Powwows as an Arena for Pan-Indian Identity Formation

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POWWOWS AS AN ARENA FOR PAN-INDIAN
IDENTITY FORMATION

by

Megan L. MacDonald

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Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
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Megan L. MacDonald
This study investigates the powwow and its role in pan-Indian identity formation. Powwows are regional gatherings that simultaneously employ sacred and secular rituals, and as such, they provide one arena for the negotiation of American Indian identity in the modern world. Through a discussion of the history and general format of the powwow, I will demonstrate that the powwow is a dynamic locus of cultural transmission through which both reservation and non-reservation Indians are able to construct and maintain identity on tribal as well as inter-tribal (pan-Indian) levels.

To illuminate the process of identity formation within the powwow, this study will focus on two issues: the introduction of the contest powwow and the role of Vietnam veterans as powwow leaders. Contest dances for cash prizes appeared approximately 25 years ago and are influencing immensely the transmission of American Indian traditions. Indeed, I will argue that the contest powwow is a threat to both the powwow and to pan-Indian identity in general. Through an exploration of the role of the Vietnam veteran in the powwow, I will argue that because of their unique position within American Indian society, veterans are crucial to the growth of pan-Indianism among urban Indians.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The powwow is a unique expression of cultural traditions. The word 'powwow' has become common in American slang as meaning meeting or gathering, usually with reference to the business community (e.g. "the bosses had a ‘powwow’ in the conference room"). When used in American Indian circles, however, it retains the same meaning but with larger implications than simply a brief gathering of a few people. Powwows are a complex mix of fun, family, community, religion, and tradition. This study draws from each of these perspectives to provide a multi-tiered image of powwows in Michigan and how they provide a common arena for the development of identity in Indian communities.

In Chapter one, I will set up the background of the powwow, providing the reader with a greater idea of the intricate workings and multiplicity these events. I will explore both sacred and secular aspects of a powwow, and I will seek to provide the foundational information necessary for understanding the prominent role that veterans — especially Vietnam veterans — play in the powwow (to be discussed more fully in Chapter three). The second chapter is divided into several sections describing key aspects of the dynamics of a typical powwow.

In Chapter three, I will explore American Indian identity and its connection to the powwow. A strong sense of ethnic identity has developed among American
Indians not only due to forces in their communities, but in response to U.S. government policies as well. I will briefly chart the historical development of American Indian ethnic identities, and discuss how powwows have become one of the central expressions for Natives and non-Natives alike. I will especially highlight how powwows are avenues for urban and off-reservation Indians to affirm their ties to the larger Indian culture, and thus how powwows have become one of the primary loci for the development of an inter-tribal (pan-Indian) American Indian identity.

Finally, I will discuss the impact that the contest powwow has had on the formation and transmission of ethnic identity within American Indian communities.

As explored in the fourth chapter, crucial to the formation and transmission of ethnic identity within the powwow is the role that veterans play as leaders and teachers. Veterans are of distinct importance to Indian culture because their role in identity formation is two-fold. First, as warriors with experience in foreign lands, they have negotiated an identity that goes beyond tribal boundaries. Second, within Indian communities, veterans already have an established role as cultural leaders based on traditional warrior philosophies. In the powwow, both these identities are fused and expressed in powerful ways. Moreover, the ubiquity of veterans within the powwow movement has led to their becoming a prominent symbol of pan-Indian ethnic consciousness.

Before beginning this exploration of the powwow, some discussion of terminology and research methods is necessary. I will devote the remainder of this introduction to this task.
A Note on Terminology

A brief explanation of terminology usage is necessary, especially when referring to a group of people who have no distinct terminology for themselves. American Indians have been subject to the languages of other cultures, not often being named in their own languages (although, the re-naming of tribes is currently taking place with tribal groups reclaiming indigenous titles). I use the words American Indian and Indian to describe indigenous peoples of the United States. I choose to use American Indian and Indian because that is what we use most often to call ourselves, especially when dealing with cultures other than our own. I did not use *anishinaabe* or the plural *anishinaabeg*, Ojibwe references to themselves and other indigenous peoples, because of the confusion it causes among non-Native readers.

I do use the word tribe or tribal group in this study. This is for ease of explanation when describing a group of indigenous people, especially with regards to government policies. The usage of the word tribe has been debated in Indian academic circles because of the associations to negative and subservient connotations.¹ The word tribe is also a reminder that indigenous nations fall under the administration of American government regulation because nations are denoted as tribes, implying that they are lesser than the U.S. government. The usage of words such as tribe also introduces the problems of identity within the government sphere.

Indian identity, in many ways, is constructed by U.S. policies and agencies. Briefly, as identity is addressed in Chapter three, multiple forces shape Indian identity. Tribal identities have not been lost, but are accepting a new evolution in the definition of affiliation. Added to one’s specific tribal affiliation, an American Indian will also identify under the broader term pan-Indian or Indian depending on the situation.

I also use the phrase pan-Indian throughout this study. Pan-Indian simply refers to a gathering of American Indians of varying tribal affiliations. I may also refer to pan-Indian gatherings as inter-tribal or pan-tribal. Although I claim that the powwow is a pan-Indian activity, many powwows are tribal. This may seem like a paradox. On one level, powwows are tribal, forging tribal bonds and solidifying tribal culture. This is what makes attending powwows in different regions of the U.S. distinct. However, when one attends a powwow, people representing a number of Indian nations are recognizable, making the event intertribal. In her dissertation, Susan Applegate Krouse asserts that powwows are in fact not pan-Indian although many scholars are turning to that claim. I agree with Krouse that the underlying strength of a powwow is tribal, but the population that gives life to a powwow is drawn from many tribes. There existed a point in history when powwows did not take place, but instead individual tribal dances. The influence of an outside culture, the Euro-American culture, initiated a syncretic revolution within the American Indian peoples in general. This is not to say individual Indian nations were not syncretically

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motivated before the arrival of non-Native people, but that on a large scale syncretic movements began taking place, especially in the twentieth century, as a coping mechanism for modernity. Powwows remain tribally based, being funded by tribal groups as in the case of many contest dances, but are drawing increasingly pan-Indian participants. The advent of the contest powwow may be the next step in the evolution of tradition. The powwow, as a cultural institution, has incredible influence on Indians of all tribal affiliations. In addition to being a dynamic event, the powwow reaches a large number of Indian people of all backgrounds unifying them under a cultural umbrella. The powwow is not in danger of syncretizing itself out of existence in the near future, but it is taking suggestions from the larger American society and adapting such ideas as economic stability, pan-Indian outreach, identity negotiation, and inter-cultural communication.

In addition to the intertribal-tribal consideration, there is a debate over traditional versus modern implementation of culture. Surprisingly enough, some hobbyists (a majority non-Native group of enactors) are questioning the validity of contemporary expressions of Indian worldviews. The basic argument is that modern movements, such as the powwow, are not viable traditional expressions because they have been saturated with Euro-American influences. Essentially, for groups like the hobbyists, powwows and other dances are not ‘primitive’ enough to be authentic.

Theoretically, powwows are a complex blend of cultural adaptation and

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resistance. Indians do not think of the powwow in this context, but scholars focus on the extra-cultural ramifications of an intra-cultural activity. The core of this simultaneous adaptation and resistance is Indian participants’ selecting and reframing sociological action within their own system- the powwow. Donald Fixico refers to this process as the retention of traditionalism, noting that the persistence of Indian culture in urban atmospheres goes relatively unnoticed by non-Indian members of society.  

Finally, I use a few acronyms throughout this study. I supply the full title, upon first reference, but for ease of understanding I will list them here: AIM- American Indian Movement and BIA- Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Methods and Research

Much of the following chapters are drawn primarily from my participant-observation at many powwows throughout Michigan and is supported by scholarship primarily found in journal articles. I will refer to the evolution of the contemporary powwow (the last 30 years) and, unless specified, when I use the term powwow, it is to the modern powwow that I am referring. Originally, I had intended to use personal interviews as supporting research. I have decided that the interviews contain such a vast amount of information that they warrant their own project.

My methodology is interdisciplinary. I draw from the fields of anthropology, religion, sociology, and history. I do not limit myself to one method of incorporating

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4 Donald L. Fixico, The Urban Indian Experience in America, (Albuquerque, NM: University of New
information, but feel that all fields have something to offer, especially when dealing with such a contemporary and dynamic group of people. The one area that deserves attention is to clarify that I am dealing with a people in process. Much of the scholarship about American Indians comes from an ahistorical perspective. This classical methodology is outdated. American Indians employ creative action to accommodate modernity. This continuous evolution of culture informs the argument against an ahistorical approach.⁵

CHAPTER II

THE POWWOW

Powwow Origins

The word powwow has European origins. An excerpt from the Indian Country Today newspaper explains the origins of the common usage of the word powwow as a misunderstanding by European explorers who viewed sacred dances and thought that a word used at the dances, pau wau, referred to the dance itself. Indian Country explains that the “Algonkian definition [of pau wau] refers to the medicine men and spiritual leaders,” not the dances being performed.¹ As the number of tribes utilizing the English language grew, powwow as a reference to a tribal gathering was adopted.

The contemporary powwow developed from a variety of individual tribal dances, such as the stomp dance, the grass dance (or omaha) and the war dance.² The Wild West shows, common early twentieth-century exhibition dances staged by Euro-Americans also influenced the powwow.³ The Wild West shows primary purpose was the entertaining of Euro-American audiences. As one aspect of their entourage, the

Wild West shows ‘hired’ American Indians to participate in what was essentially an Indian ‘circus’. Hired is a subjective term because it was not often that the Indians were actually paid money for the exhibition services; more often they were just provided with room and board. Wild West shows toured the United States portraying American Indians not only in mock combat with cowboys, but in individual tribal dances complete with regalia, head dresses, and lodgings like the tipi. Paul Reddin, in his book chronicling the history of Wild West shows, states,

the showmen knew their programs must have broad appeal; consequently audiences generally saw scenes featuring heroic figures performing adventurous deeds in wilderness settings. In this regard, [George] Catlin glorified Plains Indians and eulogized them as ‘vanishing Americans,’ [Buffalo Bill] Cody celebrated the Anglo-Saxon settlement of the frontier, the Millers tried to rally enthusiasm for cattle kings, and [Tom] Mix adulated the romanticized cowboy.

The issue of *U.S. News and World Report* that appeared on 21 May 1990 reveals that Americans still cogitate ideas and images of the West. The text explains that the ‘old myths’ include westerners as the embodiment of self-sufficient individualism and innocent children of nature; white males as heroes and agents of change; Indians as noble savages, ignoble savages, and vanishing Americans; and the West as a refuge from civilization’s problems. However, according to the article, much that was unsavory flourished in the West—greed, monopoly, poverty, dispossession, and racial discrimination—but western mythology rejected such realities.4

Wild West shows influenced Hollywood and the early Western movies, giving Americans the romantic idea that American Indians everywhere were savage peoples still living in tipis and wearing head dresses and breechcloths as everyday dress.5

Wild West exhibitions and the individual tribal dances merged over time to become the modern powwow. Many other factors, such as the assimilation policies by the U.S. government and the inevitable effects of modernity on America, also

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contributed to the rise of the powwow. The survival of dance and dance methods are further discussed in below. However, it is the individual pre-existing tribal dances and the influence of the Wild West shows that supplied the model for a pan-tribal ethnic celebration. This is ironic considering that many powwow participants today strive to retain a separate ethnic identity from the larger Euro-American culture. Another definite force contributing to the rise of the powwow came from the Indian community. After WWII, in which many American Indians fought, individual tribes conducted welcoming/honoring ceremonies for returning Indian veterans. The high number of returning WWII veterans created difficulties in the honoring of individual veterans. Ceremonies honoring groups of returning vets, bringing together families and communities, marked another precursor of the powwow. Veterans’ involvement in the powwow from WWII to the present will be addressed in Chapter three.

American Indian tribes today are incredibly diverse when it comes to methods of tradition, custom, language, and community. This multiplicity may exist within any particular tribe as well. In his essay about the powwow as an activity for American Indians to explore their cultural status, Mark Mattern illustrates, “according to one Ojibwe expression, ‘If you put five Ojibwe in a room together, there will be at least ten different opinions on any subject.’ “6 Usually hosted by one tribe, the attendees of a powwow may hail from upwards of 30 different tribal groups.7

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Patterns Within the Powwow

Powwows display many different patterns both physical and behavioral, the most prominent of which is the circular pattern. Circles are representative of many ideas, both physical and metaphysical. In a brief note on cyclical significance, Mark Mattern asserts, “the circle carries spiritual significance as an embodiment of all living creatures, and relations within this circle are characterized by unity, harmony, and inclusiveness.”

