UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS

the society for ethnomusicology

Powwows, Intertribalism, and the Value of Competition
Author(s): Christopher Scales
Source: *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Winter, 2007), pp. 1-29
Published by: University of Illinois Press on behalf of Society for Ethnomusicology
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/20174500
Accessed: 07-04-2020 22:14 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

JSTOR

*University of Illinois Press, Society for Ethnomusicology* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Ethnomusicology*

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

# Powwows, Intertribalism, and the Value of Competition

Christopher Scales / College of William and Mary

> *CS: What's the ideal sound of a drum [group]?*
> *Shonto Pete: One beat, one voice.*
> *D.J. Menenick: One* people, *one voice.*
> —Red Tail Singers

> *. . . to rework the pattern of social relationships is to rearrange the coordinates of the experienced world. Society's forms are culture's substance.*
> —Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*

Native American powwows are large, social, and generally secular weekend events held year-round by both urban and reservation Native groups. These gatherings are opportunities for community and intertribal celebration involving singing, dancing, camping, visiting, courtship, "making relatives," and honoring elders and veterans. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, these events have become important and ubiquitous sites of intertribal Native American popular culture and one of the most vital and active areas of musical and choreographic creativity and innovation. While powwows are often treated in the academic literature as monolithic entities, these events may exhibit many significant large- and small-scale variations. Several scholars (Browner 2000, 2002; Ellis 2001, 2003; Hatton 1974; Lassiter 1998; Powers 1990; Vennum 1980) have noted important distinctions between Northern and Southern styles of Plains music and dance as well as detailing aspects of tribal (in the case of Vennum, Lassiter, and Browner) and regional (in the case of Hatton and Powers) style. Less often examined in the powwow literature are the very important musical and social differences between *competition* (also called, significantly, "contemporary") and *traditional* powwows, the varying structures of which effect the codification of musical style and the negotiation of social values.

© 2007 by the Society for Ethnomusicology



This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

In the area where I carried out the bulk of my fieldwork, the Central Plains of Canada and the Northern Plains of the US, powwow participants used the terms competition and traditional almost exclusively to describe and categorize powwow events.[1] In some sense then, they may be understood as regionally specific genre categories with locally ascribed meanings. Ellis, Lassiter, and Dunham (2005), in editing a recent collection of essays on powwow culture, rightly argue that, "individual communities have accommodated the powwow to their particular needs, purposes, and cultures in a variety of ways. Once widely considered an icon of a post-World War II Pan-Indian movement in which Native people seemed to be part of a homogenized, melting pot Indian culture, in fact powwow culture began as—and remains—a complicated amalgam of sources and practices reflecting both particular and generalized notions of identity" (viii–ix). Certainly, as powwow events spread to new geographic areas and become popular within different tribal groups, new practices are created and understood outside of, or in between, the basic genre bifurcation of "traditional" and "competition." My discussion of competition and traditional powwows is limited by my (and my informants') immersion in and familiarity with Northern Plains powwow culture. However, the Northern Plains is one of the epicenters of powwow culture today and strongly influences practices as they are adopted across the continent. As such, the structural division of powwows into these two basic categories (with some variation in nomenclature) has become increasingly common outside of this region (although certainly not universal).[2]

The competition powwow circuit began to form in the 1950s as a loosely related aggregate of song and dance events that offered modest cash prizes to participants. This circuit became larger and more structurally coherent by the 1970s as more and more reservations began holding annual celebrations open to intertribal participation. The 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of "mega-powwows" with such events as the Gathering of Nations in Albuquerque, the Denver March Powwow, the Mashantucket Pequot's Schemitzun, and Coeur d'Alene's Julyamsh. Drawing thousands of participants from across North America and fueled in part by the large injection of capital generated through the proliferation of reservation-based casinos, competition powwows began offering cash prizes in the order of thousands of dollars for dance events and tens of thousands for singing contests.

Despite the staggering popularity and ever increasing growth of competition powwows in the last thirty years, their value and status among powwow participants are a source of constant debate. Competition is celebrated at the same time that it is viewed with suspicion because it is thought to be the root of potential riffs and disagreements between individuals and communities. Furthermore, the degree to which these events promote and/or obfuscate "traditional" Indian ceremonial singing and dancing practices is an almost

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

constant source of conversation among powwow people. The following lengthy excerpt from an editorial published online in the Native American newspaper *American Indian Today* expresses many of the concerns that I have heard from numerous powwow participants.

> Having been both a participant and an organizer of various pow wows for the last twenty years, I'm a little disillusioned by all the changes. Our pow wows long ago were sponsored entirely by individuals and everyone came because of the social aspects. Being together with family and friends was the emphasis. In today's times, attendance at pow wows is based on "Who's the host drum?" "Who's the MC?" "How much is the prize money?" "Is there a special contest for this or that category?" Pow wows are rated on how many drum groups attended, how many dancers registered, and so on. Quantity takes precedence over quality.
>
> Now I'll admit that things can't always stay the same, and some changes are for the better. But there has to be a medium between tradition and outright greed. For example, I've seen dance contestants cheating. They do this by having other people wear their outfit and contestant number, lying to the pow wow committee about why they were late for grand entry or missed a contest round, and lying about their age and registering in categories for which they weren't eligible. This dishonest behavior is all the more outrageous when it is children doing it with the knowledge of their parents.
>
> Is winning the money so important that a person has to cheat? Is taking part in the pow wow a chore and not a joy?
>
> My children have been dancing since they were infants. They usually compete in contests, and sometimes they place. I always remind them that they need to be thankful that they can dance, that they are well enough to be attending the pow wow, and that they should be proud to be carrying on a part of their culture and traditions. All of this is more important than winning any contest for any amount of money.
>
> At some of the mega pow wows, people have to show a Tribal ID and a Social Security card to register in the contests. This sounds extreme, but it's an attempt to curtail the improprieties described above. Unfortunately, it just bears out how far from tradition the pow wow may have come. (Quequesah, 2002)

In this article the author clearly critiques competition and competition powwows through an appeal to "tradition," with competitions explicitly marked as nontraditional. Competition events spawned many of the more formalized aspects of powwow procedures: a relatively standardized Grand Entry, the "points system," exhibitions, and "spot checks" (the practice of randomly checking the arena for dancers to evaluate the frequency with which dance competitors are participating in noncompetitive events like Grand Entry and intertribals). These formalized aspects have been blamed for other "nontraditional" behaviors such as cheating, lying, greed, and the harmful corruption of children. The author also asserts that the emphasis on competition has led to the devaluation of important social aspects of powwow, "being together with family and friends."

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Speaking specifically about singing contests at competition powwows, Andy White, the leader and drum carrier of the well-known and well-respected Ojibwa drum group the Whitefish Bay Singers, expressed very similar concerns in a personal interview:

> You know, we were told so many times [by our elders] that, you know, singing contests are not proper. Because these songs—these songs, that gathering is to make you feel good. It's to make you happy. To be healed, you know. And that's what these powwow songs are all about. And I think, I myself as an individual, I don't go for these contests. But my boys, the guys I sing with, the guys I'm talking to today, are the ones that wanted to compete. If I had my way, I would tell them, "We're not going to compete. We're just going to sing for the people."You know, and make them feel good. That's the way it should be. And the singing contest, it's something that this younger generation are getting into. (Andy White interview, September 1999)

Mr. White is articulating a common concern of powwow participants. Despite the fact that his "drum" (the typical way that one refers to a powwow singing group) regularly competes in competition powwows, these events are often regarded with suspicion and are thought to be potentially divisive, promoting unnecessary animosity between individuals and communities.

