

# **Cross Cultural Expression: Towards an Appreciation of Indigenous Song/Dance**

Patricia Dewar  
University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon

As southern Canadians we are generally ignorant of what dance is in other lands, and of what dance is within our own country. By focusing on indigenous dance--such as Plains Indian Pow Wow dance and traditional Inuit drum dance, I argue that in approaching traditional song/dance forms, we must approach it with a completely different set of expectations.

Although traditional song/dance encompasses a great diversity of forms (the variance derived from different cultural peoples, as well as different regions, different communities, different individuals and different circumstances) I explain how indigenous song/dance equates with an indigenous world view. This broad and risky approach is taken in order that we may begin to appreciate something of the vitality and complexity of indigenous dance as opposed to its diversity. Thus, I clarify that people who share a unique cultural form and particular experience, are not only distinct amongst themselves, but from the rest of Canadian/American society.

Obviously, for both Indian and Inuit their music and dance has been re-contextualized. However, the search for what it means to have a sacred space and time, to forge a particular identity through song/dance performance, is as genuine and significant today as it was yesterday. Accordingly the question to be asked is, Why, against almost insurmountable odds, are the First Nations People of the Plains and the Inuit of the Far North, still celebrating their song/dance heritage?

My approach, based on an ethno-scientific model, focuses on song/dance as cultural/historical knowledge and how they are realized in behavioural application. Specifically, I view a performance event as a cultural historical sight/site where conventional values are being tested. What is being retained, restored, rejected? How do the performance players design and re-design themselves both individually and collectively?

Discussion begins by asking, How the body itself articulates a common knowledge? What are the time tested notions of the body--its actions, its use of energy and space, that are so completely different from Euro-American theatrical traditions? Why are the images familiar, reassuring?

Having identified how the movement code itself reveals a certain semantic content, further understanding is sought by asking, What are some of the core societal values being tested in song/dance performance? What are the key principles/ethics which were central to the conduct of a traditional way of life, and which to varying degrees remain important today? Phrased differently, Why do performers feel that by drumming, singing, and dancing they are acting in a way that enables them to become a truly respectful and respected member of society?

Specifically I ask, Why do participants adopt an underlying rationale/principle of happiness and goodness, and how is this concretely tested in song/dance performance? Also, How does the performance process exemplify traditional notions of autonomy and sharing?

A brief journey into Pow Wow dancing, and Inuit drum dance will promote a greater understanding of what matters for these two distinct peoples. By discovering where our dreams both converge and diverge we might better begin to share our human resources.



**Pow Wow, Saturday Evening**