

# **Women's Cloth Dance: An Exploration of Powwow Music within the Tribal Community**

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Joint Conference of the AMS-Southwest Chapter & SEM-Southern Plains Chapter

Spring 2014

The University of Texas at Austin

## **Introduction**

Powwow music is an excellent example of music, culture, and community coming together as it perpetuates a sense of Native identity. The Intertribal Powwow is a Native American celebration where music, dance and ethnological aspects are equally important<sup>1</sup>. Even though anthropological and ethnochoreological issues are discussed, this paper will mainly focus on musical issues. The confluence of rhythm, pitch, and musical style of Powwow repertoire is markedly different from Western singing.

This paper will present my musical transcription of a Women's Cloth Dance using a modified Western notation system. I will then offer an analysis of the transcription in terms of the song's musical system and structure, and will explain the methodology used for it. I will present my findings regarding the paradigmatic analysis of this song which uses anhemitonic pentatonic scale and follows the form ABB.

This paper will begin with a historical background of Native Americans in the Plains along with a rapid overview of the first researchers of Native American music. I will then explore, in depth, the meaning of a Powwow: its spiritual aspect; the members; the musical styles and stereotypes; the repertoire; the learning process; the gender aspects; and the differences between Northern and Southern styles. I will discuss the sequence of events that occur at a Powwow and will focus on the Women's Cloth Dance, including contextual and historical information about the regalia.

## **Historical background**

Native Americans historically have had to face massive invasions of Europeans bent on claiming Native lands as their own. The only options for the indigenous peoples of the Americas were to disappear or to submit to the invaders. Century after century, the conquest of the Europeans despoiled them of their territories and rights and destroyed almost all their culture<sup>2</sup>. Native Americans were deported from their homelands in eastern North America to Oklahoma beginning in the 1830s. The Trail of Tears era is associated with the deportation of five tribes (Cherokee, Choctaw<sup>3</sup>, Creek, Seminole, and Chickasaw) from the Southeastern United States to Indian Territory<sup>4</sup>, which later became the State of Oklahoma. These groups of people were forced to repress their cultures in order to survive, so important parts of their culture disappeared.

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<sup>1</sup> Browner, Tara. *Heartbeat of the People: Music and Dance of the Northern Pow-Wow*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Debo, Angie. *Histoire des Indiens des Etats-Unis*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1994, p.158.

<sup>3</sup> Foley, Hugh W. Jr. *Oklahoma Music Guide*. Stillwater: New Forum Press, 2013, p.137.

<sup>4</sup> Conlon, Paula J. "From Powwow to Stomp Dance: Parallel Dance Traditions in Oklahoma." In *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Ethnicity*, Anthony Shay (Ed.), NY: Oxford University Press, forthcoming, p.1.

Native Americans vigorously resisted the destruction of their traditions, and gathered in 1876 for their first Powwow in Oklahoma to display and enjoy their own particular cultures. The systematic attempt to destroy Native American culture diminished greatly in 1934 with the “Indian Reorganization Act<sup>5</sup>.” The Powwow progressively became a symbol of solidarity among Native American peoples.

The Intertribal Powwow started in Oklahoma toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when tribes from across the United States were forcibly removed to what was then called Indian Territory. The contemporary generation has not given up affirming their identity and saving their songs and dances. The Powwow is a perfect example as it is a ceremony half-way through traditional and evolutionary.

### **First researchers**

Researchers of Native American culture worked intensively to preserve Native American music and dances. The 1840s gave birth to American anthropology with two major events: the creation of the Smithsonian Institution and the first field study of the Iroquois tribe in the state of New York organized by L.H. Morgan. Jesse Walter Fewkes and Frances Densmore<sup>6</sup> created recordings on early wax cylinders. Fewkes was an American anthropologist, specialist of the Zuni tribe in Maine and the first to use the phonograph for his research in 1889.

Subsequent to the ethnocide of Native Americans, collecting information on Native American cultures, or more specifically on music, has sometimes been difficult for non-Native people. As a consequence of the destructive behavior of white people towards Native American cultures, only a small amount of traditions remain, and Native Americans fear today that by unveiling their cultures to outsiders, they will transform it, damage it and finally make it disappear.

### **What is the Powwow?**

Powwows take place all over the US and are generally free. They can be held indoors or outdoors and can last from an evening to several days. They can be smaller events with only one tribe or major ones bringing together dozens of tribes. Participants are from various origins, ages and geographical locations. Powwows are a chance for Native American artists to exhibit and sell their arts and crafts. Traditional Indian foods, such as Indian tacos, are sold as well.

