

The Evolution and Continuation of Powwows in Native American Communities

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Abstract

The Powwow is generally associated with the indigenous peoples of North America. The Powwow is a cultural tradition of Native American communities that has been celebrated for centuries. Native Americans have reappropriated the word, limiting the meaning to a primarily secular event involving group singing and ballroom dancing. Although there are various types of Powwows, today, the focus is always on a dance competition organized by class, gender, and age that attracts hundreds to tens of thousands of people. This paper focuses on the significant annual Powwows held on Native American reservations that bring together people from diverse Native American groups and geographic regions, the significance of Powwows, and the future of Powwows.

Keywords: Powwow, Native American communities, indigenous peoples, North America

1. Introduction

The Powwow is a cultural tradition of Native American communities that has been celebrated for centuries. The event brings together people from various tribes and nations, creating an atmosphere of unity, respect, and community. It is a vibrant and colorful event, with dancing, singing, and drumming being the main attractions. Powwow is not just a celebration; it is an expression of the history, culture, and traditions of Native American communities.

The roots of the Powwow go back centuries, with different tribes having their unique styles of dancing and drumming. However, the modern-day Powwow has its origins in the late 19th century when the United States

government imposed policies of assimilation on Native American communities. These policies aimed to suppress Native American culture and traditions, and the government banned traditional Native American dances and ceremonies. Despite these restrictions, Native American communities found ways to preserve their culture and traditions, and Powwows emerged as a way to express their identity and celebrate their heritage.

The Powwow has evolved over the years, with different tribes adopting new dance styles, regalia, and music. Today, Powwows take place across the United States and Canada, with each event having its unique character and atmosphere. There are various types of

Powwows, including social Powwows, competitive Powwows, and ceremonial Powwows, among others. However, the underlying theme of all Powwows is the celebration of Native American culture and traditions.

One of the most distinctive features of Powwows is the regalia worn by participants. Regalia includes intricate beadwork, feathers, and other ornaments, which have significant cultural and spiritual meaning. The regalia is not just a form of clothing; it is an expression of identity and cultural heritage. The significance of regalia is reflected in the protocols and etiquette associated with Powwows. Participants are expected to treat their regalia with respect, and there are specific rules regarding when and where regalia can be worn.

The Powwow is not just a cultural event; it also has significant economic and social implications for Native American communities. Powwows provide an opportunity for Native American artisans to showcase and sell their artwork, which is an essential source of income for many families. Powwows also bring together people from different tribes and nations, creating opportunities for networking and community building.

2. What Is Powwow?

Powwow is a cultural tradition of Native Americans that is celebrated through dancing, singing, and feasting. It is a way for Indigenous people to come together and honor their ancestors, their culture, and their community. Powwows can range in size from small local gatherings to large events that draw thousands of people from around the world. The tradition has deep roots in Native American culture and has been passed down through generations.

2.1 Historical Background of Powwows

The history of Powwows is a long and fascinating one that dates back centuries in Native American culture. While the specific origins of the Powwow tradition are unknown, they are believed to have emerged from the traditional dance and music ceremonies of the Plains Indians, such as the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho tribes. These ceremonies were often held to celebrate important events such as a successful hunt, a marriage, or a child's birth.

With the arrival of Europeans in North America, the Powwow tradition began to change. In the

late 1800s, the US government banned Native American ceremonies and traditions, including the Powwow, as part of a broader effort to assimilate Native Americans into white culture. However, despite these efforts, the Powwow tradition continued to thrive in secret, as Native Americans worked to preserve their cultural heritage.

It wasn't until the early 20th century that the Powwow began to reemerge as a public celebration. In 1923, the first "Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial" was held in Gallup, New Mexico, bringing together tribes from across the region to celebrate their culture and traditions. This event marked the beginning of a new era for Powwows, as Native Americans began to reclaim their cultural heritage and share it with the wider world.

Today, Powwows are an important part of Native American culture, representing a celebration of community, identity, and tradition. They continue to evolve and change, reflecting the unique histories and traditions of different tribes and regions, while also incorporating new elements and influences. Through Powwows, Native Americans are able to honor their ancestors, connect with their communities, and share their culture with the world.

2.2 The Different Types of Powwows

There are several different types of Powwows that are celebrated throughout Native American communities. Each type of Powwow has its unique customs, traditions, and practices that reflect the history and cultural traditions of the tribe or region where it is held. Here are some of the most common types of Powwows:

Traditional Powwows: These Powwows are the most common type and feature traditional dance styles, regalia, and music. They are often held in the summer months and are open to both Native American and non-Native American attendees.

Contest Powwows: These Powwows are focused on competition and feature dancers competing in various categories, such as age, dance style, and gender. Cash prizes are often awarded to the winners.