Competition events are always constituted within culturally specific frameworks that define the nature and value of competition, and the terms by which individuals and groups compete. In the case of competition powwows, competition is understood as potentially ethically harmful and socially corrosive. This concern is articulated through the discourse of "tradition" and the value and centrality of tradition as a defining feature of "authentic" Native American identity. This article examines the paradoxical nature of competition powwows, specifically focusing on singing competitions as important sites that mediate competing ideologies of tribalism and intertribalism and, by extension, tradition and modernity. The central question that guides this study is: Why compete? Why introduce intertribal competition into what is supposed to be a community-building event? And how do we make sense of the fact that competition powwows continue to grow in size, number, and popularity seemingly *in spite* of their ethically ambiguous status. I suggest that, ironically, the context of competition actually *helps* to foster intertribal and intercommunity solidarity. The large-scale intertribal participation in competition events serves to create culturally grounded affinities between different tribal groups; through the development of ethical and aesthetic codes, competition powwows serve to foster what Arjun Appadurai has termed a "community of sentiment . . . a group that begins to imagine and feel things together" (1996:8). Through allegiance to the shared ethical and aesthetic values forged and disseminated through song and dance competitions, powwow participants collectively formulate the terms of their intertribal relation-

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

ships, and through this, the *collective* place of Native Americans within the Canadian and US states. In making this argument the first part of this article will describe and distinguish between competition and traditional powwows in both practical and ideological terms. The second part of this essay will examine singing contests as a particularly important feature of competition powwows for developing and standardizing intertribal ethical and aesthetic values.

## Traditional and Competition Powwows

Since completing my formal, extended fieldwork in 2000, I have arranged a number of university sponsored guest lecture/performances for Gabe Desrosiers. Gabe is a well-known and highly regarded singer and songmaker, founder and leader of the Ojibwa drum group the Northern Wind Singers, and a champion grass dancer who has been performing at powwows since he was a small boy. During his visits, I make very few demands about the content of his presentations, simply suggesting that he speak in some way about his life as a singer and dancer. When he came to speak in my classes in the spring of 2002, his various lectures became more and more thematically structured with each presentation. A central theme that emerged in his lectures was the important distinction between traditional and competition powwows. What struck me about his presentations was not simply the distinction he was drawing, but his use of space in metaphorically demonstrating the point. In speaking of traditional powwows he would point to his right, offering comments about typical practices found at these kinds of events; then, pointing or gesturing to his left, he would speak about what occurs at a competition powwow. Traditional powwows to the right, competition powwows to the left, and himself in between, his position in the middle of these two poles indicating his ability to travel from one to the other. Gabe's careful spatial separation of traditional and competition powwows was a forceful expression of how these two worlds are understood by many powwow participants. Their overlapping nature is suggested by Gabe's position in the middle, as one of the many powwow participants who take part in both worlds. The complex interrelationship of these two kinds of events is indicated by his struggle to explain to undergraduate music students the significant differences between these worlds, as he says things like: "We have these things [activities and events] over here [at traditional powwows] too, but at competition powwows it's," he struggles for words, "... it's different." Gabe's difficulty in verbalizing these differences stems from the fact that often what distinguishes a traditional powwow from a competition powwow is not the different kinds of behaviors or practices present but the way those behaviors are interpreted; what and how they mean and are felt.

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Luke Lassiter has suggested that Kiowas in Oklahoma participate in multiple "Indian worlds" (1998:72) where "tribal traditions are not necessarily mutually exclusive; they intersect with an intertribal social world. Therefore, we are no longer speaking of *aggregates* of individuals, but different worlds in which *individuals* participate. Powwow, hand-game, church, or peyote people, then, all take part in distinct but interrelated worlds defined by aesthetics, tradition, and history" (ibid.:77, emphasis in original). These worlds are neither exclusively tribal nor intertribal but potentially both. I would similarly argue that different powwows could be thought of as distinct but overlapping worlds, a view consistent with how many powwow participants envision the complexity of the powwow circuit.

In describing competition and traditional powwows as they exist on the Northern Plains, I wish to construct a general model of these events as cultural performances assembled in a modular way from a bounded set of practices and ideologies. Each of these events follow the general form of a Northern style powwow, feature the same general styles of singing and dancing, and engage similar protocols and ritualized behaviors (Grand Entry, feather pick-ups, scheduled dance events, feasts); yet in each case certain structural features are highlighted or suppressed as particular meanings are celebrated, reinforced, or contested. In this way, powwow performances have a unique "emergent" quality (Bauman 1977).

A number of structural components within the present day Northern competition powwow remain consistent throughout the Northern Plains and are increasingly common at large competition events across North America (see Browner 2002 for an excellent overview of Northern powwow culture). The physical organization of people and events remains relatively stable. Powwow grounds are typically structured as a series of increasingly larger concentric circles. At the center of the grounds stands the dance arena, which is surrounded immediately by singing groups who set up their drums on blankets and specially designed drum stands. Behind the drum groups are eight to ten rows of lawn chairs where elders, dancers, and relatives of dancers and singers sit and watch the weekend's events unfold. Encircling these rows of chairs one often finds several stadium style wooden benches, an informal seating area for the overflow of dancers and singers and for the many spectators. Typically, members of the powwow committee and the emcees for the event will sit and oversee the proceedings from a permanent, simply designed, wood-framed building found at one end of the dance arena.

A myriad of craft booths, vendors' booths, and fast food stands surround this dance arena and seating area on all sides. These businesses travel the Northern powwow circuit all summer setting up makeshift structures from which to conduct business. The craft booths sell a wide assortment of handmade jewelry, clothing, and powwow supplies: beads, feathers, finished hides,

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

belts, fans, roaches, moccasins, and various sundries needed to make or add to a dancer's regalia (dance outfit). The vendors' booths sell commercial items: name brand clothing and hats, children's toys and games, and sometimes quick-pick lottery tickets. The food vendors provide much of the nourishment for singers, dancers and spectators, selling gallons of coffee, homemade frybread, soups, hamburgers, hotdogs, "Indian Tacos" (frybread and chili), candy, and soda. Tents, trailers, campers, vans, cars, and lean-to's—the weekend shelter for participants and audience members—fill the rest of the powwow grounds. Portable toilets dot the area and a semipermanent building may serve as a crude shower stall for the dancers. Expecting to find a similar organization at reservation powwows across North America, powwow singers and dancers quickly learn to negotiate the social and geographical space of the powwow grounds.

The order of events has also become standardized. Typically, Northern competition powwows begin Friday evening and last until Sunday evening. That time is divided into five different dance sessions, each session beginning with a Grand Entry followed by a series of intertribal dances, then rounds of competition dancing. These sessions generally last between four and six hours. The first Grand Entry begins between 7:00 and 9:00 p.m. Friday night. Saturday's and Sunday's Grand Entries begin at 1:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. with a two hour supper break between afternoon and evening sessions. Following each Grand Entry procession a "Flag song" is rendered, after which a local or visiting elder gives an invocation or prayer. Next is a "Victory dance," a song that honors all the military veterans in attendance. During this song all dancers in the arena dance in place. Flags are then posted and visiting "royalty" (Powwow Princesses and Braves) and political figures are introduced to the audience. The Grand Entry is then considered officially complete and various rounds of dancing follow. Rounds of "intertribal dancing" directly succeed most Grand Entries. These dances are open to participation by dancers of all ages and styles and may even include spectators, singers, and others present who wish to join the proceedings. During this round of dancing a "drum order" is established as the various drum groups each perform a song in a predetermined order. Often, the round of intertribals ends when every drum group attending has had an opportunity to sing at least one song, after which the competition dancing may begin.

Competition dancing is organized according to age group, gender, and dance style category: Tiny Tots (six years old and younger, mixed dance categories and gender), Junior Boys and Junior Girls (ages 7-12), Teen Boys and Teen Girls (ages 13-17), Adult Men and Adult Women (ages 18-55), Senior Men and Senior Women (ages 55 and older). All of the drum groups in attendance provide music for these competition dances according to the preestablished drum order. The emcees (two or three will often take turns)

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

for the weekend constantly announce the order of events and the powwow is kept moving by one or sometimes two arena directors who work in the dance arena and make sure dancers are ready to dance and drum groups are ready to sing. The arena director, the head judges, and the emcee all work in close contact to make sure events run as smoothly as possible.