Powwows are an opportunity for friends and families to gather and spend quality time together. They are an excellent example of culture, community, and music coming together to perpetuate a sense of Native identity. The main themes of a Powwow today are the friendship and the unity between tribes<sup>7</sup>. The Powwows are an opportunity for Native Americans to express and embrace their identities and to preserve their cultures, and more particularly, musical practices.

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<sup>5</sup> Conlon, Paula, and Paul McKenzie-Jones. *Red Power: American Indian Activism through Powwow Music and Dance*. Edited by Eunice Rojas and Lindsay Michie Eades. *The Role of Music in Multicultural Activism*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, forthcoming, p.11.

<sup>6</sup> Hofmann, Charles. *Frances Densmore and American Indian Music: A Memorial Volume*. New York: Museum of the American Indian Heye Foundation, 1968.

<sup>7</sup> Roberts, Chris. *People of the Circle*. Missoula, MT, Meadowlark publishing Company, 1998, p.24.

## **Sacred but not religious**

There are two types of celebrations: the recreational with a secular aspect and the religious which implies sacred and divine elements. The Powwow is an entertainment event, not a religious event, although it includes sacred prayers and blessings. The dance circle is a place where spiritual transformation is not only possible but recommended. The dancers and the drum are part of the circle, and the drum is considered sacred. The dance circle is a space that is sanctified by purification rituals and by prayers. The movements of the dancers are harmonious and representative of creation<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, we can say that the Powwow is a ritual because some of its actions tend towards capturing and orienting a power. The ritual is fundamentally conservative and its loss would contribute to the end of the revivalism of identity.

## **Hierarchical system: the active members of a Powwow**

The committee of a Powwow is the group of people in charge of the organization of the Powwow from beginning to end: location, date, selection of the participants, prizes and cleaning after the event. However, members of the community do not hesitate to give their support. The satisfaction of the visitors is a key element to the popularity, the reputation, and the permanence of a Powwow.

The Master of Ceremony is the most important position. As a presenter he has to know all the specificities of a Powwow and the regional characteristics<sup>9</sup>. His commentaries must be relevant, his explanations clear and he must possess a good sense of humor. In case of problems, he will deal with the issue in a diplomatic way. The Arena Director is in charge of everything happening in the dance arena. For example, he is the one who places the dancers for the Grand Entry. The princesses at Powwows are young ambassadors of their tribes. They are between 15 to 20 years old and are chosen based on their knowledge of their traditional cultures, their academic achievements and their involvements within the communities. Princesses have special privileges such as being prominently placed during the Grand Entry. They have to give a welcoming speech to all the participants.

## **Event schedule**

Powwows begin with the Grand Entry, which is a parade similar to a slow warrior dance where all the dance participants go into the arena<sup>10</sup>. Tribal flags are carried in by honored soldiers and veterans. Flag songs are followed by an incantation, which is a prayer for a successful Powwow. Then a committee welcomes the participants and introduces the leaders.

The Grand Entry is usually followed by one or more Powwow social dance songs that are non-competitive, such as a Round dance around the outskirts of the circle or an Intertribal dance. Then the dance competition can start. Categories include Grass Dance, Jingle Dress, Fancy Shawl, Fancy Dance, Southern Cloth, and Buckskin. Intertribal dances and demonstration dances are interspersed between dance competitions. The event often ends with a closing prayer.

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<sup>8</sup> Burton, Bryan. *Moving within the Circle*. Danbury, CT: World Music Press, 1993, p.17.

<sup>9</sup> Roberts, Chris. *People of the Circle*. Missoula, MT, Meadowlark publishing Company, 1998, p.30.

<sup>10</sup> Scales, Christopher. "Unity and Diversity in North American Indian Powwows" in *Musiques, une encyclopedie pour le XXIe siècle*, Jean-Jacques Nattiez (general editor). Paris: Actes Sud/Cite de La Musique, 2005, p. 1073.

## **Music styles and stereotypes**

Aside from Alaska, the United States can be divided into 6 geographical regions where tribes and societies are distinguished with different musical styles: Eastern Woodlands; Plains; Great Basin and Plateau; North-West Coast; South-West; and California. Therefore, it is incorrect to think of Native American music as a unique style when it comprises a whole range of styles.

It is common to confuse Native American music with music from Hollywood movies where composers created a stereotypical sound based on the style of the Plains tribes. They did not consider regional or tribal authenticity even though the real music is far more complex and interesting.

## **Repertoire**

The Head Singer selects the appropriate repertoire during the Powwow. A singer who is well-regarded is usually encouraged and supported by others to become the Head Singer. If a Powwow is far away from his home town, a Head Singer will surround himself with singers who are the most familiar with his style. The Host Drum refers to the main drum group. Most of the musicians understand the Native American language in which they sing. They usually are from the same area or from the same tribe and have been singing together for years.