The cyclical significance of a powwow originates in traditional Anishinaabe worldviews. The drum is surrounded by the singers, which represent two circles. The women constitute the next circle, followed by the dancers. The elders surround the dancers, with the veterans surrounding the elders. The spirits/spirit world is the final outside circle. A possible reason for veterans being between the people and the spirits is the veteran’s ability to negotiate some transmissions between the sacred and secular based on their warrior tradition (see Chapter four for further discussion).

In American Indian life, circles convey the cyclical pattern of the seasons, the shape and path of celestial bodies, and the four cardinal directions of north, south, east, and west. Representative of the nature of life, both human and mythological, cyclical ideas are present in everything from agriculture to song. Circles appear in the powwow beginning with the arena, the central location for dancing and

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9 Browner, Heartbeat of the People, p. 125. Refer to Appendix A for an example of circular patterns.
drumming. The arena houses other concentric forms such as the drum, and in the case of an outdoor powwow, the arbor, under which many drums may be located.

The arbor, which is constructed of wood and sometimes cedar boughs to create a ‘roof,’ provides shelter and location for the drums. Owing to space constraints, the drums often are not placed in the center of the arena at an indoor powwow and may be set up outside of the arena. Whether an indoor or outdoor powwow, the flags and eagle staffs that precede Grand Entry are always in the arena. They stand alone at an indoor powwow and stand beside the east side of the drum arbor at a powwow outdoors. At either powwow, it is common to find cedar trees or cedar boughs at the East entrance.

A brief note is important here on the differences between an indoor and outdoor powwow. Powwows may be held indoors, often in a gymnasium or other large structure, usually depending on weather or the time of year the powwow is held. During the summer months, powwows are usually held outdoors at a park, field, or other large open area. Location is the only major difference between powwows held indoors and those taking place outdoors. The common non-Native conception that American Indian spirituality is central only to nature moves me to note that location does not affect the sacred events of a powwow.

Surrounding the outside edge of the arena, again in a large circular pattern, chairs or planks of wood for benches may be placed for the dancers to sit upon. It is not uncommon, especially at outdoor powwows, for dancer seating to be surrounded

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10 Refer to Appendix A for an illustration of the dance arena.
by another circle pattern. Outside of the benches/chairs, dancers and families of
dancers may
set-up shade awnings under which lawn chairs are placed. These three layers of
circles provide a definite concentric visual pattern at a powwow.

The benches surrounding the arena are laid with blankets by dancers in order
to reserve space for themselves and their families. Chairs are often turned with the
backs facing the arena so male dancers with feather bustles may sit and not crush
their bustles. Preceding the powwow, the veterans, arena director and occasionally
selected elders, prepare the arena as sacred space. Employing tobacco and the sacred
smoke of a burning sage bundle, in an act referred to as ‘smudging’, the arena is
purified and blessed to receive the dancers and drummers with the proper
cosmological balance. Browner adds, “By doing so the grounds are cleared of
negative spirits and influences, a business of utmost importance because consecrated
spaces are...neutral grounds where all personal hostilities are put aside.”

Elders teach that the smoke of sage or sweetgrass rises beyond the boundaries of humankind,
reaches the realms of the spirits, and is able to carry prayers and messages to the
spirits. Before each Grand Entry signifying the beginning of the powwow, the arena
is repurified and the arena remains sacred space for the duration
of the day. When dancers enter the arena, they always move in a clockwise manner
around the circle, since that is the direction the sun travels around the earth.

11 Browner, Heartbeat of the People, pp. 95-96.
The Drum

The drum has often been referred to as the ‘heartbeat of the [Indian] Nation,’ both in my personal experience and in many readings about powwows. It provides rhythm and a deep, resonating beat that keeps the powwow moving, both literally and figuratively. Using drums constructed of wood and a large piece of animal hide, usually deer, the drummers create sound by beating the flat hide-surface of the drum with the hide or fur covered end of large wooden drumsticks. The drum resembles a large bass drum in form and size. In fact, in the early Wild West Show gatherings, American Indians used a marching band bass drum as an instrument.

‘To sit on a drum’ is not a literal description, since there are no singers actually sitting on top of the animal hide. The term ‘to sit on a drum’ as means to sing and drum at a powwow. Drumming teams are called singers. All members of the drumming team make up ‘the drum.’ In powwow parlance, ‘the drum’ refers not only to the physical drum itself, but describes the physical drum, the singers/drummers that sit on the drum, and the ritual actions they perform. There may be anywhere from six to twelve singers sitting on a drum.

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13 Thorough exploration of the physical drum may be found in Thomas Vennum, Jr., *The Ojibwa Dance Drum: Its History and Construction*, Smithsonian Folklife Studies, No.2. (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982).
14 *Into the Circle*, video, 58 min. (Tulsa, OK: Full Circle Communications, 1995).
15 Certain American Indian and powwow colloquialisms will be used throughout this thesis. I will attempt to clarify usage of terminology when necessary. See introduction also.
The drum possesses a certain spiritual balance or harmony and thus is able to convey the heartbeat rhythm that provides the balance and power at a powwow. This balance or harmony is often a difficult idea to convey. Balance is achieved through the proper construction, care, and use of the drum. The drum is considered a living being to be treated with respect for maintaining harmony. Balance is akin to the ‘mystical energy’ that provides the drum with the capability to become the heartbeat and rhythm of the powwow. The drum is of highest importance at a powwow, since it conveys not only the sound and rhythm as the heartbeat of the nation but the rhythm of the community and traditions central to each powwow.

Powwow Songs and Singers

In Michigan powwows, all singers are male. Women may serve as ‘backup’ singers, usually standing behind the men seated at a drum. The reason why women are not drummers, as I understand from discussions with various elders, involves their power of reproduction. Women possess this particular power, a fact made potent once a month during menstruation. American Indians consider it an awesome power, and at any time women may upset the balance or harmony if they are too close to the drum. Although not common, Southern drums may include women among the drummers, as the balance and harmony of the Southern drums can accommodate the power that women have differently than Northern drums. Tribal distinctions exist about whether women are able to sit on a drum. Browner has recorded an interview with a Lakota woman, who gave her reasoning as,
My grandfather said he never wanted to see me sitting at that drum. The women in our family cannot sit at a drum. Everybody's different... Do you see women sitting at a drum? Well, maybe they have the right to sit at that drum, but... we don't. And [Grandfather] said the reason is because of the four circles. The first circle is the drum. The second circle are the men that sit behind the drum. The third circle are the women that stand behind the men and sing. And the fourth circle is the People. If you take them out of that context you lose the power.16

There are typically two styles of drums, referred to as Northern and Southern styles.17 There are subtle differences in song pattern and drumming patterns, as well as the obvious regional origins that mark the two styles. The Northern style is usually higher in pitch and faster in beat. The Southern style is usually lower in pitch and slower in beat. However, a Northern or Southern style drum team does not necessarily have to come from either region of the United States. The styles originated regionally, but today they are found in all regions of the United States. For this thesis, the word ‘drum’ will denote the Northern style drum, since it is the dominant style found in Michigan.18

If the drum does not hold its rhythm or is unskilled in maintaining a consistent beat, the dancers cannot follow the rhythm and thus cannot dance. All drums are expected to know a variety of songs. Different songs have different rhythms and beat patterns, as well as lyrics. A variety of rhythmic beats are utilized depending on the song. The one rhythm you will never hear is the one created by Hollywood Western movies; the ONE, two, three, four, ONE, two, three, four.

17 An extensive discussion of ethnomusicology and Northern and Southern styles see Browner, *Heartbeat of the People*, pp. 68-87.
18 Hereafter, the word ‘drum’ will also retain the meaning of the drum team, including both the physical drum and singers.
Typically, there are two drums that lead the powwow. Variation is accepted, as some powwows may have one drum and others may have twenty. The Master of Ceremonies, explained below, follows a schedule, the drum rotation, to ensure that each drum has a chance to sing. Drum rotation is not set in stone, and may be changed if a particular drum is requested for an honor song or other special dance. The powwow committee usually invites a host drum to lead the powwow. The host drum acts as the ‘leader of the pack.’ Accompanying the host drum is the co-host drum. These drums are expected to perform all the necessary and important songs at a powwow, including the Grand Entry, the Flag Song, and the Veteran’s song.

The cultural or religious meanings that songs possess are wide in variety. Songs that have specific purpose, those that border on religious feeling, include the Grand Entry song, Flag song, and the Veteran’s song. During these songs, all people attending the powwow, Native and non-Native alike, stand in honor and men remove hats. It is not uncommon for the drum to incorporate old warrior lyrics during these honor songs. Songs may also be completely secular. These songs have the tendency to poke fun at non-Native and Native actions and societies alike. Songs are constantly being composed that mirror events occurring in the world, such as the Black Lodge Singers, “Ask Your Mom for Fifty Cents” or “Monster Mash.”

American Indian drum songs are unique in the realm of American music because of the utilization of vocables. Although many lyrics are in one of a variety of American Indian dialects, vocables, lyrics that have no meaning but are merely

repeated sounds, are a component of many powwow songs. Typically, intertribal and specific exhibition songs combine vocables and lyrics. Such songs consist of a refrain that is repeated many times, punctuated by vocables, which allows the song to extend for any length of time. If the dancers would like to continue, which they communicate to the drum through their body language, or if the exhibition is not finished, the song can go on indefinitely by repeating the refrain and vocable combination.

Powwow songs display the dynamic nature of American Indian culture by the combination of the secular intertribal ‘fun’ songs and those songs, such as the Flag and Veteran’s songs, which evoke sacred power and agency. These songs evoke both religious and secular aspects of the powwow. This is the case not only with powwow songs, but also in all aspects of the powwow. For spectators, or those unfamiliar with the culture, the sacred may not be obvious. Anthropological investigations that group all American Indian nations into a common religious mindset, as well as pagan labels from Christian missionaries, have resulted in a misconception of Indian religiosity. There is often both a highly reverent, semi-religious aspect and a secular or fun aspect to almost every action or ritual performed at a powwow. This means that powwows are not sacred rituals as a whole. The sacred events are often recognized only by members of the culture, and may include the raising of an eagle feather, the blessing of the grounds, and the invocation, among others.

**Powwow Contributors/ Roles**

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20 *Kids Powwow Songs*, Black Lodge Singers (Phoenix, AZ: Canyon Records), sound cassette.
Specific roles are necessary for the functioning of a powwow. These roles are described below in no particular order of importance. The Arena Director is responsible for the maintenance, upkeep, and proper actions of others in and around the arena. The Master of Ceremonies, or emcee, keeps the powwow moving. He may inform spectators and non-Natives attending the powwow of appropriate behavior, tribal knowledge, and tradition. He may also tell stories, histories, and keep the powwow moving by announcing dances that are forthcoming and which drum is in rotation to perform the next song.

The Head Veteran oversees and participates in many important facets of the powwow. The Head Veteran leads the dancers into the arena at Grand Entry, blesses and honors the arena as sacred space, and typically resolves all questions and concerns that powwow committee members and attendees may have. The Head Veteran is the person to consult when there is a breech in powwow protocol or if someone has a cultural question. He is also the person to turn to when an eagle feather is dropped. He gathers three other veterans, together representing the four cardinal directions, and they perform a ritual song/prayer to ‘raise’ the eagle feather off the ground and restore the balance to the feather. The veteran then retains guardianship of the eagle feather, since the original keeper had intentionally or unintentionally lost honor for the feather. The veteran may attach it to his eagle staff, a staff with many feathers hanging from it, cultivating balance and honor.

I choose not to use the wording ‘comes into the possession of the veteran’ here, because the harmony and power of eagle feathers is not something that is possessed by one person, but merely accessed by the person guarding it.
wherever the veteran may carry the staff. The veteran may also give it to someone else, someone that he thinks is ready for the balance and honor that accompany the feather. Tara Browner explains the significance, with a slightly different reasoning than above (but again the meaning is honor and balance) saying,

the most common unscheduled special is a dance required when a participant drops an eagle feather. When that happens, the feather can only be picked up by a veteran (usually the head veteran), who, along with three other veterans, then dances in honor of the fallen warrior represented by the feather. When the dance concludes, the head veteran picks up the feather and returns it to the dancer who dropped it. The dance is an embarrassment to the dancer … who will often not claim it.

