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Research Project

### A Jukebox Native in a Contemporary World

*Thud, thud, thud, thud, thud, thud, thud, thud.* That constant, 140 beat per minute tempo of the drum fills up the surrounding atmosphere. Over and over, drumsticks with the shape of cattail plants beat the deerskin canvas with an energy that cannot simply be ignored. The energy then changes once more as piercing, rhythmic voices enter after the first four measures of beating. Though it is a simple melody, the energy drives dancers to move steadily with the beat with their one-two step styles. Even though the songs that come from the singers' seem unintelligible to many who do not speak the language, a specific group of people can and excel. Native Americans, a many age-old ethnic group, frequently participate in an experience like no other: the powwow.

This scenario is either familiar or completely unknown to various groups, but for Native Americans who live on a federal reservation, experiencing this way of life becomes a part of their very being. Because Native youth are brought up attending these popular events, the culture and traditions that are embedded in them stay with them, enough to the point at which they forget what the outside world is like. Various challenges arise for Native youth upon entering an unfamiliar world full of traditions that continually go against an already known culture. One big

challenge includes Native youth growing up in an ever-changing Americanized home and one that dates back to a Native culture that pre-dates pre-colonial times.

One big question that arises with the challenges that Indian youth face growing up with two different cultures is how do 21<sup>st</sup> century Native children live in a world that is constantly changing society with cultures that pre-date colonial times? This essay aims to analyze how biculturalism affects Native American youth who are raised in a contemporary world, the issues they face with reinventing tradition, and how these apply to their experience of the powwow.

### **Two is {Not} Better Than One**

Though not mentioned extensively in history books, Native Americans happen to be one of the minority groups that have faced the most oppression for the longest amount of time. Before Europeans “stumbled” upon the Americas, there could have been millions and millions of Natives inhabiting these continents, and all led what they believed was a “normal” life. Unfortunately, the intentions of European colonization took a turn to conquest as disease spread across tribes, slavery separated families, and as indigenous land disappeared. The list goes on and on, and the impact of colonization still remains a large part of Native American culture, and children today still experience this on a daily basis. Of the remaining Indian population today, around 33.5% live on one of the 500 reservations, and the percentage of children that grow up in that environment learn to live in two extraordinarily different cultures.

Biculturalism can be roughly defined from Google as, “involving two originally distinct cultures in some form of co-existence.” In *Contemporary Native American Cultural Issues*, Multiculturalism is used to define the lifestyle of 21<sup>st</sup> century Indians that “refers to an individual of two or more races.” This applies to Natives that may have a father who is of American Indian descent, but the mother may descend from Irish or German ancestry. In this case, the issue of

“looking Native” arises on a micro level. When one grows up in a home where certain customs are practiced, they will naturally attempt to stick with them and pass them on to further generations. However, when that same person also has to live in a society outside of those customs, they have to somewhat adapt their identity to “fit in”. On page 14 of *Contemporary Native American Cultural Issues*, Champagne states, “One assumption of this discussion is that American Indians, like blacks, live in a white world. Historically (and presently), they have had to deal with racism, stereotypes, and oppression.” This is true based off of what is taught in history classes today, but non-Indians have their own presumptions about Native Americans, particularly their skin color.

After living on the reservation for the first few years of my life, I had to quickly transition to living in an American world. One of the aspects of myself that was seemingly only noticed by others was the color of my skin. Every time I would reveal my ethnicity as Native American, people would make fun of me because in their eyes, my identity was white. What non-Indians fail to understand about contemporary Native American culture is that while they are pictured as “traditional”, a “conception that ignores the dynamic expressions of cultures that emerge, move, and fuse today in response to a changing environment, and environment which has given rise to the spread of pan-Indianism (Friesen 215).” It has always been changing since contact was first made from European colonization many centuries ago. From moments like these on, life for me and other American Indians in similar circumstances began an evolution of biculturalism, identity, and reinvented traditions.

### **The Jukebox Native: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Edition**

An easy analogy to describe the traditions of American Indians would be to picture a clay block. The clay block will always have the look and structure of a block as long as it remains

untouched. However, once a foreign object touches and changes it, the look and structure will no longer be the same, but different. Over and over, this happened to ancient tribes such as the Ojibwe tribe once European civilizations began to inhabit the Americas, and because that clay block was constantly being tampered with, it eventually became this clay sphere.

With every generation of Indians, there come new challenges and new “reinvented traditions”. To put into simpler terms of the clay block analogy, “The political act of creating, struggling for, and maintaining an Indian culture does not look the same from generation to generation. The experiences of young people, and particularly of young people of color, often do not reduce along the lines of the ideologies held by their elders... (Buff 163)” This process of reinventing a culture that is ages old creates a larger responsibility on present-day Native American youth. The primary question deals with whether or not they can uphold ancient traditions such as the powwow and ritualistic practices.

