwow* is a relatively new cultural form, although one of the most vibrant in all of Indian country.¹

Many tribes from the Northern Plains and Great Lakes had different types of drum ceremonies and war dances at the time of first contact with Europeans. From these ceremonies evolved a more secular dance that often involved people from many different tribes. It used to be that each eagle feather worn by

an Indian represented a deed done in battle—a kill, wound, or scalp—so wearing a feather bonnet, bustle, or dog soldier hat marked one as a fearsome warrior. Often, warriors and chiefs proudly displayed their feathers at treaty signings and diplomatic events, showing their military might, parading into the compounds of U.S. Army forts, for example. This custom evolved into the current *grand entry*, where Indians of all ages and genders parade into the dance arbor, although it is still veterans who lead. Styles of dance from the Omaha (grass dance), Dakota (war dance), Ojibwe (jingle dress), and other tribes were freely shared across tribal lines.

In the 1960s and 1970s, tribal governments in many places began to devote financial resources to support powwows, encouraging participation by providing meals and even money to dancers and singers. The custom grew into sometimes extravagant displays and even competitions with prize purses for best singing and dancing in multiple categories. Some of the wealthiest tribes, such as the Mashantucket Pequot, sponsored powwows with a total prize purse of more than \$1 million. Even less well-off tribes like Leech Lake (Minnesota) have devoted hundreds of thousands of dollars to support powwow customs. The practice is vibrant because an overwhelming majority of the tribal population participates in powwows, and the custom transcends lines of religious choice, tribe, and even race. Access is easy, and the creativity of native artists and musicians finds fertile ground in the music and regalia.

Powwows also offer safe, sober environments that bring communities together and usually involve people of all ages, making them a healthy social option. Some tribal members feel that the financial support given to powwows is excessive and eclipses expenditures on other even more important initiatives such as tribal language and culture revitalization. As money motivates participation, some see powwows as part of the rapid cultural change engulfing Indian country. Even though powwow is positive by itself, many say it is not and could never be a substitute for older lifeways and customs.



Northern Wind Singers at Leech Lake Contest Powwow in Cass Lake, Minnesota, September 2009

What do the different styles of dance mean?

There are many different styles of dance. The "men's traditional" style, which typically includes a feather bustle worn on the back and a feathered roach, dog soldier hat, or headdress, is one of the oldest and one of the most common. It is an evolution of older war regalia, where warriors earned feathers in battle and displayed them at war and scalp dances (but not always in battle). Today, it is not expected that those who wear such regalia have "earned" their feathers, although the feathers are still highly respected. Because in former times each feather represented a human being who was killed or wounded, a feather that is acci-

dently dropped in the powwow arena is usually picked up only by military veterans, who use a special song to dance around it and retrieve the fallen "comrade." Traditional dancers mimic the actions of warriors and hunters scouting for enemies or game. Another common men's dance is the "grass dance." Originally a distinct style used only in the Omaha Grass Dance Society, it spread to other tribes and became very popular in the 1970s and remains so today. Dancers do not usually have feather bustles, although they do often have head roaches made of porcupine



Men's traditional dancer

and deer hair, sometimes with a feather or two. The body of the outfit includes aprons with long fringe that mimics the action of grass blowing in the wind. The dancers themselves spin, turn, and move their feet as if they were moving in tall grass, all to the beat of the drum.

Men's "fancy dance" is a derivation of the older traditional style. It incorporates many elements of traditional regalia, but usually with bright colors and double bustles that are not always made of eagle feathers. The dancers display rapid footwork and even gymnastic moves, spinning, cartwheeling, and jumping. Among the most popular styles to watch, it is much more widely practiced at competition powwows than traditional ones.

There are other styles of men's dance as well, most of which involve mimicking the actions or motions of birds or animals. There are also many variations in styles of beadwork. The eastern Great Lakes often use more floral designs, while the western Great Lakes and Plains tribes often favor more geometric patterns, but dancers are free to create whatever they wish. Although some purchase their dance regalia, most make their own or have family members help them, incorporating personal colors acquired at their naming ceremonies, from dreams, or while fasting.

In older dance forms that predated powwows, women did not always dance or sing in all tribes. Today, women sing on powwow drums in Washington State and other places but are often forbidden or strongly discouraged from doing so in other parts of Indian country. The same is no longer true for dance. Powwow dancing is as popular and widely practiced among women as it is among men.