Dance events at Northern competition powwows may be separated into three broad categories: intertribals, competitions, and specials (see Browner 2002). Intertribal dancing is open to general participation and has no special footwork or regalia requirements. "Specials" refer to any number of dance events that are held apart from either intertribals or contests and may feature "memorial" dance competitions or exhibitions of any of the six major dance categories (where the memory of a particular dancer is celebrated though the sponsoring of a special competition dance). Entertainment-oriented dances such as Hoop dancing, Chicken dancing, or other tribally specific dance traditions, as well as more participatory dances (where members of the audience may be involved) such as a couple dances (e.g., the Rabbit dance), Round dances, or line dances (e.g., the Snake dance) are also common. Specials may also feature Pan-American Indian dance exhibitions such as Aztec dancing (Browner 2002:62–63; Goertzen 2001:85) or even Australian Aboriginal dance styles (Scales 2004:69). A special may also refer to a non-dance event such as a "giveaway."[3]

A Northern competition powwow features six standard competition dance styles, distinguished by gender, choreography, and regalia, with each style constituting a separate contest category. There are three men's styles: Men's Traditional dance, Men's Grass dance, Men's Fancy dance; and three women's styles: Women's Traditional dance, Women's Jingle Dress dance, and Women's Fancy Shawl dance. Ritualized practices performed at competition powwows include the Grand Entry, feather pick-up ceremony, the use of eagle whistles, and the social role of the "whip man." Each of these practices is marked both rhetorically and behaviorally as a "sacred" element of an otherwise public event. These kinds of activities are numbered among the various modular components that contribute to the structure of a competition powwow. However, the actual existence or execution of these ritual events varies between communities to a significant degree. These variations are often explained through statements such as "here in this community, we do it like this." In this way, these kinds of activities become standardized practices of Northern powwows while still allowing different communities to express and socially mark the uniqueness of their own tribal or regional practices.

Because they are community based and reflect unique community concerns and practices, it is difficult to make similar broad generalizations about regularities in Northern Plains *traditional* powwows. Indeed, the structural

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

variability of traditional powwows—compared to the relatively standardized form of competition powwows—is an important feature that marks the two events as categorically different. It is possible however to speak about broad similarities, although my experience with traditional powwows is rather limited; I attended less than a half a dozen during the course of my fieldwork, all of them hosted by Ojibwa communities. Differences between competition powwows and traditional powwows include the following:

(1) Traditional powwows place a much greater emphasis on intertribal dancing. While occasional dance exhibitions for certain categories may take place, the majority of dancing that takes place is intertribal. This has an effect on the kinds of songs that drum groups can perform, as intertribal dancing generally requires "straight beat" dance songs. Powwow musicians distinguish different song types (called song "styles" or song "categories" by indigenous musicians) according to both musical and extramusical criteria. As all powwow songs exhibit the same general melodic and formal features, musical criteria that powwow musicians use to distinguish song types include meter, tempo, and drumming patterns. Thus, for example, "straight beat" songs are those that maintain a regular duple meter, round dance songs and side step songs use a triple meter, and chicken dance songs and crow hop songs feature unique and different drumming (accent) patterns (see Browner 2002:74–88; Scales 2004:71–92).

(2) There are no contests at traditional powwows, and as such, no cash prizes. Instead both dancers and singers are paid through what are known as "drum splits" and "dance splits." Powwow organizing committees will set aside a certain amount of money to pay the singers and dancers in attendance. This money is usually a modest sum and is intended only to help offset the cost of travel. In order to be eligible for the dance and drum splits participants must register as a participating singer or dancer (or both). Competition powwows also feature drum (and sometimes dance) splits but this is only one of many sources of possible income for participants. Drum and dance splits serve to foster a "host-guest" relationship at powwows. When inviting someone to one's home, there is an obligation to make sure that the guests are comfortable and do not suffer any hardship as a result of their visit. Drum and dance splits, as well as feasts, are mechanisms by which local communities welcome visitors, and they reflect the interpersonal host-guest obligations that occur more generally in everyday reservation life.

(3) There is a much higher degree of "drum hopping" at traditional powwows (where singers will jump from one drum to the next and sing with several different groups). In many Ojibwa communities (where I did a good deal of my field research) certain individuals are drum keepers for "traditional drums," which are drums that belong to a particular individual or a particular

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

family and are passed down from one generation to the next. Traditional drums are used only for traditional powwows and never for singing competitions. These drums are named, they are "fed" at the changing of the seasons (four times a year), and have certain songs attached to them that are owned by the drum keeper. Unlike competition powwow songs, which are usually freely exchanged between singers, many of the songs sung around a traditional drum stay with the drum and are only performed with that particular instrument.

Drum keepers who care for these drums often do not have a functioning drum group or regular group of singers with whom they perform. Instead, they may simply show up at a traditional powwow and rely on other singers from the community (or sometimes from outside of the community) to come together around the drum and sing when called upon. Drum hopping is also common because there are many "family drums" present, small drum groups that consist only of family members. As these groups are often comprised of only four or five people, other singers will often join them to strengthen the sound of the drum. Traditional powwows will also feature a larger number of songs that "belong" to a particular community, and thus many singers from the community will know them. This shared community repertoire allows for even infrequently performing singers to join in and sing with a number of drums. This is markedly different from the arrangement of competition powwows, where drum hopping is often expressly forbidden for those competing in a singing contest.

(4) There is a far greater frequency of drum whistling at traditional powwows. Drum whistling is a practice whereby a dancer (almost always a Traditional dancer) will blow an "eagle bone whistle" over a drum group in appreciation of their performance. When this occurs the drum is obliged to continue singing for four more "push-ups" (verses) in an effort to extend the good feelings and good dancing generated by the performance. At larger competition powwows drum whistling is sometimes expressly prohibited or discouraged; other times the frequency and number of whistles that are allowed to occur is limited (for instance it may be announced that a drum cannot be whistled by two dancers consecutively, expressing an attempt to limit the length of performances). These restrictions are implemented in order to keep dance schedules running on time. Traditional powwows have no such concerns regarding schedules.

(5) Traditional powwows, because they are smaller, community oriented, and participatory rather than presentational, rarely involve non-Natives; conversely, competition powwows often attract non-Natives audiences, especially on Saturday night when competition singing and dancing is at its most intense. While non-Natives are usually a small minority at competition events, their presence is nonetheless acknowledged and in fact encouraged. Dance

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

competitions are thought to offer some of the "best" Native American dancing in the country and so non-Native spectatorship is welcomed. At traditional powwows, where there are no competitions, dancing is very informal and there is no element of showmanship or concern for entertaining an audience. Almost all in attendance are participants in some way, either as singers and dancers or as family members who are actively visiting with other family and friends; there is no element of spectacle. Grand Entry is not as formal and dance schedules are provisional at best. Traditional powwow dancing is not meant to be watched, but to be danced and felt.

In summary, the central element distinguishing competition and traditional powwow events is that competition powwows feature formal song and dance competitions with sometimes quite large cash prizes for participants, while traditional powwows do not. Competition powwows are generally much larger events and features a much greater degree of intertribal participation. These events are highly structured proceedings with fairly strict adherence to a schedule of events. They also place a greater emphasis on the strict division of contest song and dance categories and do not regularly emphasize community or tribal concerns or local dance traditions. These powwows are generally well funded by tribal councils and increasingly through capital generated by tribal casinos. Drum groups hired to host these events are typically well paid, and cash prizes for the competition events can range from $500 to $2000 or more for dancers and between $5,000 and $25,000 for singing groups.

Conversely, traditional powwows are very often smaller gatherings that operate on a relatively modest budget and emphasize community friendship over formal competition. Instead of holding song and dance contests, each dancer or singer participating receives a modest sum of money from the powwow committee to help offset the expenses of travel, food, and lodging. Dancing and singing activities are undertaken informally, and the proceedings will often feature a number of "giveaways," "honor songs,"[4] and other events that highlight or emphasize local community concerns.

## The Problem of Competition

My friend Carolyne Longclaws—a Jingle Dress dancer—and I were sitting in the stands at the 2000 Annual Waywayseecappo First Nation Competition powwow picking our favorite dancers for each category and then trying to guess who the judges would pick.[5] Still unclear as to what specific criteria were important for competition dancing, I asked Carolyne what it was exactly that separated a good dancer from an average one. She responded off-handedly, "You know, footwork, timing [dancing in time and in steady synchro-

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

nization with the drum beat], gracefulness . . ." pausing, and then laughing, "last name." Her only half joking comment speaks to a common complaint at competitions: favoritism and judging based on reputation and/or the family connections of dancers and singers rather than individual performances. There is, of course, no way to substantiate these claims. But the insinuation that song and dance competitions can be, and often are, unfair is a source of a good deal of intertribal tension. Other dancers have told me that they do not like to "play the game" of competition dancing, a process involving social networking and ingratiating yourself to other dancers. This is done because judging is always performed by one's peers, and the hope is that judges will base their decisions on who they know and who they like. This kind of conjecture about the motivations of judges is rampant.

