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College of Arts and Sciences Dancing Towards Pan-Indianism: The Development of the Grass Dance and Northern Traditional Dance in Native American Culture

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DANCING TOWARDS PAN-INDIANISM:  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE GRASS DANCE  
AND NORTHERN TRADITIONAL DANCE IN  
NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURE  

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ABSTRACT

Many of the dance styles found at modern Native American powwows have their roots within the Warrior Society dances that existed hundreds of years ago. Over time, the dance styles have changed and evolved. Dances have been shared between distinct ethnic groups as Native American tribes have adopted a more intertribal or pan-Indian identity. By comparing elements of the dance styles, including dance steps and accompanying songs, and more specifically, the outfits and materials used in the construction of the outfits, it is possible to track the intertribal movement of a dance style. An example of this process of change is seen in the Grass Dance, as it spread from tribe to tribe, beginning on the American Plains and moving outward. This thesis will examine the history of the dance outfits associated with the Men’s Northern Traditional Dance and the Grass Dance. Both of these modern styles of dances derive from the same original Warrior Society dance, the Pawnee Iruska Society dance. During the Reservation Period, tribes began to share dances, and as the dances passed from group to group, their meanings were reinterpreted. These changes are reflected in the evolution of the dance outfits. The pan-Indian movement today is best represented by the contemporary Native American powwow, where the shared history of the dances links previously distinct tribal groups in an emerging pan-Indian ethnicity.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

The modern Native American powwow exists as a physical representation of a cultural identity shared by Native American groups throughout the continent, an identity that has been adopted as a means of unifying tribes in their struggle for cultural sovereignty, a sovereignty that the United States government has been trying to take away for hundreds of years. Native American dancing strengthens the bonds within and between Native American tribes every time dancing is performed. The dances that exist today have changed over time, but for many, their origin is still known and recounted. Some of the most popular dances began in the War Dance Societies (discussed below) that existed hundreds of years ago, and although stylistic attributes and the meanings associated with the dances have changed, the same purpose is served. Native American dancing serves as a vehicle of cultural unification; Royce (1977:17-18) states that dance is “one aspect of human behavior inextricably bound up with all those aspects that make up the unity we call culture.” Each time Native Americans dance, they are honoring what is important within their culture, and what made their culture strong, especially their ancestors. Native American dancing does much more than celebrate the present. With each step a dancer takes, or each time a singer hits the drum, they are honoring their past. Simultaneously, they are creating new traditions for future generations to follow.

The changes in the elements of song, dance, and outfits that are visible at powwows are observable examples of how Native American culture has been able to remain vital through the years, despite oppression and reorganization. During the Reservation Period (mid- to late 1800s), the Plains started developing into a combined culture area, not just where American Indian tribes lived, but a place inhabited by Native American people. “Indianness,” or pan-tribalism/pan-Indianism as it is sometimes called, was a way to develop a stronger, unified body to resist negative outside forces. “Pan-Indianism refers to a process by which Native North Americans have elected, sometimes voluntarily, sometimes under coercion, to transcend the particularities of their
cultural-national heritage, creating instead a single overarching sense of ‘Indianness,’ shared by all indigenous people on the continent” (Jaimes 2001:433). Reservations afforded a way to establish relationships between Plains nations, and peacetime alliances were often created through the sharing of song and dance. Importantly, it was the flexible nature of these shared songs and dances that made them so popular and allowed them to be perpetuated until today, as each Native American tribe was able to alter elements of the dance institution based on tribal preferences, traditions, or norms. This dynamic aspect of the dances helped the pan-Indian culture remain alive despite attempts by dominant American society to end all Native American cultural ceremonies. I will show that by looking through the lens of the powwow (i.e., examining present-day intertribal outfit styles, dances, and songs) one is able to see how the institution of “pan-Indianism” was used as an effective tool to assure cultural prosperity among those Native American people who followed its course. As Powers states in his work on Oglala music and dance, “pan-Indianism, by any definition, has sustained a vital American Indian practice” (Powers 1970:268). The practice being described here is the powwow and its elements: Native dance and music.

Cultural change can be hard to track as it travels and morphs within a cultural group or unit. It can be difficult to determine whether a group of people is affecting a piece of material culture, or if the case is actually the opposite. Also, one must look very closely to determine exactly what elements of culture are undergoing any degree of change. In the case of the powwow, the shift from tribalism to pan-Indianism has manifested itself in many of the aspects and ideas that help to shape the entire event. Aspects of the dances, the outfits, and the songs have undergone specific stylistic variations as they adapted to new cultural identities.

It should be noted that I have approached this subject with a good deal of humility and a healthy dose of caution. As long as I have been going to powwows and dancing at powwows, I have been a white guy who was there. This is not to say that I was special for some reason, it is just that all those who are not of Native American descent enter the powwow arena with a certain stigma attached. Nonetheless, I have learned, through personal experience and through the encouragement of other non-Natives who have
blazed a trail before me, to proceed with caution and a certain awareness that “our kind” is not always welcome.

Native American people seem to have had a great deal of mistrust not only for the American government, what with the signing and breaking of countless treaties, but also for any non-Native who comes forward and wishes to learn more about the Native American ways (Deloria 1974:15). Gloria Young states in her book (1981:53) that many Southern Plains tribes can attribute a more modern fear of outsiders to a specific event. Just before World War II, for example, a woman of German descent appeared one day on the Ponca Agency in Oklahoma. She expressed great interest in Ponca culture and traditions and wished to stay with the tribe and learn their language. The Ponca people were very receptive to her and allowed her to stay with them for some time and become a part of their culture and their families. After a while, she left the Agency with little explanation other than it being time for her to move on. Later, it was discovered that the German government had been sending spies to the United States, specifically to Native American reservations to pose as interested parties who wanted to stay with tribes and learn their languages. This was done with the ultimate goal of learning as many Native languages as possible, so that they could break any American military codes that were based on American Indian languages. Since that time, Native Americans have been extremely wary of any researcher or interested person who comes to events, powwows, or even onto the reservation asking to learn more about their ways and traditions.

In this thesis, I use the terms “Native American” and occasionally “American Indian” to describe this ethnic culture. For years, this culture was described only as “Indian,” a name that many people consider disrespectful (McCarty and Zepeda 1999:199). However, during my interview process, there were numerous instances when my informants would refer to themselves or to other singers and dancers as being “Indian.” The phrase “American Indian” is also used to name certain Native American organizations, such as the American Indian Movement and the American Indian Dance Theater.

I am not Native American, but as a young person, I read many books that dealt with Native American traditions and history, and I was terribly interested in this aspect of American culture and would attend any powwow or Native event in my home area.
whenever I could. I was fascinated by the dancing and the music and paid close attention to all aspects of the powwow for years. I began to dance in the eighth grade, when I joined a local Native American dance troupe. I had read the books and watched the dancing, but it was a different story when I actually started dancing myself. Since then, I have not stopped learning. At each powwow I watch, and each dance I take part in, I learn something new. I have also become much more respected on the Powwow Trail (which will be discussed below) as both a singer and a dancer. I have spent a long period of time learning and experiencing more aspects of Native American dance and song, as well as powwow traditions, stories, protocol, and etiquette. I have had the opportunity to dance, sing and spend time with some of the most respected dance and singing champions in the world. They have all contributed a great deal to my personal knowledge, as well as to my research. I feel that my years of gaining experience and learning the Native American ways while traveling along the Powwow Trail have prepared me to conduct my research within this American culture group. I am very aware of my status as a “non-Native” and as a researcher, but when I participate in powwows, I am much more of a dancer and singer than anything else, and am accepted within the Native American community and within the powwow circuit as such, though I am clearly not a member of a Native American ethnic group.

This brings me to a discussion of ethnicity among indigenous American cultures. In pre-Columbian times, Native American peoples lived in tribal groups unified by shared language and culture. With the coming of the “white man” all of the native tribes were indiscriminately lumped as “Indians.” The imposition of this new social category by the dominant society slowly began to become a reality as distinct groups were forced to live together on reservations. The shared history of repression provided a framework to bring tribal groups together. As a response to political realities, individual tribal groups have found it to their advantage to enact a more encompassing ethnic representation. The development of the pan-Indian movement, which has its roots in the reservation period, has enabled Native American groups to pressure congress into passing legislation that fulfills both individual and pan-tribal goals. Today, Native Americans are aware of their tribal affiliations, but there are many individuals of mixed ancestry, and the pan-tribal movement serves as an umbrella for both tribes and individuals. In turn, the
contemporary Native American powwow has evolved from the Wild West Shows, where Native Americans from different tribes danced together, to become the locus for reaffirming an emerging pan-Indian ethnic identity.

In the past, ethnicity was imposed upon Native American tribes because Europeans came to this continent already possessing the concept of ethnicity. The Europeans were able to create the “Indian” ethnicity for the simple fact that they differed from the indigenous people in looks, language, and overall cultural practices. Barth (1996:79) states that no matter how varied an ethnicity is within its own boundaries, “the dichotomization between members and outsiders” supersedes this fact, and differences between two groups create more shared identity within each one of them. So although the tribes had different languages, cultures, and ceremonial practices, they were still considered similar by Westerners and were lumped into this new-formed ethnic identity, the Indian.

Within their own groups, the indigenous people of North America were related to each other based on their language and what they did, their culture. Native Americans who fished as their main form of subsistence were not the same groups as those who hunted buffalo to provide food. Europeans just saw men that lived on the continent and hunted or fished and made them all related. This is demonstrative of Barth’s (1996:76) idea that ethnicity is based on similar observed practices. That is, if groups of people do the same sorts of things, the dominant group determines the others are ethnically related.

Ultimately, Native American people took advantage of this new “Indian” ethnic identity and adopted it as a way to form and strengthen intertribal bonds. The Reservation Period provided opportunities for tribes to interact, to come together, and to make each other stronger. During this time, many traditional cultural practices were shared within the new poly-ethnic community, especially the dances that developed into some of today’s modern powwow dance styles. Living in a poly-ethnic social system “implies a series of constraints on the kinds of roles an individual is allowed to play” (Barth 1996:81). These constraints can actually work to provide an opportunity for status and status advancement in the eyes of the rest of the community. Traditional status competition was related to warfare and raiding; warriors displayed their status through dances and their associated outfits. In the transformed modern world of Native
Americans today, competitive dancing at powwows provides a new opportunity for status competition in a pan-Indian context.

The Powwow

The term “powwow” is an old Algonkian word that eastern Native American tribes once used to describe a spiritual leader (Browner 2002:27). Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island, is credited with first having taken note of this. He stated that the term was used in reference to a shaman, priest, or medicine man (Amend 1992:17). When Europeans began attending Native American events, they continually heard this word being used; since they did not speak the Native American languages, most thought that the term “powwow” referred to the entire event, as opposed to just the man who was leading the ceremony or exhibition (Hungry Wolf 1999:6). Historically, this word was spelled in different ways; pau wau was one such recorded spelling (Parfit 1994:91).

The powwow is a Native American institution that serves as a successful medium through which Native American culture is promoted, preserved, and sustained by means of dancing and singing. Powwows are relatively new events, having only started in the 1880s, but their origins can be traced back to the Plains War Dance Societies that have existed for more than a hundred years. A powwow is an intertribal gathering of Native peoples that is centered around traditionally based songs and dances. These events function on many levels, from social to spiritual and competitive. There are also many different interpretations of the powwow that vary from tribe to tribe and person to person. This will be discussed at greater length below.

Powwows exist as the most widely popular and publicly visible forms of contemporary Native American culture. Over the years, they have grown in popularity among both Native Americans and non-Native spectators and participants. Powwows have so many aspects of culture occurring in one event that it is hard not to be successful in the promotion of this culture. There is Native American singing, dancing, crafts, and traditional food. There are two basic distinctions between styles of powwows: Northern and Southern (Browner 2002:3). Though there is a difference between the two, people from all over the continent travel to either style powwow, no matter whether they
perform in a Northern or Southern style (this distinction will be defined below). The intertribal atmosphere present at powwows provides a cultural “umbrella” to cover all dancers and singers. It does not matter where a dancer is from or what style that person dances or sings; there is a place for everyone at a powwow.

The idea of the distinction that exists between Northern and Southern styles of powwow and dance can be traced as far back as the work of Franz Boas and the theory of “cultural relativism” (Browner 2002:7). Browner (2002:3) describes the geographic difference between Northern and Southern Styles:

The Northern style began in the Northern Great Plains and the Great Lakes regions and now occurs throughout the northern tier of states and in Canada. Southern pow-wows sprang from unique circumstances in Oklahoma, where numbers of unrelated tribes were crowded together during the mid-to late nineteenth century and where the concepts of “pan-Indianism” or “intertribalism” were born from necessity. For the most part, the diving line between Southern and Northern events is geographic. Everything south of the Oklahoma-Kansas border is Southern. Everything held north of that line, including the mid- and Northern Great Plains, Pacific Northwest, Great Lakes region, and all of Canada, are considered Northern.

Ellis (2003) describes Oklahoma as being the main area in which Southern style powwows occur. Kiowa, Comanche, Apache, and Southern Arapaho are among the most prolific powwow cultures within the Southern Plains powwow tradition (Ellis 2003:9).

Structurally, the powwow is centered around singing and dancing. These are the key elements at any dance event. Powwows are conceptually arranged in concentric circles. The focal point is the center of the dance arena. The dancers and singing groups sit around the edge of this area during the powwow. In the circle behind them are usually all kinds of vendors, food sellers, and crafters selling their wears. And finally, behind that circle is the camping area where all the dancers and families sleep. Teepees and tents are set up in a very large circle, encompassing all that is taking place at the powwow (Young Bear and Theisz 1994:52).