### **The Birth and Evolution of the Powwow**

As it derives from the Ojibwe (Algonquin) word, “pawa-mowin”, “powwow” has a great significance in today’s Native American culture (Thunderhorse). Algonquin tribes that number to the 60’s inhabited almost one-third of North America that ranged from Nova Scotia to the Carolinas, all before the exploration of Europeans. The Algonquin expound on the evolution of this word with the statement, “Powwow was an old, old man who had dreams of such power, he could tell the future of the tribe, give healing advice...Powwow (later) became a title for the strongest medicine men... (Thunderhorse)” and these medicine men are known in some Native cultures to have supernatural powers. With this, traditions that are common in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been passed down through the centuries by the many Algonquin Nations that originally began as simple ceremonial tasks. Some of these included reciting past dreams that reassured

their spiritual power, some with the emphasis of using drum groups, and others included dances by members of specific tribes. As these Native groups moved from their homeland to other parts of the country, their traditions and powwow customs would move with them, and this resulted with other tribes adopting those customs and adapting them as their own.

One of the most widely used shapes to bring cultures, people, and the meaning of life together is almost always the circle. Not everyone notices them, but literally, they appear everywhere. In Ancient Greece, it was believed that the circle was “the perfect shape”, as it also had perfect symmetry (“Circles, Circles Everywhere”). Even famous landmarks such as Stonehenge specifically was constructed in a circle to act as an observatory, and many more examples could be found. From Celtic symbols to Islam symbols, circles all represent one of a few different ideas. Primarily, they range from balance, “togetherness”, power, unity, and harmony, which is interesting for many different reasons, yet even mathematicians and researchers have difficulties trying to demystify this overlooked shape.

Despite how complex and fascinating circles prove to be, the one thing that is for certain is that many cultures around the globe use them, especially Native Americans. As circles can be found in many different symbols and art, they are also very prevalent in powwow activities. The dance arena is set up physically in a circle, and in the Grand Entry, all of the dancers will travel around it and eventually form a spiral. In the book titled *Contemporary Native American Cultural Issues*, the author named Duane Champagne notices that “Among Indians of Minnesota and Western Wisconsin, the circle carried spiritual significance as an embodiment of all living creatures, and relations within this circle are characterized by unity, harmony, and inclusiveness.” Even here, the unity of various tribes is present, and will create an ever more spiritual experience among the people. Though this is an old tradition, there are new

contemporary influences that created what the Grand Entry really is. The other origin of this was “invented at Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show” back around in 1883. Stereotypes of Native American life versus cowboys evolved from the presentations of Indian dress and culture, but despite this, the opening of Grand Entry has survived for many centuries and can be argued whether this is the very center of the powwow, but the most important tradition adapted from the migration of tribes is the drum.

No matter where one could be standing on the powwow grounds, there will constantly be the pulse of the drum. At the beginning of the festivities the singing and beating will not go unnoticed, but as the day wears on, attendees find that they steadily become one with that same pulse. This ancient tradition actually comes from the Menominee Nation of Wisconsin and at first symbolized the “gift of friendship”, but eventually turned into the narrations of war, survival, and religion of the many different tribes after colonial invasion of the Americas (Thunderhorse). According to Iron Thunderhorse in *Algonquian Influence on Powwow Culture; Tracing the History of Powwow through Algonquian Culture*, there were periods of about four days of preparing decorated water drums to receiving tribes with a four day celebration afterwards. It was then presented in powwow rituals, and was adapted to different tribes as the Algonquian Indians migrated away from their original homeland. To this day, many outsiders view powwows as a grand social event for Native Americans, but will not see the complexities of what seems to be simple, reinvented traditions. However, children who grow up in a reservation environment view these traditions on levels that can match their ancestors from ages back, which also brings up the issue of identity for 21<sup>st</sup> century Indians.

**Culture: Stay with Me**

As powwow culture is unfamiliar to many non-Indians, when in attendance, they typically see “pretty” outfits of the Powwow Princesses and strange music that gets them to dance. They do not seem to understand that “Young women, for example, use the role of powwow princess to negotiate their dual identities: as young Indian people with a claim to a specific history and culture and as minorities in a nation that sees them as culturally extinct and calls on them to assimilate (Buff 150).” 21<sup>st</sup> century Native youth constantly face the clash of cultures as they try to save their own identity through already reinvented traditions; over history, generations of Native Americans had developed a new sense of “self-determination”, which leads to the biggest kept tradition of the Native Nation.

### **Closure**

Overall, powwows became the main support for what non-Indians call a “dying” culture, but in its origins meant more to contemporary Native Americans than any other generation. Based on tragic history, what was once beautiful and predominant slowly became withered with time and oppression for many centuries on this ethnic group. Contemporary Indians live in a bicultural world, as they can exist on reservations and in the public of American society, but they themselves face their own challenges. They struggle against stereotypes and forms of racism, while trying to hold up centuries worth of traditions that have been passed onto them. Then, because of the evolution of today’s self-determination, powwows have become the center of the unity of tribal nations in North America.

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