Because of the suspicion and ambivalence surrounding the place of competition in the larger Northern Plains powwow community, participation in traditional powwows is thought to be an essential part of singing and dancing. When singing groups participate *only* in competitions at the expense of traditional powwows, their behavior is regarded as problematic, as the following comments by powwow singers indicate:

> John Menenick (Yakama, mentor for the Red Tail Singers, champion Traditional dancer, and father of D.J.): What I feel too is that you go to the bigger powwows but you also have to go back to the smaller powwows.
> D.J. Menenick (leader and lead singer for the Red Tail Singers): One week we'll be at Gathering [of Nations in Albuquerque] and the next week we'll skip a big powwow and go to a one-night powwow in Spokane, sing for fun.
> JM: We like to keep our heads down—small . . .
> DJM: Try not to get a big head . . .
> JM: And I try to bring them [the group] back [down to Earth]. Because there's powwows we go to that are just fun times. We have a lot of fun there. Some of the big competition powwows, everyone's staring daggers at you. It's not too fun anymore. But we go to a small powwow, everybody's laughing and having a good time and that's what the boys like . . . (Red Tail interview, March 2000)

> Gabe Desrosiers: In our schedule I always try to put in some traditional powwows. Because, you know, out there [on the powwow trail], there's a couple of years we hardly went to traditional powwows. And we heard back. People used to say, "why isn't Northern Wind coming to our powwows? Are we too small for them now or do they think they're too good for us now?" We always heard stuff like that. It always kind of bothered me because we don't even think like that. So you know, we try and always fit in traditional powwows in our schedule. (Desrosiers interview, May 2000)

Both Gabe and the members of Red Tail are pointing to a kind of ethical self-policing that goes on within the powwow circuit. Singing groups that participate only in competitions may be accused of being conceited, self-important, and greedy. John and D.J. insist that singers need to "keep their heads down." Singing at traditional powwows is a way to ensure that one

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

stays modest. By singing at smaller powwows one does not become too ensnared in the world of competition, where "people are starring daggers at you." Gabe's comments also speak to the suspicion that groups that sing only at competitions sing only for financial gain, something considered to be a serious breach of moral conduct. Many singers have made comments to me about the ethical duty of singing. As a singer, one's "traditional" social role is to sing for the people and be of service to the community.

> Andy White: The history of Native people, the history of it [powwow] is for everybody to feel good around the drum, you know. And there's a lot of culture that's not—maybe not disappearing, but not wanting to be used, in a way . . . That's why they had drums in the middle a long time ago [the middle of the dance arena—still a common practice at traditional powwows in the Lake of the Woods area where Mr. White is from]. You'll dance around the drum—dance around. Nowadays [at competition powwows] you see them in the side corner. I don't know what it means—that the respect's not there, I don't know. You know, it's just the way it is. I know back home though, all the powwows, they have all the drums in the middle—drums in the center. That's traditionally the way it is. Maybe it's—today—so people can see, because more or less it's like a show now. You know, so people come. I mean it's enjoyable, everybody's kind of healed and happy. And that's why they talk about no creation of animosity when you have powwows. Because [at competition powwows] there's one champion coming out—one category. And there's about forty of them [competing dancers], so what do you do? Same thing with the singing contest, you know, there's forty of them [drum groups competing] and there's only—one coming out [winning]. So that's why they try to preach a lot of this respect—not to have animosity. You don't try to think, "I'm competing with the other guy." I'm *not* competing with the other guy. I'm only trying to sing the way I can sing, the way we can do our best. You know, just try to make people happy. (Andy White interview, September 1999)

Here, Andy draws stark distinctions between traditional and competition powwows. Traditional powwows are thought to be repositories of local (often tribally defined) "culture" and "tradition," both of which are framed as resources that are not used at Competition powwows. At traditional powwows, drums are treated as sacred objects, and thus given a place of honor at the center of the dance arena. At many competition powwows on the Northern Plains, this "traditional" practice is abandoned. Thus attendance and participation in traditional powwows are understood as both an ethical and cultural imperative. Conversely, competition powwows stray from these traditional values and participation in these events bring the danger of conceit and the possibility of tribal or intertribal division and animosity.

Within the discourses of powwow participants, traditional powwows are experienced and interpreted as embodying "local," tribally specific, and culturally "authentic" values and practices while competition powwows represent (inter)national, pan-tribal, and variably inauthentic kinds of activities. Authenticity is defined in both cases in terms of actions and ideologies cul-

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

turally specific to Native American groups in opposition to non-Natives, and legitimated through the rhetorical force of history. Observing "traditional" practices guarantees that one is remaining true to one's cultural heritage and thus acting in a way appropriate for Native Americans. In straying from these practices one runs the risk of acting increasingly "non-Native." In summary, while there are real, practical differences between traditional and competition powwows, it is the ideologically constructed *meanings* associated with these differences that are important in understanding the sociocultural value of competition.

## The Effects of Competition: Judging Singing and Drumming

The ideological tensions surrounding the context of competition have profound implications for the nature and terms of competition events. One site where these tensions become negotiated and resolved is in the standardization and codification of musical style, which is defined by the aesthetic criteria by which powwow singing performances are formally evaluated and judged. The rise in popularity and proliferation of competition powwows has created a newly developed verbal discourse among powwow participants, a more systematic attempt to express the technical and aesthetic principles of powwow musical style. Singing contests at competition powwows have had the effect of formalizing many aspects of the Northern singing style. This is not to say that all drums are starting to sound "the same." Regional and personal stylistic variation continues to develop; however, what has become more standardized is the *evaluation* of these stylistic developments.

The discussion of powwow performance aesthetics presented here is informed to a large degree by the aesthetic principles developed on the Northern competition powwow trail. The principles discussed represent an amalgam of these formalized aesthetic criteria based on formal and informal discussions with a number of singers regarding the business of singing. Many of the singers and drum groups I interviewed, recorded, or otherwise interacted with were groups of young men between the ages of 18 and 30, who have thus grown up learning to sing in the context of competition powwows and have absorbed those aesthetic values. Almost all of the singers I interviewed or interacted with were male, a reflection of the gendered nature of singing. Most powwow participants consider singing to be a male domain, and while women may sing as "harmonizers" (joining a song at certain points and singing an octave above the main melody), it is rare indeed to find a women sitting at the drum at a competition powwow (see Hatton 1986). As singers (and sometimes male dancers) almost always serve as judges for singing competitions, these aesthetic criteria are the result of exclusively

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

male aesthetic preferences. This discussion also represents my own synthesis of aesthetic values learned through informal conversations with musicians as well as my own experiences as a singer. These observations are mixed with numerous quotes and interview excerpts with a number of powwow musicians. The formal interview setting is not an accurate representation of how musicians typically talk to each other about singing and musical performance. However, these conversations did produce a higher degree of analytic specificity than I usually encountered during informal conversations, which I rarely recorded.

The judging of singing competitions goes on all weekend long. At these powwows, singers are judged by their peers—other singers and dancers chosen by the head singing judge—although, as a rule, one is disqualified from judging if they are related to any of the competitors. Each round of contests is evaluated by a different set of judges; by end of the weekend, a group's final score will be the result of the work of ten to twenty different people. For every round of competition, a group of judges will travel from drum to drum, clipboard in hand, and observe the performances. Scores are written down on a scoring sheet and submitted to the head judge. There are a fixed number of general criteria, often organized into between four and six categories that are graded on a scale of 1 to 5. These categories represent a fascinating mix of aesthetic preferences that address issues of musical ability, style, and appropriate behavior and decorum. In listing these criteria I wish to emphasize that they represent some of the very real and tangible musical effects of competition. It should also be noted that often the stylistic traits that are judged concern not large-scale aspects of compositional style and form, but subtleties of performance practice. Thus, all Northern style songs share the same basic stylistic elements that have been detailed by numerous other authors (see, in particular, Browner 2000, 2002; Nettl 1954; Powers 1990; Vennum 1980).[6] Judging criteria instead evaluate significant elements of style that are difficult to notate but that become essential in establishing a drum group's unique and personal performance style.[7]

Judging criteria for competition powwows may include any number of the following items. This list is not presented as comprehensive but simply presents a number of judging criteria that appeared regularly on judging sheets at competition powwows that I witnessed or participated in between the summers of 1998 and 2001.