Dancing has always been a part of the powwow and will continue to be the most visible element of this type of event. There are many different dance styles for both men and women and all are treated with similar respect. Among the men’s dance styles are Northern Traditional, Southern Straight, Northern Fancy, Southern Fancy, Chicken,
Grass, Eastern Straight, and Contemporary Traditional. Among the women’s categories are Northern (Buckskin) Traditional, Southern (Buckskin) Traditional, Jingle, Fancy Shawl, Eastern Blanket, Modern Cloth, and Crow Traditional (Simon 1999). Dance styles have been developed over the years as the powwow grows and develops, but all styles of dance can be traced back to the original War Dance Societies of the Plains (Simon 1999).

Methodology

Though there are both Northern and Southern style powwows, and there are differences between them, the overall structures are very similar. If I were to look at all styles of powwow and dance and song from Florida to Alaska, this thesis would be far too extensive. To pinpoint the beginnings of powwow and Native American social dancing and to look deeper into the adoption of the pan-Indian cultural identity, I have focused my research on the Northern styles of dance. The two Northern Plains styles of dance that are most reflective of the idea of exemplified cultural change, as well as being most deeply rooted in early War Dance Societies (discussed in chapter 2), are the Men’s Northern Traditional Dance and the Grass Dance. These two styles of dance have their origins in present day Nebraska and South Dakota. It was in this region that many scholars agree was the birthplace of the powwow.

My research included a review of books, articles, and journals dealing with Native American dancing and powwows. I tried to examine literature from some of the earliest works I could find, namely Alice Fletcher’s studies among the Omaha (1892, 1893), and through some of the most recent books and articles written by modern scholars of anthropology and ethnomusicology. My literature reviews included discussions of both Northern and Southern style powwows, dancing, and singing, but the interviews I conducted were largely of Men’s Northern Traditional and Grass Dancers, which ultimately gave me a greater emphasis on Northern dance ideals, values, and traditions. Another aspect of my research included non-participatory and participant observations, as well as data collected through interviews.

Interviews were conducted mainly in person, and also over the phone or through the mail whenever face-to-face contact was not possible. As opposed to just Northern
Dancers, I chose to interview singers from both Northern and Southern backgrounds. There are singers on the powwow circuit who have been around for many years, and who are some of the most knowledgeable members of this culture group. To exclude some of the Southern singers just because of where they were from or the style they dance would have been a great detriment to my research and would have caused me to miss out on a significant amount of information dealing with powwow dancing and singing, culture, and history.

I chose to interview dancers before, during, and after powwows. I thought that by asking questions about powwows as the people were actually taking part in them, I could find them in a state when they were most closely in touch with and immersed in the feelings and emotions involved with these events. Some of the people I interviewed I have known for years, and some were people I had never met before. I approached all of these dancers and singers with a friendly attitude and explained to them what I was working on and how I could use their help. Each person was completely aware that they were being interviewed for my research and that their answers would be used in my thesis data (see Appendix). For both face-to-face and mail interviews, I provided the subjects with a questionnaire that I had developed to try to gain insight into dancing history, based on tribal stories and traditions. I also tried to speak with dancers and singers from all over the United States and Canada. I hoped this would give me a very wide range of answers and cultural traditions and histories pertaining to the powwow and the dance styles. In all, I collected eighteen questionnaires and interviews. Each questionnaire contained these questions and statements:

1. What is your name? (optional)
2. What is your tribal affiliation?
3. Where are you from/ where did you grow up?
4. What is your dancing and/ or singing style?
5. Please give a short description of why you perform in this style and what it means to you.
6. Please give a short tribal history, if any, which pertains to your style of dance.
7. Where and why did the Grass Dance originate?
8. Where and why did the Traditional Dance originate?
By asking questions two through four, I hoped to gain a look into personal and tribal reasons behind the dances. I wanted to know if the region or tribe in which a person grew up would determine what style of dance they would perform. Question number five was a chance for the dancers or singers to include their own interpretation as to why they dance like they do. I suggested they provide answers that pertain to family or personal reasons. I did not give them a list to choose from, but instead offered what form of response I was looking for. Question six gave the dancers an opportunity to embellish on tribal history of a dance style, even if it was not necessarily what they believed. (One thing I found quite interesting while undertaking my research was the number of tribes who stated they were the ones who first came up with the Grass Dance. It seems that the Omaha, the Lakota, the Cree, and other tribes in Canada all claim to have started this style of dance.) Finally, questions seven and eight were aimed at getting a personal view from the dancer or singer, no matter what his or her style, of where the Grass Dance and Traditional Dance came from. I expressed to those I interviewed that they should answer this question based on their own understanding and feelings about dance histories and where dances came from, despite what they may have learned from their tribal elders or family. If their tribal and personal views were the same, I asked them to indicate that as well.

After my informants had filled out my questionnaire, I gave each one the opportunity to add, verbally, anything they would like to as I took notes on what they said. Many of the dancers and singers were happy with this option and said that they did not feel they could explain themselves adequately on paper. They said that oral tradition was necessary and felt more comfortable just talking to me about dance history and traditions than writing it down. Many of the dancers joined in on some of these conversations and added what they knew about dance history. Also I asked each informant if they were comfortable with my recording the interview on cassette tape. Most were much more comfortable with my taking notes of their explanations.

I found that I was able to get more information out of those I interviewed when I just asked them questions. Many dancers and singers said that to sit and write out some of the answers they had would take a very long period of time and the true way to learn is to have someone tell you the answer verbally, as opposed to writing it down. It was also
good when some of the dancers would get together in groups and discuss dance history, mainly because this was done within tribal groups; that is, I would talk to a few Lakota dancers in one group, and then a few Kiowa dancers in another group. This really helped to keep answers straight. The only difficulty I had was when dancers from varied backgrounds talked at once. I would have to ask them to slow down or take their turns while talking so I could get all my notes down on paper. Presenting a few base questions, to which I definitely wanted answers, and then leaving the interview open-ended, was an excellent plan. It left open the option for dancers to include anything they felt was very important to them, personally, or to their tribes.

After I received all of my questionnaires from my informants, I took them home and read each one and put them into piles depending on how the questions were answered. There was a pile that told me the Pawnee developed the Grass Dance, a pile that said the Omaha started the Grass Dance, and one giving credit to the Lakota. After this initial sorting, I began to look at the answers pertaining to dance outfit construction and history and to identify, based on the tribe of the informant, from which tribes or what regions the dance was received or originated. For instance, when one man said that the Lakota received the Grass Dance from the Omaha (who, in this case, developed the style) and the outfits were covered with braids of grass, I would compare that to another man’s answer stating that the Omaha actually received the dance from the Pawnee, who had not added braids of grass to the dance outfit. This suggested that any tribes who were wearing the braids of grass on their dance outfits came in contact with the Omaha and not directly with the Pawnee. The responses are received are discussed further in the section on the Grass Dance and Men’s Northern Traditional Dance.

Undertaking this thesis topic was a difficult choice, because it is hard for non-Native American people to be accepted into Native American communities enough to learn from the people about the traditional and cultural practices. I have been careful in my research to approach my informants with respect in order to learn about their traditional cultural practices. I have collected data from written sources that detailed Native American cultural practices in both historical and modern contexts. I have then compared that information to sources based in oral tradition and to information from my interviews. This method was especially important in trying to learn about the War Dance
Societies and other traditions that were the antecedents of modern powwow style dancing.

The remainder of this thesis will include chapters dealing with a history of Native American social dancing, the development of Warrior Society and Warrior Dance traditions, the evolution of the dances, the outfits, the songs, and the current state of powwow dancing. Chapter one will be a discussion and examination of early mentions of Native American dancing, as well as a description of the emergence of Warrior Dance Societies among the Plains tribes and how these dance institutions gave rise to social dance traditions throughout Native America. Chapter two will outline the repression that Native American social dancing faced at the hands of the United States government. From the 1880s to the 1930s, Native American dancing and ceremonies were outlawed and fully prohibited as a result of many acts and mandates enacted by the government in its attempts to manage and control Native American tribes. This would ultimately play a very large role in the development of Native American social dancing.

In Chapter three, I will discuss the re-emergence of Native American dancing in the United States. Ironically, it was mainly at the hands of the U.S. government and military that Native dancing was reborn and grew in popularity. This chapter will also discuss examples of Native American dancing, as they were re-established among tribes without the influence of white America. Revitalization movements helped give dancing the meaning it once had. Chapter four will include explanations and descriptions of contemporary dance styles and their corresponding outfits and will show how “pan-Indian” styles have emerged from the afore-mentioned Warrior Dance societies.

In addition to the dance styles and the outfits, the accompanying songs are a very important part of the powwow. Much like the dance outfits, the songs have changed and have adopted new ideals and elements over time, making them more contemporary and popular, as a culture shift to “pan-Indianism” or “intertribalism” has developed. This will be discussed in chapter five. Chapter six will be about pan-Indian identity and how powwow dancing and singing have become popular art forms, as well as offering an arena for status competition through dancing. The thesis will close with a discussion of pan-Indianism and the evidence for it that can be found within the powwow.
When French explorer Jacques Cartier wrote in 1534 about his explorations of North America, he stated that during his approach to the mouth of the St. Lawrence River he was greeted by Native American people dancing and celebrating in their canoes. This early mention is the first reference to Native American dancing on this continent (Cartier quoted in Laubin 1977:3):

wilde men,… all of which approached neere unto our boate, dancing and making many signs of joy and mirth, as it were desiring our friendship…. Some of the women who came not over, we might see stand up to their knees in the water, singing and dancing.

Other explorers may have seen Native Americans performing ritual or ceremonial dancing of some sort, but it was never noted in any journals or diaries of European missionaries or explorers. However song and dance is such an integral part of Native American culture, whether for enjoyment or ritual purposes, that it has been included in discussions of and writings about North American Indian tribes for centuries (Laubin 1977:25).

A more complete description of Native American dancing appeared in 1804, when Lewis and Clark began to explore the new land acquired by the United States through in the Louisiana Purchase. Among Thomas Jefferson’s instructions to Lewis and Clark was the following (Jefferson quoted in Bergon 1989:xxv):

The commerce which may be carried on with the people inhabiting the line you will pursue, renders a knolege of these people important. You will therefore endeavor to make acquainted, as far as a diligent pursuit of your journey shall admit, with the names of the nations & their numbers;… their relations with other tribes or nations; the language, tradition, monuments; … and articles of commerce they may need or furnish, & to what extent.
It was quite important to President Jefferson that the Lewis and Clark expedition discover as much as possible about all aspects of the lives of the indigenous people living on the continent. This is why so many things, including dance and ceremony, were commented on in their journals. The first mention of dance activities taking place was in the section describing their experiences among the Lakota. In the entry for Thursday, August 30, 1804, Clark states the following (quoted in Bergon 1989:40-41):

> in a battle with the Crow Indians who inhabit the Cout Noir or black Mountain out of 22 of this Society 18 was Killed, the remaining four was dragged off by their Party. Those men are likely fellows and the[y] Set together Camp & Dance together. This Society is in imitation of the Societies of de Curbo or Crow Indians, whom they imitate.

Later portions of the journals describe more dances of the Lakota, the Mandan, and the Shoshone. There were war (scalp) dances, dances to honor the buffalo, round dances, and social dances. Within such dance groups and societies is where one can find the roots of modern day powwow dance styles (Bergon 1989:55). The Louisiana Purchase and Lewis and Clark’s expedition played a major role in opening the West for American expansion, as well as offering an initial, more formal, introduction to Native American tribes of the western United States (Gooding 2001:441).

**The War Dance Society**

Within Plains tribal cultural, there were many societies that existed outside of the normal kinship bonds. Lowie (1954:105) stated that “apart from a person’s social ties with his family, band, or clan, he was in most Plains tribes connected with organizations in which membership did not rest on kinship.” Many of these sodalities were Warrior Societies, also referred to as War Dance Societies or Dog Soldier Societies, reflecting their emphasis on prowess in battle. The Warrior Societies of the Plains were known as the ultimate fighting force, “concentrating on the three cardinal characteristics of police and soldier functions, age-graded memberships, and the ‘no flight’ pledge in battle” (Ellis 2003:32). Each Warrior Society functioned both as a private and as a public institution. “For the individual his society was a club, and at its lodge he would lounge, sleep, eat, dance, sing, and generally have a good time with his fellows” (Lowie 1954:111).
Publicly, these societies served mainly to provide police and leaders in battle. Each society had songs, dances, and outfit components that were specific to that society and that would distinguish them from other sodalities. Within these societies, men would be honored for deeds that had accomplished in both life and battle. Specific outfit parts, especially eagle feathers worn on the clothing (discussed below), were markers of what roles men served within the society and how they were viewed among their tribal peers (Simon 1999).

Prior to the birth of recreational dancing, the main form of organized dancing that existed was found within the War Dance Society. “Tribal societies and their dances played crucial roles in social, cultural, political, and martial affairs, and their influence reached to every corner of life” (Ellis 2003:29). In addition to taking part in actual battles, the members of the War Dance Society would sing and dance to act out what occurred during battle or in a hunt. Many societies also had set meetings during which they danced and sang the dances specific to their society, renewing their roles as members of the society and celebrating and publicizing their importance as a society (Ellis 2003:30). During the Reservation Period, the martial emphasis of the War Dance Society declined, but the dances continued to be used to display status. “As the younger men had no chance to show their prowess in warfare and hunting, there was a change of emphasis to recognition of superior singing and dancing ability as one of the roads to public approval” (Flannery 1947:64).

