

Aboriginal Dancing and the Assimilative State

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Between 1884 and 1951 the Government of Canada systematically attempted to suppress several traditional forms of Aboriginal cultural and religious expression, for example, the Potlatch, a North West Coast sharing ritual possessing many social and economic functions, and prairie dancing. What united the Aboriginal indigenous rites in the eyes of Christian missionaries and Canada's Department of Indian Affairs was both their expression of Aboriginal values that Euro-Canadians sought to extirpate and their role as a medium for transmitting and perpetuating those same values. In other words, the Potlatch, the Sun Dance, the Thirst Dance, and other similar ceremonials were both the object to be eliminated so far as Euro-Canadians were concerned, and a mechanism for preservation of traditional society in the eyes of the Native groups themselves.

Beginning with a major revision of the Indian Act in 1884, the Canadian state sought to abolish, first the Potlatch specifically, and then, from 1895 onward any type of ceremonial that involved give-aways and objectionable practices, such as the self-mutilation that young males practised in the Sun Dance and Thirst Dance. The statutory prohibitions were stiffened from time to time in amendments of the Indian Act that conferred increasing powers of enforcement and adjudication on Indian Agents. In spite of these potent paper weapons, the forces of Euro-Canadian society proved largely unable to eliminate these indigenous practices. Finally, as part of a general overhaul of the Indian Act that removed many paternalistic and interfering clauses, the prohibition on give-away dances and ceremonies involving self-mutilation was repealed in 1951. From the 1960s onward prairie dancing in particular has thrived.

This paper explores several aspects of the long, complicated, and revealing story of the campaign against indigenous values and practices. It examines the motivations behind the attempted suppression, the various mechanisms that Indian Agents and others employed in pursuit of that end, and the many techniques that Aboriginal groups utilized to frustrate the campaign. It also evaluates the place of the government campaign against dancing in the larger program of attempted assimilation of Native people economically, politically, and socially that disfigured federal policy from the 1880s onward. In doing so, it sheds light both on Euro-Canadian attitudes towards indigenous cultural practices such as dancing and on Aboriginal communities' ability to defend their traditions against ethnocentric assault.

This research is based on material from a broad range of sources. Obviously, documentary evidence from government and church archives underpins the analysis of Euro-Canadian motivation and efforts. Therefore it also examines evidence from the Native oral tradition, specifically one story concerning dancing that has been published in a book entitled Earth Elder Stories. Illustrations are also used to demonstrate both the features of traditional ceremonies that were considered objectionable and the fact that Native people successfully maintained their practices in the face of secular and religious disapproval.