### (1) Unity of drum beat (all drummers beating the drum in clear unison)

Mike Esquash (Ojibwa, leader, lead singer, and songmaker for the Spirit Sands Singers): I think the goal of the singing group is to sound together. Everybody's voice matches.

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

CS: Oh yeah, so blending is good?
ME: Blending. And then the rhythm of the beat is good and the beat is on time. Everybody's beating the same. Yeah, everybody at exactly the same time. You got ten guys with ten sticks and they got to all hit the drum at the same time. They go off beat you can hear it, eh. It's like Mother Earth's heart, they say. That's what it represents. You know, it's like our own hearts. If it skips a beat, you're gonna feel that. So it's always in rhythm, in time. And that's what we try to do is keep in time. I notice when we go—like listen to Southern drums [groups who sing in the Southern style], they have it. You stand close to them you can kind of feel that heart ... that beat on your chest and stuff, and the power. I like that power, that blast. (Mike Esquash interview, September 1999)

Typically judges like to see all members of the group drumming and all drummers striking the drum towards the center of the drum with equal force. Often, less experienced singers will strike the drum on the rim or closer to the rim (as I was often encouraged to do) because it is less audible. Judges, usually singers themselves, are aware of this practice and when judging they may look for it and deduct points if they see any member of the drum trying to "hide" his drumbeat on the rim. It is also common to see judges tapping along to the beat of the drum with their pen on their clipboard. This kinesthetic mimesis allows judges to measure the steadiness of the tempo (by experiencing the tempo physically through participation) and also expresses an attempt to find the "center of the beat." The aesthetic ideal is for all the drummers to sound "as one."

## (2) Equal participation by all members of the drum group

Often judges can be seen performing a "head count" while evaluating a drum group performance. When a drum group registers for a competition they must register all the individuals who will be singing with them that weekend. The number of singers registered at the beginning of the competition then becomes the set number of members that must sing every time the group is being judged. Points are deducted if a group performs with any singers missing; similarly, having too many singers (more than they initially registered) may disqualify a drum from the competition or at least that round of judging. This criterion is set in place to limit the now common activity of "drum hopping" and is also an expression of the value placed on singers and drum groups who take the responsibility of singing seriously.

The number of members within a drum who can sing a "lead" (the opening phrase of a verse or "push-up") is also a consideration. Groups with many lead singers are awarded more points than those who rely on only one or possibly two singers to perform all the leads. The degree to which a large number of lead singers are valued varies from powwow to powwow. At large, urban competition powwows this seems to be an important factor, while at

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

reserve-based powwows it appears less frequently as a judging category and groups are simply judged on how they sound in performance.

### (3) Clarity, quality, power of singing voice, and blend of vocals

CS: So power is important?

Mike Esquash: Yeah, very important. It wakes you up from being bored, whatever. It gets you up there, kinda "Hey." It gets you excited, eh. Good songs are like that. A lot of Northern styles are like too, eh. Like, I like Eyabay. They sing deadly, man. Those guys are pros.

CS: What's good about their singing?

ME: They got deadly songs. The power, the power. I see those guys, I watch them sing. Every song I see them pushing more. So they are *in* that song, they are giving. And that's good. There's nothing like that at all. It's *real* singing, they're real singers. That's what I like. A group, I think, has gotta sound ... like one person. And that's one focus, that everyone should sound the same. Same level, same tune.

CS: Same volume too?

ME: Yeah, same volume. They work together as a group, eh. Smooth. That's very important. Clarity is important. You don't want—you want to hear what they're singing. If they're singing a word song, you want to know what they're saying. If they're singing just a straight up song [a song with vocables only], you want to hear them emphasize certain parts of that song. I think it adds to that song. (Mike Esquash interview, September 1999)

CS: What's the sound of a good powwow group?

D.J. Meninick: A good powwow group? Drumbeat, singing, style, togetherness.

CS: So singing together in unison so that all the voices are blending?

Shonto Pete: Combining all the bass and the highs and the medium and combining all of that.

DJM: That way people can hear our style and actually *feel* the songs.

SP: You try to make it sound like just one voice, one voice, everyone sounds—you can't pick all the singers. It's just one voice and one style too. That style's not going to match any other style. It's going to have it's own style. Twelve guys all trying to sing one thing.

CS: So it's that particular blend of voices that makes a particular style for a drum group? What their blending sounds like when they sing together?

SP: Yeah, when you hit that blend, you can feel it ...

DJM: I don't know if you've ever noticed or not, but if you ever think about it, the best drum groups are family groups.

CS: And you think that's because they just sing together all the time?

DJM: Cuz' they're always around each other all the time.

CS: So they blend easier?

DJM: Yeah.

CS: So what do you think makes a good sounding voice?

DJM: Practicing!

CS: But what's the *sound* of a good voice?

DJM: What's the sound?

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

[Choosing demonstration over analysis Shonto Pete starts singing, playfully offering his own voice as an ideal type. Everyone laughs uproariously]
DJM: [laughing] high, clear, all the turns [melodic contours], all the accents, everything. (Red Tail interview, March 2000)

Aesthetic preferences regarding ideal voice production vary widely among powwow musicians and frequently are dependent upon a host of factors including age, tribal affiliation, geographic region, and personal taste. At competition powwows however, there does seem to be some level of agreement regarding certain elements of vocal production. "High," "clear," and "powerful" were adjectives that were often employed when describing ideal vocal production. High, clear voices are a hallmark of the Northern style of singing and as such, the use of these terms is not surprising. If a singer's (especially a lead singer's) voice cracks or falters during a performance that is being judged, points are generally deducted. However, sometimes less than smooth vocal performances may be overlooked if the group is singing with exceptional power (meaning volume). These preferences are repeatedly demonstrated when singers list groups who are considered by them to be many of the top performing drums on the Northern circuit: Eyabay, Blacklodge, Blackstone, Bear Creek, and Midnite Express. All of these groups, who consistently win or place in singing competitions, are known for their high and powerful singing styles. Groups may also be known for either strong command of the upper range (usually exhibited during the beginning phrases of a push-up) or lower range (exhibited during the last phrases of the push-up) of their vocals. Having control and power at both ends of the vocal spectrum is considered ideal.

## (4) Cleanliness of the area surrounding the drum

Mike Esquash: You have to take care of a drum. A drum is very important. Not anyone can just, you know, have a drum. It takes a lot of work. You can't always be perfect, but you try to do the best you can.
CS: Is that why the cleanliness of the drum area is important?
ME: Yeah, it's very important, respect for the drum. You know, you take care of the drum. It's alive. Everything we have is alive. You know, that drum, what I was taught is you take care of that drum, that drum will take care of you. And I believe that. It's really—again it goes back to the spiritual side. Everything, I think pretty much, a lot with singing is a very spiritual thing. As well as a social thing. It's a good time but it [pause] . . . it means a lot, eh. You know, the connection there . . . (Mike Esquash interview, September 1999)

This judging criterion appears with remarkable consistency, perhaps an indication that drum group professionalization must still incorporate what are deemed to be "traditional" values associated with singing. Cleanliness of the drum area is something taken quite seriously by most singers. Singers

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

generally agree that good vocal/song performances stem directly from the power of the drum. It is considered disrespectful to the drum to have refuse or clutter nearby, and while the drum area might become cluttered between performances with cigarette boxes, drum sticks and drum stick bags, cans of soda, and bottles of water (as singers will often turn around folding chairs to watch the powwow, eat supper, or sit and smoke and drink coffee), when their turn comes to sing, the drum area is quickly cleaned and tidied.

### (5) Dancer participation and reaction

Mike Esquash: One thing important is you have to watch the dancers, how they are reacting to your beat. If it's too slow of a beat and they're kind of just walking along or pacing, you know. And if you up your tempo a bit, you up your song, you know, you might be able to catch them and start, you know—"hey"—they'll start bouncing along and having a good time. It's just . . . you have to watch as a singer.

CS: Is that your job?