The earliest War Dance Society known to be a precursor to today’s dances was the Pawnee Iruska Society. It is generally believed that this society began in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, and the dance, outfit, and song associated with it were given to the Pawnee people through a dream of a warrior (Young 1981:126). The Iruska Dance became popular and spread to other tribal groups during the Reservation Period, when tribes on the Plains were forced to live closer together and began having more friendly contact (Gooding 2001:46). The key to the success and importance of the Pawnee Iruska Dance was its adaptability; its elements could be changed or added, and its meaning reinterpreted by the different groups who began to dance in this manner (Gooding 2001:45). Other War Dance Societies were more rigid in maintaining the purity of their dances.
Debate exists between some tribes and scholars, but most people presently agree that powwow dancing has its roots in the traditions of the Pawnee Iruska Warrior Society of the Southern Plains. This Iruska Dance was started when a young man received a vision in the form of a dream. As the story goes, a Pawnee man, Crow Feather, had a vision in which he was visited by a fallen Pawnee warrior. This warrior gave Crow Feather instructions for a set of dances, songs, and articles of clothing and told him to share the dances and the songs with his people and to form a society based on the dance. The warrior first explained to Crow Feather what had happened in battle and why he was unable to return to his people (Young 1981:126). During the Pawnee warrior’s last battle, his scalplock had been cut off. Pawnee warriors shaved their hair down to the skin, except for a strip of hair along the top of the head and a longer lock of hair left hanging free at the back of the ridge of hair. This length was then braided and let hang down the back of the head; feathers and other decorations were woven into it (Paterek 1994:130). This braid, or scalplock, was considered to be the sign of a true warrior; it was his strength and his pride. This hairstyle, known today as a “Mohawk,” was such a strong cultural marker of the tribe that ultimately it is how the Pawnee people received their tribal name: “The name comes from the way they used to wear their hair – the scalplock was stiffened with paint and fat and curved to resemble a horn or pawnee” (Paterek 1994:128). Without his scalplock, a warrior was nothing, and since the dream warrior’s scalplock had been cut off, he was forever shamed as a soldier and could not return to his people (Young 1981:126).

In his vision, Crow Feather was led into the forest where he saw many people dancing around a fire over which a pot full of boiling liquid was sitting. The people who were dancing around the fire were sticking their hands and arms into the boiling liquid and into the fire but were not getting hurt (Powers 1994:476). The dancers taught Crow Feather the songs and the dances they were performing, but soon after this, the people all turned to animals and they scurried deep into the forest (Powers 1994:476).

The following day, Crow Feather was led into the forest by a woman, and he came upon a scene that matched his dream from the night before. Again, he saw men dancing around a boiling pot, sticking their hands and arms into the hot liquid and waving them over the flames. In some versions, the story has the men dipping their hands into a
boiling pot containing the entrails of enemies they had just killed in battle (Browner 2002:23). Crow Feather was taught the same songs and dances as the previous night, “which imitated birds and animals or warriors attacking the enemy,” and he was held over the fire in an attempt to teach him the ways of these warriors (Young 1981:126). But again, all of the men turned into animals and ran into the forest, except for one (Powers 1994:476). Young (1981:126-127) states:

The remaining human (Crow Feather’s guide from the previous night) told Crow Feather how the animals and birds had helped prepare the things he wore in the dance. Because I lost my scalplock [the animals and birds] said they would give me a headdress, which was even more important than a scalplock. The headdress was made of hair given by a deer and feathers given by a turkey. For a belt, the deer also gave deerskin, a crow gave feathers and a wolf gave his tail. The human gave Crow Feather the headdress and belt to take home.

The Pawnee spirit guide also described the story of the power and the medicine that was possessed by those putting their hands and arms into the pot. If an individual were to possess this knowledge and this medicine, the boiling liquid would not injure him. He told Crow Feather that the beings he saw dancing around the fire were known as the *Iruska*, which means “fire inside of all things” (Young 1981:126); “they dance in the fire,” “they are inside the fire,” or, more common and more simply, “warriors” (Powers 1994:476).

As previously stated, during battle the warrior had been “scalped” and was therefore shamed and was unable to return to his people. Crow Feather gained the knowledge of the dances, songs, and the dance outfit so that he might help the fallen warrior to regain some pride and standing among his people. Crow Feather took this knowledge to the Pawnee people and showed them the new ways. Parts of the dances and parts of the outfits, specifically the “crow belt” and the roach headdress, represented some elements of the vision (Powers 1994:476).

The roach (explained below) was a very important piece of the outfit of the *Iruska* Society. This, more so than any other piece, most closely symbolizes the origins of the dance society. The roach headdress consists of lengths of hair attached to a base that is then attached to the head of a warrior, dancer, or member of the *Iruska*. This new style of headdress acted as a sort of symbolic/prosthetic hair. Since the Pawnee spirit’s scalplock
had been cut off in battle, wearing the roach would symbolically take the place of the hair that had been taken from his head. This is why the roach is worn at the back of the head, in the place where a warrior’s scalplock is located (Figure 1).

The roach headdress consists of two rows of hair, an inside row comprised of longer porcupine hair and a shorter outside row made of deer hair. The main body of the roach, the deer and porcupine hair, is said to represent the fire that the men were dancing around and into which they stuck their hands and arms. The deer hair was traditionally dyed red (Figure 2), which represented the flames, and the porcupine hair, which was black and often tan at the tips, represented the smoke rising off the fire (Powers 1994:476).

![Figure 1. Man wearing roach headdress (Wills 2003:61).](image)

Inside of the roach was a bone “spreader” with a central socket where a feather or multiple feathers were attached (Figures 3 and 4). The spreader inside the roach had a two-fold purpose: “to spread the roach hairs apart so they would be more beautiful, and to serve as a firm base for the bone socket and plume holder, which held both the hair lock and decorative eagle feathers” (Hail 1988:142). Symbolically, the bone roach spreader represented the knowledge of the dances and songs that accompanied the Iruska complex. Possessing that power (the knowledge that the original Iruska men possessed) would help to protect the warriors from ever being harmed. The bone spreader symbolized this idea (Young 1981:126).

Inside the roach spreader was a single or several eagle feathers (Figure 5), or a substitute, such as turkey feathers (Figure 6). Feathers are considered to be extremely
powerful objects by almost every Native American tribe. Feathers represent prayers as well as warriors (Amend 1992:14). The eagle feather placed inside the roach spreader represented Crow Feather’s vision of seeing the last human dancing above the fire. Roach feathers are loosely attached, so that they sway and spin as a dancer’s head bobs up and down with his dance movements. This movement is symbolic of the Iruska men dancing over the fire. The hair roach itself represented the fire, the spreader represented the knowledge of the dance and songs that protected him from being burnt, and the eagle feather represented the man dancing above the flames.

Crow Feather was also given a “crow belt,” sometimes called a “feather belt,” in addition to the roach, to be used as part of the outfit for members of the new War Dance Society. Hungry Wolf (1999:12) describes how the feather belt was tied around the dancer’s waist, hanging down behind when he danced:

It consisted of a whole, stuffed eagle, below which hung two trailers covered by small feathers. It had two feather spikes, or “horns,” which stuck up somewhat like antennas.

The name “crow belt” came from the fact that many times crow feathers were used instead of eagle feathers in the construction of the belt. Whole, stuffed bodies of crows or ravens were also frequently seen as part of the Iruska Society outfit (Hungry Wolf 1999:12). The pictures in Figures 7 and 8 show men wearing crow belts. In Figure 7, only the dancer on the right is wearing the crow belt, and in Figure 8, a crow belt is worn by each of the two men on the right in the photograph.

There is an extremely small amount of research on the Pawnee Iruska, and very little is known about the styles of dancing and singing that accompanied the Warrior Society meetings. Browner (2002:21) states that the Iruska Society dance was similar to something known as the “Hot Dance.” During this dance, men would dance around a pot filled with boiling liquid and try to retrieve chunks of meat with their hands or a stick. Similarities to other dances will be discussed below.
Figure 2. Early Blackfoot roach (Thom 1992:85).

Figure 3. Reproductions of Old-style bone spreaders (Noc Bay 2003).

Figure 4. 1830s Pawnee elk antler roach spreader (Dubin 1999:42). The larger hole in the upper portion of the spreader is where the feather socket was located.
Figure 5. Eagle feathers in a double roach spreader (Author 2003).

Figure 6. Turkey feathers in a roach spreader.
Pawnee, early twentieth century (Hail 1988:123).
There is likewise little information provided about the songs that accompanied the Iruska, other than the fact that songs were sung in the Pawnee language and they discussed hunting or war exploits (Hungry Wolf 1999:9). The music of the original War Dance Societies is an area that must be researched further in the future. When the Iruska Society began, the dance was just a part of a larger ceremonial complex. A series of rituals and ceremonies was used to celebrate ancestors and fallen warriors (Fletcher 1893:25). Many of these ceremonies lasted for four days and included prayers, singing, and ritual activities, as well as dancing (Hungry Wolf 1999:6).

A short time after the Iruska Society began among the Pawnee, the United States government began transplanting many Native American groups to the Plains, where they came into contact with unfamiliar groups, and new patterns of alliance formed among the tribes (Gooding 2001:442). Tribes that once had fought against each other were now forced to live together somewhat harmoniously. This situation contributed to the spread of the Iruska Dance throughout the Native American tribes of the Plains (Young 1981:126). Although this was a period of increased contact between tribes, it was also known as the “period of repression,” because many of the traditional lifeways of these peoples were outlawed. This will be discussed further in the next chapter.

During the Reservation Period alliances were formed, and many groups met and shared ideas and traditions, gifting each other their special dances (Powers 1990:477). The Iruska Society spread and evolved into the Hethuska Society, the Omaha Dance Society, and the Grass Dance Society; the different names reflect language differences, the source of the dance, or its reinterpretation (Gooding 2001:442). The Iruska Society Dance was transferred and transformed from tribe to tribe, and it became more pan-Indian and more Intertribal.
Figure 7. Old-time Sioux men in dance regalia, 1900-1920, including a crow belt on the right (Hungry Wolf 1999:11).

Figure 8. Dancers wearing crow belts, c.1910 (the two men on the right) (Hungry Wolf 1999:13).
Warrior Societies began to lose their popularity and effectiveness during the Reservation Period. Many groups still possessed tribal-specific dances, but these were mainly religious society dances or dances that were dedicated to the spirit world (Fletcher 1893:27). Religious dances also began losing popularity over time, as Native American consciousness shifted to an intertribal, Native American identity. The War Dance Societies had existed for years as the most prevalent and most powerful form of dancing among Native American peoples living on the Plains, but when the United States government began to push people onto reservations, this proud warrior tradition was forced to come to an end. It has survived though the strong tradition of the Pawnee Iruska Society, which moved from tribe to tribe and transformed itself into the modern Grass Dance and Northern Traditional Dance, emblems of the success of the pan-tribal movement.
CHAPTER 3

THE EFFECT OF U.S. GOVERNMENT REPRESsION OF
NATIVE AMERICAN TRIBES AND THE DEVELOPMENT
OF INTERTRIBALISM ON NATIVE AMERICAN DANCE

The United States government’s repression of Native American tribes, which began around the mid-1800s and lasted until the 1930s, ultimately changed the lives of Native Americans in many ways, and in particular had profound negative effects on Native American social dancing and customs. As described at the Fort Laramie National Historic Park, Ft. Laramie, Wyoming, The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 was the first major United States government attempt to force and keep Native Americans westward (and out of the way of advancing troops). This treaty “gave” many Sioux the rights to their sacred Black Hills and lands west of the Missouri River in South Dakota. The land was to remain Native American property forever or until three-fourths of all Lakota males voted to change it. This treaty was never changed, yet the United States government used this as an initial stepping stone to force Native Americans westward and onto reservations, ultimately taking more and more land from them. The Dawes Act of 1887 had a similar effect, in that the government tried to take away the traditional lifestyle of Plains Indians and introduce them to the notion of private land ownership (Young Bear and Theisz 1994:xxix). The Dawes Act, also known as the General Allotment Act, gave Native Americans U.S. citizenship, as well as divisions of land that were overseen by the head of household. This was all basically to try to make the Native Americans more American. Though the government allotted the land to many of the Native Americans, there were still many stipulations concerning property, and very little freedom was actually granted along with the land. Edward Grosek (2003:32) supports this, stating the following:

Congress began to deal with Native Americans unilaterally by statute. Treaty-making with American Indians diminished after 1871, so that the majority of treaties made between them and the United States occurred in the years 1778 to 1883. However, many of the 18th and 19th century
treaties are still good law and are still referred to for land claims, for hunting and fishing rights, and for political recognition and status. The U.S. government was (and still is) very much in control of the lives of the Native American people who were affected by the General Allotment Act and many of the other treaties shared between the United States and Native Americans (Carlson 1994: 27).

In 1887, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), under the Department of the Interior, imposed a mandate upon Native American tribes that outlawed all performances of music and dance or religious exercises (Burton 1993:35). The government feared a collective uprising among Native American groups and decided that the best way to combat this was to ban all such “gatherings” and to allow U.S. troops to arrest or kill tribes taking part in such activities. The most infamous result of this law was the massacre at Wounded Knee Creek on Pine Ridge Agency in 1890 (Young Bear and Theisz 1994:139).

Years later, Native American tribes were once again allowed to practice some of their traditional ways with the passing of the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) in 1934. This lifted the ban on tribal activities and even encouraged the birth of tribal government. Though Native American groups were allowed more freedoms under the IRA, more reservation boundaries were established, and traditional life styles began to vanish. Also, starting at this same time, many tribal members began trying to reenact the “old-ways,” that is, learn the sacred dancing (Burton 1993:35).

Intertribalism and the Spread of the Iruska Dance

The treaties made by the United States government forced Native American groups into smaller areas and took their traditional lifestyles away from them. This coming together of tribal ties that bridged traditional tribal boundaries became known as “intertribalism.” Some elements of culture that quickly adopted the idea of intertribalism and exhibited its importance among Plains tribes were dancing and music.

The term “pan-Indianism,” coined in 1948 by Karl Schmitt from the University of Oklahoma, has been used to describe the social phenomenon that was beginning to occur in the late 1800s, when the Omaha, the Sioux, and the other Native American tribes began to have increased contact with each other (Young 1981:69). The tribes of the
Plains started to develop a collective identity through the sharing of dance and song (Powers 1990:11-12). Pan-Indianism took root as tribes were oppressed and needed to form a stronger unity through increased alliances and bonds with other tribal groups (Young 1981:69). The old saying that there is strength in numbers definitely applied to this situation. The collective Native American identity that developed as a result of alliances manifested itself as the War Dance Society, which began to spread through the Plains and to almost all Native American tribes that came into contact with each other.

