

Indigenous Peoples' Day & the Pow Wow Highway

the new holiday & the pow-wow tradition

By Millie Ketcheschawno and John Curl

Celebrate this new annual holiday with us in honor of all of our ancestors,
the people continuing the struggle today and future generations.

The Grass dancers shake and bend, the high curves of their hair "roaches" like clipped horses' manes. The men move slowly around the large chalk circle in the center in the park, stepping to the drum beat, long ribbons and yarns on their outfits and leggings almost brushing the ground, the fringes hiding and disguising intricate foot movements. Beneath a shade outside the circle, a group of Indian men sit beating time with drum sticks on the large northern drum, singing in a high falsetto; women join in the chorus.

Hundreds of people on the lawn watch while hundreds of others mull about the Indian craft and food booths that surround the circle. Then the drumming suddenly stops and, as if on cue, the dancers all finish precisely on the last beat.

The men step out of the circle and a group of women dancers enter, each with an eagle plume atop her head and holding an eagle wing fan. They are wearing long buckskin and taffeta dresses reaching down to their ankles, some adorned with metal disks sewn in patterns. The southern drum group begins a faster tempo. The Jingle-dress dancers take off with quick movements, disks clattering, a hint of stiffness in their flowing steps, a sense of calm in their energy.

We are at the Berkeley Indigenous Peoples' Day Pow-wow.

Every year on the Saturday closest to the traditional date of the arrival of Columbus at Turtle Island, this year on October 11th, Berkeley holds a pow-wow and Indian market, to celebrate the survival and revitalization of Indigenous cultures, and to commemorate Native resistance to the forces still threatening to destroy them.

What is a Pow-wow?

Pow-wows offer the most public situation in which non-Indians are welcome and can connect with Native culture, which is always around us in mass society but often nearly invisible to those unaware. There are pow-wow dances in which everyone can participate. But although millions of non-Indian people have been to pow-wows, most really know little about the meaning of the cultural form or its history.

Many people think that pow-wows are a fairly new creation, because until the 1950s most pow-wows were very local. It has been said that contemporary pow-wows began in the honoring ceremonies for Indian veterans returning after World War II. It was only in the middle of the 1950s that many Indian people began traveling the Pow-wow Highway between Indian communities, dancing while promoting Intertribal culture.

But pow-wows go much further back than that. Perhaps the oldest continuous annual one today is the Quapaw pow-wow, started over a hundred years ago.

In the early twentieth century a dance known as the Helushka or Hedushka spread out of Oklahoma through the Great Plains north to Canada. Helushka societies were formed in over thirty tribes through the Great Plains region, and through the dance former enemies made peace. The Helushka became the form known today as the Straight Dance; it is the earliest pow-wow dance, around which all the others coalesced.

There are different versions of the origin of the Helushka; the historians, as usual, disagree. The Ponca-Omaha are usually credited with the most developed early form. Some say it originated through a vision to a Ponca-Omaha man, and that the earliest Ponca pow-wows were celebratory gatherings of the tribe's survival after their forced deportation to Oklahoma from their original homeland in Nebraska. Others historians say the Poncas adapted it from the Pawnee's Irushka ceremony in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Among the Pawnee it was a spiritual dance, taught in a vision to a Pawnee man by a group of beings immersing their hands into boiling water and handling fire. The beings told him they had a new dance to teach him, then held him over the hot coals; after he survived this ordeal, they taught him the songs and dance and told him to take them to the people. Then the beings turned into birds and animals and left. The next night the man climbed a hill to fast; again he met the beings sitting around a fire, singing and laughing. Again he was put to the fire ordeal; again the beings turned into animals and birds. All except one. Then the others left, but the lone being stayed and taught the Pawnee man to make two of the most important symbols of today's male pow-wow dancers, the roach headdress and the "crow belt." The roach headdress, made from deer and porcupine hair, represents the fire ordeal. The eagle feather, in a bone spreader made from the shoulder blade of a deer, represents the man standing in the center of fire; the bone represents the medicine given to him. The being taught the man to make many of the other items worn today in the dance, and the first initiate in turn passed them on to his people. The back bustle worn by Fancy dancers is a development from the crow belt.

This vision was acted out in ritual as the dance moved in the early days among the Plains tribes. "Irushka" literally means "they are inside the fire," in the Pawnee language, but is often translated as "warrior." According to this version of history, the Ponca adopted the Pawnee ceremony, but changed the spiritual dance into a commemoration of warriors and war, and therefore also of peacemakers and peace, of cultural resurgence and survival, as tribes who were formerly enemies now danced together. Another version holds that the Ponca had the songs and dances before the Pawnee.