ME: Yeah I watch, I really watch how they're doing it. I try my best to see, to judge. I listen. When we sing a song, I'll listen to a couple of drums ahead of us [before their turn in the drum order]. One or two away from us. I'll see how they're singing, what kind of style they're singing, watch the dancers. And if it doesn't work for the dancers—how fast the tempo is, whatever—I'll switch. I'll go fast or I'll go slower or—I'll try different things. It's for the dancers. That's what it's for. (Mike Esquash interview, September 1999)

The degree to which dancers respond is often thought by judges to indicate the success of a singing performance. When judging an intertribal song, regardless of what a particular judge may think of the style or song the group is performing, it is hard to argue with success (measured by dancer participation). Mike's assertion that a good drum group leader will always gauge the response of the dancers was mentioned to me numerous times by different singers. However, it should be mentioned that this stated goal is more of an ideal and in reality, during most competition powwows, because the drum groups are often surrounded on all sides by "tapers" (those making personal recordings with handheld recording devices) and other interested listeners, it is often quite difficult for drum group members to see the dance arena. Thus, in a typical competition setting, singers can really only guess at the response of the dancers, although the size of the crowd around the group during a performance is often an equally good indicator of how well the song is being received.

### (6) Appropriateness of song for the dance category

CS: So you're always gauging your songs towards the dancers?

ME: Yeah. You gotta. It's for them, that's what you're singing for. It's for them to

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> enjoy. It's a connection, eh. We want them to connect with the music. Hopefully you can make your music sound good. You can have good music for them, so they can enjoy what they're doing. When they're competing, I think, like it's important to sing dancers real good songs. Suitable to them. Because they'll have a better time dancing to it. And they'll do all their moves or whatever. They perform better. You know, it's just important. Cuz that's who you're singing for—the dancers. Everybody works together. (Mike Esquash interview, September 1999)

Crosscutting the various dance styles are a number of song types, each of which may be played only for certain dance styles. At competition powwows in particular, the importance of making clear distinctions between the different types is underscored by the value placed on the "appropriateness" of the song type for the dance category for which the drum group is performing. Appropriateness of songs for the dancers is highly valued and the best and most respected drum groups will always be counted on to play an appropriate song. For example, if they are being judged during a Jingle Dress competition dance, a group will lose points for singing a song that is difficult for the dancers to dance to or if it is not the song type that the emcee requested of them. This could happen for many reasons; a younger drum may not know the particular song type required, or they may not have been paying attention when a particular song was being announced. When a drum group does not play the correct song for a particular dance category, the host drum is often called upon immediately afterwards to render the appropriate song for the dancers. An appropriate song is defined not only by tempo and drumbeat (major stylistic markers distinguishing the categories) but also by what the emcee, in consultation with the head judges and powwow committee, requests of the drum.

## Mediating Tradition and Competition

The six criteria just listed are significant in that they attempt to synthesize several competing ethical and aesthetic tensions. One way that powwow participants address the ethically questionable status of competition powwows—the suspicion that competition promotes intertribal tensions and/or "untraditional" behaviors—is to mix elements of traditional powwows into judging categories.

### (1) Participatory vs. presentational elements of musical performance[8]

Some of these judging categories reflect the participatory values associated with traditional powwows. At traditional powwows, participation is the goal and the focus of the event for both singers and dancers. As mentioned

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

previously, at many traditional gatherings in the Lake of the Woods area in western Ontario (where I carried out some of my research), drum carriers simply show up with their "traditional" drums. Singers from other groups will then gather around that drum and sing the songs associated with that drum carrier and that specific traditional drum. These makeshift singing groups often comprised the bulk of the music performed for the weekend. Thus, at traditional powwows, drum hopping is not only encouraged but also actually *required* as a prerequisite for musical performance.

At competition powwows, drum hopping is most often formally disallowed, but participation is still valued. Rating dancer participation and the appropriateness of song choice is an expression of the traditional responsibility of singers: performing songs that will inspire large numbers of dancers to dance hard and dance well. There is also a clear articulation in these criteria that the best drum groups are those who display maximum participation by all group members. But participation here is valued as an expression of musical *ability*. All members must share a similar degree of drumming expertise. All must drum with a similar force and volume and the greater the number of singers who possess the ability to sing a lead, the better. Within these judging criteria, competency and skill are valued over participation. Judging categories that evaluate musicianship are a direct product of competition.

### (2) Sacred vs. secular elements

Mike Esquash of the Spirit Sands Singers, a group I sometimes sang with during my fieldwork, kindly took it upon himself to become my main teacher of powwow singing and Ojibwa culture. He once described the various ceremonies of which he and his family (and I) took part as existing on a continuum of sacred to secular practices. Rituals like *Yuwipi* and Shaking Tent gatherings were described by Mike as very "high" ceremonies and were thus located towards the religious end of the spectrum.[9] Sweat lodge ceremonies were considered "not quite as high," meaning not quite as sacred. Powwows were positioned towards the "secular" end of the continuum with traditional powwows, importantly, considered "more sacred" than competition powwows.

Within singing competitions at competition powwows, judging criteria that deal with musical competence, such as unity and blend of singing and drumming, as well as the value placed on the number of members who are considered "lead singers," speak to secular elements of performance. However, some sacred elements from traditional powwows, such as the respect for the drum as a sacred object, are also present. Respect for dancers and for the communities within which singers perform also reflect the "sacred" nature of singing and the ritual duty of singers. Within more sacred contexts, singing

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

is thought of as an ethical duty, and in these circumstances singers are rarely paid for their participation (at least not through any formal arrangement involving money). Their involvement in these events is simply considered to be part of their duty and responsibility. At competition events, singers are always paid for their performances.

### (3) Regional/idiosyncratic vs. national/standardized singing styles

The Spirit Sands Singers participated in the singing contest at the Onion Lake powwow in July of 2000. The Onion Lake Cree Indian Reserve is located in central Saskatchewan, over a ten-hour drive from the Swan Lake Ojibwa reserve where many members of the Spirit Sands drum group lived. Sunday night, near the end of the powwow, many of the singers were sitting around the drum, waiting for the competition winners to be announced. The group had performed well for all of their contest songs and members were anticipating placing in the competition. "We sang well enough to place here," one group member observed. Buff, another member of the group said with a smile, "We're not gonna place. We don't have the word 'Cree' in our name."

The dynamic between standardization and regionalism is played out in numerous ways. At traditional powwows, it is expected that local songs and singing styles will form the bulk of the music performed for the weekend. However, competition powwows mix individual, regional, and pan-tribal stylistic criteria in the judging of singing competitions. Tribal and regional aesthetic preferences are incorporated into the singing contests through the appointment of a head singing judge. These judges, often in consultation with the powwow committee, create judging sheets that list the categories or criteria to be judged. This list is dependent on the individual preferences of the head judge and the opinions of the committee. Local singers who serve as head judges may thus design judging sheets that reflect local aesthetic preferences. However, increasingly, especially at urban competition powwows and other events where no single tribal group predominates, head judges are hired from across North America and judging sheets are less reflective of tribal or regional bias. Thus, while regional styles still play a part in competition judging, there is an increasing uniformity in judging criteria at competition powwows.

## The Value of Competition

In light of the previous discussion, we may return now to our original question: Given the general suspicion of competition as an activity that promotes unethical and/or "un-Indian" behaviors, why compete? And the simplest

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

answer is this: Competition events are contexts within which intertribal bonds are formed and intertribal cultural practices are created and negotiated. Ironically, despite the fact that for many Native Americans competition is antithetical to the goals of intertribal solidarity, it is nonetheless a more fruitful context for creating intercommunity bonds. Traditional powwows are ineffective towards this end because they are too regionally specific; while they may draw intertribal participation, they are local, community events that celebrate regionalism. Competition powwows are a relatively "neutral ground" upon which a common set of intertribal ethical and aesthetic norms can be generated and negotiated. They are thus extremely effective in developing and codifying culturally grounded affinities between different tribal groups.