The first dance and music phenomenon resulting from this forced intertribal contact was the Iruska Dance Society, developed by the Pawnee, of north-central Oklahoma who speak a Caddoan language (Map 1). The next group to receive the Iruska dance and songs was the Omaha, of the Mississippi Valley branch of the Siouan language family (sub-category Dhegiha), located in Nebraska (Map 1) and in extreme northern Oklahoma (Map 2) (Ethnologue 2004). It is not known exactly when the Iruska Society dance was given to the Omaha, but most scholars feel this took place during the early part of the nineteenth century (Young 1981:103). Of the little that has ever been mentioned, or is known, about this exchange, Alice Fletcher’s writing on the Omaha people (1892:142) is most important:

In view of the democratic character of the Hae-thu-ska, its touches of ritual and symbolism, its stirring music and dramatic dancing, its social power, —for its members not only had their valiant acts preserved in its archives of songs, but were honored by peculiar ceremonies after their death, —it is not surprising that this society should have found favor in other tribes, and have flourished as it has done among the Otoes, Ioways, and Pawnees. Tradition tells of an old and close alliance with the Pawnees, who belong to a distinct linguistic stock from the Omahas. The society among the Pawnees is called the Hae-thu-ska, and seems rooted among these people; they have a large number of songs, and, although Omaha Hae-thu-ska songs are known, they are never sung except as a compliment to some visiting member of a tribe.

The Omaha took the dance (1890s), incorporated what was important to them into it, and made it more personal (Hungry Wolf 1999:13). When the Omaha started to perform the Hethuska (the name was changed from Iruska because of language differences), the main change that took place was in the outfits (Burton 1993:15). The Omaha began the practice of wearing braided sweet grass tucked under their belts as they danced, which was said to represent the scalps a warrior collected from enemies (counting coups) during battle (Powers 1994:477) or to remind the dancers of the goodness of the earth (Simon 1999). In this case, the sweet grass represented either buffalo tails, effectively thanking the buffalo and Great Spirit for providing the people with such an ample form of sustenance (Hungry Wolf 1999:12), or it signified respect for Mother Earth. The Native American warriors often brought bundles of grass with them when they went on raiding parties or on buffalo hunts. These were used to start fires to cook their food and to keep warm (Simon 1999).

I discussed the use of braids of sweet grass in the Huluska Dance outfit with Kenny Scabby Robe, a member of the Blackfoot tribe and head of the Black Lodge Singers (one of the most popular contemporary powwow singing groups to tour the powwow circuit and record their music) and one of the most well respected Old-style Grass Dancers. He said that the Omaha were the first tribe to start using grass on the dance outfits. They would take small bunches of grass, fold them and wrap them with more grass to form tight little bundles, and then stick them under their belts. The grass reminded the Omaha of the power of the earth and the buffalo. They then used these braids of grass to start fires during celebrations of battle. He also said that some people made long braids of grass for their dance outfits to represent the scalps of enemies, and these were worn for dances before and after battle.

Some time later, the importance of representing the buffalo and Mother Earth waned, and the meaning of the grass braids shifted to represent only the braided hair of enemies that had been scalped and the “coups” that had been counted by each individual warrior during battle. “Counting coup” was the act of sneaking up on an enemy and touching them with a hand or a weapon, but not injuring them. Having coup counted upon a warrior was considered to be his ultimate disgrace in battle (Simon 1999). A fierce warrior would have counted many coups and would have many scalps. To show
this fierceness, dancers began making more braids of sweet grass and placing them around their knees and ankles. Their symbolism was always important, though the meaning was changing, and they became a more important part of the dance outfit (Interview with Scabby Robe, April 2003). This showed that although the Hethuska was based off the Iruska, the society was becoming more complex. The dance outfit of the Hethuska Society started to exhibit personal prowess as a warrior. This is in comparison to the fact that as part of the Iruska Society, all members wore the insignia—the roach and the crow belt.

Another difference exhibited in the outfit of the Hethuska Society, as opposed to the outfit of the Iruska Society, was the changes in the style of crow belt worn. Alice Fletcher described their society outfits (Fletcher 1892:138):

No clothing was worn except the breech-cloth, and at the back a long bunch of grass was fastened to the belt…. The Leader, and other men distinguished for their skills and success in war, wore an ornament called Ka-hae, or crow. This was made of two sticks like arrow shafts, painted green, and feathered, like the stems of the fellowship pipes, with feathers of the buzzard; tufts of crow plumage and long pendants reaching nearly to the ground, made of crow’s feathers, completed this ornament, which was worn at the back fastened to a belt, the two shafts rising to the man’s shoulder blades.

It is possible to see what Fletcher is describing in two photos from 1900 shown in Figures 11 and 12. In these illustrations, both men are wearing the Omaha Ka-hae, or crow belt, and both belts contain bird plumage and feathers, as well as bunches of grass and two spikes that reach up from the belt to approximately shoulder blade height.

Only a few men who were found to be of great honor and bravery were allowed to wear the crow belt. They also painted their bodies almost totally black, with white spots on their backs; black represented the dead, decaying bodies of their enemies, and white spots represented the droppings left by the birds that were picking and eating their rotting flesh. Fletcher (1892:138) describes the significance of the dance outfit of the Omaha people:

The crow was worn, as it was said to be the first to find a corpse, and later was joined by other birds of prey. The tuft of grass worn by all the members of the Hae-thu-ska bore a twofold significance: it represented the tail of the Me-ka-thu, or wolf, the animal closely allied to the warrior, and it also symbolized the scalp of the vanquished enemy.
The pictures in Figure 13 illustrate a typical late-1800s Omaha Dance outfit, similar to that described by Fletcher.

The Omaha Hethuska still resembled the Pawnee Iruska Society a great deal, though some elements had begun to change (Powers 1994:476). The ideals of the society and most of the dances were the same, but songs changed to include Omaha words, and the outfits of the society changed to include the braids of grass, representing the earth, the buffalo, and the scalps of enemies, that were so important to the ceremonial complex of the Omaha (Powers 1990:30). Another interesting aspect of the Omaha Dance Society was the custom of serving food with two sticks; as Fletcher (1892:140) explains, “if these were not provided, then the naked hand must be thrust in the boiling pot to take out the meat.” This belief was definitely an elaboration from the original Pawnee Iruska myth.

In the early 1860s, the Hethuska dance was passed from the Omaha to the Lakota (more commonly referred to as the Sioux) in South Dakota, as a way to form friendships (see Map 1) (Young 1981:128). The Lakota are also members of the Mississippi Valley branch of the Siouan language family, but they belong to the sub-category Dakota (Ethnologue 2004). (The Siouan language family tree diagram in Figure 14 shows how these languages are related.) A four-day ceremony was held during which the Omaha taught the Lakota the songs, dances, and protocol for performing this dance. There was also great feasting, and friendships were established (Interview with Scabby Robe, April 2003). There was also a name change when the Lakota received the dance. The name Hethuska name was pronounced Heluska (reflecting language differences), but the Lakota began calling the dance the Omaha Dance, because the Omaha were the people who gave them the dance. Prior to the Lakota receiving the dance, it had never been called the Omaha Dance. This means that at this point, the Lakota were the only people performing the “Omaha Dance” and there was no dance called the “Omaha Dance” before the Lakota started so perform it.
Figure 9. Lakota “Omaha Dancer” wearing a crow belt (1900) (Powers 1990:ii).

Figure 10. Dancer wearing Omaha-style crow belt (1900s) Picture postcard (courtesy of DeChristopher).
Figure 11a. front.

Figure 11b. legs.

Figure 11c. back.

Figure 11. Omaha Dance outfit. These figures, containing pictures taken from the Museum of the Plains Indian in Browning, Montana, show a typical turn-of-the-century Omaha Dance outfit. Figure 13a shows the simple front of the Omaha outfit and the roach headdress. Figure 13b shows the lower portion of the dance outfit. Figure 13c shows a good example of the feather belt worn by these dancers (photos by DeChristopher).
The Lakota also called it the *Peji Mignaka Waci*, or “Grass-tucked-in-the-belt Dance,” reflecting the grass pieces that the Omaha had added to the outfit. This was often shortened to just “Grass Dance” (Powers 1994:477). As the Lakota tribe inherited the dance, they were especially taken with the look of the outfit, more so than with its original significance. Lakota Sioux outfits started to focus on the use of fringes and less on the meaning of the sweet grass braids tucked in their belts.

![Siouan Language family tree](after Dying Tongues Website, 2004)

The two Lakota Grass Dancers shown in Figures 13a and 13b are from the early twentieth century and they reveal how the style of the outfit was changing. These dancers used plumes, ribbons, and yarn or string in place of actual grass, as was present in the outfits of the Omaha Hethuska. This period of time saw one of the first major splits in dance identity (Evans 1998:3): “The Lakota are credited with refining the dance and eliminating some of the ceremonial Warrior Society elements. The Lakota Omaha Warrior Society dance evolved into a Traditional Dance Society.”
This led to the name of the dance being changed even further because of what the dancers wore on their outfits. Over time, many of the Lakota started calling the dance the *Galala Waci* or “Ribbon Dance,” which reflects a shift in meaning of the dance (Powers 1990:73). As the Lakota performed and spread the Grass Dance, the Heluska name was used less frequently. There was also less emphasis placed on the Warrior Society beginnings and more placed on the outfits themselves. It should also be pointed out that one of the reasons for the widespread use of this dance was because there was much more peace time between the different tribes on the Plains. Instead of fighting, they would get together to share the dances and ceremonies, and “dance soon became a medium by which one-time enemies established peace” (Powers 1994:477). As the Iruska Society dance spread, tribes began to change the meaning and general style of the dance, and there was a significant change in the materials used in the construction of the outfits to mirror the shift in the style of the dance. These differences will be further discussed in Chapter 5.
In 1887, the Pawnee people visited the Lakota for the first time since the Iruska Warrior Society began to spread throughout the Native American tribes of the Northern Plains. The two groups came together in peace and unity and danced the Iruska/Hethuska/Omaha Dance together. It was remarked upon that many of the songs were still the same (except for Lakota words having replaced Pawnee words), but many of the outfits were different. The Lakota were making more elaborate outfits for the dances (Young 1981:170-1). Their clothes were more ornamented, and they wore sleigh bells around their legs. At this time, the Pawnee still wore nothing more than a breechcloth, a roach, and a crow belt—this being the original outfit of the Iruska Society. Also the Lakota had changed the style of crow belt, which evolved into a “bustle,” a larger and more elaborate version of the feather belt (Young 1981:172).

The Iruska Society outfit changed, and the warrior aspect gave way to other interpretations. The main change that took place when the Lakota adopted the dance had to do with the feather belt, which went from a bundle of plumage, and a bird carcass to a flatter, rounder, feather bustle (Hungry Wolf 1999:68). It had a trailer of feathers hanging down from it, as well as two antennae, or “uprights,” sticking upward from the top of the belt. This first transformation of the bustle produced what is known as a “feather mess,” or “messy bustle.” Other versions will be discussed below. Figures 14-16 all show versions of the messy bustle.

Wearing a feather mess bustle instead of a crow or feather belt ultimately became a very important marker of the shift from Warrior Dance Societies to Traditional Dance Societies. As tribes came into contact with each other and shared dances, they learned either the Grass Dance (with outfits covered in long fringe) or the Traditional Dance (with more elaborately decorated outfits that featured a larger feather bustle on the back).
Figure 14. Lakota dancer holding a round messy bustle, 1888 (center) (Hungry Wolf 1999:34).

Figure 15. Sioux feather messy bustle, 1890s (Hungry Wolf 1999:70).
The Sioux, specifically the Lakota Sioux, are considered to be responsible for the second major wave of intertribalism, through the very productive spread of the society dances (Interview with Scabby Robe, April 2003). In the late 1800s, the first split between dance styles emerged along the path of this shared War Dance Society. Sioux tribes to the north became much more interested in the more modern style of the Omaha Dance that exhibited a dance outfit covered in yarn or fabric fringes, said to represent the swaying of prairie grass in the wind. This dance eventually came to be the only dance known as the Grass Dance. Sioux tribes that remained in the southern Plains states, closer to the origin of the War Dance Societies, maintained many of the ideals of these societies, as well as much of the outfit styles. They focused on wearing feather bustles and still danced in a way that told the story of a raid or of hunting or battle (Evans 1998:3). This split was mainly due to differences in popularity and geographic separation. So as tribes to the north came in contact with each other, they shared what
became known as the Grass Dance, and those to the south shared what would become the modern Northern Traditional style of dance.

The Lakota were a very mobile group, who had frequent contact with other tribes on the Northern Plains. The Lakota first passed the new dance institution to the Three Affiliated Tribes: the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara (or Ree), who lived in North Dakota. These groups, in turn, started sharing the dance, spreading it to both eastern and western tribes. The Ojibwe were one of the first tribes to the east to be given the dance. The version of the dance that they received featured outfits covered in long fringe and grass. The Ojibwe adopted the Grass Dance very quickly, and it grew in popularity when they started dancing it. Ellis (2003:52) states “it was the Grass Dance that seems to have filled the void in social life…. in this way the Grass Dance provides occasion for group recreational outlets while at the same time enhancing feelings of social solidarity.” The Ojibwe started to make the dance their own, and it became more contemporary and was more respected after they adopted it (Interview with Scabby Robe, April 2003). This dance style, practiced by the Ojibwe as well as other Great Lakes area tribes, is performed in a way that is characteristic of tribes in this region, but still reflects a Lakota influence in both dance and song style (Romero 2001:458).