Many tribes also trace pow-wows back to their own periodic gatherings, large traditional celebratory feasts, usually after the fall harvest.

The Forms of the Dance

With time and many different tribes adding their individual characters to the dance, the Helushka began to take a variety of forms and different names, such as Grass Dance, Prairie Dance, Wolf Dance and Omaha Dance. At first women did not dance. When non-Indians featured it in nineteenth-century Wild West Shows, as Buffalo Bill did, they called it the "War Dance."

The term pow-wow, from the Algonquian word for a gathering of people, began to be used in Oklahoma around 1900.

The Helushka soon took the form on the Southern Plains of the traditional Straight Dance: traditional dancers move proudly and sedately. On the Northern Plains each tribe developed its own unique styles, such as the Northern Traditional. Over the decades other styles of both male and female dance, movements and songs have developed: the modern Grass, Fancy and Traditional dances for men; the Shawl, Cloth, Buckskin and Jingle Dances for women. The Shawl Dance is the women's fancy dance, with elaborately beaded or sequined tops and leggings.

The dances continue to develop as more and more tribes outside the Plains tradition have begun to join in pow-wows in order to make social connections with other tribes for friendship, trade and to be part of the Pan-Indian movement.

Pow-wows follow a traditional form: they begin with a grand entry, flag ceremony, invocation; followed by a sequence of dances, dance contests, singing, drumming, prayers, speeches, and honoring ceremonies such as giveaways of presents.

There are usually four dance contest categories: tiny tots; boys and girls; young men and women; elder men and women. They compete in Straight/Traditional, Fancy, Grass, Jingle and Shawl Dancing. The contests are judged by people knowledgeable in pow-wow style dancing, who may be dancers themselves.

Early pow-wows usually held dance contests, but without the cash awards of today.

pow-wows vary from place to place. In some areas a pow-wow is primarily a spiritual and traditional celebration, while in other areas it is a more social, secular and commercial event. Many pow-wows in Indian Country are not announced in the non-Indian media, and outsiders are rarely invited to some very traditional ceremonies. Indian people from many tribes gather together from every direction to participate in the activities, meet old friends and make new ones, be part of the culture. Almost every week of the year there is at least one pow-wow somewhere in the United States and Canada.

Today's Indian Resurgence

Pow-wows are integral to today's resurgence of Indian pride, and a primary way that Native people develop inter-tribal culture in a modern context without demanding that each tribe give up its own unique identity. For urban Indians in particular, where Native culture is often very low profile, pow-wows are a way of primary public affirmation. pow-wows have helped to develop a contemporary context in which each tribal culture can continue, and have helped to create the great movement that is shaping the Indigenous revival of today.

Understanding the modern pow-wow is central to recognizing the revitalization of Indigenous culture with its values of respect for the earth, living in traditional balance, respect for the multiple of cultures and creatures on Turtle Island. It is through living our lives in this recognition that we offer hope to move beyond the destructive powers of mass industrial civilization.

The Birth of Berkeley's Indigenous Peoples Day

The idea of replacing Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day was not a new one. It was first proclaimed by representatives of Native nations and participants at the United Nations-sponsored International Conference on Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations in the Americas, which took place in 1977 in Geneva, Switzerland. The declaration of this body was applauded and echoed by Native peoples around the globe.

Indigenous peoples and human rights/peace/social justice/environmental organizations were beginning to gear up for the 500th anniversary of Columbus' voyage, 1492-1992, which marked the beginning of the European invasion of the Western Hemisphere and Native resistance to it. While governments were trying to make it into a celebration of colonialism, Native peoples wanted to use the occasion to reveal the historical truths about the invasion and the consequent genocide and environmental destruction, to organize against its continuation today, and to celebrate Indigenous resistance.

With representatives from 120 Indian nations from every part of the Americas, the all-Indigenous First Continental Conference on 500 Years of Indian Resistance, held in Quito, Ecuador in July 1990, saw itself as fulfilling a prophesy that the Native nations would rise again when the eagle of the north joined with the condor of the south. The conference resolved to transform Columbus Day, 1992, "into an occasion to strengthen our process of continental unity and struggle towards our liberation."

Resistance 500

Upon return, all the conference participants and like minded others began organizing in their communities. A year and a half before the Quincentenary, Indian people of Northern California met at Native American D-Q University in Davis, California, and organized the Bay Area Indian Alliance for counter-quincentennial planning. They resolved to "reaffirm October 12, 1992 as International Day of Solidarity with Indigenous Peoples."

The final day of the conference was moved to Oakland and was opened to non-Native people. This conference organized a broad coalition to coordinate 1992 activities with Indigenous leadership, called Resistance 500. The Resistance 500 coalition broke down into four committees revolving around different municipalities, planning local activities in San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley and the South Bay.

Meanwhile, the Bay Area had been chosen by the U. S. Congress as the national focus for the planned Quincentenary Jubilee hoopla, with replicas of Columbus' ships scheduled to sail into the Golden Gate and land in a grand climax (eventually canceled). Berkeley Resistance 500 asked the City Council to set up a task force to make recommendations regarding Quincentenary planning.

After meeting for a number of months, the Resistance 500 Task Force proposed replacing Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day.

To make the case for changing Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples Day, the Task Force had to convince the community not only that Native people should be honored with a day, but that Columbus should no longer be honored. The Task Force presented their research which showed overwhelming evidence that Columbus himself took personal leadership in acts that would today be called genocide.

Columbus planned to conquer and colonize all the Caribbean islands and the mainland. The islands were populated by over a million Taino Indians, peaceful farmers and fishermen. Unable to find enough gold to finance his schemes, Columbus captured thousands of Tainos and shipped them to the slave markets of Spain. The Tainos resisted with fishbone-tipped spears, but these were no match for artillery. Columbus demanded that each Taino pay a tribute of gold dust every three months, under penalty of amputation of the hands. In two years over a hundred thousand Tainos were dead, and the survivors were slaves in the mines and plantations. Columbus personally invented European imperialism in the Americas and the transatlantic slave trade.

Once the Berkeley City Council understood the proposal and that there was wide support for it in the community, they voted unanimously in its favor, declaring October 12th to be commemorated annually as "Day of Solidarity with Indigenous People."

The Council also declared 1992 the Year of Indigenous People (also proposed by Native groups to the U. N., who ultimately gave them 1993 instead), and supported a series of ideas for its implementation in the schools, libraries, museums, arts, and the University.

Finally the City approved the Task Force's proposal to replace the old broken fountain in the park behind City Hall with a new fountain designed as this country's first monument dedicated to Indigenous Peoples. This fountain, known as the Turtle Island Monument, designed by Lee Sprague, Potawatomi, has a life of its own, and the City of Berkeley is currently finalizing plans for its construction, which will include a time capsule buried beneath it containing messages from today's Native peoples, to be opened by the Seventh Generation.

Other municipalities have followed Berkeley's lead, have dropped Columbus Day and have begun to celebrate Indigenous Peoples Day instead, including Sebastopol and Santa Cruz, CA. The State of South Dakota, in a related move, also dropped Columbus Day and replaced it with Native American Day.

At first there was some outrage from the large San Francisco Italian-American community, which always came together for an annual Columbus Day parade and reenactment, so felt attacked. But on quiet evaluation of the historical record, the leaders of the Italian-American community decided that Columbus was no hero of theirs either, so requested that the City of San Francisco drop Columbus Day like Berkeley did. However, San Francisco replaced it with Italian-American Day, which is how it is celebrated there today.

Meanwhile, at the request of the world's Indigenous groups and led by Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú, the United Nations declared the International Day of Solidarity with Indigenous Peoples, and declared the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People (1995-2005), to address the human rights of the estimated 300 million Native Peoples in more than 70 countries, and to cultivate a partnership between Indigenous Peoples and the international community. But instead of changing Columbus Day, which was seen as too threatening to some governments, the U.N. declared a different day as Indigenous Peoples Day, August 9th.

Watch the Parking Meters

However, we Berkeleyans will have none of that, and are sticking to October. The Indigenous Peoples Day pow-wow is now a Berkeley tradition. Perhaps its most visible year-round manifestation is on every Berkeley parking meter, which lists Indigenous Peoples Day, along with a handful of other holidays when you don't have to deposit a nickel.

Our group, the Indigenous Peoples Committee, organizes the events each year on the nearest Saturday to October 12th.

Here are some suggestions to help you enjoy the pow-wow: Bring a lawn chair or a blanket, sunscreen or an umbrella. Do not sit in the inner circle or the areas reserved for dancers. No alcohol is allowed. Join in when you are invited to participate in a social dance, but only when invited. Ask permission before taking pictures; photos may be prohibited during contest dancing. Respect feathers and regalia: do not pick up any fallen feathers from the arena; that is the Arena Director's job. Feel at home; most Indian people are glad to answer respectful questions.

We invite you to come this year to the Berkeley Indigenous Peoples Day pow-wow, make or renew our friendship, enjoy Native American foods and crafts, share a wonderful and powerful experience. Ride the lifestream of the pow-wow highway with us, as

Indigenous culture spreads its spiritual roots and breaks through into the mainstream of the multicultural society that is appearing before our eyes today here on Turtle Island.

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