Social Powwows: These Powwows are community-based and are often held to celebrate special events such as birthdays, weddings, or the return of a soldier from military service. They are less formal than other Powwows and feature more opportunities for

socializing and enjoying food and music.

Special Event Powwows: These Powwows are focused on a specific theme or event, such as honoring a particular tribe or celebrating a historical milestone. They are often held in conjunction with other cultural or educational events.

Dance Exhibition Powwows: These Powwows are designed to showcase different dance styles and regalia from various Native American tribes. They may feature demonstrations of traditional dance styles, as well as more modern interpretations of traditional dances.

Overall, the different types of Powwows offer a window into the rich and diverse cultural traditions of Native American communities. Each type of Powwow reflects the unique history and traditions of the tribe or region where it is held and provides an opportunity for both Native American and non-Native American attendees to learn about and appreciate Native American culture.

2.3 The Importance of Regalia and Dress in Powwows

Regalia and dress play a crucial role in Powwows and are essential elements of Native American culture. Regalia refers to the traditional clothing, accessories, and adornments that are worn during Powwows. Each piece of regalia has a specific meaning and significance, representing the individual dancer's tribe, family, and personal history.

Regalia and dress in Powwows are not just about fashion; they are a means of cultural expression and connection to one's heritage. For many Native Americans, wearing regalia and participating in Powwows is a way of honoring their ancestors and keeping their traditions alive. It is also a way of passing down cultural knowledge and values to future generations.

The importance of regalia and dress in Powwows is also reflected in the dance styles and movements. Each dance style has its unique regalia and dress requirements, which reflect the history and traditions of the tribe or region. For example, the Grass Dance, a style of dance that originated in the Great Plains region, requires dancers to wear long, flowing fringe to represent the tall grasses of the prairie.

2.4 The Significance of Food in Powwows

Food plays a significant role in Native American culture and traditions, and this is no different in

Powwows. The food served during Powwows not only sustains attendees physically, but also carries spiritual and symbolic significance.

Traditionally, Powwows were held as a way for tribes to gather and celebrate a successful hunt, harvest, or other important events. The food served during these gatherings often included game meats, wild berries, and other foods native to the region. Today, Powwows continue to serve as a celebration of Native American culture, and the food served during these events has become a blend of traditional Native American cuisine and modern American fare.

One of the most significant aspects of Powwow food is the way it is prepared and shared. Traditional Native American dishes are often prepared in large quantities and served communally. This communal aspect of Powwow food represents the importance of sharing and generosity in Native American culture. It is not uncommon for Powwow attendees to share their food with others or to invite strangers to join them at their table.

In addition to its communal significance, Powwow food also carries spiritual and symbolic meaning. Many traditional Native American dishes are prepared using ingredients that are considered sacred or have special healing properties. For example, wild rice, a staple of many Powwows, is considered a sacred food by many tribes and is believed to have healing properties. Other ingredients, such as berries and roots, are used in traditional Native American medicine and are considered powerful spiritual tools.

2.5 Economic Impact of Powwows

Powwows not only hold cultural and spiritual significance for Native American communities, but they also have a significant economic impact on both local and regional economies. The economic benefits of Powwows come from various sources, including tourism, merchandise sales, and job creation.

One of the most significant sources of economic impact from Powwows is tourism. Powwows attract visitors from all over the world who are interested in learning about Native American culture and traditions. These visitors often stay in local hotels, dine at local restaurants, and purchase souvenirs and other items from local businesses. As a result, Powwows can bring significant revenue to the communities in which they are held.

In addition to tourism, Powwows also provide economic benefits through merchandise sales. Vendors at Powwows sell a variety of Native American-themed items, including jewelry, clothing, art, and crafts. These sales not only generate income for the vendors but also for the Powwow organizers who charge a fee for vendors to set up shop. Additionally, Powwow organizers often sell their own merchandise, such as t-shirts, posters, and other items, which can generate additional revenue.

Powwows also create job opportunities for members of the local community. In addition to the vendors who set up shop at the event, Powwow organizers often hire security personnel, food vendors, and other staff to help run the event. These jobs provide income for members of the local community and help support the local economy.

Overall, the economic impact of Powwows is significant and multifaceted. They bring tourism revenue, merchandise sales, and job creation to local and regional economies. This economic impact not only benefits the organizers of the Powwow but also the members of the local community who rely on the income generated by these events.

2.6 The Impact of Colonization on Powwows

The impact of colonization on Powwows has been significant. The arrival of Europeans in North America in the 15th and 16th centuries led to a long history of colonization, displacement, and oppression of Native American communities. The forced assimilation policies of the US government, such as the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and the boarding school system of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, had a profound effect on traditional Indigenous practices, including Powwows.