The social work of intercommunity networking is certainly not unique to powwow competitions and several scholars working in different cultural and geographic areas have suggested a similar social function for competition events. In his introduction to *Mashindano,* a monograph dedicated to music and dance competitions in East Africa, Gunderson has (rightly) suggested that, "music competitions are a place where community values are displayed, remembered, and reinforced" (2000:15). To this I might add that competition events are always arenas of cultural struggle over exactly *which* community values are remembered and promoted. The values expressed in the ethical and aesthetic principles that guide competitions are themselves always contingent upon structures of social power. As Coplan reminds us, "performance traditions as reified forms of identity are rarely unitary, and their status is often a matter of who claims them, under which conditions, and for what purposes within the dynamics of internal and external relations of social power" (1991:36). The deep moral ambivalence towards competitions expressed by many powwow participants is an expression of the struggle to *define* community (and intercommunity) values. In North America, this power of definition is structured to a significant degree through the colonial experiences of Native Americans. Gunderson, citing Pels (2000), suggests that, "dances such as *Beni* and Luguru *ngoma* were primarily sites for playing out intergenerational power struggles, in relation to the colonial situation. Some of the younger generation benefited from the opportunities afforded by colonial education, thus from the point of view of the elders, the newly appropriated Christian ngoma became a reactionary site useful to curb youths' natural proclivity towards insubordination" (Gunderson 2002:12). In other words, competition can mediate some of the generation-based social cleavages structured through the colonial encounter. Through competitions, differing experiences of colonialism are worked out in a public and social way. Andy White's comments that began this essay suggest that there are certainly intergenerational tensions within the powwow circuit surrounding the value (and values) of competition. In many ways, competitions represent

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the values of the younger generation; a new way of inserting "traditional" Indian singing practices into modern life.

The more complicated answer to the question "why compete?" is to suggest that competitions are not only sites where "community values" are on display, but also events that structure the very constitution of "a community" as such. Competition powwows are uniquely powerful in creating intertribal bonds because this essentially *social* work is achieved through *cultural* means. The power of the standardization of the aesthetic criteria used at competition powwows is that they merge several competing and contradictory aesthetic preferences and ideological discourses: participatory vs. presentational, sacred vs. secular, regional vs. national (and international), and, implied in all of these, traditional vs. modern. Powwow participants invoke "tradition" in multiple domains. The discourse of tradition plays itself out in the negotiation of the "continuity of tradition," which attempts to mediate the ideologically conflicting discourses of modernity and tradition.

Within the world of powwows, the discourses of modernity and tradition are reproduced in multiple contexts. The traditional and the contemporary are marked on a fundamental level in the designation of traditional and contemporary (a term used synonymously with competition) powwows. Within competition powwows, singing groups participate in one of two simultaneously running singing competitions: the "traditional" singing contest or the "contemporary" singing contest. Drum groups that participate in the traditional contest sing only "straight songs" (songs with vocables only), while those who participate in the contemporary singing contest perform "word songs" (songs with texts in an aboriginal language). With ever increasing frequency, dance styles are being similarly marked as either traditional or contemporary and it is now common to find competition categories for "old style" (or "traditional style") and "contemporary style" Grass dancing and Jingle Dress dancing. More recently, at some east coast powwows, I have seen the emerging trend of splitting the Men's Traditional dance category into "traditional" or "old-style" Traditional dancing and "contemporary" Traditional dancing.

The binary structure of the modernity/tradition discourse across these multiple domains of music making and dancing is difficult to ignore and signals a deeply felt working out of the issue by Native Americans who participate in present-day powwow culture. Competition powwows present one way of expressing and mediating this dichotomy, one solution to the task of "walking in two worlds" that has become a common description and central challenge of colonized indigenous peoples and communities in North America (Crozier-Hogle et al. 1997). These two worlds are the world of "traditional" tribal lifeways, and the modern or contemporary circumstance of "Native Americans" as an identifiable minority ethnic group within the US and Canadian geopolitical states.

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

It is worth noting that other scholars have also observed that discourses of tradition and modernity play an important role in structuring other kinds of music and dance competitions. Stillman (1996) notes that the two main styles of hula dance at competition events are "ancient" and "modern," and that formal competitions can, paradoxically, serve as sites for both the "preservation" and "transformation" of hula dance styles. Similarly, Goetzen (1999) suggests that organizing fiddle contests by age allows "older fiddle styles" to be preserved and, presumably, protected from more "modern" styles. This perhaps suggests that one of the broader, shared cultural functions of competition is to mediate local discourses of tradition and modernity, which can (and often do) manifest themselves in instances of "modernist-reformism" (Turino 2000) often found in nationalist projects (ibid,; Douglas 2003), but also in sub-nationalist or "culturalist" movements (Appadurai 1996) such as the struggle for federal recognition of "Native American" status and claims of aboriginal rights in Canada and the US.

Of course the kind of minority ethnic identity marked by the term "Native American" is an explicit product of the colonial encounter. The very idea of a "Native American" social or cultural group is a product of the structural position of the various indigenous tribal groups within modern geopolitical states. Competition powwows, in mediating the traditional and the modern, help not only to forge intertribal relationships, but also help to shape the very nature of "Native American" or "American Indian" ethnic identity. The development of shared, culturally grounded musical practices allows Native communities to construct intertribal connections that facilitate broader kinds of social mobilization, including economic and political alliances. Native Americans' engagement in powwows through participation provide a cultural—and thus an ideological—basis for both the enlargement of the scope of political participation as well fundamentally shaping the nature of political action. The link between politics and aesthetics need not be explicitly stated or consciously acknowledged or pursued. Political positions and opinions are often implicitly acknowledged and practiced in the poetics of everyday life, including the regular participation in events like competition powwows. Competition events foster intertribal and intergenerational "communities of sentiment" that are constituted through shared cultural codes and values. The shared experience of competition allows powwow participants both to "imagine" (Anderson 1991; Appadurai 1996) and to actually share and experience a broader, national (and international) "Native American" identity.

The formalized nature of judging criteria in competition are important because they reflect an attempt to enforce certain aesthetic values over and above, or at the expense of, others. This is important if we believe (as most ethnomusicologists do) that aesthetic values are intimately tied to social ethics. It is shared values of social and ethical conduct that help to link groups together culturally. In other words, the cultural and the social are inextricably

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

linked through the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. Aesthetic doctrines help to naturalize the ethical principles they embody. Music and dance competitions are particularly effective in the project of intercommunity group formation because they are, by their very nature public and interactive. Formalized musical competition events like powwows are thus both deeply ideological and also educational. That is to say, musical competitions do not serve to simply "reflect" or (re)present community values but are instrumental in generating and enforcing community values; they are arenas in which the struggle over community values takes place.

Not only is the "cultural" content of the community at issue but the very nature of the community as a social entity. Thus who is and is not part of the community is also established. Traditional and competition powwows are sites that work through and model different ideas about what it is to be (and behave like) an "Indian"; each one constructs a "practical essentialism" (Herzfeld 1997) about Indian identity as expressed through behavior on the powwow grounds. Herzfeld suggests that the power of such essentialisms rests on "creating the semiotic effect technically known as iconicity, the principle of signification by virtue of resemblance . . . Iconicity seems natural and is therefore an effective way of creating self-evidence. But it is in fact culturally constituted in the sense that the ability to recognize resemblance depends to a large degree on both prior aesthetic criteria and the politics of the situation" (Herzfeld 1997:27). The transformation of indexical signs into iconic signs is part of the work of powwow festivals. The kinds of practices found at powwows operate as indexical signs that, through rhetorical strategies of participants, become iconic and thus more deeply ideological. For example, "giveaways," as public forms of generosity and sociality (concern and commitment to community), become reified (essentialized) as iconic of "Indianness." Singing competitions similarly reify musical styles within a bounded universe of aesthetic (and thus ethical) principles. In this way competition powwows become worlds in which "Indianness" is imagined, practiced, and learned, involving the "selective manipulation of stereotypes" (Herzfeld 1997:30) which become "good to think" for both Natives and non-Natives.

Finally, I would suggest that musical competitions are particularly effective in forging intercommunity and intertribal bonds because music is a nonlinguistic aesthetic system and thus the aesthetic impact of the performance takes place at a nonlinguistic level. Even though judging at these events is always linguistic and always involves aesthetic categories that are formulated and mediated through language, one learns these values through performance—through physical and emotional engagement—levels of participatory involvement beyond the realm of linguistic argument, thus naturalizing the ethical principles embodied in a particular set of aesthetic values. In this way,

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

music is more powerfully educational than any linguistic political debate or argument. The educational power of these events is tacitly acknowledged in the quotation from Andy White found in the opening pages of this article. Singing contests are indeed, "something that this younger generation are getting into." For this new generation of singers, who have grown up learning to sing within the context of competition powwows, what it means to sing and what it means to participate in powwows as a singer and as a Native American has indeed changed. The trepidation expressed by older-generation singers like Andy White is a testament to, and tacit acknowledgment of, the power of singing and the power of powwows in shaping individual subjectivity, and by extension, the potential for group solidarity.