It must not be forgotten that the Lakota Omaha Dance was still a descendent of the Pawnee Iruska, and although Evans states some of the Warrior Society elements were gone, many still existed. Lowie (1954:113) discussed the Lakota Omaha Dance and how many of the practices that came from the original Pawnee Iruska Society still existed. Among these were the practice of dancers placing their hands in boiling water and claming not to be hurt. This relates back to the Omaha practice of dipping sticks into pots of boiling water to retrieve meat, and the Pawnee Iruska practice of dipping one’s arms and hands into boiling liquid or fire. Each time a member of one of these societies performed this act, they were creating ties back to the Warrior Societies of the past. They were demonstrating what made them warriors, and ultimately strengthened the cultural identity of the tribal group, as well as the intertribal bonds that also existed.

The Blackfoot, in present day Washington state, were one of the first western tribes to receive the Grass Dance from the Lakota. When the dance was introduced to them, it was again the version more closely related to the current style of Grass Dance.
(Interview with Scabby Robe, April 2003). In a photograph from 1910 (Figure 19), it is possible to see how the dance outfit began to evolve and change its general style. Here, the long ermine skin fringes are used on the shirts to represent flowing grass, a carry-over from the Lakota style of Grass Dance outfit construction. This is opposed to the dance outfit that existed among the Omaha, where fringes (most often of braided sweet grass) were used to represent scalps of the enemy. In the original outfits of the Pawnee, fringe was not even a component of the dance outfit. Also, the feather belts on these Grass Dancers are much smaller than those traditionally worn by the Hethuska or Omaha Society Dancers. The use of fringes on the shirts and the styles of bustles used provides more examples of how it is possible to track a cultural shift, as it was moving through the West, by examining the materials used and construction methods of the dance outfits.

![Figure 17. Blackfoot Grass Dancers, 1910 (Hungry Wolf 1999:31).](image)

The Native American tribes of the Plains became much more similar in their ceremonial complexes, as they came together to form alliances and share ideas. The spread of similar Warrior Societies, rituals, and associations across the Plains indicated a sharing of cultural values and practices among Native American tribes (Ellis 2003:36).
Facing opposition and oppression from the United States government, this was a very effective move to combat these outside forces. Intertribalism was taking root, and it was reflected in the dancing of the Native American nations coming in contact with each other. The idea of intertribalism, by its definition was a new cultural identity that superseded tribal unity and developed and overall “super tribal” community that far exceeded geographic boundaries. Each time a group or society performed the Grass Dance or Northern Traditional Dance, they were part of the Native American tradition. They were taking part in Native American activities and by doing so, reaffirmed their places within this super culture.

All of the changes and innovations in the dance outfits (e.g., variations in crow belt style, the inclusion of grass braids tucked in the belts of dancers, or the use of ermine skin or yarn fringes in the place of grass braids) exemplify how tribes came together and shared ideas and values during the Reservation Period. Although the dances were being modified from tribe to tribe, the fact that tribes continued to share this dance society and its values assured the dance institution’s prosperity.

Reservation life afforded Native American tribes a great deal of free time, as much of their traditional nomadic lifestyle was taken away from them. They were not allowed to hunt they were not allowed to move around in their normal fashion, and many of their religious practices had been lost as a result of the BIA ban (Young Bear and Theisz 1994:22). This free time was ultimately filled with dancing and singing. Tribes now began to sing and dance with no real spiritual or ceremonial significance (Hungry Wolf 1999:9). It was often even considered a kind of practice for when the dancing and singing really did “count.” New dances were developed, as well as new songs to go along with those dances (Black Bear and Theisz 1976:54). Examples of this are the couples’ dances, the Rabbit Dance, and the’49, for instance. The songs were sung in the native language and talked about elements of the dance as well as what the people danced for. “These also are dances by which the young men, young women, and everyone else enjoy themselves. That is for you to enjoy yourself. You will have fun” (Black Bear and Theisz 1976:81). Tribes that had once warred were now coming together in the vein of cultural unity and friendship. Wartime dances were now being used as peacetime dances.
and allies were being established through the trade of these dances and songs (Young 1981:128).

The first large intertribal gathering of Native Americans took place in Oklahoma in 1887. It was a four-day festival, arranged by many tribes in Oklahoma. The Ponca Fair and Powwow, which still exists and thrives today, was born from this initial meeting of Oklahoma’s Native American people. The celebration was banned for many years; local officials decided that, although the tribes involved said the function was purely social, the event had potential for trouble, and they therefore outlawed this “savage and pagan” act (Hungry Wolf 1999:9-10). It was later in 1887, as previously stated, that the Bureau of Indian Affairs instituted their mandate to outlaw the dances (Burton 1993:35).

As the Iruska Society dance started to spread throughout the Plains, the groundwork for a new ethnic identity was laid. The rationale for these dances persisted, but the markers changed as the dance spread. The main change was from tribal specificity to intertribal community. Geertz (1996:41) states that a person searches for an identity to become “somebody in the world.” He further asserts that in the case of multiethnic identity, personhood is based on belonging. If many groups share common practices and common ideas, they belong to the same group; they are the same ethnicity (Geertz 1996:41). A problem arises from this new ethnicity; it is what Geertz (1996:43) refers to as “longing not to belong to any other group.” With new loyalties and boundaries formed, there is a tendency to avoid alignment with any other new ethnicities that may exist or arise, Native American or otherwise. Arias (1992:230-231) comments:

Where a dominated group maintains its own ethnic-cultural identity, that very identity easily becomes a force for the mobilization of that group. The defense of a specific ethnic identity reinforces those cultural-ideological norms that solidify the group, which makes destruction of old structures and transformation of the social system possible.

This view follows reflects the growth of pan-Indianism in opposition to the oppressive United States government. Even if Native American groups were wary of adopting a new intertribal ethnic identity, the idea of losing a tribal identity to an intertribal identity was more attractive than becoming less Native American to become more American.
CHAPTER 4

THE REBIRTH OF NATIVE AMERICAN DANCING

The return of Native American dancing (late 1800s) as a public and acceptable activity was largely due to actions taken by the United States government, the same body that had outlawed dancing in 1887. Government-sponsored bodies and events called for Native American dancers and singers as a way to create entertainment for white audiences. The touring Wild West show was responsible for many American citizens getting their first glimpse of “real live Indian” culture (Burton 1993:35). Entrepreneurs, such as Buffalo Bill Cody (Figure 20), took their shows around the country, exposing nearly everyone to this highly misunderstood and stereotyped culture. At the same time, though, the Wild West show promoters increased the misconceptions and stereotypes by dressing the Native Americans in the manner they saw fit and had them dance in the way they thought would be the most interesting to the public. Even if everyone in town did not go to see the show, the “Indians” were often paraded through town so everyone could get a glimpse of this new culture with which everyone was becoming so fascinated (Simon 1999).

Considered to be the first of its kind, the “Kickapoo Medicine Show” toured much of the northeastern United States, starting in 1881. This show was run by John E. Healy and Texas Charlie Bigelow, and it gave American citizens one of the first glimpses into the “real” life of tribal people of the Great Plains (Young 1981:173).

Most dances were called the “War Dance” because that is what people wanted to see (Powers 1990:29). The Western Show promoters encouraged the dancers to embellish their outfits and dance more “wildly” and more vigorously, to attract more spectators to the shows. Many of the show promoters introduced the idea of cash prizes for the Native American dancers who were most popular among the audience.
This had a great influence on Native American social dancing, because it was the birth of the contest dance. The dancers added more feathers to their outfits and put more hop in their steps. The idea of and meaning behind the dances shifted from a ceremonial, even tribal, dance, to something that was meant purely for the entertainment of non-Native American people.

While promoters brought the Native Americans to the general population of the United States, at that time located in the eastern portion of the country, there were also people who tried to bring the eastern portion of the country westward. The largest push for this was between 1890 and 1940 (Dockstader 1994:599). Fred Harvey played a role by exposing many people to Native Americans and the West. In the late 1800s, he wanted to provide people with an opportunity to travel westward to see what much of the country was like. He built very comfortable inns and restaurants in association with the new railroad lines, to entice people to come westward. Many Easterners received their first glimpse of the Wild West while visiting his establishments, seeing the Native American dance shows for the first time. Harvey was integral in giving people a reason to travel westward and exposing them to much of the Native American culture in the
process. The increased number of visitors to the American West greatly influenced the popularity of the dances and Wild West Shows (Weigle and Babcock 1996:56).

In addition to the public dancing, there were many dances going on that were performed by Native Americans for their own reasons. The first such movement that took place after the initial Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) ban of Native American dance practices was the Ghost Dance (Young Bear and Theisz 1994:139). The Ghost Dance was a revitalization movement that started in the 1880s in Utah by a Paiute man named Wovoka (Burton 1993:35). When the Ghost Dance was performed properly, when the rules were followed and the correct outfits were worn, it was believed that the ancestors would return, the buffalo would become plentiful again, and the Native American people would be impervious to the bullets and oppression of the U.S. government. This dance became hugely popular among Native Americans and quickly spread throughout the Plains (Young Bear and Theisz 1994:138). After the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre, on Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, the United States government placed tighter restrictions on any ceremonial activities undertaken by Native American groups (Ortiz 1977:117). This forced many religious and dance societies to go underground, to try to continue their ceremonies in private (Young Bear and Theisz 1994:86).

With the spread of pan-Indian forms of dance and the popularity of the Wild West Show, the warrior society dances that had been so prevalent in the past had nearly vanished. World Wars I and II played a significant role in renewing the warrior spirit in American Indian tribes. As Native Americans enlisted in the American war effort, many were experiencing the same feelings that their ancestors had before going into battle. To help foster these proud feelings and traditions, tribes began holding Warrior Society-type dances once again. These dances inspired the soldier before he went off to war and helped give him the courage he needed to stay safe in battle. Dances were also held to welcome these warriors home. This was the rebirth of War Dance Societies, many of which still exist today (Gooding 2001:43).

Also, as the Warrior Society dances reemerged, the United States government started to allow these dances to take place, which greatly helped in the tribal efforts to bring back the more traditional, warrior ways. The government knew that Native American tribes maintained Warrior Dance Societies. They also knew that other
American citizens were aware that the dance societies existed. The government decided to capitalize on this fact and to encourage Native American nations to hold their War Dance Society gatherings on their reservations. The government charged an entrance fee for spectators; it was a way to try to collect money to help the war efforts overseas (Gooding 2001:43). And as the Warrior Society dances were allowed, the U.S. government allowed Native American tribes more freedom in performing other dances and ritual ceremonies.

The institution of the Wild West show is considered responsible for continuing the separation that existed between the Grass Dance and the Northern Traditional Dance, despite the BIA ban of these dances. What the show promoters did was basically take the dances that already existed and embellish them to be more exciting and attractive to watch. The western shows that grew up in the northern Plains had dancers include even more fringe on their outfits. They also had them dance in a manner that was even more symbolic of tall grass blowing in the wind. Likewise, western shows in the southern Plains had dancers cover their outfits in even more feathers and dance with more war-like movements. Though tribal dancing had been technically outlawed in 1887, the Wild West shows were able to help (and, in a way, force) these two styles of dance to develop independently of each other.

**The Modern Powwow**

Since the birth of the powwow in 1887, social dancing events have spread throughout the Great Plains, across the United States, and even to far corners of the globe. Because the birthplace of the powwow was in the American West, it is also considered to be the home of the best powwows in the world. Native American social dancing and powwow-style dancing have also become popular outside of North America. American Indian culture is very popular in Germany, and there are many dance troupes that exist there, as well as many powwows that are held there every year (NAAOG 2003).

There is also a difference between Native American powwows and Hobbyist powwows. A “hobbyist” is a person who is not of Native American descent, but who takes part in Native American cultural events, such as powwows, Native American dance
performances, and musical performances. The term “hobbyist” comes from the fact that most people consider powwow a way of life that only people of Native American descent can take part in. If you are not of Native American descent, then dancing is just a hobby (Gowder 2003). Hobbyist powwows occur around the country, though these powwows are fewer in number and are often considered not to be as “authentic” or of the high caliber that all-Native dances are. A large reason for this is the fact that people taking part in Hobbyist powwows are not descendents of those who were involved with the original spread of the dances and the War Dance Societies. Several hobbyist organizations throughout the country host powwows every year. Examples of these are FIHA (the Florida Indian Hobbyist Association) and LIHA (the Louisiana Indian Hobbyist Association) (Gowder 2003).

Most dancers feel the powwow is most prevalent in the American West because the dancers in that area are still full-blooded Native Americans who are comfortable in their “Indianness.” Therefore, these Native Americans are not bothered by those who are mixed-blood or non-blood dancers. All kinds of people dance at powwows, from very young to very old, from full blood to non-Native, and from those who have been dancing for years to those who have stepped into the dance circle for the first time. In addition to the dancers and the singers, there are families at powwows. Biological families as well as families consisting of long-time friends take part in powwows together. Even when there are only one or two dancers in a family, many other members of the family will go to the powwows to support them. It requires a family to take care of the dancer or singer, his or her outfits, and to help prepare them for the weekend. It is often the family that inspires the dancer; many dance in honor of those who have “passed before” them or in honor of a sick relative. Dancing is a way to revitalize the spirit of the culture and keep Native American ways alive. Whether it is by telling stories of the past or just by causing dancers to remember the past, it is an effective medium of cultural intensification.

The powwow has become a popular form of dance and expression over the past thirty to forty years, and it has become something that many people now dedicate their lives to, aside from the moneymaking aspect. People spend countless hours making new outfits and practicing their steps (Gathering of Nations 2003). There have even been many professional dance organizations that have grown out of the appreciation of
powwow dance styles as an art form. The most famous of these groups is the American Indian Dance Theater, based in New York City (Jones 1992:174). This Native American dance troupe was started in the 1980s and has traveled all over the globe performing traditional and contemporary styles of Native American dance for audiences. They have played a significant role in exposing people all around the world to this art form (Schwei 1989).