Forced assimilation policies aimed to erase Indigenous culture, traditions, and beliefs, and Powwows were often seen as a threat to this goal. As a result, Powwows were banned in some areas, and Native Americans were punished for participating in them. This had a devastating effect on the transmission of Powwow culture from generation to generation.

Despite the attempts to eradicate Powwows and other Indigenous cultural practices, many Native Americans managed to keep them alive through secret gatherings or by adapting them to fit the new reality of life on reservations. Today, Powwows are an important symbol of

Native American resilience and resistance to colonization. They provide a space for Indigenous people to come together, celebrate their culture and traditions, and connect with their heritage.

3. Why Is Powwow Still Practiced by Native Americans Today?

Powwow is still practiced by Native Americans today for a variety of reasons. For many, Powwows are a way to connect with their cultural heritage and honor their ancestors. They provide a space for Indigenous people to come together, share their stories, and celebrate their traditions. Powwows also serve as a means of cultural preservation, as they provide a way for younger generations to learn about and engage with their culture.

Furthermore, Powwows have become a symbol of resistance and resilience for Native American communities. Despite centuries of colonization, displacement, and oppression, Powwows continue to thrive, showcasing the strength and perseverance of Indigenous people. They provide a way for Native Americans to reclaim their culture and traditions in the face of ongoing challenges such as cultural appropriation and the loss of language and land.

Additionally, Powwows serve as an important economic driver for many Indigenous communities. They attract visitors from all over the world, creating opportunities for Indigenous entrepreneurs and businesses to showcase their products and services. Powwows also create jobs and provide a boost to local economies.

Overall, Powwows remain an important part of Native American culture, providing a space for celebration, cultural preservation, and economic opportunity.

4. The Cultural Importance of Powwow

The cultural importance of Powwow in Native American communities cannot be overstated. Powwows serve as a way for Indigenous people to connect with their cultural heritage, traditions, and spirituality. They provide a space for people to come together and share their stories, dances, songs, and art, while also celebrating their unique cultural identities.

Powwows offer an opportunity for Native Americans to honor their ancestors and the land that they have inhabited for generations. They also provide a way for younger generations to learn about and engage with their culture,

creating a sense of pride and belonging.

In addition, Powwows serve as a means of cultural preservation. Through Powwows, Native American communities are able to pass down their traditions, songs, and dances from generation to generation. This is particularly important in the face of ongoing challenges such as the loss of language and land.

Powwows also play a significant role in the spiritual life of Native American communities. They provide a space for people to connect with the Creator, their ancestors, and the natural world. Through prayer, dance, and song, Powwows offer a way for people to express their gratitude, seek healing, and find strength.

Overall, the cultural importance of Powwow in Native American communities cannot be overstated. They provide a way for people to connect with their culture, honor their ancestors, and celebrate their unique identities, while also serving as a means of cultural preservation and spiritual connection.

5. The Origins and Evolution of Powwows in Native American Culture

The origins of Powwow can be traced back to the Plains tribes of North America, particularly the Sioux and Blackfoot tribes. In the early days, Powwows were held as a means of social gathering and were marked by feasting, dancing, and drumming. Over time, Powwows evolved into more formal gatherings with specific protocols and rules.

The evolution of Powwows was also influenced by the arrival of European settlers and their impact on Native American communities. Many tribes were forced to relocate and adapt to new environments, leading to changes in their traditional ways of life. However, Powwows continued to be an important cultural tradition and a way to maintain a sense of community and identity.

In the 19th century, the United States government banned Powwows and other Native American cultural practices in an attempt to assimilate Native Americans into American society. However, despite these efforts, Powwows continued to be practiced in secret and eventually regained their status as a public celebration in the mid-20th century.

Today, Powwows continue to evolve and adapt to modern times while still maintaining their cultural significance. Many Powwows

incorporate contemporary music and dance styles alongside traditional practices, showcasing the continued evolution and vibrancy of Native American culture.

6. The Role of Gender and Age in Powwows

Gender and age play significant roles in Powwows, as they are tied to traditional Native American beliefs and cultural values. In most Powwow traditions, both men and women participate in dancing and singing, but the dances themselves may be specific to gender. For example, the Grass Dance is typically performed by men and represents the way in which they would flatten the grass before a campsite to prepare for ceremonies. The Jingle Dress Dance, on the other hand, is usually performed by women and has healing origins. The dance is believed to have originated during the 1918 influenza epidemic when a father had a dream that his daughter would recover from the illness if he created a dress with metal jingles and had her dance in it. The dance has since become a significant part of Powwow culture and is often used in healing ceremonies.

Age is also a crucial factor in Powwows. Elders are highly respected in Native American culture and are considered to be keepers of traditional knowledge and wisdom. They often hold positions of honor during Powwows, such as leading Grand Entry or serving as judges. Younger generations are also encouraged to participate in Powwows and learn traditional dances, songs, and customs from elders. Many Powwows have specific dance categories for children, allowing them to showcase their skills and participate in their culture's traditions.