They must, however, …give it away. One explanation…is when an eagle drops a feather and a human picks it up, the eagle does not return to demand the feather back. Therefore, neither should a human who drops an eagle feather expect it to be returned.22

Browner goes on to say that the dropping of a feather is also about the caring and preservation of a dancer’s regalia. Dropped feathers signal a person who is lazy in regards to the honor that their regalia requires.23

The Head Veteran is chosen on the basis of not only his military service, but of the cultural knowledge and way that he conducts himself in the Indian community. I must first clarify the term military service. Today, Head Veterans achieve ‘warrior’ status through service in the United States or Canadian military. The other way that veterans may achieve ‘warrior’ status in the community is through struggles in which the veteran was defending American Indian territory from a U.S. military unit.24 An example of this would be veterans who fought at the second Battle of Wounded Knee (1973), coinciding with the American Indian Movement’s struggle to regain land that

22 Browner, *Heartbeat of the People*, p. 95.
23 Browner, *Heartbeat of the People*, p. 95.
the United States government had given to Dakota/Lakota tribes and then taken back, or the Oka conflict (1990) surrounding the Mohawk/Onondaga fight to preserve a gravesite in Quebec.\textsuperscript{25}

Aside from the Head Veteran, there are other head people involved in the powwow. Selected by the powwow committee prior to a powwow, Head Female and Male dancers fill the primary function of being leaders and role models for every dance. Head dancers enter the arena before anyone else at the beginning of a song, and traditionally other dancers are not supposed to enter the arena until the Head Male and Female have passed by them. The Head Junior Male and Female also perform similar functions in the arena, serving as role models for all junior dancers. At a contest powwow, at which dancers compete for cash prizes, Head Judges oversee the judging of all competition dances.\textsuperscript{26} Head Judges, like the Head Male and Female and the Head Junior dancers, are selected prior to the powwow and they, in turn, select a team of judges to assist them with evaluating the dancers’ footwork and regalia. The Head judges and their team determine who among the competing dancers are the best.\textsuperscript{27}

Traders

One of the first aspects of the powwow a first-time visitor notices is the ‘county fair’ type atmosphere invoked by the traders on the outer edge of the arena.

\textsuperscript{25} Information regarding the Oka conflict may be found in Rudy Freisen, “Reflections on Oka: The Mohawk Confrontation,” \textit{Conflict Resolution Notes} 8, no.4 (April 1991): 36-38.
\textsuperscript{26} A further discussion of contest powwows will come in Chapter two.
Within colorful tents and awnings, traders display blankets, clothing, feathers, and jewelry, as well as other items available for sale. The traders sell not only crafts and souvenirs for the spectators and visitors to a powwow; they also provide tools and supplies for the dancers who make their own regalia.\textsuperscript{28} In addition to craft and supply traders, a powwow attendee would find a number of Indian food booths. These food traders offer a selection of non-Native foods as well as foods linked to indigenous communities such as corn soup, Indian tacos, buffalo burgers, and fry bread. Food is often considered the ‘glue’ of Indian communities. I have heard dancers at powwows joking that if there is any conflict between two people or groups of people, just feed them and all will be well. Thus, at a majority of weekend powwows, a feast (usually at Saturday dinner) is held to feed all participants of the powwow, and the public is invited after all powwow participants have been fed. The feast is provided by the powwow committee and may be potluck or catered buffet-style.

A pro-Indian development is influencing the majority of powwows in Michigan. A major voice in this ‘Indian or Red Power’ movement is the American Indian movement (AIM).\textsuperscript{29} AIM became known to the American public through its members militant take-over of the Bureau of Indian Affairs office in Washington.

\textsuperscript{27} Knowledge of the head staff comes through my participant-observation as well as my experience on powwow committees.

\textsuperscript{28} Dancers outfits are commonly referred to as regalia or dance clothes, not costumes. Costumes imply that the clothes are for display and spectators only, when in fact they are traditionally inspired honorariums to a culture.

\textsuperscript{29} Josephy, Jr., \textit{Red Power}; Nagel, \textit{American Indian Ethnic Renewal}; Wilkins, \textit{American Indian Politics}, pp. 210-211.
D.C. (1972), as well as the second battle of Wounded Knee (1973). The Red Power movement’s influence on Michigan powwows has been most noticeable regarding the unacceptability of non-Native traders on the powwow circuit. AIM wishes to allow only card-carrying Native traders to sell Native crafts. This focus on card-carrying traders only is a result of the impinging hobbyist movement, which takes away from the Indian-ness of a powwow. A compromise I have noticed while participating on powwow committees is to allow traders who have long-standing ties with the Native community.

Traders applying for trader space are usually screened via photograph. The committee looks at the goods for sale and the quality and authenticity of the products. Handmade Indian crafts are encouraged and at the majority of powwows that I have attended, the powwow committee reserves the right to ask any trader to remove non-Native-produced goods from their tables. Another influence on the traders at powwows comes from the hobbyist movement. Hobbyist powwows and traders are usually non-Native people, who are associated primarily with Civil and Revolutionary War re-enactments and encampments. Despite opposition, the hobbyist movement is composed of groups who seek to romanticize the idea of the Old West Indian, instead of engaging contemporary American Indians and Native traders (who sometimes oppose the hobbyist movement). However, even the powwows I have

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31 Card-carrying refers to the United States government’s method of identifying American Indians through blood-quantum. Once blood-quantum is determined for a person, they are issued a card stating
attended that are hobbyist-dominated, are still well attended by Native people themselves.

The idea of the politics of Indian identity is undergoing a definite transition and will continue to do so for quite some time. This expression of Indian identity through hobbyist powwows is not easy to explain, simply due to the fact that it is a contradiction. Influences of significant intermarriage and romantic ideas of the American Indian are primary sources for the success of the hobbyist movement. Hobbyist participators often heavily research their dance style and regalia. Most respect the culture and customs of Indian people, and make regalia by hand. The hobbyist movement is, in fact, supporting Native culture, which many Natives recognize. However, the idea of misappropriation of identity and lifeways is a larger problem than the promotion of Native ways.  

Dancers

A significant variation in regalia and dance styles exists at any given powwow. For ease of explanation, I will begin with women’s dance styles and end with men’s. Junior dancers or Tiny Tots are just miniature versions of adult dance and regalia styles. Women’s styles include the traditional buckskin and cloth, Jingle Dress and Fancy Shawl dance.

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32 Hobbyist powwows will be addressed in the context of identity in Chapter two.
33 For further reading on dance styles, consult Tara Browner, *Heartbeat of the People*, pp. 48-66. This is the most comprehensive study of the Northern powwow that I have found. Also consult Krouse, “A Window Into The Indian Culture.” Other, non-scholarly, sources to consider are websites about
For the women, the two traditional dance styles are marked with regional differences, including regalia materials and dance movements around the arena. For either style, feathers in the hair may be worn up or to the side. Women’s buckskin consists of a dress that is all buckskin, with heavy fringe off the sleeves and often a full breastplate of bone pipes or tubes. Women’s buckskin dancers remain in one place around the edge of the arena and dance with feet together in what looks like a bobbing motion while rotating in a 180 — degree pattern. These dancers must keep rhythm with the drum and raise their fan during honor beats (one-three strong beats of the drum). Women’s buckskin dancers carry a shawl, but place the shawl hand on a hip and hold the fan at the belt with the other hand.

Women’s cloth is the other traditional category. Women’s cloth typically has no fringe around the sleeves and a shawl is carried over one arm. The shawl for either traditional category is usually made of wool or other heavy material and fringed with a flat ribbon or thin woven fringe. Women’s cloth moves forward around the arena in a step that resembles a toe-heel, toe-heel pattern while bending the knees to make the shawl fringe keep time with the drum. A fan may also be carried along with a purse or bag. Either traditional style may be adorned with heavy beadwork on the regalia and accessories. The pattern of the beadwork is usually dependant on the tribal affiliation of the dancer. Many tribes have patterns for bead and ribbon work associated specifically with their group. These may include floral or geometrical patterns. Both

powwows and books like Julia C. White, *The Powwow Trail: Understanding the Native American Powwow*, (TN: Book Publishing Co., 1996) but the information found in some of these sources is unreliable and sometimes misleading.
styles also wear leggings, usually tied under the knee originally to protect against abrasive grass and plants, and leather moccasins.

The Jingle Dress is another style for women. This dress developed in the northern plains tribes and the origin myth is usually attributed to the Ojibwe people. Also referred to as the Prayer dress, the Jingle Dress consists of 365 tin cones attached to material. It is said that a male elder was ill and had a dream. In his dream, a woman visited him, telling him that his only cure was for a woman to make a dress with the 365 cones and when each cone was rolled, a prayer must be said. The woman must then dance for him. Today, the Jingle Dress is made in the same way, with the cones made of snuff can lids. Jingle Dress dancers also carry a shawl or bag and have one hand on a hip with the other carrying a fan. The fan is lifted during honor beats to raise the prayers for healing. A single feather is worn pointing up at the back of the head. Jingle Dress dancers make their way around the arena in a side-shuffle step, keeping both feet together and facing the center of the arena. It has been said that women who are Jingle Dress dancers were called to this style, either by a vision or through family illness. This calling does not always happen today, but the Jingle Dress style still commands a great amount of respect.

A third style of women’s dance is the Fancy Shawl dance. The Fancy Shawl is a recent innovation in dance styles, and grew out of the Men’s Fancy dance. It is a showy style that consists of leggings, a skirt ending just below the knee, and a top with a cape over the shoulders. The shawl is worn over the shoulders, under the cape,
and is adorned with flat fringe. The material used for the dress is usually a satin-like shimmering material with a cape with extensive ribbon or bead work. The Fancy Shawl dance is an active form of dance with dancers lifting their legs in the air, executing spins and using high arm motions. This dance is also referred to as the Butterfly dance, as the dancer is said to mimic a butterfly coming out of a cocoon and raising its wings. It is not uncommon to see regalia adorned with sequins, beadwork, and ribbon work. Feathers in the hair may consist of one feather worn pointing upward at the back of the head and additional feathers on the side of the head pointing down, or simply the feathers at the side of the head.

Men’s styles of dance are comprised of Men’s Traditional, the Straight dance, Grass Dance, and the Men’s Fancy dance. The Straight dance is a form of Men’s Traditional. The dancers have aprons, carry a drop fan (a stick with feathers attached to the end and beadwork on the shaft) or a staff, and may wear a long cloth or fur piece attached at the neck and reaching to the knees. Straight dancers do not always stand straight up as the name implies, but may bend over at the waist or knees. Dancers make their way around the arena with the toe-heel footstep. Headgear, such as a fur cap or other cap may be worn, and a variety of beadwork or ribbon work may adorn aprons and shirts. The Men’s Traditional is very similar in regalia, with the major difference being that Traditional dancers wear a large feather bustle at the waist. Both styles of dance may include beaded or patch military insignias, representing military experience or family military experience. Men’s Traditional

34 See Krouse, “Window into Indian Culture,” Appendix 2, pp. 190-191 for elaboration on the origin
dancers may also wear a roach on the head. A roach is the soft long fur from a porcupine attached in a U-shaped fashion to a piece of hide. The roach is held flat by a piece of bone called a roach spreader.

Men’s Grass Dance is a style that comes out of the plains traditions and originally was a dance to flatten large areas of grass for ceremonies. Grass dancers wear a top and pants adorned with fringe or yarn in layers that mimic the movement of tall plains grass. Dancers move their shoulders in a wavy motion that is followed by their hips. A roach is worn on the head and may have other adornments like feathers, circular links, or beadwork. Grass Dancers typically raise their knees high and bend to meet the knee movement to create the image of blowing prairie grass. There is little beadwork on Grass Dance regalia because it is covered in fringe or yarn.

Men’s Fancy dance is the most recent of the men’s dance styles. Coming from the northern plains in the 1950’s, the Men’s Fancy is said to have developed out of Men’s Traditional by youths who wanted more movement. It is a flashy style, with regalia including a roach, cape and aprons, leggings made of fur called goats, and various fringe and beadwork adornments. Dance sticks or drop fans may be carried. Men’s Fancy dancers wear two feather bustles, one attached at the shoulders and the other at the waist, and have small bustles around the top of each arm. This showy style utilizes modern craft innovations, for example, compact discs at the center of the bustle. Active footwork, spins, and high arm movements are characteristic of this story.
dance. This dance often resembles an athletic event with the extensive body movement, jumping, and spinning. The dancer must always keep foot rhythm with the drum.