New songs are regularly composed. Leonard Cozad<sup>11</sup> is one of the most famous composers of Powwow songs. A good group knows how to perform a large repertoire. The music of the Plains can be classified into three categories: songs with syllables, songs composed with words and songs combining those two technics. The syllables and their disposition stay the same after their first public presentation, just like a song will keep its lyrics and its order after being performed in a public setting. Usually the melody goes from high to low pitches. Each group has its own style and the melody can be adjusted to the stylistic preference of the group.

## **Transmission of knowledge**

The Powwow comes from oral tradition so people go through a kinesthetic learning process. There is no formal Western training for this music. Most singers start their career in their family at around the ages of seven to ten. First they focus only on beating the drum while listening to the songs. Later on, they join the singers<sup>12</sup>.

## **Drum, singers and gender**

The quality of the music is a key factor to the success of a Powwow. The drum means the instrument itself but also the group of musicians who play the drum<sup>13</sup>. There are generally between five to ten participants and they sing at the same time as the drumming. The Powwow world has been influenced by the feminist movement, especially in the northern Plains where the men sing in a high register. At southern Powwows, women sing standing behind seated men around a drum. At northern Powwows, not only can women sometimes be seated around the

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<sup>11</sup> Ellis, Clyde. *A dancing people: Powwow Culture on the Southern Plains*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003, p.117.

<sup>12</sup> Hofmann, Johanna. "The drum of the North-American pow-pow, heartbeat of a people and rhythm of its spirituality" in *Les cahiers de musique traditionnelle, numero 10*. Geneve: Georg Editeur/ Ateliers d'ethnomusicologie, 1997, p.250.

<sup>13</sup> Zotigh, Dennis. *Moving History: Evolution of the Powwow*. Oklahoma City: The Center of American City, 1991, p.31.

drum, but they can also be lead singers<sup>14</sup>. The southern Plains are more conservative than the northern Plains. However, musical practices should not be viewed as sexist but as gendered. Males and females are viewed as equal but not similar. Each role is seen as honorable and females are treated and considered with the upmost respect.

## **Dances**

The main activity of a Powwow is dancing and performing music. There are two types of Powwows: the traditional Powwow, and the Powwow with competitions<sup>15</sup>. Traditional Powwows usually have a smaller budget and focus more on local traditions and tribal businesses. Powwows with competitions follow a stricter structure as far as organization, dance categories, and timing. They require careful organization and significant financial involvement as the prizes are in cash<sup>16</sup>. The meanings of the dances and of the outfits are linked to their origins. A traditional dance outfit is called regalia. Where the Powwows have been performed for a long time, the regalia are very sophisticated. Consequently, where the Powwow is more recent, the regalia are more modest and inspired by basic models. As soon as dancers advance in their skills, they do not hesitate to add to their regalia some elements that are typical of their tribes in order to proudly state their identities<sup>17</sup>. An expert can identify the tribe of dancers just by looking at their outfits. If the outfits have evolved, the dances have too. The popularity of dances changes as well. Some dances, like the Jingle Dress, were very popular in the 1920s and almost disappeared in the 1960s but are now popular once more.

## **Northern and Southern styles**

The songs are always heterophonic, the pulse is isochronic, and is performed slightly before the drumbeat<sup>18</sup>. The Powwows from the southern Plains and the ones from the northern Plains are slightly different in their performance styles. Singers have to have a clear and loud voice. The Northern style is sung at a higher pitch with more use of hard drum beats than the lower pitched singing and more regulated hard drum beats of the Southern style. A well-organized Powwow should include singers from the northern Plains and from the southern Plains to fit both types of dances.

## **Women's Cloth Dance**

The Cloth Dance is a woman's dance that originated from the Plains. The outfit features a dress, a shawl on the arm, a buckskin bag and fan, some leggings and beaded moccasins. The dresses for this dance were traditionally decorated with wapiti teeth, coins, Cori shells, ribbons, and flowers made out of pearls. The flower tradition comes from French merchants selling floral embroidery in the Great Lakes and from states that bordered Canada. Since Native American women did not know how to embroider, they reproduced the floral motifs with pearls and quills<sup>19</sup>. The dress varies according to the tribe.

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<sup>14</sup> Roberts, Chris. *People of the Circle*. Missoula, MT, Meadowlark publishing Company, 1998, p.114.