Powwow singing groups, or “drums” (i.e., singers accompanied by a large drum), are another popular institution associated with powwows. A great many of the drums that travel from powwow to powwow have recording contracts and are in high demand. Powwow promoters pay thousands of dollars to have the most popular drums sing at their powwows. Many dancers feel that the success of a powwow depends on the singers who attend (Interview with Darrell Goodwill, February 2003). The better the drum is, the better the dancers will be, and the more people will come to see the powwow. The number of people, good dancers, and good singers that come to a powwow dictate how many people will come the following year and how much money the powwow promoters will make. The powwow drum has become so popular that the Grammy awards now have a Native American Music category, for which mainly powwow groups are nominated. In addition to this, there is an event called the Native American Music Awards, at which only Native American groups are honored for their efforts and contributions (Native American Music Awards 2002).

The powwow has become a hugely popular event since its beginnings on the American Plains. The dances and outfits of the original Warrior Society tradition have evolved into a contemporary representation of an intertribal cultural movement that exists as a way to unify and strengthen Native American identity. The changes that have taken place in the songs, dances, and in the construction and makeup of dance outfits exemplify how the meanings behind the dances and the reasons for doing them, as well as Native American social dancing in general, have changed to promote a positive self view held by Native Americans throughout the country. The modern powwow is quite different from the first intertribal gathering held in Oklahoma in 1887. Dance styles have evolved, types of dancing have changed, the outfits are different, and people dance for different reasons.
The styles of dance that exist today are a result of Intertribal interaction between Native American people across the Plains and the rest of North America.
CHAPTER 5
TWO CONTEMPORARY DANCE STYLES AND OUTFITS

The two contemporary dance styles that most clearly exemplify the changes that have taken place from the Warrior Dance Societies to the dances of modern times are the Grass Dance and the Men’s Northern Traditional Dance. This chapter discusses the outfit styles, dance steps, and meanings behind these modern dances as they have developed in the wake of an emerging pan-Indian identity.

After the Lakota initiated a split in the Omaha Dance Society, resulting in the Grass Dance Society and Traditional Dance Society, the BIA banned all of these cultural practices among Native American tribes. Following this, the Wild West Show entrepreneurs capitalized on these circumstances by starting to have groups of Native Americans dance in their performances in a prescribed manner and with conceived outfits. The dancers were told to take their existing outfits and make them fancier and flashier by adding more of the elements that they already had. This meant that Grass Dance outfits were covered with even more fringe and Traditional Dance outfits were covered with even more feathers. For many generations, these were the most prevalent styles of dance that Native American people took part in.

In 1934, after the Bureau of Indian Affairs removed the ban against dancing, Native Americans were again allowed to take part in their cultural practices. As a result, the popularity of the Wild West show died down in the 1940s and the large majority of Native American dancing that took place was then performed by Native Americans, on their reservations, for themselves. During the period of time that had passed while the dances were banned by the government, a great deal of the knowledge surrounding these dances was lost by the Native American people. The War Dance Societies, which had been such a major part of their culture in the past, were taken away from them and many of these traditions slipped away. The parts of the dances and ceremonial culture that they still remembered, though, were that which happened within the context of Wild West shows. Though it was not “authentically” Native American, it was still Native American.
Many Native American tribes took the reworked Grass Dance and Northern Traditional Dance and made them their own. In the 1950s, these two dance styles continued to develop from the forms that existed in the Wild West shows to become eventually what we see at powwows today.

The Grass Dance

The modern Grass Dancer is said to represent grass on the prairie. This is in contrast to the Warrior Society dancer, who dances with “scalps” tucked under their belts. Grass Dancers cover their outfits with long fringes of yarn, ribbon, or chainette, and as they dance, they try to make the fringe look like the tall grass blowing in the wind.

There are no official steps to the Grass Dance, and there are even times when the dancer’s feet can remain still, but his shoulders and arms are still moving. The style of dance is very fluid, smooth, and flowing. There is a lot of swaying involved and, lately, more spinning in the dance (Simon 1999). Dancers sometimes hop on one foot as they tap down the heel of their other foot in front of them, then tap the toe in back and sweep from side to side with it in front and in back with the toe, heel, or sides of their foot, as if to kick stones and sticks out of the way (all of this is done while still hopping on one foot). Some dancers view this dance as having come from the practice of sending out specific dancers to find new dance circles. The dancers would dance to flatten the grass and try to kick stones out of the way so other dancers would not step on them (Schwei 1989). Many powwows begin with the Grass Dancers dancing into the circle before any of the other dancers. This practice is representative of this idea (Burton 1993:37).

The two dancers in Figure 19 exemplify the modern-day Grass Dance outfit. The contemporary outfit worn by Grass Dancers has very little in common with the original Lakota Grass (Omaha) Dancers of the mid- to late 1800s. The outfit style is now completely based on the fringed component. There is no bustle any more, only a fancy, ribbon-decorated back apron at most.

I interviewed and danced with three of the top name Men’s Contemporary Grass Dance champions, to understand the modern state of the Grass Dance. These three men were Marty Pinnecoose, Darrell Goodwill, and his son, Terrance Goodwill (Figures 20a-20c). All of them have won top prizes at the most competitive powwows in North
Figure 19. Contemporary Grass Dancers. These two pictures exemplify the outfit of the modern Men’s Grass Dance outfit. Both dancers have outfits covered in long ribbon and yarn fringe. Note the back apron of the dancer in the picture in Figure 19b. There is no bustle currently worn by Grass Dancers, but the large majority of the outfits have very highly decorated rear aprons, which I believe to be a carry-over from the original feather belts worn by the original Iruska Society dancers.
Figure 20. Contemporary Grass Dancers. These are three of the people I interviewed for my thesis research.
America. They told me that Grass Dancing is a sacred dance that began with the Omaha people, and that when Grass Dancers dance today, they do so to honor the earth and to impersonate the grass on the prairies. When dancers start moving to the song, they try to set their outfits into motion, to make the long fringe appear to swing and sway as if the dancers were large fields of tall grass blowing in the wind. The dancers try to move in a very fluid manner while they dance.

Each Grass Dancer who received my questionnaire was asked about the history of the Grass Dance. The information I collected from my informants was varied, but taken together, it provides a glimpse into how the Grass Dance developed and traveled throughout the Plains. Of the eighteen questionnaires I handed out, ten people told me that the Grass Dance style started among the Omaha; three told me it started among the Pawnee; two told me that the dance had its origins among the Blackfoot or some other western US tribe; two did not answer the question, and one man told me that stories vary based on politics.

When I examined each questionnaire and organized them according to the informant’s tribal affiliation, an interesting point arose. It appears that each person attributes the Grass Dance to the group from which their tribe (or tribes that inhabit the region in which they live) received it. The men who grew up in the Western Plains attribute the Grass Dance to the Blackfoot because that is who gave it to their tribes. They do not, however, trace the Grass Dance any further back in history than that. Likewise, the responses of dancers from the Northern Plains suggested, that for them, the dance originated among the Omaha. The large majority of these men were members of the Sioux tribe, which originally received the Grass Dance from the Omaha. Since this is known to be true, members of the Sioux tribe do not look further back than the Omaha. The three informants who told me that the dance originated among the Pawnee are members of Southern Plains tribes that had direct contact with the Pawnee. The two dancers who did not answer the question were southern women who said that they did not know about northern styles of men's dancing because this was not their area to know about. And finally, the man who told me that stories vary stated that many different people take credit for the Grass Dance or attribute it to another tribe; however, he respects each story because it is told for some important political reason or another.
I looked at all of my data and decided to trace the origins of the Grass Dance back as far as my informants’ answers would allow. It is known that the Iruska and Hethuska Dance Societies developed in the Southern Plains and the answers I received reflected this fact. Western tribes traced the Grass Dance to the Blackfoot; a Blackfoot man traced the Grass Dance to the Lakota; Lakota men traced it to the Omaha, and Southern Plains men told me that the dance came from the Pawnee, not the Omaha. This was a way of narrowing-in on the place of origin of the Grass Dance. The farther away from the Southern Plains my informants lived, the farther the origin seemed to be, as well. But as my informants’ areas of origin moved closer to the Southern Plains, the further back in time the origin of the Grass Dance appeared to be. The comparison of answers traced the beginnings of the Grass Dance back to the Pawnee, confirming the history of the Pawnee Iruska Society.

Men’s Northern Traditional Dance

The Men’s Northern Traditional Dance is presently a very common dance style, seen at almost every powwow across the continent. This dance style is said to be the most closely related type of dance to the old Warrior Dance Societies. Osceola Redshirt (Figure 26), currently the fourth-ranked Northern Traditional Dancer in the world, explained to me the origin of the Men’s Northern Traditional Dance; his account is virtually the same as that which C. Scott Evans describes in The Northern Traditional Dancer (1998). Redshirt said that the beginnings of the Northern Traditional Dance style can be traced back to the Northern Plains (around South Dakota), and that it was originally a part of the Grass Dance ceremony, that is, the original Omaha Dance of the Lakota. The Northern Traditional Dancer represents a warrior. When the men dance, they are supposed to act out certain moves that are seen during the hunting or tracking of animals or the enemy. Also, the way in which some men dance is representative of buffalo bulls circling the herd to protect females and offspring. It is the job of the Men’s Northern Traditional Dancer to encompass all of these ideals when he is dancing.

Along with my question dealing with the Grass Dance, each of my informants was asked to discuss the history of the Men’s Northern Traditional Dance style. There was less variation within this set of answers. Three informants did not answer the
question, and the rest told me that the style originated among either the Sioux or the Omaha. Ten people told me that the Sioux tribe developed this style of dance. They said that the Sioux had been dancing it for years, but their outfits changed when they met the Omaha. The Omaha tribe influenced the Sioux with their style of outfits used in the Hethuska Society. The current Northern Traditional Dance outfit is much different than that of the original Omaha Hethuska, but the idea of the back bustle was adopted by the southern Sioux tribes and ultimately developed into the present-day style of Men’s Northern Traditional Dance. The remaining informants who discussed the Northern Traditional Dance originating among the Omaha told me that the idea for the style of outfit and dance that exists today is a direct result of the Omaha Hethuska dance. The outfit styles, the ideas for the dance, and the way the men dance are all due to what was practiced by the Omaha during the Hethuska Society dances.

Figure 21. Osceola Redshirt (Author 2003).
The Northern Traditional Style is a dance that represents warriors. War veterans and those currently in the military frequently dance Northern Traditional Style. Men who dance this style are highly respected, partly because of the style’s strong history, which shows in their dance steps and outfits. As Osceola Redshirt explained, when the men dance, they act as if they are hunting or tracking an enemy. “The dance style is flat-footed and earth-bound, but may include active head and upper body movements portraying hunting, tracking, or fighting movements” (Huenemann 1992:127). Also, this dance is still very tribal-specific. Dance steps can vary, depending on tribal affiliation; face paint harkens back to old tribal customs, and motifs on the outfits and beadwork styles are very tribally oriented, as can be seen in the beadwork designs on the dancers’ outfits in Figures 22 and 23.

The dancer in the foreground of Figure 23 is wearing a “full bead set” in traditional Sioux designs (Evans 1998:32). A full bead set includes aprons and side drops (with beaded belt), choker, armbands, cuffs, knee bands, a beaded vest, and moccasins (see Figure 24). Fully beaded sets in traditional tribal designs are most common in the Northern Traditional Style outfit.

It should be noted here that there are other types of “sets” in addition to bead sets. The two other major types are “feather sets” and “bone sets.” A traditional dancer’s “feather set” consists of roach feathers, bustle, and scalp feathers (if he wears them), as well as shoulder feathers (if he wears them), a fan, stick feathers, and roach pin feathers (Evans 1998:18). Some traditional dancers will wear what is called a “feather nest” headdress (see Figure 26) in place of a roach and roach feathers. The “nest” is based on the old Mandan Dog Soldier Society headdress and is also included in a “feather set” (Hail 1988:172). A “bone set” consists of a breastplate, a choker, and bandolier, all made from many short lengths of bone, called “hair pipe,” strung together (Evans 1998:18). These, however, are usually not made of real bone like they once were. Due to its lighter weight and lower cost, dancers now use hair pipe made of plastic (Evans 1998:30-32, 34-35).
Figure 22. Northern Traditional Dancers wearing full bone sets (© Gathering of Nations, Ltd. 2003).

Figure 23. Traditional Dancers wearing full bead sets (Evans 1998:32).
Figure 24a. Beaded belt, aprons, and side drops.

Figure 24b. Beaded choker, cuffs, armbands, and knee bands.

Figure 24c. Beaded vest.

Figure 24d. Beaded moccasins.

Figure 24. Northern Traditional Dancer’s full bead set (KQ Designs 2003).
The Northern Traditional Dance has also evolved into a more modern form, known as the Contemporary Traditional Dance (Figures 30-33). These dancers have much more brightly colored outfits and less tribal-specific patterns and styles of beadwork on their outfits. It is also common for these dancers to have extremely colorful and “wild” designs painted on their faces (see Figure 33). In old times, the paint that was used on the body and face usually came to a dancer in a dream or was a specific motif that had been passed down in his family or tribal lineage for years (Laubin 1977:268). The Contemporary Traditional Dance style, however, has moved away from that tradition to adopt a much more pan-Indian style of dress. In addition to dressing differently, dance steps have become more “modern,” in that they tell less of a story and are considered “fancier.” The Contemporary Traditional Dancer is not required to look like he is hunting or tracking animals. Step patterns and body movements are allowed to be flashier and branch away from the more traditional style.

The Contemporary Traditional Dance is a style that has not only changed in outfits, steps, and paint patterns; there is also now a difference in who dances this style. Since its inception, the Northern Traditional Dance has always been a dance reserved for the veterans and warriors of a tribe. In the Contemporary Traditional style, however, this is not a prerequisite. Men and boys from all walks of life now dance in this fashion, though some of the older dancers do not feel that the younger boys have earned the right to dance in this style or to wear eagle feathers, things that had only been given to warriors upon completion of a major feat in battle or in life (Simon 1999).