The "women's traditional" dance has many variations in regalia. Southern Plains style often incorporate elk teeth as evidence of the hunting skill of a woman's mate. Western tribes sometimes make use of the cowry shell, although that item has religious significance for many Great Lakes tribes and is less common there. Typically, the outfits incorporate elaborate beadwork and very long fringe, and gentle dance motions rock the

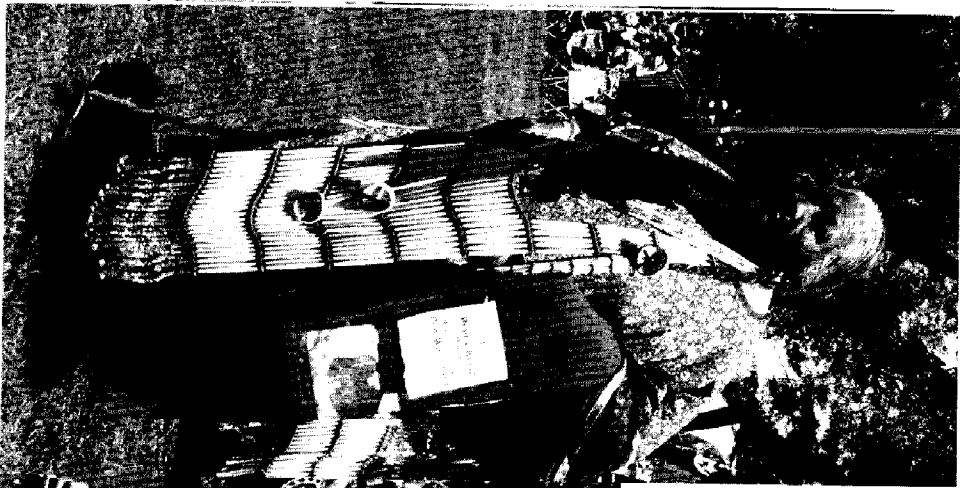
Men's grass dancer



Men's fancy dancer



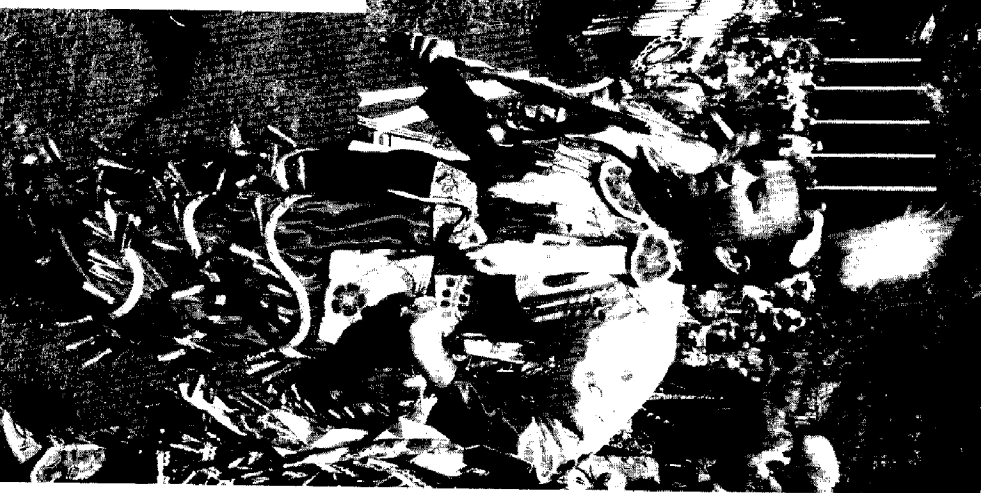
Women's traditional dancer



fringe back and forth. Often, women's traditional dancers ring the outside edge of the dance arbor in a circle around the men.

The women's "jingle dress" style involves a long, tight dress covered in numerous jingles, often constructed from snuff can lids or other metal. The jingles make a swooshing sound. The jingle dress style evolved from an Ojibwe man's dream of the dress around the time of World War I. The jingle part of the regalia was believed to have healing power. Sometimes jingle dress healing songs are performed at powwows, but usually the secular version of the dance is on display.

Women's "fancy shawl" is the other popular form of female dance. The attire involves a colorful dress and shawl. The dancer spins and moves her arms to mimic the actions of a butterfly coming out of its cocoon and flitting about the arena.



Women's jingle dress dancer

Opposite:

Women's fancy shawl dancer



Why are "49" songs sung in English?

