

# Powwows bring traditions to new age of Indians

**T**wo middle-aged dignitaries solemnly lead the grand entry procession from the east into the dancing circle. Following behind them were about 60 Indians, adorned in a variety of colorful and dazzling dancing costumes highlighted by feathers, bells and beads.

A group of six men were seated around a large drum in the middle of the dancing circle. Working together at the big drum, they pounded out a heavy beat, slow and steady.

The procession leaders carried two flags — one American, one Nebraskan — and the dancers who followed moved deliberately around the circle in time with the drum beat.

**O**nce all the dancers had entered the circle, the men at the drum began to chant and sing. Inspired by the music, the dancers broke out of their somber mode and began dancing free-style.

Individual dancers weaved throughout the group, each sharing their personality, their spirit, with the others. Although the dancers seemed to move at random within the group, there was an amazing non-order as the overall group moved as one.

The sounds of the drum, the singing and jingle of the bells worn by the dancers were occasionally punctuated by a yell, a sort of short spirit cry. The dancers gave physical life to the song.

All in one moment, the drum beat stopped, the singing stopped, the dancers stopped. A brief prayer and the dancers broke up the circle.

Indians keep their tribal culture and identity alive through powwow activities.

**B**efore the dancing began, the organizers of the powwow "gave away" colorful blankets to Indians who had come to the powwow.

Helen Long Soldier, a Lakota Indian and counselor at Multi-Cultural Affairs at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, said that "give aways" are common when Indians get together.

"At almost any event, you'll see someone having a give away," she said.

Give aways express respect and thanks, Long Soldier said.

"It's a way of showing respect for the people who came to the powwow," she said.

Long Soldier said non-Indians have difficulty understanding this, but Indians don't expect gifts on personally significant occasions such as birthdays. Instead, large family gatherings, such as powwows, are more common for gift giving.

That's just one example of some of the opposing cultural values held by Indians and non-Indians.

The drum is fundamental to the powwow. Not only does it provide the beat for the dancers, it is full of symbolism as well, Long Soldier said.

**F**or example, the drum sits at the center of the arena and the dancers move around it. Long Soldier said the placement of the drum at the center of the arena is symbolic of the drum being at the center of the world. She said that the sound of the drum represents a heartbeat.

The drum is also symbolic of the world perspective of Indians, Long Soldier said.

"The drum is round," she said. "We are a circular people as opposed to a linear one."

Philip Wright, elder of the drum for Mazakute, or "Iron Shooter," a group of traditional Indian musicians from Santee, said there

**C**eremonial dancing is formal and consists of specific dance moves that tell a story or have some social significance within the tribe, Long Soldier said.

"People usually have to go through some kind of learning process to do it (ceremonial dancing), she said. "It's much more serious and it usually has some religious significance."

"It's symbolic of something that is happening or has happened," Long Soldier said.

Social dancing is less formal, allows more room for personal expression, and can be broken down into four categories: traditional, fancy, jingle dress and grass. Gilbert said the

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*-- Long Soldier*

are two kinds of songs: tribal and intertribal. He said tribal songs are sung in the traditional tribal language, whereas intertribal songs are more like chanting.

Wright said the drum and the songs are an important part of keeping the tribal culture alive. The drum is sacred to the Indian people and is treated with respect, he said. For example, they offer a sacrifice of tobacco to the drum before playing, he said.

The songs are important to the people because they "lead towards prayer," Wright said.

"The drum and the songs belong to the people," he said.

Long Soldier said Indian people believe a song can't be owned.

"Certain people make songs, but they give them to the people," she said. "You can't own a song."

**L**ong Soldier said the songs are important because they help Indians remember their history and culture. Traditionally, Indians have an oral history instead of a written one.

"The words of a song may describe an image or tell a story," she said.

Marcy Gilbert, member of the Lakota tribe and a UNL sophomore home economics student, said dancing is another important way for Indians to preserve their culture.

"Among our people, dancing is to us what the Olympics is to the white world," she said. "It's like bonding — it keeps you in contact with each other."

There's one more reason to dance at a powwow, Gilbert said.

"It's a lot of fun," she said. "I grew up with it."

Gilbert said there are two types of Indian dancing: ceremonial and social.

type of costume worn by the dancer distinguishes the category of the dance.

Most dancers take pride in making their own costumes, Gilbert said.

"If you sit down and bead every day, you can make one (a costume) in two months," she said. "It's the beadwork that takes the longest."

David Esau, an 18-year-old Omaha Indian, has been dancing for five years. He said learning to dance is a life-long activity.

"It takes a lot of years to learn how to sing or dance," he said. "My dad's 42, and he's still learning."

Many powwows sponsor a dancing contest, giving cash awards to the best dancer. The contest is broken down by sex of the dancer, age of the dancer, and style of the dance.

**J**ason Sperry, a 14-year-old Cherokee Indian from Broken Arrow, said it's an honor to win a dance contest.

"It tells people that you were the best dancer that night," he said. "The person who came in second that you beat that night might beat you next time."

Long Soldier said putting on a powwow is expensive, especially in an urban area. More and more people charge nominal fees to help defray the costs of putting on a powwow, she said.

"The more spread out Indians get, the more people will have to charge for powwows," she said. "The atmosphere is the same though."

The word powwow is not a real Indian word, Long Soldier said. She said people have many ideas about where the word came from.

"Some think it is from the sound of the drum, some think it is a distortion of some other word, some think it comes from the French word "parler" or "meet," she said. "Some think it came from Hollywood."

But the Indians are happy to use the word, she said. It's a word they all understand.