Both Men’s Northern Traditional Dance and Men’s Contemporary Traditional Dance styles are known for the single eagle feather bustle that the dancer wears on his back. This has become the trademark of the outfit and the style. “The ‘U’ shape or ‘swing’ bustle has become the standard traditional bustle at powwows all across America” (Evans 1998:15). The “swing” bustles that Northern Traditional Dancers wear today (Figures 34-38) help demonstrate a shift in dance outfit construction and cultural identity, from tribalism to pan-Indianism.
Figure 25. Contemporary Traditional Dancer, Arizona (Author 2001).

Figure 26. Contemporary Traditional Dancer, Arizona (Author 2001).

Figure 27. Contemporary Traditional Dancer, New Mexico (Dr. K. Belle 2003).

Figure 28. Contemporary Traditional Dancer, New Mexico (© Gathering of Nations, Ltd. 2003).
One hundred fifty to two hundred years ago, it was possible to tell what tribe, society, or sodality a dancer or warrior belonged to, based on his outfit and his bustle. Those who wore bustles in the past were the Hethuska and Omaha Dancers. The Lakota started to influence the dance, then they developed a Traditional Dance Society dance, whose dancers wore (messy) bustles, while Grass Dancers covered their outfits with fringe instead of feathers. At today’s powwows, the bustles again appear in yet another form. They are flat-sided and comparatively very large. At a powwow today, a Northern Traditional Dancer who is of Omaha descent, one of Lakota descent, and even one of Seminole blood would all be wearing the same style of bustle. The bustle is still a very prominent part of men’s dance outfits, but now it is the mark of a different style and is made in a different way. The examples in Figures 34-38 are of Northern Traditional Dancers from around the country, all wearing the same style bustle.

The Grass Dance and Men’s Northern Traditional Dance have a common history that stretches back into the War Dance Societies of the Plains. Through the adoption of a pan-Indian identity and the birth of intertribalism, the Dance Societies were shared among tribes on the Plains and were altered and modified as they moved. The current Grass Dance has a completely different meaning from what was originally called the Grass Dance by the Lakota, however. That original Lakota Grass Dance was actually much more similar to the dance and outfit style of the present-day Men’s Northern Traditional Dance. These dance styles traveled great distances over time and have changed greatly along they way. As the dances and dance styles were traveling and being shared between Native American tribes, the songs that accompanied the dance societies were traveling with them, and changing along with them as well.

Although these two dance styles have changed slightly in meaning since the I Ruska Society Dance, and the construction and overall appearance of the outfits are very different, there is a common thread that runs through these styles and can be traced back to the original society dances of the Plains. The reason men dance in these fashions is to carry on a warrior tradition that was started hundreds of years ago. When a man puts on his Grass Dance outfit, he is reminded of the I Ruska Society and the Hethuska Society.
Figure 29. Contemporary Traditional bustle (Dr. K. Belle 2003).

Figure 30. Contemporary Traditional bustle (Author 2001).

Figure 31. Northern Traditional bustle (Author 2000).

Figure 32. Contemporary Traditional bustle (Author 1997).

Figure 33. Contemporary Traditional bustles (Author 2001).
He feels that he is part of history for Native American people. And although what he is doing is taking place in the present, it will be considered the past for future generations. The perpetuation of Native American tradition is something that continually attracts dancers to take part in powwows and intertribal dancing.

The same idea is apparent among dancers of the Northern Traditional Style. The remembrance of the past is often more evident in this style of dance and dress. The Northern Traditional Style is still considered to be a warrior’s dance. Many men wear war insignia on their dance clothes, and it is not uncommon to see Northern Traditional Dancers who have a red, white, and blue or American Flag motif in the beadwork. The eagle feather bustle is also a symbol of warrior status. Eagle feathers were traditionally earned upon completion of a personal feat of heroism, be it in battle or in the community, and eagle feathers were given to recipients by those who already possessed an eagle feather or who were veterans of battle. A man’s status as a great warrior was reflected in the number of eagle feathers he wore on his outfit (Simon 1999).

This tradition still exists today, as Men’s Northern Traditional Dancers cover their outfits with the feathers they have earned. The larger the eagle feather bustle is, the more respected the man. Today, it is possible to obtain eagle feathers in other ways, but those who still believe in the traditional meanings behind feathers and their proper care and usage feel that only the accomplished warrior should own many eagle feathers (Simon 1999).

The Northern Traditional Dance has managed to maintain the common thread of a dance outfit that signifies warrior status, even though it is based on an intertribal perception. Warrior Societies still exist today. There are many tribal-based societies that continue to have regular dance gatherings throughout the year. What separates these from powwows is their tribal nature. Men from a specific tribe come together to dance in a specific tribal way, and only wear outfits based on that tribe’s history. It is not a way of sharing intertribal Native American culture with other groups, but it serves a similar purpose within that tribal culture. Dance is the binding factor that runs through these cultures.
The changes in outfits and general dance styles that occurred as dances moved from tribe to tribe resulted in the composition of new songs to accompany them. Songs must be discussed along with the dances, because the song and the dance are so connected that they cannot exist without each other. Severt Young Bear, past head singer of Porcupine Singers and a widely respected composer on the powwow circuit, describes this connection (Young Bear and Theisz 1994:38):

Song and dance can’t really be separated. Even though I’ll talk about one or the other, they’re always connected. We never dance without singing and we rarely sing without dancing. The involvement of the whole body is to us part of the balance we look for in our lives. The body and the voice are there along with the mind and the heart. We use our bodies to have fun, to pay respect to others, to pray to the Great Mystery.

Like the two basic styles of powwow and dance, songs can also be categorized into Northern and Southern styles (Gooding 2001:442). Tara Browner (2000:217) makes the following distinction: “The Northern style area includes Drums from the central and northern Great Plains, Canada, and the Great Lakes regions, while Southern singing is synonymous with Oklahoma.” (Note that the term “Drum” refers to the group of singers, in addition to the actual physical drum [Hunemann 1993:140]. Browner [2000:215] states that drum is a “term used by Indians to designate a singing group as well as an instrument.”) At certain times, style switching does occur, but it is also generally accepted that a Northern drum cannot do a Southern song justice, nor can a Southern drum properly sing a Northern song (Gowder 2003). A singing group’s geographic distribution, however, is not necessarily the only factor that distinguishes between a song style being classified as either Northern or Southern. Singing style and song structure are the real factors that separate Northern and Southern styles (Browner 2002:71). In general, Northern drums sing in a higher register than do Southern drums. Southern men
sing in a voice that is very close to a regular talking voice, and they do not raise the tone of their voices much higher than that. Northern singers, on the other hand, sing in a very high, falsetto style (Browner 2002:74). The deeper you begin to look into songs and song structures, the more distinctions it is possible to find. Aside from Northern and Southern styles, the other distinctions I will explore in this chapter is the difference between are “word songs” and “vocables.”

Word Songs

A “word song,” simply put, is a song that contains words. Word songs are always considered to be the more “traditional” types of songs (Black Bear and Theisz 1976:13). They are songs that have been passed down for generations within a specific culture and that use spoken words from that language. All Native American groups have word songs.

There was an original set of songs that went along with the Pawnee Iruska Society dance, but as the dance spread to different tribes, each tribe began to translate the words into their own language and to make changes in the lyrics of the songs reflecting the changes in the outfits and steps (Young 1981:126). The Pawnee sang about warrior traditions, such as hunting, tracking, and raiding. By the time the Lakota were performing this dance, however, they were singing about men dancing with grass in their belts, not war clubs in their hands (Powers 1994:477). There was more attention paid to the physical aspects of the dance than to the original meanings. As the meaning of the Grass Dance changed to represent grass on the prairies, the songs changed to support that idea. The texts of the accompanying songs are much more light-hearted and encourage the men to enjoy themselves as they dance in representation of grass blowing in the prairie winds. Red Leaf Takoja, a drum group from South Dakota, sings a song in this style. The lyrics are “These men are spinning and dancing! These men are spinning and dancing! These men are dancing, they’ve come to the Grass Dance” (Bad Hand 1988).

Another example of a song changing over time is the Rabbit Dance. This is primarily a Lakota song that is used as a couples dance. It is called the Rabbit Dance because the steps of the dance (two forward, then one back, repeated) are said to
resemble the tracks of a rabbit on the ground. This song was traditionally sung from a woman’s point of view while talking to her older sister, her cepansi, and the song began with the word cepansi (Young Bear and Theisz 1994:87). The theme of the song was basically shyness, and it portrayed the two sisters discussing a boy that the younger one had her eye on, with the younger sister asking her cepansi advice about him. There is an old Lakota Rabbit song that translates: “Is he alright? Should I get his name? Where is he from? Should I talk to him? Would you?” (Young Bear and Theisz 1994:87). The Rabbit Dance has since changed its theme, reflecting cultural changes.

Severt Young Bear (Young Bear and Theisz 1994:92-93) described how the dominant white culture has adversely affected the Native American population and how that fact is evident in the songs. Where Native American girls were much shyer in the past, the modern Native American mores show the influence of the more risqué lifestyle of white Americans. Modern songs take on a different feel when they deal with alcoholism and a promiscuous way of life. For example, a more recent Porcupine Singers Rabbit Dance song (recording and translation courtesy of Mike DeChristopher) translates as follows: “Dearie, even though you are married and I have lots of kids I still like you. If you feel like it, I may still break up your home.” When the word “Dearie” is used (which is now the most prevalent word beginning any Lakota Rabbit Dance song), it represents the fact that the woman is now talking to the man instead of to her cepansi. It shows that shyness is gone, and the women are being much more aggressive. The Lakota attribute this to the negative influence of the dominant white culture.

A comparison of the modern Grass Dance and its songs to the beginnings of the Grass Dance and the original songs reveals that the song’s words show how the dance developed. From the comparison, we can infer some of the lifeways of the groups who performed this dance. Initially, the Grass Dance was a part of cultural complex associated with a Warrior Society. This was reflected in the lyrics of the accompanying songs. The singers sang about exploits of warfare and hunting and told the story of certain things that happened in battle. The people listening to the songs knew that the dance belonged to a Warrior Society. The type of battle or hunting that is described can also be used to help pinpoint the groups that took part in this dance, as seen in the following Lakota Victory song, used before going into battle: “Palanipe! Palanipe!”
"Palanipe ceya pelo. Palanipe! Palanipe Nake ceya pelo!" ("Pawnees! Pawnees! They are crying. Pawnees! They are finally crying!") (Black Bear and Theisz 1976:52-53). Since the song is sung in Lakota and is about defeating the Pawnee and making them cry over their loss, it is known what Native American groups the singers are singing about and possibly the battle to which they are referring. At a certain point in time, when the songs begin to reflect the emphasis on the use of grass in the outfits, it is possible to infer that there was a change in the meaning of the dance. The dancers are not as concerned with telling the story of battle as they are talking about how the dance looks or singing in support of the dancers. Much of the singing now is done to encourage the dancers to keep going and dance well (Young Bear and Theisz 1994:56). An example of this is found in a recording of a Grass Dance song performed by the Ikceya Wicasa Singers: “Ahhintúnwanpó ahhintúnwanpó glinanjinpélo, Omaha waci wicasaki tányan wacinninyanpelo, Ahhintúnwanpó kabdebedeca wacipelo” (“Look and see, look and see, they have returned; Grass dancers, in a good way, people are depending on you; look and see, they are all broken up as they dance”) (Bullhead 1991). Not only is there less presence of the warrior traditions, it is also possible to tell that the dance migrated northward on the Plains where the tall grass they speak of is more common. Also, when the grass is being used to represent buffalo, we know that the practitioners lived in an area where buffalo hunting was the primary form of subsistence.

**Vocables**

A vocable is a sound made in place of a word in a song (Burton 1993:64). Singing vocables is possibly a more modern style of singing than words. Vocable songs are sung with no lyrics aside from rhythmic sounds, such as “hey-ya, hey-yo,” and “wey-yo, hey-ey-ey-ey-ey-yo” sounds that are frequently heard in Native American songs. Burton (1993:64) gives two possible reasons behind singing with vocables:

1. The song is a personal gift from the Creator and the words are known by, and important to, only the performer and the Creator. Worshippers’ utterances in many world traditions carry a similar meaning--the words and melodies convey the deepest expression of the heart and soul and do not require the trappings of formal language to communicate the content fully.
2. Vocables represent either the remnants or fragments of an archaic tribal language or may be an effort to imitate the sounds of the language of another tribe from which the song was obtained. In some cases, songs continued to be used by members of a tribe after their language became “extinct.” Gradually, the correct pronunciation and specific word meanings were forgotten, although the performers remembered the underlying content—“what the song was about”—and continued singing the “old words.”

Scholars mainly agree that vocables developed with the birth of intertribal dancing. As dancers from different backgrounds and different tribes came together to dance, at such places as the first Ponca Fair and Powwow in 1887, they wanted to dance and sing together but did not know each other’s languages (Hungry Wolf 1999:10). The singers were able to sit down and play the same beat and follow the rhythm of the song, but not the lyrics. So in place of words, singers from different backgrounds fell in sync by using vocables (Hungry Wolf 1999:12). They would replace words with sounds so that any singer, no matter what language he spoke, could sit down and sing the song. As scholars cannot agree on the reason why vocables are used, they are not positive on when they first came into existence. From the data that I have collected in my research, I believe the period of time when vocables first came into use to be some time in the mid- to late 1800s, as intertribal dances started to become popular.

The use of vocables instead of song text is a sign of intertribal contact. When you hear a song that is sung in Lakota or Omaha, you know that it is an old song. Songs that are sung in vocables, however, are more recent songs and do not always have a specific history to them. There are some vocable songs, though, that do have a strong history. The AIM (American Indian Movement [discussed below]) song, composed by the Porcupine Singers, is all in vocables, but it is nonetheless very powerful. This song was composed in the late 1970s, around the time of Wounded Knee II, and though composed by Lakota singers, vocables were used in the place of words so that Native Americans from any tribe could recognize it and sing along with it when they heard the song (Young Bear and Theisz 1994: 175). The song was written to evoke a cultural consciousness as opposed to just telling a story with words.