The "49" song accompanies one of the few partner dances exhibited at powwows. The music is differentiated from other powwow songs by its slower and syncopated rhythm, to which partners hold hands and move in a long line, twisting and winding around the arena, following the moves of the lead couple. The music uses English in part because this dance is inspired by French and English partner dance customs but also because it is an especially popular form of music among young singers. Over time, it has sought to entertain with wit and even popular culture lines, such as "you got the right one, baby," and "good ol' fashioned Indian lovin'." It's part of the culture of the music.

How come they have a prize purse at powwows?

Not all Indians are happy about this development, although it is a huge part of the life of many native people. Competition for prize money in various styles of dance and singing derives from the rodeo component of powwow's origins. As the dances became more rigidly stylized and secular and less ceremonial, this was an easy segue. Today, tribes with significant financial means often offer large prize purses to draw numerous singers, dancers, and spectators. It is seen as a way to show local hospitality, raise the profile of the host community in Indian country, and demonstrate authentic culture to outsiders.

Some Indians oppose the proliferation of contest powwows over traditional powwows and other cultural forms. They say that placing a monetary value on participants' abilities to sing and dance supplants older cultural ideals of community cohesion, inclusiveness, and respectful generosity.

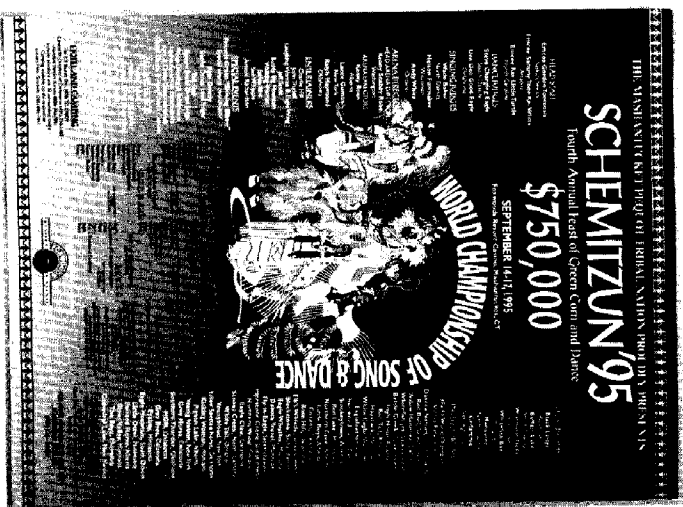
Powwow is the largest and fastest-growing part of Indian culture today. It is everywhere. Tribes like Leech Lake (Minnesota) spend over a hundred thousand dollars on prize money for Labor Day contest powwows alone; and Leech Lake has at least a dozen powwows a year, ranging in size from its large contest powwow to several smaller community powwows. The powwow

budget for Leech Lake completely eclipses tribal expenditures on traditional culture and Ojibwe language revitalization, and that's what really bothers some tribal members.

Tribes and tribal people are agents of their own cultural change. 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 substitution for traditional religion or ways of life.

Can white people dance at powwows?

Yes. Although there are prohibitions against the participation of outsiders in ceremonial events and customs for some tribes, powwow has no such official barriers. Furthermore, as the number of Indians with light complexions has grown over the past few decades, many nonnative people may even be assumed to be native at powwows. The powwow emcee will announce to the audience if there is a special honor song or exhibition song for a certain style of dance. Otherwise, powwow music is considered and often called inter-tribal—open to people of all tribes and races.



Schemitzun Powwow poster, Mashantucket Pequot, 1995

Do women sing at powwows?

Yes. Women from all tribes sing in a variety of secular and ceremonial functions, but there are rules and sometimes those rules are gendered. Some types of ceremonial music are exclusively male and other types exclusively female. For most Great Lakes tribes and many others, women do not touch ceremonial big drums or even powwow drums. Men sit around those drums and do the drumming and most of the singing, although women can and often do stand or sit behind the men, singing with them, usually an octave above to the same melody.

The first ceremonial drum that the Dakota gave to the Ojibwe came through the vision of a Dakota woman who "saw" men singing at the drum and women sitting behind the men, singing with them. That practice carried over to secular forms of singing on large drums for the Ojibwe, Menominee, Potawatomi, and others. For those tribes, it is not seen as an exclusion of women but rather as the greatest way to respect the vision of the woman who "gave birth to the drum." Tribes in the Pacific Northwest do not have the same prohibitions, and women often sing on larger powwow drums there. But tribal people respect the traditions of the host communities, including their varying protocols for gender and singing.