Tribes across the nation are utilizing all of these dance styles. Tribal origins of the dance styles have become inconsequential because of the pan-Indian utilization. There are other dances at a powwow that are still tribally affiliated but they may not appear at all powwows. Examples include the Hoop dance, the Gourd dance, or the Pipe dance. The dancers usually indicate their tribal affiliation by the adornment of shells, bone, beadwork patterns, ribbonwork patterns, or insignias on individual regalia.

Grand Entry

The contemporary powwow usually occurs on a weekend and lasts all of Saturday and Sunday, although many one-day powwows are found in Michigan. Grand Entry marks the beginning of the powwow for general participants. Standard for powwows in Michigan, Grand Entries occur at noon or 1 p.m. and 7 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday at 1 p.m. Grand Entry is the time that not only marks the beginning of the powwow, but it acts as a sort of ‘parade in’ for dancers. Dancers begin to line up at the east entrance to the arena shortly before the Grand Entry. They line up in a very specific order, and within each dance style it is customary for the elders of the group to lead and the rest of the dancers follow, in order of descending age. Guests at the powwow are asked to stand at this time to honor the dancers, and
men are asked to remove their hats. At many powwows, the question of photographs during Grand Entry is controversial. I have attended many powwows that forbid photographs during Grand Entry, but this policy is becoming more relaxed. Photographs are still not allowed during the Flag Song and Veteran’s song as these are considered honoring ceremonies, although they are increasingly allowed during the parade of dancers. When visiting a powwow, the best course of action regarding photographs is to listen for announcements by the Emcee, or to ask the person for permission before taking their photograph.

The flag bearers, including the Head Veteran, lead all dancers. Head dancers, powwow princesses, and honored guests (i.e. special visitors, foreign or military dignitaries) follow the color guard. Powwow princesses are usually chosen and crowned at large pan-tribal (i.e. Gathering of Nations) or Homecoming (tribal) powwows, such as the Potawatomi Homecoming.

Behind Head dancers and guests come the dancers, with the men entering first: Traditional and Straight, followed by Grass, then Fancy dancers. The women enter after the men: buckskin, then cloth, followed by Jingle Dress, then Fancy shawl. The youth dancers and Tiny Tots follow at the end. Once everyone has entered the arena, the drum may repeat part of the Grand Entry song, with all the dancers turning toward the center of the arena and dancing in place. After the Grand Entry song, dancers remain in the arena and a Flag Song is sung to honor the flags and eagle staffs that have been brought into the arena. Flags may include national flags, flags representing branches of the military, and tribal flags. Staffs adorned with eagle
feathers represent particular Nations or groups of American Indians, or a specific military conflict. The flag bearers are almost always military veterans of some sort. After the Flag Song, the colors are posted as indicated by the Master of Ceremonies. An elder usually gives an invocation for the dance and the people, before the dancers may be seated. The invocation is given in an indigenous language first, and then possibly repeated in English. At Michigan powwows the invocation is usually in a dialect of *anishnaabemowin*, or Ojibwe language. When the invocation is complete, dancers exit the arena in a clockwise fashion, careful to not move counterclockwise around the arena.

The next song is the Veteran’s song. Again, the guests are asked to rise to honor veterans. The Emcee invites any veteran or close family member of a veteran, regardless of nationality or race, into the arena to dance during the Veteran’s song. This is a time to honor and remember veterans. In her dissertation, Susan Applegate Krouse quotes Ojibwe elder and frequent Emcee, Eddie Benton Benai, at a 1989 powwow,

... In proportion to our population, there were more American Indian men and women in the lines of conflict, to enlist and to volunteer their services. American Indian people have always held our veterans in high regard, in high esteem. We did not spit on them when they come home. we honored them with song; we have always honored them; we have always put them up in front to be role models for our sons and daughters and our nephews. That continues today. We’re going to honor our veterans again. We’re going to ask for a veterans’ song. And all veterans... Indian and non-Indian alike, this song is for you. And it’s our way of saying thank you, *miigwetch*, ... for the honor that you did us, for protecting what we have in this country, no matter what it may be. ... Dancers, we’re going to let all the veterans make their round, ... and then we’ll join them. ... Remember those veterans who aren’t with us anymore. Remember those ones in Vietnam who have yet to come home.15

After the veterans have completed one full circle of the arena, everyone is invited to come and shake hands with the veterans. The people who have entered the arena to shake hands then take a place in line behind the veterans and dance behind them for another rotation. When the song has ended, veterans may be asked to remain in the arena, and an opportunity to applaud the veterans is extended to the guests of the powwow as thanks to the veterans.

Traditionally, women entering the arena in street clothes should wear or carry a shawl. This is a disappearing trend, however, just as people who do not have full leg coverings (i.e. are wearing shorts) are no longer forbidden. Men require no special adornment to enter the arena when not wearing regalia.

It is important to note that women who are menstruating should by no means enter the arena. Women who are menstruating have an incredible amount of power in terms of their ability to bear life. By entering the arena, they will upset the balance and harmony that was brought to the sacred space of the arena by the blessing before the dance. They can also upset the harmony of the drum with their power. Menstruating women at a powwow are on the honor system not to enter the arena and may signal their power to others by wearing a snip of cedar on their clothing.

Other Dances

Once the honoring songs are complete, the powwow then progresses with a variety of different songs. It is the discretion of the Emcee as to what order the songs are performed. Some songs may not take place at all. Examples of differing songs
include the Crow hop, the Round dance, the Two-Step, Intertribals, “specials” or honor songs, the Blanket dance, exhibition dances, the occasional Hoop dance or other specific tribal dance, and the ‘shawl’ dance. The Crow hop is a dance usually performed only by Traditional male dancers. It progresses much like its name, with men doing a hop step around the arena, mimicking the movement of a crow. The Round dance involves both sexes. Dancers face the center of the arena, and move in a side-step around the arena. A Two-Step is a fun dance, and one of the only couples dance at a powwow. Couples pair up and follow the lead of the Head dancers who wind them around both the inside and outside of the arena. Anyone may participate in the Two-Step. The Emcee’s, “Everybody Dance” often accompanies Intertribal dances. Anyone may participate in an Intertribal, and it is an opportunity for people to learn how to dance by watching different dancers. “Specials” or honor dances are requested by a specific person or group of people to honor someone else. This may be for a birthday, a celebration, a homecoming, illness, or award. “Specials” include the honoree and his/her family and everyone else may join in the honor after the honoree and family have completed one rotation of the arena. Blanket dances are a type of dance to help out ill or struggling people, to help pay for an event or a drum, or to offset powwow costs. The blanket dance is structured much like an Intertribal, with the exception of the blanket placed near the center of the arena. As dancers pass by the blanket, they drop money (or occasionally gifts) onto the blanket for whatever causes the blanket dance is honoring. Exhibition dances may occur at powwows, as

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well. These are opportunities for the dancers in a specific style to show the spectators and families how well they can perform.

It is also an educational opportunity for powwow spectators to learn the intricacies of a dance style. Exhibition dances are a regular event at contest powwows. Judges get to see each dance style individually. Occasionally at Michigan powwows, there may be a Hoop dancer or other dance specific to a particular tribe that dance an exhibition.

A dance that reflects the abundant humor at powwows is the ‘shawl’ dance. Making fun of gender boundaries, this dance is performed primarily for the amusement of dancers themselves. Male and female dancers may exchange shawls and dance staffs or bustles, respectively, and imitate the opposite sex while dancing around the arena. As a result of Hollywood, many non-Natives view Native people as stoic and humorless. This, in fact, is the opposite of what is found at many Native gatherings. Native people, specifically at powwows, are full of jokes, humor, and poke fun at both Native and non-Native society alike. The ‘shawl’ dance, as an example of societal joking, softening the stringent division that society creates between the genders.

Aside from dancing and singing, there are some acts of the powwow that are usually left until the end. Giving in American Indian communities is no better illustrated than in the giveaway at a powwow. A vast assumption among historians and sociologists is that American Indian communities have long participated in giving
rituals, i.e. the potlatch of the Northwest coast. While the ideas of giving and receiving are not formally ritualized in many Indian communities, there is a popular theme at contemporary powwows to host a giveaway at the end of the dance, symbolizing a kind of ‘thank you’ to all the participants, families, and guests. When dealing with occasions of honor, a person has many options to choose from. A person may choose to honor a birthday, homecoming, or other significant event in a relative or friend’s life by making a donation to the powwow, by buying a song referred to as a “special” or by hosting a giveaway. People who are experiencing a momentous life event, like being Head dancer, or entering the arena or introducing a child for the first time, usually host the giveaway. The powwow committee, as previously mentioned, may also host giveaways. There is no competition between who has the ‘biggest’ or the ‘best’ giveaway because the focus is on honor and thanks. If a person chooses to host a giveaway, they will then purchase a number of items to share. The person coordinates with the Emcee to secure an appropriate time for the giveaway. If a monetary gift or “special” is the choice, the Emcee will announce to dancers and spectators that a gift has been made and the purpose for which it has been given.

Visitors to a powwow often question the purpose of the giveaway since the items are not always ‘traditional.’ Giveaway items may include handmade crafts or craft supplies, plants, household items, baskets, tools, toys, candy, etc. A key point in the

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giveaway procedure is the order in which people are called to receive or choose a gift. Typically, the order is as follows: the person speaking for you, the principal people (Head Veteran, Head Male, Head Female, Master of Ceremonies, Arena Director, Princesses, and Head Junior dancers), the Powwow committee (unless the giveaway is hosted by the committee), all veterans, all members of the drums, the dancers (beginning with the elders first and in accordance with the Grand Entry lineup), and then any other people attending the powwow or families of the dancers/drummers, again with the elders first. A receiving line is formed, headed by the person/people hosting the giveaway, and each gift recipient shakes the hand of the people who have gone before him/her. Gift recipients occasionally give monetary gifts in return to the person hosting the giveaway. These monetary gifts are usually placed on the host drum as an extra honor for a good performance and to help pay for travel.

Powwow Actions

Powwows also have a code of conduct that is either unspoken or announced once for the benefit of first-time visitors. Rules for etiquette, within the code of conduct, may also be printed in the powwow program. Alcohol is forbidden on powwow grounds. The majority of powwows in Michigan post an alcohol ban on the fliers, as well as at the powwow itself. Powwows usually run on 'Indian time.' This explains why events do not always happen on time. If an event, for example the

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38 This generalization comes from my contact with many spectators to a powwow and conversations with those spectators while serving on powwow committees.
39 The lineup for a giveaway is flexible, this is a usual order based on my participant-observation experiences.
Grand Entry, is slated to happen at one o'clock, it may not happen immediately at one. If the Grand Entry is late, the usual way of explaining the lateness is to say events are running on ‘Indian time’, or a time before clocks were regular measures of time passage.

People who attend the powwows, particularly dancers and their families, will camp at the powwow grounds for the duration of the event. Campers will use a variety of means for campsite accommodations. Tipis (or lodges), motor homes and campers, and tents are just some of the lodgings a visitor may encounter when skirting the powwow grounds.

At dusk, before the sun sets, it is traditional to retire the flags and eagle staffs. In an event that functions as the opposite of Grand Entry, dancers in regalia will follow the color guard. When the color guard completes one rotation around the arena, it will line up at the east entrance and the dancers will file through the ‘arbor’ that the flags create and out of the arena, symbolizing the ending of the dance for the night. After the flags have been retired, it is not uncommon for people to remain in the arena to socialize.