Vocable songs continue to help promote cross-cultural unity during powwows. Since structure is mainly constant within powwow style songs, any singer would have the
ability to sit down at a new drum and sing a vocable song with that drum even after hearing only a few lines from the song. Many accomplished singers are able to sit down and sing the song as they hear it. They “instantly adjust” to the next note and can pick up with the other singers as soon as they hear the first note.

Through the study of music and culture, it is possible to tell a great many things about a group of people. It is possible to determine where a group moved, who it had contact with, what their daily lives consisted of, what values were important to them, and what materials were considered to be the most valuable and most widely used. In addition, it is possible to see the non-Indian influences that are acting upon a culture and on that culture’s songs. Cultures adapt over time, and comparing similar aspects of culture can help to show all of these aforementioned aspects. What causes groups to thrive over time is their adaptability, and by using diachronic comparative methods, it is possible to tell exactly how and why certain elements have changed.
CHAPTER 7
PAN-INDIAN IDENTITY AND THE POWWOW

The contemporary powwow represents, as well as exemplifies, a pan-Indian identity that exists among Native American people today. This pan-Indian movement, also known as intertribalism, is a self-preservation mechanism that many Native American cultures have developed concurrently to form one “umbrella” culture. Intertribalism creates a more unified force, a collective “us,” to help guard against the collective “them.” Within intertribalism, Native American groups find strength, unity, and support. The powwow is a physical manifestation of all of these ideals.

The intertribal identity has other facets that should also be discussed. There are two main distinctions within the idea of intertribalism; these are pan-Indianism and pan-Tetonism (Powers 1990:61). The Lakota, or Teton Sioux, have held a more traditional life style and cultural ideal than have many other Native American groups on the Plains (Young 1981:63). This strong cultural identity that the Lakota preserve is known as pan-Tetonism (Powers 1970:270). But even within Tetonism, there is the struggle between traditionalism and the modern Lakota (Young Bear and Theisz 1994:16).

Part of the pan-Indian or Intertribal movement is being able to adopt modern influences and ideas. As the dance outfit is one of the most exemplary pieces of material culture offering evidence of this fact, it is instructive to look at how modern influences have affected this part of the powwow. It is now common at modern powwows for dancers to include motifs found in popular culture in their outfits. This occurrence can be likened to warriors hundreds of years ago using symbols of power (such as the lightning bolt or the bear or eagle) when painting their bodies, shields, or horses before battle (Hungry Wolf 1999:34-35). If a dancer gains good feelings or personal power from certain symbols, he will use them on his dance clothes. Modern symbols of pop culture can range from team logos and sporting company insignia to cartoon characters, to name a few.
The two examples shown in Figures 34 and 35 illustrate the use of popular culture icons in Native American dance outfits. The dancer in Figure 34 has included an appliquéd “Tasmanian Devil” cartoon character on his bustle trailer. The other dancer (Figure 35) has a beaded “Nike Air Jordan” symbol on his dance fan. Sports logos are also becoming extremely popular in beadwork and ribbonwork patterns recently. I have seen logos for the Boston Bruins, the Cleveland Indians, the Florida State Seminoles, and the Buffalo Sabres, to name a few. As dances become more contemporary and pan-Indian, outfits also adopt new elements, helping the powwow stay contemporary and thrive.

Aside from serving as a just a marker of contemporary culture, these icons also serve to show the common thread that runs throughout Native American dance and culture. In the past, Native American dancers used symbols of power and personal talismans on their outfits to make them feel and dance better. The grass braids used by the Omaha Hethuska Dancers were a symbol of their personal power and prowess. If a dancer had many braids in his belt, he knew he was a well-respected and powerful warrior (Hungry Wolf 1999:14). Likewise, these personal symbols (Figures 34-35) help the dancers to focus personal power and prowess in the dance arena.

Powwows are now much more social than they ever were before (Simon 1999). Dancers and singers come together at powwows to spend time with old friends and family members and enjoy each other’s company. The powwow has even been described as “the new battlefield,” where people now meet in the spirit of friendly competition and not in war (Schwei 1989). The majority of powwows held around the country are contest powwows, as opposed to social powwows. Dancers enjoy competing against each other to see who will be the champion dancer for that weekend (Simon 1999). Since many of the same dancers travel on the same powwow circuit, they all compete against each other over and over. The two powwows in the country that are considered to be the best competition powwows are “Gathering of Nations” held in Albuquerque, New Mexico (Gathering of Nations 2003), and “Schemitzun” in Ledyard, Connecticut (Simon 1999). When a dancer wins at one of these powwows, he or she is not just champion for the weekend, the dancer is considered to be a national champion.
Figure 34. Northern Traditional Dancer with pop culture symbolism. The bustle trailer worn by the dancer in this photo illustrates the use of pop culture symbolism within modern dance outfits.

Figure 35. Contemporary Traditional Dancer with pop culture symbolism. The fan used by this dancer exhibits a beaded Nike Air Jordan symbol, illustrating the use of pop culture symbolism in modern outfits.
The Native American powwow developed as a vehicle for cultural unification. During its existence, throughout the history of Native American social dancing, the powwow has afforded Native American groups the opportunity to come together and form a stronger, more all-encompassing tribal bond. This opportunity for cultural unification is the basis of intertribalism. It is the adoption of a new cultural identity that exists only when multiple tribes come together and share customs, ideas, and life ways. As these groups share all of these aspects of life, a sort of cultural equilibrium is reached and the practices start to become more homogeneous throughout the population.

This change to a more unified culture is not unintentional. The Native American groups and individuals who take part in powwows go into the dances knowing what is entailed. It is the attractiveness of the new cultural identity that draws American Indians into in the dance and ceremonial complex of the powwow. One reason participation has become so popular is because the powwow IS Native American. The powwow is Native American culture that exists not for spectators, but for participants. Those taking part in the powwow are carrying on the traditions of their culture in a way they see fit, and it is not something that other outside groups are forcing them to do, as had been the case for so long.

Native American tribes are still working to build an intertribal Native American identity. A recent example of this on-going battle is the American Indian Movement. This group was formed in Minnesota in 1968 as a way to help police events that Native American people would be attending. Those who got involved wanted to help protect their people in any manner they could, ranging from protests, to political backing, to violence and hostile takeovers. Since that time, AIM has continued to grow throughout the country and to support Native American groups and people in their battle against the dominant culture in the United States. AIM is a force that struggles to maintain ethnicity and personhood among Native American people (Black Bear and Theisz 1994:148). Even the American Indian Movement can be looked at as carrying on a Warrior Society tradition. Men and women from all tribes are invited to join a force that is used to protect and help Native American people stay more Native American. They are like the original policing societies that existed in the past. And similar to the past, many of the battles that
exist today are over ethnicity and indigenous rights. Also, AIM has many of its own insignia and it has its own song, something that is reminiscent of the old societies.

**Summary and Conclusion**

The comparison of elements of songs and dances and how they have changed over time shows how Native American cultures have adopted modern materials and values as a way to help assure prosperity and the future success of their cultural practices (Young 1981:68). The development and sharing of social dances arose from the need for a combined Native American identity that would strengthen intertribal bonds on the Plains and help to develop a collective consciousness against the oppressive American government during the 1800s.

As pan-Indian identity developed, the dance styles and outfits of Native American groups who partook in the Warrior Society traditions became more intertribal, and each group of people dressed and danced in a similar fashion. Tribal-specific outfits and dances gave way to new dances that belonged to the intertribal Native American. Again, these dances developed out of the combined movement to increase tribal power by increasing the number of people fighting for the cause. Instead of Omaha, Lakota, Salish, Crow, Arapaho, and Shoshone (for example), they started to call themselves “Indian” (Coffey 1986). The dances and the outfits reflected this cultural identity shift. Two dance styles developed that best represent this idea: the Grass Dance and the Men’s Northern Traditional Dance. Elements of these two styles, specifically their respective dance outfits and the materials used in construction, demonstrate this cultural identity change. The timelines in Figures 36-37 help to show and summarize the changes and innovations within the War Dance Society outfits as these dances were shared throughout the American Plains.

Looking at Timelines 1 and 2, it is possible to see how the Pawnee Iruska society developed into the modern styles of Men’s Grass Dance and Northern Traditional Dance. The two diagnostic markers of members of the Pawnee Iruska Society, which was born in present-day Oklahoma between the late 1700s and early 1800s, were the roach headdress and the crow or feather belt. The Pawnee soon had contact with the Omaha in northern Oklahoma and Nebraska and shared the dance with them. When the Omaha received the
Iruska Society in early to mid-1800s, they introduced some variations and innovations to it. One of the first and most important changes that developed was in the name of the society. The Omaha, because of differences in language, called it the Hethuska Society. The roach and the crow belt were still used, but the crow belt was embellished. Instead of just a bunch of feathers, they were placed into an arrangement. The crow belts (often called bustles as they became more elaborate) started to exhibit two “uprights” sticking up from the bustle, and looked fancier. Also, the Omaha started the practice of wearing braids of sweet grass in their belts to represent the scalps of enemies. This element of the dance outfit showed how the dance complex became more elaborate once it was passed to the Omaha. Individual merit (coup counted in battle) was shown as part of the outfit. This way, people observing could tell the prowess of a warrior just by looking at his clothes.

The next change that occurred within the dance society occurred when the dance was shared with the Lakota in northern Nebraska and South Dakota. When the Omaha passed the dance to the Lakota, in the mid-1800s, the Lakota started to call it the Omaha Dance. The innovation that became apparent in the outfits was the use of fringes on the outfits. These fringes can be seen on the shirt and pants of the man in the corresponding picture in Timeline 1. As the Omaha Dance Society gained in popularity and spread to the Lakota, regional styles of dance and clothing developed. Sioux tribes to the north (northern South Dakota and North Dakota) developed what became known as the Grass Dance tradition, continuing to add fringes on the outfit and discontinuing the use of the crow belt. Sioux tribes to the south (in South Dakota and Nebraska) continued the Warrior Society traditions, wearing larger feather bustles and dancing in a manner that closely resembled the earlier dances performed by the Iruska, Hethuska, and Omaha Societies.

Timeline 2 shows how the BIA ban of Native American cultural, which lasted from 1887 to 1934, was overlapped by the push for Wild West shows. The Wild West shows promoted the division between the Grass Dance and the Northern Traditional Dance, and encouraged the styles to become even more diverse. When the BIA ban was lifted in 1934, and Native Americans were once again allowed to practice dancing on their own, two separate styles had emerged; the Grass Dance and the Northern
Traditional Dance. After the Wild West shows died out in the 1940s, the 1950s saw a rise in the popularity of the Grass Dance and the Northern Traditional Dance among Native American groups. These two dance styles became independent of each other and were danced for different reasons, even though both derived from a single original dance.

Native American dance effectively transformed Native American cultural identity throughout the Plains tribes, and ultimately through the rest of North America. By expanding the tribal practice of the War Dance Societies, dancing became something that all tribes could understand and use to help them become more unified. Presently, the powwow serves the same purpose. It brings Native American people together from all areas to dance and share in Native American culture. Even today, the practice of contest dancing is a remnant of the competition for status within a dance society. The outfits have changed, and there have been numerous innovations within each dance style, but Native Americans dance for the same reason today as they did before the Pawnee Iruska Society started. By dancing, they strengthen and reestablish their place (individual and tribal) within the Native American community. Intertribalism has been a constant struggle to maintain a degree of self and personhood that the United States government has been working so steadily against. Dancing helps Native Americans to become once again part of their past, their present, and their future.

The powwow is a very contemporary, trendy, and popular part of Native American culture. It is the “most recent development of a response to stresses and constraints which for hundreds of years have been placed on Native American music, dance, and ceremonialism and the lifeways they symbolize” (Young 1981:1). The powwow has developed as a way to help celebrate the past as well as their ancestry, which is something extremely important to Native American people. Also, the powwow is contemporary and ever-evolving, which serves as a way to celebrate the future. Holding powwows and Native American dance gatherings every year helps assure the prosperity of Native American culture for the next generation and all those to come.
Figure 36. Timeline 1. This timeline shows the origin of modern styles of powwow dancing as they developed among the Pawnee and spread through the Plains.
Figure 37. Timeline 2. This timeline shows the overlap of the ban on Native American dancing and the Wild West Shows and during which period the modern styles of dance underwent mutually exclusive development.
APPENDIX

This questionnaire will be used for the purpose of my thesis research. Please do not answer the questions if you do not wish to and only provide your name if you wish. Names will not be used if you request to remain anonymous. These responses will not be published in any other place than my master’s thesis.

Questionnaire

Name (optional) ____________________________________________________

Tribal affiliation _____________________________________________________

Where are you from/ where did you grow up?______________________________
___________________________________________________________________

Dancing and/ or singing style____________________________________________
Please give a short description of why you perform in this style and what it means to you.

Please give a short tribal history, if any, which pertains to your style of dance.

Where and why did the Grass Dance originate?

Where and why did the Traditional Dance originate?
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Powers, William K.

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Young, Gloria A.

Young Bear, Severt, and Ronnie D. Theisz
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Nicholas I. Belle grew up in Long Valley, New Jersey, and after graduating from high school in 1995, he attended Villanova University where he received a Bachelor’s Degree in Geography in 1999. After completing a Master’s Degree in Anthropology and the World Music Certificate program in the School of Music at Florida State University, he will enter a PhD program in Anthropology. He is active in the American Indian Student Union at Florida State University and is currently its assistant director and head powwow coordinator. He is also the founder and director of FSU’s Native American Music Ensemble in the School of Music. He has spent many years dancing and singing on the powwow circuit, and is a member of the Bum Kneez Singers, based in New Jersey.