What is the protocol for gifts at powwows?

Visitors are not required to give gifts at powwows, where it is the host community's responsibility to show generosity to others. Toward the end of the powwow, the host community usually sponsors a giveaway, during which they make large piles of blankets and other goods and distribute them to dancers, helpers, and spectators. Sometimes a family will sponsor a giveaway. Once in a while, a family that is having a hard time might ask for a blanket dance to solicit donations for travel or health care. Contributing money during a blanket dance is a free will donation.

Tribal Languages

"This is our language. It is the sound of the waves crashing on the shore, the sound of the wind in the pines, the rustle of the leaves in autumn. It is the sound of the birds singing in the forest and the wolves howling in the distance. This is our language, from which we obtain life, our means of knowing who we are, this sacred gift, bestowed upon us by our creator."

GORDON JOURDAIN, Lac La Croix (Ontario)¹

How many tribal languages are spoken in North America?

There may have been as many as five hundred distinct tribal languages in North America prior to sustained contact with Europeans. There are now around 180, but the number is shrinking quickly. All world languages are members of families, such as the Germanic or Romance language families. And languages in the same families (like English and German) have some similarities, although they are not always mutually intelligible. There are fifty-six language families in North America and over three times that number in South America. Sometimes Native American languages spoken by groups that are geographically adjacent (like Ojibwe and Dakota) are as different as Chinese and English.

Which ones have a chance to be here a hundred years from now?

There are currently about twenty tribal languages in the United States and Canada spoken by significant numbers of children. They include Ojibwe, Cree, Ottawa, Diné (Navajo), Hawaiian, Tiwa and Tewa (Pueblo), Hopi, Apsáalooke (Crow), Mohawk, and Lakota. But even most of these tribes do not have any monolingual speakers of the tribal language. Usually, English is used for some aspects of daily life (school, job, or social). Even in remote parts of the Navajo Reservation (Arizona), Ni'ihau (Hawaii), or Lac La Croix First Nation (Ontario), where there are enclaves that have 100 percent fluency in the tribal language, mainstream media is coming in via satellite dish and English is starting to become the peer language for some of the youngest age groups. People are worried about the future vitality of tribal languages everywhere in the United States and Canada. In Mexico, some of the thirty Mayan languages have large numbers of speakers (six million total), including significant groups of monolingual speakers, and their future seems certain in some places.

Why are fluency rates higher in Canada?

They aren't that much higher. Like indigenous communities throughout the Americas, most Canadian First Nations are in language crisis. The missionary activity started early in the colonial experience there, although the residential boarding school system started (and ended) later than in the United States. That timeline, coupled with the geographic isolation of some communities (accessed primarily by floatplane or boat), has helped to keep rates higher in a few areas.

Some communities also have unique circumstances. Manitoulin Island (in the Georgian Bay of Lake Huron) has a large tract of unceded Indian land that provided a higher degree of geographic isolation and thus mitigated some of the language pressure seen in other parts of Ontario. Another example is a

large group of Dakota who escaped military attack and persecution in southern Minnesota in 1862 by settling in Canada. Their descendants have been especially tenacious about language revitalization in recent years, creating a living resource for today's Minnesota Dakota communities in their own language revitalization work.

It seems like tribal languages won't give native people a leg up in the modern world. Why are tribal languages important to Indians?

In fact, tribal languages do give Indians a leg up in the modern world. The Waadookodaading Ojibwe Immersion Charter School in Reserve, Wisconsin, has for ten years garnered a 100 percent pass rate on state-mandated tests administered in English, and the teachers do not speak to the kids in English until the higher grades. Even wealthy, predominantly white suburban school districts don't usually score so consistently high. Tribal language education is a powerful tool for the development of everything from cognitive function to basic self-esteem.

Indian people value their languages for many other reasons as well. They are cornerstones of identity, and their use keeps us recognizable to our ancestors. They are defining features of nationhood. The retention of tribal languages tells the world that we have not been assimilated, in spite of five hundred years of concerted effort to achieve that. They are the only customary languages for many ceremonies, a gateway to spiritual understanding. And tribal languages encapsulate unique tribal world views. They define us as distinct peoples.

Why should tribal languages be important to everyone else?