<sup>15</sup> Conlon, Paula J. "From Powwow to Stomp Dance: Parallel Dance Traditions in Oklahoma." In *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Ethnicity*, Anthony Shay (Ed.), NY: Oxford University Press, forthcoming, p.12.

<sup>16</sup> Scales, Christopher. "Unity and Diversity in North American Indian Powwows," in *Musiques, une encyclopedie pour le XXIe siècle*, Jean-Jacques Nattiez (general editor). Paris: Actes Sud/Cite de La Musique, 2005, p. 1075

<sup>17</sup> Roberts, Chris. *People of the Circle*. Missoula, MT, Meadowlark publishing Company, 1998, p. 31.

<sup>18</sup> White, Julia. *The Pow Wow Trail*. Summertown, TN: Book Publishing Company, 1996, p.27.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

This dance is a traditional women's competition dance at Powwows that is the equivalent of the men's Straight dance. The Women's Cloth dance displays elegance and majesty rather than quick movements. The gentle swinging and the slow walking follow the drum beats. There are two versions of this dance: a southern and a northern version.

### **Women's cloth song**

Here is my musical transcription of a Northern style Powwow song sung by the Powwow drum group, "Wild Horse."<sup>20</sup>

The lead singer is the person who decides the number of times each verse will be sung, and is the first person to lead a song. The first verse of a song is called a push-up and is sung by the lead singer only. The repetition of BC is called 'second slide.' This repetition is emphasized by an Honor Beat, a strong loud beat on the drum, also called check beat or hard beat. Very specific musicians play them by beating closer to the center of the drum and by augmenting the volume while others diminish theirs. These drumbeats are usually played by following the four cardinal points. The first honor beat is very loud and the following honor beats are a bit softer. The musicians try to diversify the tempo and the intensity of each verse to give them a more dramatic dynamic. It can also be a clue for the rest of the musicians that the general dynamic is about to change.

### **Methodology**

1) To determine the musical system used in this Powwow song, we first need to write the initial and final pitches of the piece and the initial and final pitches of the various phrases. This exercise allows us to have a precise idea of hierarchy between degrees without having a unique polar.

Initial pitch: A

Final pitch: C#

Solo: A-B

First phrase: A-C#

Second phrase: A-C#

Third phrase: G#-C#

2) Then we need to write down all the pitches in order from lowest to highest register and define the three notes that are close together (the standard do-re mi)

G#-B-C#-E-F#-G#-A-B-C#-E-A.

The three notes are A-B-C#, indicating that we are in an anhemitonic pentatonic system.

3) To choose a "dominant" aspect to this pentatonicism, we should count the occurrence of each pitch in eighth note values.

G#=2          A=11, 5

B=4, 5          F#=9, 5

C#=22, 5      E=13, 5

This method of counting allows us to determine that the reference pitch is C# and that G# is a less important pitch.

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<sup>20</sup> Powwow Music, *Gathering of Nations Pow Wow*, recorded at the Annual Gathering of Nations Pow Wow in New Mexico by various drum groups, May 1999, The Soar Corporation, UPC 722871120020, 2000, compact disc.

4) The writing of the musical phrase in a paradigmatic way allows us to clearly see the structure of the form. In conclusion, this dance uses anhemitonic pentatonism: aspect of third in A. By looking at the range we notice that the pitches used in phrase A are similar to the ones used in A,' and that phrase B is similar to phrase C. The intervals used successively indicate that overall the melodic line is linear except for the second half of B. The most important intervals are the second followed by the third. The piece finishes with a C# which is the third. The form of the piece is AA'BCBC.

|             |   |                 |
|-------------|---|-----------------|
| Aspect I:   | 1 | do re mi sol la |
| Aspect III: | 2 | re mi sol la do |
| Aspect V    | 3 | mi sol la do re |
| Aspect II   | 4 | sol la do re mi |
| Aspect IV:  | 5 | la do re mi sol |

### **Conclusion**

The confluence of rhythm, pitch, and musical style of Powwow repertoire is evidently different from Western singing. The methodology offered today is applicable for any Powwow song. The transcriptions and the analysis of multiple songs indicate very similar musical features and I can state that they systematically feature anhemitonic pentatonism with a descending melodic line. It would be interesting to apply this methodology to other oral traditions using pentatonic scales to determine if there are structural elements comparable to Powwow songs.

The Women's Cloth Dance allows us to better understand the culture behind Powwow celebrations. Each dance has its own symbolism that ties the culture and the community together by placing it in its cultural context. The Powwows are transmitted by oral tradition and some songs are subject to a variation in popularity. Also, tradition evolves and it would be fascinating to keep today's transcriptions and to compare them to performances a few decades from now.

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