Conclusion

Although variations occur in powwow methods and events, this chapter has given a brief history and overview for the majority of Michigan powwows. Chapter three will address how American Indian identity is directly influenced by powwows, as well as indicate that powwows are becoming the primary form of ritual activity
influencing identity. Powwows (especially in those rituals set forth by the Head Veteran) incorporate fundamental religious ideas and secular that define American Indians. Increasingly, the idea of a common Indian identity, as opposed to separate tribal identities, is becoming the norm. A push to retain strong tribal ties in other realms of Indian life, e.g. language, clan retention (*dobemowin*), and bureaucratic recognition, is increasingly overshadowed by pan-Indian powwows.
CHAPTER III

AMERICAN INDIAN IDENTITY AND THE POWWOW

This chapter will focus on the contemporary issues of American Indian identity, referred to as the ‘urban identity crisis’ by Donald Fixico, a prominent Native scholar. It will also focus on how the powwow can reaffirm identity ties for a group of people that is becoming increasingly urban.¹ Indian identity is a multifaceted concept that is not easily categorized. Due to space constraints, this chapter will primarily address identity activism and legislation that influenced the advent of the contemporary powwow. More specifically, I will address a contemporary modification to powwows that seems to be a response to this issue: the contest dance. The contest powwow is important because of the impact it has had upon Indian identity and pan-Indian gatherings. The contest powwow is a precursor to a cultural shift. I perceive the contest dance as a threat to the transmission of tradition, and thus to pan-Indian identity. This sounds a bit extreme, considering all powwows are not contest and the powwow is a dynamic cultural practice that adapts pan-tribal and non-Native actions. However, the focus of the contest powwow is shifting from the sharing and education of traditional ways to the economic incentive, which will inevitably have an impact on Indian identity in general.

¹ Donald Fixico, The Urban Indian Experience in America, (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2000).
American Indian Identity

Research in the area of American Indian identity can occur on many levels. Identity issues can be explored on a tribal level, given the particularized nature of Indian culture. Scholars have also been exploring Indian identity on a more abstract level. At the forefront of general Indian identity scholarship are Joane Nagel, Donald Fixico, Vine Deloria, Jr., Melissa Pflüg, and Devon Mihesuah.2 Scholars of Indian identity are establishing a strong foothold within written anthologies dealing with identity in general. A central focus of many of these writings is how large populations of Natives have merged into mainstream America without completely assimilating or giving up their culture. Illustrating this point, Donald Fixico states,

...Persistence occurs through the continual practice of traditional Indian cultures and remains relatively invisible to other members of urban society.... It is wrong to assume that American Indians have completely assimilated into the urban mainstream and discarded their native culture, simply because urban Indians do not dress or appear in stereotypical fashions of the past, [a] mental picture [that] is etched into non-Indian minds.3

The shift of Indian people from the reservation to the urban setting began with relocation initiatives by the U.S. government in the 1950's. The Federal Indian Policy of 1946-1960, popularly referred to as ‘Termination,’ focused on ending the sovereign rights of American Indians and assimilating them into the larger American

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3 Fixico, Urban Indian, p. 44.
In her book exploring the recent regeneration of Indian identity, Joane Nagel states,

The various programs constituting termination policy were intended to end the trust relationship between the federal government and recognized tribes, to settle all outstanding land claims and treaty disputes, to train reservation Indians for wage labor jobs, to relocate trainees to urban areas, and for once and all, to solve the ‘Indian problem.’ Once again, however, the pursuit of federal assimilationist goals provided an unexpected impetus for the emergence of intertribal and ultimately supratribal Indian organizational and identity formation—organizations and identifications that became the infrastructure upon which was built the Red Power movement [e.g. American Indian Movement].

After the termination policy was deemed unjust by the public, and the government recognized that it was not achieving the goal of assimilation, identifying oneself as ethnically Indian became much more appealing for reasons ranging from land grant claims to financial benefits (e.g. grant facilitation) to tribal groups. After 1970, the federal policy regarding termination was revised and, in the end, became a policy of self-determination. Fueled by the growing number of voices in the Red Power movement as well as tribal cries for recognition, the government established the Indian Educational Assistance and Self-Determination Act of 1975 which “represented watershed self-determination legislation in that it reduced the power of the Bureau of Indian Affairs to control tribal finances by permitting tribes to contract for...services thus represent[ing] further affirmation of tribal rights.” The policy of self-determination, also called sovereignty, allowed reservations and tribes to thrive

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4 Nagel, Ethnic Renewal, p. 118.
6 Nagel, Ethnic Renewal, pp. 130-140.
thereby increasing the opportunities for the communication of identity and culture to urban Indians and non-Natives. William Meadows comments on identity in his dissertation, saying,

That maintaining a distinct ethnic identity is still important for many Native American people is clear in light of governmental attempts for termination in the 1950’s, of the general rise of ethnic awareness in the United States since the 1960’s, and of the failure of the ‘melting pot’ theory to materialize, as evidenced by the continuity of numerous ethnic communities throughout the United States.  

Before the rise of identity movements, it was not politically beneficial to connect oneself with an American Indian identity. A variety of reasons including social harassment and discrimination found “many native census respondents, particularly those of mixed ancestry, [having] little motivation to report ‘Indian’ as their race on census forms.” Drawing largely on Deloria Jr.’s article dealing with the resurgence of popularity surrounding Indian affiliation, Nagel points out that the trend of dodging Native heritage “was reversed in the 1960’s, when ethnicity became a more valued identity in U.S. society, leading many individuals of mixed Indian descent to identify themselves as Indian.”

As a result of federal programs, Indian identity has only grown stronger and more prominent. Indian displays of culture and identity are often criticized by the American public in regards to ‘traditional’ versus ‘contemporary’ actions. Donald Fixico addresses the resurgence of Indian culture and the critics, saying, “…there is no traditional culture, because culture evolves with time as it comes into contact with

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new peoples of different cultures and as history causes such evolution." 

Indian culture remains dynamic, taking into consideration the contemporary American society. The expression of Indian identity manifests itself in a variety of ways ranging from militant movements such as American Indian Movement, to cultural movements such as the powwow, to educational movements such as the American Indian Scholarship Fund and Foundation. In the late 1970’s, the rise of Indian youth activism reached a peak with the occupation of Alcatraz Island. This activism also prompted the government to conduct research on the motivations behind the occupation, and "the final report of the Native American Research Group issued in 1975 highlighted the concerns felt by the first urban Indian generation." 

The strength of pan-Indianism was influenced heavily by this generation of urban Indians, who identified more as the generic ‘Indian,’ as opposed to a specific tribal affiliation. The question of ‘what it means to be Indian’ is difficult to navigate, especially with ethnic identity becoming a popular idea in American culture overall.

Officially, Indian ethnicity is calculated in terms of blood quantum by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (the BIA). In his book, American Indian Politics, David Wilkins defines blood quantum as,

An administrative measure of Indian ancestry, whether defined by a tribal government, Congress, or various federal agencies, in which, for example, a person considered to be ‘full-blooded’ Navajo is alleged to be entirely descended from Navajo

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ancestors; one-half blood quantum typically denotes someone who has a non-Indian parent and a ‘full-blooded’ parent [and so on].14

Individuals who are part of a federally recognized tribe (card carrying) receive official benefits as an American Indian from the U.S. government. Recognition by the government officialdom leaves many American Indians, who are not card carrying, lacking in benefits and resource distribution offered by the BIA. This government recognition creates a double standard for Indian identity. A person of American Indian heritage can be recognized by community and family as Indian, but if that person cannot produce documents and certificates connecting his/her ancestral lineage to a recorded tribal enrollment list (of a federally recognized tribe), the U.S. government will not grant a BIA card, thus denying that person any assistance offered to Native people. Ironically, ‘official’ American Indian identity is shaped not by Indian people, but by the U.S. government. Class structures such as blood quantum and tribal registration were instituted by government regulatory agencies. Indian nations have adopted, and adapted, these regulations to ensure that bloodlines are recorded and correct. Identity issues are incredibly prevalent in the case of non-reservation, or urban, Indians. Many urban Indians have one foot in the non-Native society and one in the Indian society and are faced with the difficulty of how to remain Indian in terms of identity in a dominant non-Indian society. As a result, urban Indians have to cope with numerous identity issues.

American Indians are no longer living pre-dominantly on reservations, but in urban areas. Thus, American Indian identity must encompass those still living a reservation life, as well as urban Indians. Indians no longer resemble the stoic, breechcloth clad, whooping Indians of the old West and John Wayne westerns; instead Indians are classified as full-blood, mixed-blood or half-breeds, multiheritage, enrolled, unenrolled, recognized, or “I’m [insert your tribe here].”

Currently, the powwow acts as a unifier for American Indian identity. As a contemporary arena for expression of American Indian culture and religion, the powwow provides outlets on many levels. The solidifying of Indian-ness takes place through dancing, drumming, and ceremonial events as well as community, family, and social gathering. Within even secular dimensions, the foundations of the powwow are, in fact, spiritual traditions that emphasize unity. The powwow speaks to American Indians on many levels, as Michael Parfit demonstrates, “The reason for the growing popularity of powwows may be what many have called a resurgence of Indian identity.” In an intensive study on Southeastern tribal identity versus pan-Indian identity, Patricia Lerch and Susan Bullers conclude that powwows retain a strong presence in the Indian community because they foster a significant sense of

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cohesiveness and are just one way of expressing one’s ties to a community environment.\textsuperscript{18} Lerch and Bullers state, “The local powwow is so embedded in the individual’s self-identity as a symbol of the group that it has become reinterpreted as a local emblem of identity.”\textsuperscript{19} They indicate that it is not only social identity that is shaped by the powwow, but also one’s self-identity of what it means to be Indian. Powwows bring together friends and family that serve as a support network for Indians, as well as provide hint of sacred traditions.

With reference to the spiritual, investigators into the powwow must recognize that the academic binary opposition of sacred and secular is not always that simple. Scholars dealing with American Indian actions often overemphasize the idea of the sacred, or the spiritual. For example, the powwow is not a wholly sacred event, but it may have sacred undertones or powwow participants will conduct sacred rituals. However, many scholars either do not recognize any spiritual power within the powwow or try to overemphasize it, placing an Anglo construction upon an indigenous expression that has no dogmatically delineated space. Powwows employ what can be termed the situational sacred. The implementation of sacred action or continual connection to spirits is not continual, but often is utilized when the need arises (e.g. introducing a child to the arena for the first time, blessing, eagle feathers dropped). Prior to the advent of the pan-Indian gathering, individual tribal groups promoted a variety of religious actions. A result of the powwow is that the sacred

\textsuperscript{18} Patricia Barker Lerch and Susan Bullers, “Powwows as Identity Markers,” pp. 390-395.
\textsuperscript{19} Lerch and Bullers, “Powwows as Identity Markers.” p. 395.
actions are influencing pan-Indian identity; creating the idea that on one level these rituals are pan-tribal. As mentioned previously, powwows do retain a sense of tribal affiliation, which results in the variety of powwow experiences in different regions of the U.S. This tribal affiliation fosters sacred identity on an intra-tribal level, but because even tribally based powwows draw pan-Indian participation, sacred identity is transferred onto those participants. One example of this is anyone who enters the arena, particularly those in regalia. Throughout my participation in powwows, a person who enters the arena to dance must be in the ‘right mind-set.’ This means that the dancer should have good thoughts because within the blessed arena positive energy is shared with others. As a kind of insiders’ information, situational manifestations of the sacred, such as the example above, are embedded within the culture of the powwow and Indian identity. Powwow participants learn unspoken behaviors (situational sacred) from family and other participants. In this way, urban Indians and others with marginal identity are incorporated into the larger Indian community and traditions.

While the assimilation policies of the government in the early twentieth century failed, Indians have nonetheless become interwoven in the modern American society. However, there is a push by Indian people to retain sovereignty from the whole of society and resisting the forces of assimilation. The powwow is just one of the unique expressions utilized by American Indians. It is a community event, functioning as a family gathering and fun recreation, as well as an outlet for identity construction, particularly for those Indians having difficulty securing legal
recognition. Powwows are the invitation for those of marginal Indian identity as well as those of traditional backgrounds to regain and retain traditions. The constant communication of tradition with all Indians at a powwow fosters a sense of identity for Indians above what the larger American society prescribes.

Communication between cultures is illustrated in the hobbyist and new-age (non-Native majority) powwow movements. There is a disagreement over the appropriation of cultural institutions, but within the powwow these disagreements seem to be resolved. The use and misuse of identity and culture by such groups as the new agers, receive both criticism and support in the powwow community.