Overall, the roles of gender and age in Powwows highlight the importance of intergenerational learning and passing down traditional cultural practices.

7. The Future of Powwows in Native American Culture

The future of Powwows in Native American culture is a topic of great significance and concern for many Indigenous communities. While Powwows have survived and continued to thrive throughout the centuries, there are still challenges that must be addressed in order to ensure their continued importance and relevance.

One of the challenges facing Powwows is the loss of traditional knowledge and practices.

Many Powwow traditions have been passed down orally from generation to generation, and with the effects of colonization and the displacement of Native communities, much of this knowledge has been lost or diluted. As a result, many Powwow dancers and singers may not have a full understanding of the cultural and spiritual significance of the Powwow.

Another challenge is the issue of cultural appropriation, where non-Native individuals may appropriate aspects of Powwow culture without fully understanding or respecting their significance. This can lead to a misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Powwow culture, and can contribute to the erasure of Indigenous perspectives and voices.

Despite these challenges, many Native communities are actively working to revitalize and preserve Powwow culture for future generations. This includes efforts to teach traditional knowledge and practices to youth and to promote the cultural and spiritual significance of Powwows. Additionally, there are ongoing efforts to promote respectful engagement with Powwow culture and to raise awareness about the importance of cultural preservation and indigenous sovereignty. With continued efforts and support, the future of Powwows in Native American culture can be a bright one.

8. The Challenges Faced by Native American Communities in Preserving and Promoting Powwow Culture

Native American communities have faced numerous challenges in preserving and promoting Powwow culture. One major challenge has been the loss of cultural traditions and knowledge due to colonization, forced assimilation, and the boarding school era. These historical traumas have resulted in the loss of language, customs, and traditional knowledge, making it challenging for Native American communities to pass down their cultural heritage to future generations.

Another challenge is the lack of resources and funding to organize and host Powwows. Powwows require significant financial and organizational resources, which many Native American communities may not have access to. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed a significant challenge to the preservation and promotion of Powwow culture, as many Powwows were canceled or moved to virtual

platforms due to health and safety concerns.

Cultural appropriation is also a major challenge faced by Native American communities in preserving and promoting Powwow culture. The commercialization of Native American cultural symbols, clothing, and regalia has led to the commodification of Powwows and the misrepresentation of Native American culture in mainstream media. This has led to the exploitation of Native American traditions and has contributed to the erasure of the true meaning and significance of Powwows.

Despite these challenges, many Native American communities continue to work towards preserving and promoting Powwow culture. Efforts to revitalize traditional practices, such as language and dance classes, are being made in many communities. Additionally, there is a growing movement towards decolonizing Powwows and creating spaces that prioritize the voices and perspectives of Native American people. The resilience and determination of Native American communities to preserve their cultural heritage are a testament to the enduring significance of Powwows in Native American culture.

The cultural significance of Powwows is not limited to Native American communities alone. Powwow culture intersects with other indigenous cultures worldwide and can be seen as a way for indigenous people to connect with each other and celebrate their shared heritage.

For example, the Powwow has become an important cultural event for First Nations communities in Canada, and the term "Powwow" is also used in Australia to describe similar gatherings of Indigenous Australians. These events provide a space for indigenous people to celebrate their culture and traditions, as well as to share their experiences and struggles.

Additionally, the Powwow has also been adopted by indigenous communities in other parts of the world, such as the Maori people in New Zealand and the Sami people in northern Europe. These communities have adapted the Powwow format to fit their own cultural traditions, but the core principles of celebrating heritage, connecting with others, and honoring ancestors and spirits remain the same.

The intersectionality of Powwow culture with other indigenous cultures highlights the importance of recognizing and honoring diverse

cultural traditions. It also provides an opportunity for indigenous people from different parts of the world to come together and celebrate their shared experiences and histories.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, Powwow is an integral part of Native American culture that has survived centuries of colonialism, oppression, and cultural erasure. The history and evolution of Powwows showcase the resilience and strength of Native American communities in preserving and promoting their cultural traditions. Powwows provide an opportunity for indigenous people to celebrate their heritage, connect with their ancestors, and share their culture with the world.

However, Powwow culture still faces several challenges, including cultural appropriation, lack of funding and resources, and the impact of modernization on traditional practices. To ensure the survival and continuation of Powwow culture, it is important for non-indigenous communities to show respect and understanding for the cultural significance of Powwows and for governments to provide support and resources to Native American communities.

Overall, Powwows serve as a powerful reminder of the rich and diverse cultural traditions of indigenous people worldwide. It is important to continue to educate ourselves and others about the significance of Powwows and to work towards preserving and promoting this important cultural tradition for future generations.

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