I always tell the deans and president at Bemidji State University, where I work, that when people call for the "Department of Foreign Languages" to be sure to direct them to the English

Department. Tribal languages are modern, domestic languages. They are the first languages of this land and the first languages of the first Americans. These facts alone should make their retention especially important. The proven links between academic achievement and cultural and linguistic competency for native youth also indicate that everyone should want the most successful strategies employed to bridge the educational and economic achievement gaps for Indians so that natives can be the best possible neighbors and need fewer entitlements to alleviate poverty, reducing the tax burden for all. But even more important, the survival of tribal languages and cultures is a litmus test for the morality of our nation and its ability to provide for the needs of all of its citizens. If the United States can enable and support the retention of cultural and linguistic diversity, its strength and moral position is obvious, rather than tainted.

What are the challenges to successfully revitalizing tribal languages?

Some tribal languages have no speakers left and very few written resources. The Hebrew language was revived almost two thousand years after it became moribund, but in a form highly altered from its original use and with the help of lots of written material and a large population of people committed to seeing that result. The deck is stacked against many tribes accomplishing something similar. The places that have a good chance of making a successful intervention have a critical mass of fluent speakers and a growing body of resources (books, audio recordings, and computer materials for instruction). The challenges are finding adequate language resources, certified teachers fluent in the target language, and financial support. Often tribal government support is limited, as resources are diverted to entitlements or because tribal leaders do not see the value of preserving their own languages. Lighting the fire for a major revitalization is challenging in many places, even where the potential for intervention is great.

When were tribal languages first written down?

Some tribes did write before European contact. The Mayans had a unique system of writing. The Ojibwe used mnemonic devices written on birch bark to preserve critical information. But the formal writing systems developed for most tribal languages were introduced after European contact. Missionaries wanted the Bible and other religious texts to enter the minds and hearts of Indians as quickly as possible, and some did a lot of work with tribal languages to achieve their goal. Most systems used roman letters. Some, like syllabics (employed for Cree and Ojibwe), used unique symbols. Sequoyah, a Cherokee silversmith, developed a syllabary for Cherokee. His syllabary—the first to be independently created by a member of a nonliterate people—was formally adopted by the Cherokee Nation in 1825 and is still employed today, recently being incorporated as a language on the Macintosh and iPhone operating systems.



Sequoyah developed the Cherokee syllabary even though he was not literate in other languages.

Many tribal languages were never written. Why do they write them now?

At one point in time, white people never used cars, so why do they use them now? Because it makes life easier and more efficient. Indians also at one point did not have cars, or electricity, or writing systems for most of their languages. But those things can improve quality of life or ease of communication. Still, there is not universal agreement about the writing of tribal language. The Pueblos are among the strictest in their insistence that the language remain oral and not written. Most tribes accept the writing of tribal languages but may not agree on specific writing systems. In most places, there is an increasing awareness that writing can be a critical part of developing needed resources, preserving critical information, and stabilizing languages.

Why is it funnier in Indian?

All languages have their words comprised of smaller parts of words called *morphemes*. In English, those morphemes come from the language's Germanic roots, from Latin, Greek, and many other languages, so everyday speakers of English do not commonly know the roots of words. But the opposite is often true for many tribal languages, whose speakers know the deeper meanings behind their words and can then communicate on two levels—using words and the deeper meaning behind them. That makes it easier to have plays on words, puns, descriptions, and names converge in ways that give greater meaning and humor to many situations.

In Ojibwe, for example, the word *giboooyegwazonag* means “pants” or, literally, “leggings that sew up the hind end.” Ojibwe people must have thought pants were hilariously impractical in a cold-weather climate where one had to take the entire works down to relieve oneself, when someone with a skirt or breechclout and leggings had quick and easy access. Even today, when

Ojibwe people regularly wear pants instead of breechclouts, the word still elicits a chuckle.

How do tribal languages encapsulate a different world view?

Just as morphemes carry possibilities for humor, they also carry deeper and more resonant meanings that shape attitudes. In Ojibwe, for example, the word for an old woman, *mindimooye*, literally means “one who holds things together,” describing the role of the family matriarch. In English, *old woman*, *elderly woman*, and *aged woman* all speak to age rather than to a more exalted function for elder women in society. Many women dye their hair, get Botox injections or face lifts, and rarely admit to their true age in order to combat the appearance of growing older, because the world view of many English language speakers devalues the role and appearance of older women. But in the Ojibwe language, there is a revered place for elder women, one reflected in core values, actions, and the language itself. You don't have to tell Ojibwe speakers to respect their elders. The respect is built right in with every word one would use to refer to them. Even the gender-neutral term for elder in Ojibwe, *gichi-ayaa*, literally means “great being.”