Michael Parfit, in his article “Powwow” for *National Geographic* magazine, notes, “Powwows are booming…a book that catalogs this year’s powwows lists 930. And this doesn’t take into account the many smaller powwows that occur throughout the year.”\(^{20}\) Powwows *are* booming, occurring all over the U.S. on any given weekend at the tribal and intertribal levels and offering a multiplicity of cultural benefits. Boye Ladd, a powwow dancer and former Indian Coordinator for the state of Wisconsin, also sees the outlet that powwows offer, observing, “A lot of people are coming back to our traditions. Powwow opens the door for them. One positive aspect of the powwow…is that it’s an entry point for Natives in search of their heritage and culture.”\(^{21}\) Parfit, who speaks from the position of non-Native journalist, seems to echo Ladd, adding, “Powwows today are far more than a salute to the past. They’re

\(^{20}\) Michael Parfit, “Powwow,” p. 94.

not shows. They’re not entertainment. Most Indians call them celebrations.” not only are the number of powwows in the U.S. growing, but also the purpose of a powwow is so dynamic in nature that it addresses many of the contemporary concerns of Indian people, as illustrated by Parfit and Ladd, above.

**Contest Powwows**

The development of the contemporary powwow has not been without problems. Over the past thirty years, the powwow has been an arena, a dynamic forum, for the transmission of tradition, religion, and culture of American Indians. Eventually, the powwow became highly recognizable, public entertainment for American people of all cultural descent. Today the powwow has been transformed by the pressures of economic struggle in America, evolving from ‘traditional’ style, or dancing to dance, to the ‘contest’ powwows in which dancers and drums compete for cash prizes. This does not seem ‘authentic’ to many non-Native observers. Michael Parfit observes,

> visitors to powwows are sometimes disappointed at the fancy sound systems, the paper numbers pinned on buckskin, the Indians in regalia using tape recorders. It doesn’t seem authentic. But as I watch a long Giveaway in honor of a teenager who died in a car crash, I realize that these Indians are not playing games about how it was. They’re trying to carry a long heritage right into the future. This is not how it was. This is how it is.  

The contest dance is an indication of a troubled future for the powwow as a transmitter of tradition. In an article about Boye Ladd (a championship dancer), Richard Peterson notes, “because of his overwhelming respect for Native veterans

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22 Michael Parfit, “Powwow,” p. 94.

23 Michael Parfit, “Powwow,” p. 105. Italics are the author’s.
and warriors, Ladd holds the original meaning of the powwow close to his heart. In those early days of powwow…only the men contested and the event was centered around the family, community, and honoring veterans.”

Contest powwows are a recent development in the history of the powwow, only appearing regularly approximately twenty-five years ago. Contest categories, called exhibitions, provide judges with the opportunity to view each dance style separately. Dancers compete for prizes in Men’s Traditional, Women’s Traditional, Men’s Fancy, Women’s Fancy Shawl, Men’s Grass Dance, Women’s Jingle Dress, and boy’s or girl’s versions of the adult styles. While the judges seek out personal style and well-constructed regalia, they are looking specifically at the footwork of the dancer falling with the beat of the music. A judge assembles a team of assistants to watch each exhibition. The team convenes at the end of the exhibition to discuss and decide which dancer will receive first, second, and third places. The head judge records the dancer’s names for the Emcee to announce when prizes are distributed, usually at the conclusion of the powwow.

A good dancer on the contest circuit can profit enough from their winnings to travel to other powwows and buy craft goods for their regalia. There are some dancers across the country who have perfected their styles so well that they are in a class of their own, championship powwow dancers who are well known at any powwow they attend. While contest powwows are funded by many sources, the major resource for contest tribal powwows is the tribe itself. In turn, a major resource for

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tribal funding is the casino and Indian-owned big business. Throughout the last ten years, non-Natives have thrust the latest Indian venture into the American economy to the forefront of the news media. The rapid growth of casino gambling on Indian reservations is big economic news in everything from hometown newspapers to the Associated Press. The Associated Press became interested in the casino boom and conducted a quality of life study dealing with casinos and Indian reservations, which are some of the poorest areas in the country and most dependent on government funding.\textsuperscript{25} If done right, the study will indicate the quality of life, in general, and in particular the quality of tradition as transmitted through the contemporary powwow.

According to the National Indian Gaming Association, tribal gaming is regulated in a three-tier process: first, by the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act which allows Indian nations to develop gaming regulations for tribal gaming; second, by the state in which the Indian nation is located; and third, by federal agencies developed to enforce laws established for Indian gaming, for example the National Indian Gaming Commission, the FBI, the Department of the Interior, and the IRS.\textsuperscript{26} The Indian Gaming Regulatory Act states that revenues must be used in five specific areas. Revenues must be used to fund tribal government operations or programs, provide for general welfare of tribal members, promote tribal development, donations to charitable organizations, or to help fund the operations of local government agencies.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{26} National Indian Gaming Association website; http://www.indiangaming.org, accessed on 11 March 2002, 7:56 p.m.
gaming operations promote economic independence for tribes and tribal members as well as promoting culture and tradition. An example comes out of Myers' interviews with members of Michigan casino-owning tribes, and cites one as saying,

That tribe [the Hannahville, MI tribe] don't [sic] pay per capita at all. Every dime they make in the casino is put back into the tribal operations. They have a gorgeous tribal center. They have a school system that would knock your socks off. They have an Olympic pool, indoor and outdoor. Every child has a laptop computer. They have a planetarium. They have it all. Twenty years from now that tribe [Hannahville, MI] will be light years ahead of this tribe [the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa].

Casino revenue, in many cases, goes directly to support the powwow. By building new powwow grounds, new sweat lodges, and funding tribal community college powwows and tribal powwows, casinos are sustaining Indian culture with a new economic independence from the government.

Casinos as big business have the economic ability to utilize the media, promoting their predominantly contest powwows to large audiences both Native and non-Native, thus communicating the spread of Indian tradition. Paul Pasquaretta analyzes the casino's influence on Indianness in his article “On the Indianness of Bingo,” saying,

...The 'casinoization' of American Indian reservations has precipitated debate on many levels, the most basic of that involve the nature of Indianness itself. ...By engaging dominant categories and structures (that is, Indianness, tribalism and capitalism) their descendants have cultivated opportunities to reclaim a measure of their Native inheritance.

So why would contest powwows pose such a problem, causing some Indians


to question the motivations behind dancing for cash prizes? One answer is the increasing rate at which powwows are becoming contest. For many Indians, especially those raised in urban environments, the powwow is the only exposure to traditional ways they receive. The construction of identity is fragile for any person, but when construction is drawn from a source as dynamic as the powwow, the framing of pan-Indian identity becomes more precarious. The advent of the contest dance poses a threat to the future of the tradition-based powwow, and therefore to Indianness in general. The exchange of traditional teachings for economic prizes may increase the loss of tribal powwow foundations and will eventually affect pan-Indian influences.

Gaming offers a viable solution to the economic struggles of Indian nations. An eclipsing of more altruistic motivations, such as sitting with elders to learn the craft of regalia making and hearing the stories of why dances have evolved to what they are today, is taking place through the casino-generated powwow. Boye Ladd, the former Native American Coordinator for the state of Wisconsin who traded his position in the governor’s office for powwow dancing, sees this as a problem. Ladd describes the powwow as very “patriotic, respectful and it celebrates [veterans] return.” He has noticed, however, that over the past decade the powwow circuit has changed, with footwork and dance styles becoming more generic. He critiques the contest powwow, saying, “Today the powwow has been taken over by the dollar and

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the casinos. Whatever happened to the beauty of it all? There are no intertribals, no relaxation; money has split our people.”  

Boyce Ladd echoes many of the elders with whom I have discussed this project. They have not stopped dancing, but do have reservations about the direction that the powwow is taking.

Another example of the dominance of contest powwows has occurred at Western Michigan University, in which I had personal experiences as the chairperson. In 2000, for the first time in thirteen years, Western Michigan University hosted a traditional dance. Known for a contest powwow that has $350 first place prize money and $500 first place drum money, many dancers questioned the absence of the contest dance and were upset that WMU was not offering prize money. A number of dancers actually left WMU, choosing to go to prize-bearing powwows.  

One of the largest powwows in the United States draws crowds with cash prizes. Michael Parfit, reporting for National Geographic, follows the Powwow Trail all the way to Hartford, Connecticut to see Schemitzun, the Mashantucket- Pequot-sponsored powwow. He cites dancers as saying, “‘Those dancers at Connecticut. With all that money, they’re going to pull out the moves!’ The tribe has invited 32 drum groups and hundreds of dancers to the Hartford Civic Center and will pay $2,500 for first prize in some events.”

The draw that contest dancing has for Indians is not unjustified economically; although Ladd’s strong observation that “money has split our people” is an aptly

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2. Personal experiences/ participant observations Annual Powwow at Western Michigan University, University Arena, Kalamazoo, Michigan April 5-6, 2001.
stated commentary on the uncertain future of the powwow. The powwow as a cultural and religious medium only recently developed, is still unfolding in American Indian life, and may be compromised by materialistic motivations. Reinforcing this idea, Meadows also witnessed Natives leaving a ceremonial to earn money at a powwow offering cash-prizes. He states, “...the increasing number of annual powwows, especially those containing dancing and singing contests, sometimes lure membership away from society ceremonials from the opportunity of cash prizes.” Within the powwow, the elements of economic gain and cultural expression come to a head. The final outcome has yet to be determined and requires further study beyond the scope of this thesis.

Conclusion

In conclusion, ‘what it means to be Indian’ raises many questions and has many answers. The multiple forces that shape pan-Indianism also shape an individual’s personal sense of Indianness. Casino revenues and government policies are just a few of the significant factors contributing to Indian identity and, in turn, the dynamic nature of the powwow. Identity remains an ever-changing social construction that is shaped through intra-tribal negotiations as well as political and economic forces. The powwow is the perfect arena for identity construction because it is a unique institution that functions for both pan-Indian and tribal understandings. Persons seeking to sustain a cultural connection, not necessarily on a tribal level, can

do so through a powwow. Indianness is expressed through intertribal drumming and
dancing, broadening the idea of ‘Indian’ beyond simply tribal affiliation.

The powwow is subject to these forces and is far from stagnant. Powwows
will continue to change, allowing for new scholarship and community observances to
occur. Pan-Indianism and powwows recently introduced to Indian culture have
received little scholarly attention. Brown and Toelken state,

Anthropologists and folklorists seem to have avoided the subject as a newer form of
expression that does not represent a pure strain of folk or ethnic traditions (an ironic opinion,
if it indeed persists, for the subject of ‘purity’ in tradition has not occupied the theoretical
musing of folklorists for some years now).\textsuperscript{15}

Mainly Native scholars, trying to communicate the identity issues that the
community is experiencing, are conducting the scholarship that is being published.
Veterans, especially, have had an influential presence in the powwow, as well as
other cultural events, influencing Indian identity. Organizations such as the pan-
Indian Vietnam Veterans Intertribal Association illustrate that veterans are a strong
presence in the formation of Indian identity and continue to inform non-Natives of the
strength of cultural institutions, such as the powwow.\textsuperscript{36} In the next chapter, I will
introduce questions and explanations as to why veterans have influenced the pan-
Indian movement as opposed to remaining influential only on the tribal level. The
veteran has a voice in two worlds, the non-Native military world and the pan-Indian

\textsuperscript{35} Brown and Toelken, “American Indian Powwow,” p. 46.
and Indian cultural world. I perceive that voice as powerful enough to warrant a
closer academic look.
CHAPTER IV

AMERICAN INDIAN VIETNAM VETERANS, IDENTITY, AND THE POWWOW

Introduction

American Indian Vietnam veterans are leading the powwow. Veterans, in general, have contributed to the structure of the contemporary powwow by serving as dance leaders as well as spiritual leaders. This chapter will discuss the history of Indian Vietnam veterans, as well as the notion of warrior identity and stereotypes. It will conclude with an exploration of the veteran leadership within the powwow and seeks to explain how and why Vietnam veterans, in particular, are strengthening and perpetuating the powwow.

Little scholarship exists on the American Indian participation in and reactions to the Vietnam War. Tom Holm (Cherokee/Creek), a University of Arizona professor and veteran of Vietnam has published numerous articles on this subject as well as a book, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls*. These will serve as my primary source of academic support. Initially, I was going to include personal interviews in this

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Chapter. I have decided that they are, and will be, substantial enough to warrant a project of their own. Instead, I will rely on the few Indian veteran memoirs and existing investigations for examples. Indian Vietnam veterans are important and deserving of scholarly exploration to communicate to the academic world the influences that Indian vets have had upon cultural institutions, as well as their unique reactions to the Vietnam War. Vietnam veterans have received little positive attention from scholars and the public alike, as compared to the recent popularity of the Navajo Code Talkers of World War II.  

In fact, Indian participation in European military endeavors began in 1680 with the Pueblo Revolt.  Indians have had an active role in all military operations since 1680. An article in the American Forces Press Service finds that “historically, Native Americans have the highest record of military service per capita when compared to other ethnic groups. Today, there are nearly 190,000… [Indian] military veterans, according to Department of Defense statistics.” During World War I, Indian regiments were used for patrol and scouting because it was thought that Indians were naturally suited for such duties. It was not until World War II that interest arose in recording American Indian assistance in defense of the U.S. This record was kept primarily by the U.S. media, which often “exploit[ed] the scout

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3 Consult Holm, Strong Hearts, pp. 77-128.
syndrome for propaganda purposes,” implying that all Indians were raised in the woods and, thus, natural trackers.6

World War II saw not only the Navajo Code Talkers, but also great policy changes influenced in part by the large number of Indians in the military. William Meadows states, “During World War II, over 25,000 Native Americans served in the United States Armed Forces along with several hundred women in the Wacs and Waves. As a whole, Native Americans enlisted at a rate of one and half times the number that were drafted...”7 Col. John D. LeHockey, of the Marine Corps, adds to Meadows statistics, saying, “More than 10 percent of the Native American population, or one—third of all able-bodied Indian men from 18 to 50 years of age saw service during World War II.”8 This high enlistment rate did not go unnoticed by the government. According to Lt. Commander Rod Hill [Department of Defense], “the War Department awarded two Medals of Honor, 51 Silver Stars, 34 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 47 Bronze Stars and 71 Air Medals to Native Americans during World War II.”9

The Korean War also saw disproportionate numbers of Indians enlisting.10 A large number of the over 25,000 Indian servicemen in WWII returned for duty in Korea.11 Meadows adds that among more recent wars, “numerous send-offs and

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6 Holm, “Warriors All;” pp. 9-10.
8 Williams, “Marine Creates;” p. 3.
10 Holm, Strong Hearts, p. 89.
powwows were held for incoming and outgoing servicemen and women during Operation Desert Storm.\textsuperscript{12}

The Vietnam War, however, was very different, particularly from other wars in the twentieth century. Negative reactions by American people to the war, the draft, and the returning veterans left no room for the celebrations that the returning World War II veterans received.\textsuperscript{13} Overall, America’s reaction to returning Vietnam vets was profoundly unsupportive. In an article from \textit{Time} magazine, July 1981, the lack of return celebrations, such as those found at the close of World War II, is discussed regarding “America’s longest, strangest war.”\textsuperscript{14} An example of the reception illustrates,

A trooper would head for the bar and order a beer. ‘You got ID?’ the bartender would demand. Well, it was the nation’s first teen-aged war. … And in a day or two, if the soldier stayed in uniform, a fellow American would as some stunning, stopping version of: ‘How many babies did you kill?’ For many Viet Nam veterans, the moment of return, that bleak homecoming, was the beginning of a long rage.\textsuperscript{15}

This reception was not uncommon for American Vietnam vets in general. Recently, a comprehensive study of the Vietnam veterans movement was published by Gerald Nicosia called \textit{Home to War}.\textsuperscript{16} Consult Nicosia for further studies on the veterans’ reception and the reactions to the War.

\textsuperscript{12} Meadows, “Remaining Veterans,” p. 412.
\textsuperscript{15} Morrow, “Forgotten Warriors,” p. 19.
American Indian Vietnam Veterans

Despite the feelings of the American public, American Indian communities reacted to their returning Vietnam soldiers in a positive way. Meadows’ exploration of military societies explains this difference, saying,

...Native American views and reactions of participation in Vietnam differed tremendously from those espoused by the larger American society. While American troops were often verbally and physically assaulted upon returning home, Native American veterans were honored, respected and praised by their home communities as warriors...17

Community receptions, including the powwow, have sustained Indian veterans and propelled them to the forefront of the culture. Due to the high proportion of Indian vets existing inside the Native communities, the powwow is a vital event for unifying the people. Holm’s research indicates, "There were over 42,000 American Indians who served in Vietnam between 1964 and 1973."18 In addition to this personal research, Holm contributed to the Working Group on American Indian Vietnam Era Veterans, commissioned by the Department of Veterans Affairs to conduct the largest survey of Indian vets, researching 170 individual veterans spanning 77 different tribal groups.19 Considering the high number of Indian vets (statistics indicate that 10 percent of all living Indians are vets), the lack of scholarship on American Indian Vietnam vets is appalling.20 Within the study, Holm

attributes this to two ideas: Indian scholars often focus on subjects other than veterans and Vietnam researchers see Indian participation in the war as “insignificant.” Thus, Indian vets faced adversity not only with regards to re-enculturation, but also with having a voice in the larger American veterans movement.

Another challenge facing returning Indian Vietnam vets was common among all vets: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD will only be addressed here briefly. In a short definition, Steven Silver says PTSD

Requires historical existence of a traumatic stressor, its re-experiencing through dreams, intrusive recollections or flashback phenomena, a numbing of responsiveness to or a withdrawal from the environment, and the existence of at least two other symptoms from a group including survivor guilt, startle reactions, sleep disturbances, memory or concentration problems, avoidance of reminders of the trauma, and an increase in symptom severity when exposed to those reminders.

Many American Indian Vietnam vets did not utilize the services offered by the Veterans Administration (VA) not only because the VA centers were mainly located in urban as opposed to rural areas, but because of the ‘culturally unfriendly’ practices of Anglo psychiatric techniques, when dealing with PTSD.

Silver also indicates, as a clinical case study, that the 1983 Vietnam Era Veterans Inter-Tribal Association powwow (Anadarko, Oklahoma) recognized a unique cultural effort for coping with PTSD and other ramifications of the war. He says,

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Attending were American Indian Vietnam War veterans from across the United States with a variety of tribal affiliations. Many of them had been raised within the environments of their tribal cultures but an informal survey indicated that an equal number had not. Interestingly, a large number had incorporated significant amounts of their tribal cultures and traditions into their lives, even when living in urban settings, since returning from the Vietnam War.25

The powwow focused respect on the Vietnam vets and advanced ideas of community veteran identity even for those with marginal Indian identity by placing value on each warrior’s experience.26 Even though significant time has elapsed since the end of the Vietnam War, these outlooks on the veteran are still perpetuated at every powwow, through the color guard and Veteran’s Song, as well as through the respect every veteran receives.

The Warrior Identity

A discussion of the Euro-American concept of the Indian ‘warrior’ is vital, before addressing the veteran’s particular importance within the powwow. From the Euro-American point of view, the Indian warrior often is a war-seeking male who acts unmercifully. This common opinion is wrong on many fronts. To begin, Indian warriors may be female, as well as male. Women are not exempt from warrior status. Many American Indian women have served in the military. One of the initiatives to honor those women is at Arlington National Cemetery. The Memorial Foundation states, “As of 1994, 1,509 Native American women…were serving in the military….

Thousands more have served in the military over time.\textsuperscript{27} I have found, however, that the available information on American Indian women veterans is even more limited than that on American Indian Vietnam veterans in general.

In addition to the reality of female vets, the general stereotype is that American Indians thrive on war and embrace the experience, mainly due to the Euro-American misconception that all Indians view war in a positive light.\textsuperscript{28} As Silver notes, Indians view “war... as a major disruption of the natural order of life and the universe.... Often the warriors are in need of special preparation for the ordeal of war, as well as cleansing and healing later.”\textsuperscript{29} Instead of the notion that Indians could go to war and then remain free and clear of emotional or mental ramifications, large numbers of American Indian Vietnam vets participated in specific tribal cleansing/healing ceremonies as well as the powwow. Veterans seek healing and within American Indian communities, that healing was found within the established culture. This sets American Indian Vietnam vets apart from veterans of all other cultures who often had to seek healing separate from culture. These ceremonies will be discussed further in the next section, but briefly, Holm relates an example in which a Menominee vet from Wisconsin presented an eagle feather to another veteran, thereby solidifying both veterans’ position within the community.\textsuperscript{30}


\textsuperscript{28} Silver, “Lessons,” p. 15.

\textsuperscript{29} Silver, “Lessons,” p. 15.

\textsuperscript{30} Holm, \textit{Strong Hearts}, p. 187.
Another stereotype confronting American Indians in the military occurs more while the person is serving in the armed forces than upon return home. This stereotype involves the nickname of ‘Chief,’ often assigned to the token Indian in a platoon. Leroy TeCube, a Jicarilla Apache infantryman in Vietnam, has chronicled his one-year experience in Vietnam from the American Indian point of view.\(^{31}\) In his memoir, TeCube discusses not only his combat experiences, but also the cultural influences he had before and after the war.\(^{32}\) As the only American Indian in his platoon, TeCube recalls a fellow GI nicknaming him ‘Chief,’ a result of both TeCube’s cultural background as well as the platoon-mate’s ability to only recall one historical Indian, the ‘chief’ Geronimo.\(^{33}\) In addition to the clichéd nicknames, Indians in combat were often asked to walk ‘point’ or serve as scouts because “Native Americans were endowed either by heredity or circumstances of birth with the ability to read their environments.”\(^{34}\) The ‘point man’ was typically in the most danger, being the first to trip mines and be sighted by enemy soldiers. A Navajo veteran related his view to Holm, saying he was the ‘point man’ frequently because “he was...stereotyped by the [Western] movies. Nicknamed ‘Chief’ right away. Non-Indians claimed Indians could see through trees and hear the unhearable.”\(^{35}\)

Aside from stereotypical notions of the Indian warrior, the historic tribally-based warrior tradition does exist. As Holm states, “warrior traditions abound” in a

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\(^{31}\) Leroy TeCube, *Year In Nam: A Native American Soldier’s Story*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

\(^{32}\) TeCube, *Year In Nam*, pp. 1-3, pp. 259-261.

\(^{33}\) TeCube, *Year In Nam*, pp. 22-23.

\(^{34}\) Holm, *Strong Hearts*, p. 151.
variety of tribal groups within the U.S.\textsuperscript{36} Traditional, pre-contact warfare occurred for a variety of reasons. However, war and the warrior are not inherent states of human nature for Indians. A number of different tribal histories regarding warfare demonstrate that war ceremonies are as important in Indian society as tribal identity, sacred rituals and beliefs. Holm finds,

Without warriors there could be no war power. That power, along with other ceremonies, customs, and powers, were the pillars on which a society was built. Remove one and the rest were weakened.\ldots [Tribes] utilized ceremonies to prepare, cleanse, and/or honor warriors. These ceremonies ranged from the simple to the complex.\ldots They were time-consuming, costly, and elaborate, yet tradition demanded that they be performed, if for no other reason than the maintenance of the tribe’s special relationship with the spirit world.\textsuperscript{37}

Contemporary motivations for entering military service are not exactly the same as the traditional explanations found above. A syncretism of modern military enlistment with a traditional view of warriors is occurring. American Indians are not enlisting in the military for specific reasons such as the devotion and defense of our nation. They are more focused on enlisting to defend the land, combined with the fact that their father/mother or other family member served previously. Enlistment then results from a sense of honor and duty to tribal tradition. One individual who participated in the Readjustment Counseling Service’s national survey of Indian veterans stated, “My people have always honored our treaties, even when the white’s haven’t. I went in because our treaties say that we’re allied to the U.S.”\textsuperscript{38} The traditional American Indian understanding of warrior motivations, combined with the American military ‘warrior’ propelled Vietnam era veterans into the leadership of


\textsuperscript{37} Holm, \textit{Strong Hearts}, p. 40.
Indian culture, namely the powwow. Socially, this may have been because the Vietnam war was extremely difficult for people to rationalize in terms of losing American soldiers and the end result (or lack thereof) of the war.

**Gourd Dance**

The Gourd dance is another contemporary arrival on the powwow circuit. Clyde Ellis suggests, “since its revival the Gourd Dance has become an extremely popular part of contemporary Native American culture and represents a particularly potent pan-Indian cultural revitalization movement.” The Gourd dance, however, is not found in Michigan, and even though this paper focuses on Michigan powwows, I am of the opinion that it is an important influence on pan-Indian powwows, as well as on American Indian veterans. I will therefore include a brief description of the dance below. The Gourd dance is mentioned in much of the prominent scholarship regarding veterans, and highlighted in the articles by Holm and Silver found in the *Report of the Working Group on American Indian Vietnam Era Veterans.*

The Gourd dance is found pre-dominantly in the Oklahoma area and usually takes place prior to the beginning of a powwow. In discussions with friends on the

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38 Holm, *Strong Hearts,* p. 118.
39 Clyde Ellis, “Truly Dancing Their own Way”: Modern Revival and Diffusion of the Gourd Dance,” *American Indian Quarterly* (W1990), pp. 19-33. Ellis and I disagree when it comes to his theoretical foundations, in that any Indian cultural movement can be considered revitalization and is not limited to recent modifications to Indian activity, as Fixico points out earlier in this paper. To employ a theorist such as Anthony F.C. Wallace, who concretized the revitalization idea as pertaining to American Indians, implies inadequate research and a limited outlook on Indian culture and religion. See Anthony F. C. Wallace, “Revitalization Movements: Some Theoretical Considerations,” *American Anthropologist* (1956): 264-281.
powwow circuit, I have discovered that the Gourd dance does occur, on occasion, as far north as powwows in Indiana. It has emerged primarily from the Kiowa traditions, in particular from three groups, the Black Legs, Gourd Clan, and Ohomo.41

The Gourd dance, as pertaining to identity, is part of the larger network of southern Plains military societies explored by William Meadows. He recognizes, “military societies are an integral part of maintaining a distinct ethnic identity in order to continue to preserve the distinct relationship that individual tribes have as sovereign entities with the United States government.”42 Gourd dances serve multiple purposes, like the powwow, but do have a primary importance for veterans. The Gourd dance evolved from “traditional Kiowa forms of honoring veterans and the views associated with their lengthy pre-reservation military history…contemporary military service continues largely unchanged from earlier traditional forms.”43

Gourd dancers utilize a bobbing method of dance, carry gourd-like rattles for which the dance is named, and wear red and blue robes or blankets. The red side of the blanket is worn on the left, had the veteran actually seen combat.44 Once only a men’s warrior society, the gourd dance is often viewed as a veteran’s ceremonial and often precedes the beginning of a powwow.45 Steven Silver indicates it is still

42Meadows, “Remaining Veterans,” p. 430.
primarily a men’s society, although women are participants and he describes his experience at the Vietnam Era-Veteran’s Intertribal Association powwow,

The first major indication of the degree of family and community involvement in these ceremonies was demonstrated during the gourd dances. Vietnam veterans and veterans of other wars and eras of service formed an inner circle, slowly approaching the drum and then withdrawing together. In an outer circle were the women relatives and supporters of the men... It was noteworthy that at no time in the many hours of gourd dancing did the men ever dance alone.\textsuperscript{16}

The Gourd dance is not only a recent pan-Indian initiative; it serves as a coping mechanism for the stresses of military service and a reintroduction into society. Cultural invigoration with particular regard to warriors/veterans is the focus of this brief introduction to the Gourd dance. Although not occurring in Michigan, the Gourd dance represents a strong pan-Indian veterans society that is becoming inextricably linked with the modern powwow.

Leadership in the Powwow

Indian identity is being shaped, within the powwow, by what may seem like an unlikely source to non-Natives: the veteran. It is my conclusion that because veterans are faced with many identity issues themselves, involving re-integration into the society after experiencing combat and military life (if non-combat), they provide tacit leadership with regard to American Indian identity. Veterans are the spiritual and cultural leadership of a powwow. The traditional ideas of becoming a warrior endow the veteran with the ability to tap spiritual power that many Indians do not experience

personally. The spiritual power is available to every warrior, but they have to choose the good ‘Red Road,’ or traditional lifeways, to access that power. This is not to say veterans have to revert to pre-reservation lifestyles, many veterans are urban dwellers, but veterans have to choose a committed to culture and spiritual preservation.

A number of different veterans’ ceremonies specific to tribal groups exist. The Cherokee ‘Going to the Water’ ceremony, the Navajo ‘Enemy Way’ and ‘Blessing Way’ ceremonies, are a few, as well as general prayer meetings and special dances that exist pan-tribally. These ceremonies are designed to incorporate the future soldier or returning veteran into the spiritual society. Especially with regard to returning veterans, the ceremonies provide re-introduction to the Indian community and act as a psychological purifier for the vet who has experienced combat. This is not to say that all psychological ailments are ‘cured’ or erased by these ceremonies. Instead, the veteran is reassured on cultural, spiritual, and communal levels. This reassurance also takes place in the powwow. Leadership of a powwow, taking on the role of head veteran, is no small task, as Chapter one indicated. Many powwows since Vietnam have focused on celebration of the veteran.

These veterans’ powwows served more than the overall community. By participating in the powwow, the individual Indian veteran had a ceremonial re-introduction to American Indian society. Upon return from the Vietnam War, Holm’s study explains,

The reasons underlying [the] positive outlook [of American Indian vets] are somewhat complex but basically rooted in individual tribal cultures. Several respondents
stated they had taken part in tribal ceremonies designed either to purify or honor returning warriors. Information gleaned from elders of various tribes suggests that in the past many Indian groups in this country engaged in distinct, separate rituals to celebrate the activities of war and peace.47

Many Indian nations in the United States, including the Three Fires tribes, have blended military service into the powwow, occasionally recounting war stories before the beginning.48 Holm supports this observation, saying, “At powwows, for example, if a dancer drops an eagle feather, it can only be retrieved by a warrior who is accompanied by a chorus singing an appropriate honor song.”49

Tara Browner recorded an interview with George Martin (Ojibwe), a frequent Head Veteran dancer at Michigan powwows and veteran of the Korean War. Browner captures the voice of a vet describing his role:

Some head veterans who are at powwows are not combat veterans and some are combat veterans. And the staff that we carry is very old. It is the oldest flag that we know of. And a long time ago, these veterans, these warriors that carried these staffs into battle were the first to go. The first one to meet the enemy with that staff and to bring that staff back again to have some strong, strong medicine [sic]. When the combat veteran carries that staff into the arena, he still has that medicine. No pictures should be taken...[because of the medicine]. And to carry it, to lead our people into an arena for a powwow, they still have that medicine, with a sacredness...50

The medicine that he speaks of allows veterans, and veterans alone, to connect the powwow community with the spiritual, sacred powers.

Victoria Sanchez, in her study of Ohio powwows, illustrates the political nature of the flags entering the arena, as they are also directly tied to veterans, saying,

The American flag’s presence at powwows is an equally pointed reference to the fact that American Indians and Americans fought as brothers against America’s enemies in WWI, WWII, Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm, and other conflicts, despite considerable racism and discrimination at home. ...the warriors’ flag represents all warriors who have fallen in all

48 Three Fires refers to the prominent Michigan tribes, Ojibwe, Odawa and Potawatomi.
49 Holm, “Culture,” p. 246.
wars and is a very pointed reference to the number of American Indian people who fell while fighting against European invaders.51

At every powwow, the flags are flown, and eagle staffs posted. This is the most poignant display of support for veterans, outside of a permanent memorial. It is uniquely American Indian, for how often do non-Native Americans, as a community, appreciate their veterans? Memorial Day and the Fourth of July are the two most prominent holidays to celebrate service to the U.S., but even these holidays have become ‘picnic’ days or days off from a job. Flag Day is no longer even a dominant holiday in American culture. American Indians have distinctively instituted a regular celebration for the pillars of their society, the veterans.

Conclusion

American Indian veterans are numerous. What is more important is that large numbers of those veterans who are participating in their culture as vets are honored as such. They have sustained the warrior role, modifying it to syncretize both traditional, tribal values and American military actions. This distinctive display of veteran identity provides the powwow community with an example of how to foster their own sense of uniquely Indian identity. The powwow community is strengthened with regard to identity because the veteran provides an example: veterans have gone to war, seen combat in many cases, viewed death which in turn cultivates an appreciation for life, returned home, been re-acculturated to American Indian communities, and have taken on the role of leadership in the most contemporary

51 Victoria E. Sanchez, “Intertribal Dance and Cross Cultural Communication: Traditional Powwows
display of American Indian traditions, the powwow. Some of the veterans have struggled with the re-introduction to community, and have grappled with alcohol, drugs, PTSD, and alienation. Psychologically, the powwow and other ceremonial activities support American Indian vets. Respect from community members facilitates the healing process for vets, reminding them that assistance exists in the form of community support. Veterans are not alone in their healing processes, and it is through the powwow that the community displays their support to Indian veterans.

The non-Native stereotype of the warrior has not assisted the transition for American Indian veterans. These experiences illustrate to the community how difficult it is to remain strong through cultural adversity.

The powwow evolved to be the inter-tribal expression of community, identity, family, and tradition. The struggle of the American Indian veteran parallels the struggle of Indian culture across the U.S. The veteran allows the perpetuation of powwow culture because of the spiritual power bestowed to only warriors. The powwow allows the pan-Indian kinship network to welcome and sustain the Vietnam veterans return to the community.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study sought to demonstrate that the powwow is an arena for the maintenance of culture and the development of identity in American Indian communities. Pan-Indian identity, tribal identity, and the powwow are all growing together. This growth is indicative of the dynamism and adaptiveness of contemporary American Indian culture.

Chapter two detailed the history and intricate workings of the typical powwow. Implicit in this description is the sacred and secular activity that permeates powwow actions. The powwow has only recently developed in the history of Indian culture, but is a strong arena for identity negotiation as well as cultural solidification.

Chapter three charted the development of contemporary American Indian identity. The many forces, inside and outside of Indian culture, that influence Indianness were described, especially government policy. American Indian identities have been forged within different types of Indian communities, such as among reservation and non-reservation urban Indians, and on regional (tribal) and nation (pan-Indian) levels. I sought to demonstrate that the contemporary powwow is the place where these various identities come together, are expressed, and are reinforced. I also posit that contest powwows, although not wholly negative, are viewed by many as a potential threat to growing pan-Indian affiliation and tribal identity.
The final chapter introduced the Indian veteran, particularly the Vietnam vet, as a leader in the identity construction that takes place at powwows. As argued in this chapter, veterans are a unique resource to Indian culture because their role in identity formation is two-fold. First, as soldiers, they have created an identity that transcends tribal boundaries. Second, within Indian communities, veterans already enjoy a special status because of traditional warrior philosophies. In the powwow, both these identities are fused and expressed in powerful ways, and this in turn justifies the prominent leadership role they play in the powwow. Ultimately, the importance of this study lies in the fact that powwows represent the ability of American Indian culture to employ tools of resistance and adaptation for survival. Powwows may be considered resistance to colonization and to the forces of cultural homogenization inherent in modern American culture. Such actions are resistant because they individualize and separate American Indian culture from the larger American society.

The powwow as a syncretic social construction that incorporates traditionalism, modernism, economic stability, and non-Native society is especially powerful in this regard. Traditionalism is the uniquely Indian worldview that permeates powwows. Traditional ideas become transformed by modern realities, such as innovative craftmaking, weekend dances accommodating work schedules, and sound systems for better broadcast. The traders selling goods, as well as contest dances, signal that the powwow is concerned with the economic stability of Indian people. Finally, influences such as government labels, hobbyists, and non-Native interest have also informed the cultural construction of powwows and Indian identity.
In academia, categories like traditional and modern are often used to perpetuate ideas of cultural stagnation when dealing with American Indians. However, when dealing with the powwow, it becomes obvious that both categories are appropriate, and that the charge of stagnation definitely is not.

Veterans, too, represent the dynamic blending of traditional and modern. Through an *anishinaabe* worldview, for example, a veteran and a warrior are virtually synonymous, blending both traditional and modern identities. Contemporary veterans have had challenges to their personal identity structure as a result of service experiences, in which the majority of service people are non-Native, and they have faced the problems of re-introduction to Indian communities after their service experience. For this reason, the veteran, whose identity is the result of the blending of traditional and modern elements, is an important force in the continued development of tribal identity as well the larger category of Indian. This is especially true through their leadership of the powwow.

In conclusion, powwows reflect the identity struggles of both the Indian people and Indian veterans. Drawing on shared experiences, powwow participants can work together, as a culture, to forge a common Indian identity (pan-Indianism) and reinforce local identities.
Appendix A

Layout of Dance Arena
Powwow arena as understood by participants.

Depiction of powwow dance arena.
Appendix B

Powwow Regalia
Male Traditional Dancer

Men's Fancy Dancer
Women’s Jingle Dress Dancers

Women’s Traditional Cloth Dancer
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