## Acknowledgments

I am extremely grateful and indebted to the many singers who shared their insights into the intricacies of powwow singing, in particular my principal teachers Mike Esquash and Gabe Desrosiers. I would like to thank Andy White, John Menenick, D.J. Menenick, and Shonto Pete for kindly allowing me to include their thoughts and words in my work. I am also grateful to Joanna Bosse, Bruno Nettl, Tom Turino, Donna Buchanan, and Anne Rasmussen who read earlier versions of this material and provided invaluable critical feedback, and to the anonymous readers who reviewed this article for publication, whose suggestions were immensely helpful. This research was partially funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada and I gratefully acknowledge their support.

## Notes

1. Albers and Medicine (2005) argue for a similar "model" of Northern Plains powwows, describing a continuum of practices clustered around two archetypal events that they have termed "in-group" and "Pan-Indian" or "intertribal."

2. For example, Southern Plains powwow culture, centered in Oklahoma, is another important epicenter of powwow culture. Southern powwows do not share the same binary categorization and feature a much wider variety of events in structure, organization, and cultural meaning.

3. A giveaway is a public and formalized session of gift giving. Giveaways are organized and sponsored by individuals, families, or other social or political groups. Families generally must plan these public spectacles months in advance, slowly accumulating the various blankets, shawls, articles of clothing, house wares, tobacco, and other homemade and commercially produced products to be given away. At the behest of the family organizing the event, gifts are given to particular individuals or particular groups (e.g., all the male Traditional dancers at the powwow). Exigetic explanations of giveaways highlight their purpose in "honoring" specific community members, family members, or groups of dancers or singers. In this way, ritualized gifting practices such as giveaways help to forge and maintain social alliances while simultaneously replicating the social divisions between groups (Mauss 1924).

4. "Honor songs" are songs that are either composed or performed for specific people or families. There are almost no musicological stylistic features that distinguish these songs within the larger powwow repertoire (although a great many are "word songs," featuring lyrics in an indigenous language); instead, their genre categorization is based entirely on their use.

5. The Waywayseecappo Ojibwa First Nation reserve is located in southwest Manitoba, a few miles from the southwestern corner of Riding Mountain National Park.

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

6. These traits include: (1) a musical texture featuring unison singing to the accompaniment of a steady drumbeat; (2) a high, tense, loud vocal production; a terraced, descending melodic line; (3) the "rhythmic displacement" of melody and drumbeat (the melody being sung slightly behind or slightly ahead of the beat of the drum); and (4) a song form represented as AA'BCBC, often referred to as "incomplete repetition."

7. Having a unique and recognizable musical style, while rarely a formal judging category, is nonetheless almost a prerequisite of success for a competition drum group. On the Competition powwow trail, participants value recognizably unique singing styles. For instance, the Ojibwa drum Eyabay, from Red Lake Minnesota, has consistently been one of the most popular drum groups on the Northern circuit from the mid 1990s to the present. As a result, many young singers and drum groups have been greatly influenced by their particular singing style, marked by a high, screaming, extremely aggressive vocal style and their interesting, technically difficult vocal melodies. However, I have heard some drum groups criticized for sounding "too much like Eyabay" and these drums are often judged as needing more time to develop "their own style."

8. See Turino (2000:46–54) for a brief but cogent discussion of the ethical and aesthetic implications of these two large-scale musical/social style types.

9. The Yuwipi is originally a Sioux ceremony that has been adopted and transformed by some Plains Ojibwa groups in the Central Plains of Canada.

## References


Albers, Patricia, and Beatrice Medicine. 2005. "Some Reflections on Nearly Forty Years on the Northern Plains Powwow Circuit." In *Powwow,* edited by Clyde Ellis, Luke Eric Lassiter, and Gary H. Dunham, 26–45. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* London: Verso.

Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bauman, Richard. 1977. *Verbal Art as Performance.* Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.

Browner, Tara. 2000. "Making and Singing Pow-Wow Songs: Text, Form, and the Significance of Culture-Based Analysis." *Ethnomusicology* 44(2):214–233.

———. 2002. *Heartbeat of the People: Music and Dance of the Northern Pow-wow.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Coplan, David. 1991. "Ethnomusicology and the Meaning of Tradition." In *Ethnomusicology and Modern Music History,* edited by Stephen Blum, Philip Bohlman, and Daniel M. Neuman, 35–48. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Crozier-Hogle, Lois, Darryl Babe Wilson, Giuseppe Saitta, and Jay Leibold, eds. 1997. *Surviving in Two Worlds: Contemporary Native American Voices.* Austin: University of Texas Press.

Douglas, Gavin. 2003. "The *Sokayeti* Performing Art Competition of Burma/Myanmar: Performing the Nation." *World of Music* 45(1):35–54.

Ellis, Clyde. 2001. "'We Don't Want Your Rations, We Want This Dance': The Changing Use of Song and Dance on the Southern Plains." In *American Nations: Encounters in Indian Country, 1850 to the Present,* edited by Frederick Hoxie, Peter Mancall, and James Merrell, 354-373. New York: Routledge.

———. 2003. *A Dancing People: Powwow Culture on the Southern Plains.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.

Ellis, Clyde, Luke Eric Lassiter, and Gary H. Dunham. 2005. *Powwow.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures.* New York: Basic Books.

Goertzen, Chris. 1999. "Balancing Local and National Approaches at American Fiddle Contests." *American Music* 14(3):352–381.

———. 2001. "Powwows and Identity on the Piedmont and Coastal Plains of North Carolina." *Ethnomusicology* 45(1):58–88.


This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Gunderson, Frank. 2000. "'*Kifungua Kinywa,*' or Opening the Contest with *Chai.*" In *Mashindano!: Competitive Music Performance in East Africa,* edited by Frank Gunderson and Gregory Barz, 7-20. Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers.

Hatton, O. Thomas. 1974. "Performance Practices of Northern Plains Pow-Wow Singing Groups." *Yearbook,* 123-137. Department of Music, Institute of Latin American Studies, University of Texas at Austin.

Hatton, Orin T. 1986. "In the Tradition: Grass Dance Musical Style and Female Pow-wow Singers." *Ethnomusicology* 30(2):197-222.

Herzfeld, Michael. 1997. *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State.* New York: Routledge.

Lassiter, Luke E. 1998. *The Power of Kiowa Song: A Collaborative Ethnography.* Tuscon: University of Arizona Press.

Mauss, Marcel. 1924. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies.* New York: Norton and Company.

Nettl, Bruno. 1954. *North American Indian Musical Styles.* Philadelphia: American Folklore Society.

Pels, Peter. 2000. "*Kizungu* Rhythms: Luguru Christianity as *Ngoma.*" In *Mashindano!: Competitive Music Performance in East Africa,* edited by Frank Gunderson and Gregory Barz, 101-142. Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers.

Powers, William K. 1990. *War Dance: Plains Indian Musical Performance.* Tuscon: University of Arizona Press.

Quequesah, Ruth. 2002. "Reflections from the Powwow Trail." *Indian Country Today,* 15 August 2002. http://www.indiancountry.com/content.cfm?id=1029416332.

Scales, Christopher A. 2004. "Powwow Music and the Aboriginal Recording Industry on the Northern Plains: Media, Technology, and Native American Music in the Late Twentieth Century." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Stillman, Amy Ku'Uleialoha. 1996. "Hawaiian Hula Competitions: Event, Repertoire, Performance, Tradition." *Journal of American Folklore* 109(434):357-380.

Turino, Thomas. 2000. *Nationalists, Cosmopolitans, and Popular Music in Zimbabwe.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Vennum, Thomas, Jr. 1980. "A History of Ojibwa Song Form." *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* 3(2):42-75.

This content downloaded from 195.113.0.105 on Tue, 07 Apr 2020 22:14:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms