

Traditional, Contest, or Something In-between: A Case Study of Two Mi'kmaq Powwows

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In this article the author discusses aspects of the powwow through critical assessment of the impact of local tradition and intertribal tradition, and the processes of change that are essential to understanding the emergence of the powwow as a powerful site of Native identities. There are two frames of reference for the discussion: the traditional powwow in Miawpukek, Newfoundland, and the contest powwow in Elsipogtog, New Brunswick.

Powwow literature has recently turned to discussion of the way in which powwow as an intertribal tradition becomes localized.¹ As Fowler has noted, “interpreting just how these [powwow] rituals do cultural and social work requires that they be understood in local contexts and as products of local histories” (2005: 68). In terms of singing styles, Browner (2002) and Hoefnagels (2004; 2001) have noted that the dichotomy between Northern and Southern singing styles is increasingly becoming more fluid and regional styles and repertoires are developing.² As these binary understandings of powwow singing styles break down, it may be that other binary constructions such as traditional and contest are also becoming less meaningful distinctions in the understanding of powwow. Is there a middle category? Is there a “celebratory” or “local” contest powwow that combines the local, intimate, Nation-specific qualities of the traditional powwow with the popular and competitive practices of the contest powwow?

The labels “traditional” and “contest” (or competition) in relation to powwow help to identify modes of action and participation at a powwow, while dictating the roles of singers and drummers, dancers, emcees, and other participants. Further, the type of powwow chosen by a community largely determines the styles of music and dance featured and those that may not be included. For example, there may be fewer social dances at a contest powwow or Nation-specific dances may not be showcased in favour of other specials. While its origins are unclear, contest dancing emerged in the 1960s, featuring dance traditions largely “associated with Plains cultures” (Desjarlait 1997: 116). Albers and Medicine³ note that by the 1980s, contest dances had largely overtaken powwows, which also featured “specials” or exhibitions by visiting performers (2005: 37). With increased funding for prize money and a proliferation of contest categories (distinguished on the basis of dance style, musical style, and age group), competition dancing flourished. In recent years, an occupational class of professional powwow dancers, singers, announcers, and judges has even emerged (Albers and Medicine 2005: 37-38).

The lure of the contest powwow and its associated prize money makes it a popular event for many; however, the traditional powwow has its own appeal: “Some of

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² See also Tulk, “Cultural Revitalization and Mi'kmaq Music-Making”: Three Newfoundland Drum Groups” (forthcoming).

³ Beatrice Medicine is of Standing Rock Sioux heritage.

the small celebrations are now gaining reputations for putting on good 'traditional' events and are attracting more participants who wish to experience the sociality and intimacy of an 'old-style doings' rather than the glitter, bustle, and anonymity of the big powwow" (Albers and Medicine 2005: 40). Such events afford the opportunity to hear one's native language, engage in Nation-specific practices and local customs, and renew familial and social ties (Albers and Medicine, 40-41).

Desjarlait, of Minnesota Ojibwé-Anishnaabé⁴ heritage, notes the primary distinction between the two types of powwow: "In one, we dance socially; in the other, we compete for prize money" (1997: 116). The traditional powwow, termed "in-group" by Albers and Medicine (2005), according to Desjarlait is "a community-based, intercultural event primarily composed of local residents and dancers/singers from nearby [. . .] communities" (116). In contrast, the contest powwow, termed "intertribal" by Albers and Medicine, is described by Desjarlait as a "community-sponsored, intertribal event predominated by nontribal⁵ [. . .] dancers and singers" (116). While many of the fundamental elements of powwow are common to both types, including dance categories, controversy ensues over some traditions, such as the use of eagle bone whistles and the role of female drum groups, which Desjarlait suggests may be more common in contest powwows than in traditional ones (116, 124). In either type of powwow, spectators form the largest group of people attending a powwow, outnumbering singers, dancers, and vendors.⁶

While the purposes of traditional and contest powwows may be distinctive, one with a goal of expressing "tribal-centricity" and the other providing a space for competition (Desjarlait 1997: 126), traditional and contest powwows are valued modes of cultural expression and participation. Desjarlait asserts that competition dancing "helps build confidence, character, stamina, and balance, . . . allows the spectator the opportunity to see the best dancers within their respective categories" (128). In addition, contest powwows have greatly expanded powwow musical repertoires. The traditional powwow, on the other hand, may serve to "retain and express" the distinctive qualities of a particular Nation (126). While both types of powwow have their own benefits, the increasing commercialization (especially of contest powwows) is an area of concern and debate for those within the culture.

The powwow tradition was brought to Mi'kma'ki, the traditional territory of the Mi'kmaq people, in the early 1980s and has since become a popular cultural celebration throughout the past two decades. This paper will take as case studies two Mi'kmaq powwows: a traditional powwow in Miawpukek, Newfoundland and a contest powwow in Elsipogtog, New Brunswick.⁷ Focussing on this relatively new Mi'kmaq tradition, I will compare the layout of powwow grounds, genres of music and dance, participation, use of ceremonies, and function in an effort to illuminate the similarities and differences between the two types of powwow in a Mi'kmaq context. This comparison will demonstrate that the

⁴ Here I maintain the spelling of Ojibwé-Anishnaabé as used by Desjarlait in his article.

⁵ Dejarlait uses "nontribal" to refer to dancers who are not of the same First Nation as those hosting the powwow; in his specific case, non-Ojibwé participants.

⁶ Of course, membership in these categories may be fluid, since spectators may also dance, dancers may also form part of the audience when not dancing themselves, and drummers may also join the dancers periodically.

⁷ Miawpukek is the Mi'kmaq name for Conne River, Newfoundland. The two names are used interchangeably in this paper and in practice in the community. The same is true of the name Elsipogtog, the anglicized name of which is Big Cove, New Brunswick.

dichotomy of powwow types is not as clear cut as earlier discussions may suggest when one takes into account the local context of powwow.⁸

The Miawpukek Traditional Powwow

Miawpukek is located on the south coast of Newfoundland, a relatively isolated area of the province that receives significantly less tourist traffic than other parts of the island, given that it is some 140km off the Trans Canada Highway. Its population of 800 is largely employed in aquaculture and silviculture, with increasing interest in adventure- and eco-tourism (Miawpukek Mi'kmaq 1997: 9). The Miawpukek powwow⁹ occurs annually on the first weekend of July. Since its inception, eleven years ago, dedicated powwow grounds at the entrance to the community have been constructed, with new amenities added over the years, including some vendor booths, a stage for the emcee and evening entertainment, a shelter under which Elders may sit shielded from the sun, and an arbor in the centre of the grounds that shelters drummers and provides a space for the posting of the flags.

The Miawpukek powwow is arranged in what Browner describes as sacred fire layout (as opposed to sacred hoop), placing the drum, often called the "heartbeat of mother earth," at the centre of the proceedings.¹⁰ Concentric circles of participation and involvement are evident: drum at centre, surrounded by drummers, encircled by female "back-up" singers if any are present, surrounded by a circle of flags posted at the pillars of the arbor, followed by an area for dancers, then spectators, next vendors, and in the outermost circle the campers and tents of those staying on the powwow grounds (see Figure 1).¹¹ There is normally anywhere between three hundred and five hundred people on the grounds at any given time. They participate in the event in various ways, by singing, dancing, watching, engaging in conversations, purchasing goods not always available in the community or souvenirs, or indulging in a favourite food – fry bread or Indian tacos.

The powwow celebrations actually begin the evening before the powwow. Approaching the grounds just before suppertime, you find them bustling with activity.

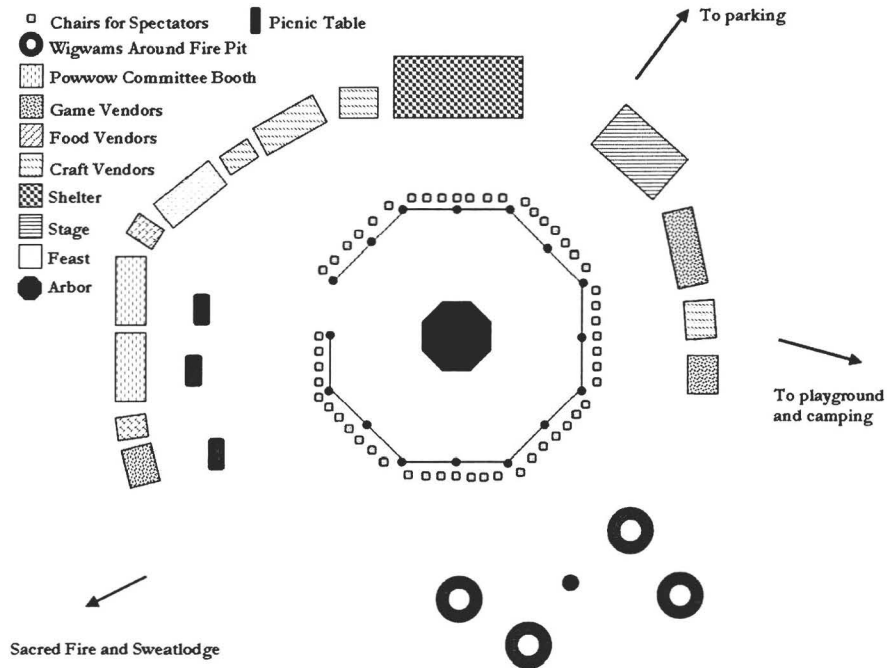
⁸ This is a regional and Nation-specific study and should be read as such. However, it is possible that other First Nations may have similar experiences of localized traditional and contest powwow manifestations.

⁹ The history of how powwow was brought to Miawpukek has not been fully traced, but is the focus of my current research.

¹⁰ For a discussion of these two cultural metaphors as they relate to the organization of powwow grounds, see Browner 2002: 96-98.

¹¹ Browner (2002) notes that there are many more layers involved in the circles of participation than non-Native people normally perceive. While some may reduce the space to four circles – musicians, dancers, audience, and traders – it is possible to observe more nuanced layers that include drum, drummers, women back-up singers, dancers, Elders, audience, and spirits. This final layer of spirits acknowledges an unseen spiritual element of the powwow (p. 98). Rosen (1998) speaks of similar concentric circles as a healing circle in which the self is at the centre, surrounded by family, then community, then world (p.24). For a discussion of circle imagery, see also Diamond et al (1994:21-33).

Figure 1: Miawpukek powwow layout (July 2006)



Preparations for the social night¹² are made. This open mike setting in which community members and visitors alike perform is sometimes referred to as a kitchen party.¹³ For the three years that I attended the powwow, Angela Brown acted as organizer and hostess of this event, joined by singer-songwriter Paul Pike the first two years and Reg Brown, a west coast musician, the past two years.¹⁴ Musicians from

¹² For powwows running Friday through Sunday, the social night occurs on Thursday evening. For powwows running only Saturday and Sunday, the social night occurs on Friday evening.

¹³ The use of the term "kitchen party" references a particular type of Newfoundland house party. In discussions with my colleague Kelly Best, she pointed out that in recent years, the term kitchen party has been used to advertise intimate concerts performed in small venues by Great Big Sea and since then performances labelled as a "kitchen party" have been cropping up. For discussion of the creation of a cyberspace "kitchen" for and among Newfoundland diaspora communities, see Hiller and Franz (2004).

¹⁴ Reg and Angela Brown have been performing throughout Newfoundland for two decades. They have produced several audio and video recordings, available throughout the province and especially in the Corner Brook area. Angela's most recent work is available on the CD *Bay D'Espoir Cancer Benefit Album 2005*; it is a song called "Mardena," written in honour of a Conne River community member. This CD is available locally in Conne River, Head Bay D'Espoir, and St. Alban's or online at www.steadfast.h-g.ca. Paul Pike, a Mi'kmaq from Corner Brook, is the lead-singer of Medicine Dream, a contemporary Native music group based in Anchorage, Alaska. Medicine Dream has recorded two albums with Canyon Records, is the 2006 recipient of a Native American Music Award (NAMMY) for Best Video, and is currently working on their third album. More information about the group and how to purchase recordings is available at www.medicinedream.com. (See also Tulk 2003; Tulk 2004).

nearby communities such as St. Alban's and Milltown also perform on stage, contributing to the eclectic mix of traditional Mi'kmaq song, contemporary Native music, Irish-Newfoundland music, traditional accordion tunes, country songs, and Top 40 hits.¹⁵ In this space, traditional Newfoundland folk songs such as "I'se the B'y" may be localized through lyric substitutions, such as "Fogo, Twillingate, Moreton's Harbour, all around Conne River," as sung by Reg Brown in 2005.¹⁶ Music plays into the night as participants arrive and set up their tents, vendors set up and arrange their wares, families and friends reconnect over moose burgers and fry bread, and children play with glow-in-the-dark jewellery, Hi Bounce and Hedge Balls, and other toys.¹⁷

Each morning¹⁸ of the powwow begins with a sunrise ceremony at the sacred fire, then breakfast is consumed and dancers and drummers set about the task of preparing for Grand Entry while the powwow grounds are set-up for the day. Microphone cables are run and sound checks completed, chairs are set out around the perimeter of the dance area, and the concession stands begin preparing food for the day. Registration for dancers, Drums, flag carriers, and eagle-staff carriers is called around 11:00 or 11:30 am, with an anticipated Grand Entry at 12 noon. At the same time, Drums are called for warm up songs. Normally, however, the powwow begins around 1:00 pm. There are no registration fees, nor is admission charged at this powwow. Grand Entry, the Flag Song and posting of the flags, and the Veterans' Song are conducted with strict protocols; photographs are not permitted at this time. Immediately following these three songs, there is an opening prayer, often said in a combination of Mi'kmaq and English by a visitor from another community such as Elsipogtog, and opening remarks often by Saqamaw Mi'sel Joe are given in English.¹⁹ This is followed by an intertribal dance open to everyone in attendance, regardless of whether they are wearing regalia.

The remainder of the day features a combination of social dances and category dances. Round dances, spot dances, and two-steps are interspersed between Men's Traditional, Fancy Shawl, Jingle Dress, and other styles of dance. While dancers in regalia participate in category dances, participants without regalia dance during social

¹⁵ For example, the 2005 "kitchen party" included Medicine Dream songs "Invitation to Breathe" and "If You Dream of Eagles," Angela Brown's contemporary song "Mardena," a traditional song on hand drum (incipit: Ska-lu-ska; possibly of Ponca origins) sung by Paul Pike, and local musicians performing traditional and popular songs such as "Tell My Mom" (or "Tell Me Ma," traditional), "Molly Bawn" (Ryan's Fancy version), "The Old Man and the Old Woman" (reel), "The Northern Lights of Labrador" (by Cory and Trina), "Music and Friends" (by Bud Davidge/Simani), and "Redneck Woman" (by Gretchen Wilson).

¹⁶ The original line is "Fogo, Twillingate, Moreton's Harbour, all around the circle." Those keen on geography will note that these three communities are quite distant from Conne River, but this detail is not important in this context. What is important is the inclusionary effect of such a lyric change, which elicits laughter and cheers from the audience.

¹⁷ Pictures of Hi Bounce Balls and Hedge Balls can be found online at <http://www.partypalooza.com/IndlItems/Balls-Bounce-Balls.html> (accessed 21 November 2006).

¹⁸ While this powwow generally spans three days (Friday, Saturday and Sunday), it has in the past been abbreviated to a two day powwow (Saturday and Sunday only).

¹⁹ Browner (2002) notes a slight variation in this order. After Grand Entry and the Flag Song, she notes that prayers and the welcoming of guests occurs, followed by the posting of the flags (colours), and then a Veteran's Dance (pp. 89-91).

dances and intertribals. Children and youth enjoy a sort of challenge dance that takes place each year, called "Indian Breakdancing," in which girls face off against boys in a competition to determine who dances the best. The "team" that wins gets bragging rights for the year. The Ko'jua dance – a traditional Mi'kmaq dance with quick footwork, accompanied by hand drum – also appeals to many of those in attendance, as seen during the 2006 powwow. The round dance elicits a trademark saying from the emcee, Mike Doucette: "Swing and sway the Mi'kmaq way!" While a variety of dances that foster participation by everyone present are featured, those present may also choose to watch the dances, purchase tickets on various prizes, and socialize. Some may leave the area and go swimming nearby, while others drop in for a few minutes and then leave the grounds again.

At 5:00 pm, a feast open to all in attendance²⁰ is arranged which often features moose and other carved meats, baked or boiled potatoes, salads (such as macaroni), pan fried fish, shrimp, homemade bread or rolls, and partridgeberry pie for dessert. Members of the community, often women, who are central to this aspect of the powwow may be "unseen participants." They prepare food for the feast in their own homes, several of them coordinating to cook or bake for hundreds of people on each of three days of powwow, and then join the flurry of activity on the powwow grounds as the feast is set up. Their efforts in the creation of this event are perhaps not as visible as that of emcees, canteen workers, or security, but this "backstage" contribution is an important part of the event that reinforces cultural values of hospitality.²¹ During the feast, Mike Doucette, the emcee, may entertain children by holding special dances, such as a powwow version of musical chairs, with donated monetary prizes. Dancing continues into the evening and ends just before sunset when the flags are retired.²² There is no evening Grand Entry on Friday or Saturday at this powwow.

Approximately an hour later, once the sound system has been set up, the evening will feature karaoke at the stage. An audience of about forty or fifty gathers in front of the stage, often shivering from the cool evenings near the water, while others roam the grounds and otherwise amuse themselves. 49ers²³ are also heard at this time, usually sung in one of the large wigwams some distance from the stage. Two sonic spaces exist at the same time and while some "bleeding" may occur, they coexist amicably. The evening may also be a time for participating in a sweat lodge ceremony, during which strict protocols govern participation: the participant must be sober for four days, female participants must wear a skirt, and female participants cannot participate if they are menstruating. While these "rules" are not printed in materials that advertise the powwow to tourists and others who choose to attend the event (which may cause upset with tourists who were unaware of these prohibitions in advance), the protocols are passed on and enforced informally and through oral means.

²⁰ The order for participating in the feast is Elders, registered participants, and general public.

²¹ As Goffman (1971) points out, the many hours of work that go into the preparation for the performance of an event are somewhat concealed in the performance as it is observed by outsiders (p. 44).

²² Here retiring the flags is sometimes referred to as Grand Exit.

²³ 49er songs feature a round dance beat (dotted rhythm in long-short pattern) and are often sung with a combination of vocables and English text, which is either romantic and/or humorous in nature.

The following days of powwow, usually Saturday and Sunday if the powwow begins on a Friday, continue according to a similar order of events; however, on the Sunday, Grand Entry begins an hour earlier than usual to facilitate travel for those who will leave at the end of the day. Also, before retiring the flags, a giveaway ceremony takes place, in which all who contributed to the powwow are honoured and invited to select a gift of thanks. Dancers and drummers do not receive their honoraria at this time; rather, they receive it before or after the giveaway. After the powwow grounds are cleared, a community BBQ may take place, hosted by one of the organizers.

Special ceremonies may be interspersed throughout the days of powwow, based on need or request. For example, if an eagle feather falls to the ground, the powwow stops and a Retrieval Song is sung.²⁴ This very particular protocol surrounding the way in which a fallen feather may be retrieved is always observed in this type of situation and the explanation for it asserted in Conne River, as in Desjarlait's work, is that "a dropped feather symbolizes the warrior who fell" (1997: 122).²⁵ Desjarlait also describes the use of eagle bone whistles, items that in many Nations are deemed sacred and are carried by a select few (1997:123). While these may be used at some powwows, I have not seen them in the Conne River context. However, some male participants in Conne River have fanned the drum with an eagle fan. Immediately the song turns into an Honour Song and restrictions on recording are set in place, the song is repeated four more times after the initial fanning, and the dancer is invited to speak about his personal reasons for fanning the drum if he cares to share them.²⁶ Additional ceremonies in honour of particular community members who have passed away or families who have been mourning the loss of a loved one may be conducted as appropriate or requested.

The functions of this traditional powwow are multiple. A combination of the social and the spiritual, this community celebration provides an opportunity to renew social ties and maintain relationships with Mi'kmaq and other friends and family visiting from within the province and other areas of Mi'kma'ki. It even provides an opportunity for Mi'kmaq youth to meet and sometimes matches are made (though they may be fleeting relationships that fade with the last notes of the powwow). At the same time, spiritual ceremonies take place that have important significance for those participating. Bascom (1965) noted that there were four functions of such folklore or expressive culture: to validate culture, to integrate members of groups or maintain conformity, to provide escape, and to educate. He also suggests that there may be a fifth function: entertainment (1965:288-94). However, these are not the only functions of expressive culture. Others include problem-solving, social, economic, and political functions, and the demonstration of the continuity of a group.

As Gelo (1999) and Mattern (1998) have demonstrated, much of the negotiation that occurs at a powwow is presided over by the emcee, who provides contextual information for the practices and customs throughout the powwow and enforces customs and traditions as necessary. Mattern further notes that explanations of music and dance

²⁴ Desjarlait (1991) refers to this as a Picking-Up-The-Feather Dance (p.121), while Browner (2002) refers to the song accompanying this ritual as "Charging the Feather" songs (p. 95).

²⁵ In-depth descriptions of ceremonial events at the Miawpukek powwow are not included in this study. For a description of this type of ceremony, see Browner (2002:95) and Desjarlait (1997:121-22).

²⁶ Again, I have chosen not to describe or discuss this ceremony or the reasons given for fanning the drum by some dancers I observed. For a description of the use of an eagle bone whistle, see Desjarlait (1997:122-23).

styles, and traditional and customary practices, are often directed at non-Native people or Natives visiting from other Nations as a means of education. However, Mattern notes that such explanations are also used purposefully to remind Native peoples “of the meaning of their practices” and reinforce collective memory, which in turn serves to foster the construction and assertion of community and identity (1998:124,125).

The Elsipogtog Contest Powwow

Elsipogtog, New Brunswick, located 10 kilometres from Rexton, New Brunswick is home to the oldest powwow in Mi'kma'ki and celebrated its twentieth powwow on Labour Day Weekend 2006. While it has taken the form of a traditional powwow in previous years, in honour of this historic anniversary, organizers decided that a contest powwow would be an appropriate means of celebration. This host community has a population of approximately 2500, with other Mi'kmaq communities situated close by (*Elsipogtog Community* [n.d]). While powwow has a longer history in this area than in Newfoundland, the location of the powwow has changed over time. The community does not presently have a dedicated space for the powwow, nor are there permanent structures for vendors, the emcee, or drum groups. Currently held on the track and field site adjacent to the local school, temporary wooden structures are erected for the emcee and the concession stands, while nylon shelters or gazebos provide shelter for the drum groups. The feast area, which also serves as a shelter for Elders, consists of a large white canvas event tent, while vendors supply their own set-ups.

Powwows regularly give Drums, dancers, flag carriers, and eagle staff carriers honoraria to thank them for their participation in the event. At a contest powwow, prize money is awarded to the top dancers in each category of dance and to the winning drum groups participating in the competition. Consequently, there are stringent restrictions imposed on dancers and drummers at a contest powwow that govern their participation and eligibility for prize money. In Elsipogtog, a minimum number of drummers was required (six) for a group to be included in the drum competition. It was also required that they all be present for registration and be ready at their drum when called upon during the powwow. Drums were required to keep their areas clean and to have a member at the drum at all times. Further, women were not permitted in the arbors during competitions unless they were back-up singers²⁷ and drum hopping²⁸ was not permitted during contest songs.²⁹ Failure to observe these regulations would result in a point reduction. The prohibition of drugs and alcohol which is standard at most powwows, whether traditional or contest, was also observed and carried a stricter penalty – disqualification. On the first day, while the emcee was announcing the rules for drum groups, he issued a warning to any drummers who wanted to have a drink that night to celebrate: “Don’t bother coming back. You can kiss your honoraria goodbye” (Fieldnotes, September 1, 2006).

²⁷ While it is rare to see an all female drum group at powwows, women do participate in music-making, most often in the role of back-up singers. These women stand behind the drummers and generally sing on the second half of phrases, an octave or two above the men. See Browner (2002:73).

²⁸ Drum hopping is a practice often seen at traditional powwows and during non-competition segments of contest powwows. Members of other drum groups or friends and family present may join a drum group for a song or two.

²⁹ These rules were posted at the powwow committee booth (see Figure 2) and also on a website in advance of the powwow (see “Elsipogtog First Nation 20th Annual Powwow” [n.d]).

The rules governing dancers were not publicly voiced in the same fashion. Rather, as young dancers registered, they were informed that their honoraria would be determined based on their participation, their performance, and their presentation during the powwow. In terms of participation, being present for Grand Entry each day and the number of dances in which one participates would be reflected in one's honorarium. "Performance" is a term I have chosen to encompass the skill, enthusiasm, and energy with which one dances.³⁰ The powwow coordinator suggested to participants that enthusiasm and energy were most important. Finally, a dancer's presentation at the powwow refers both to the state of one's regalia (clean, appropriate attire, and design) and the way one presented oneself while wearing regalia (appropriate language and behaviour). Presumably the awarding of prizes would be based on similar categories (for example, dancers were judged on their regalia and posed in front of the judges after dancing to highlight the best features³¹); however, I only ever heard participants speaking in terms of honoraria, not prizes.

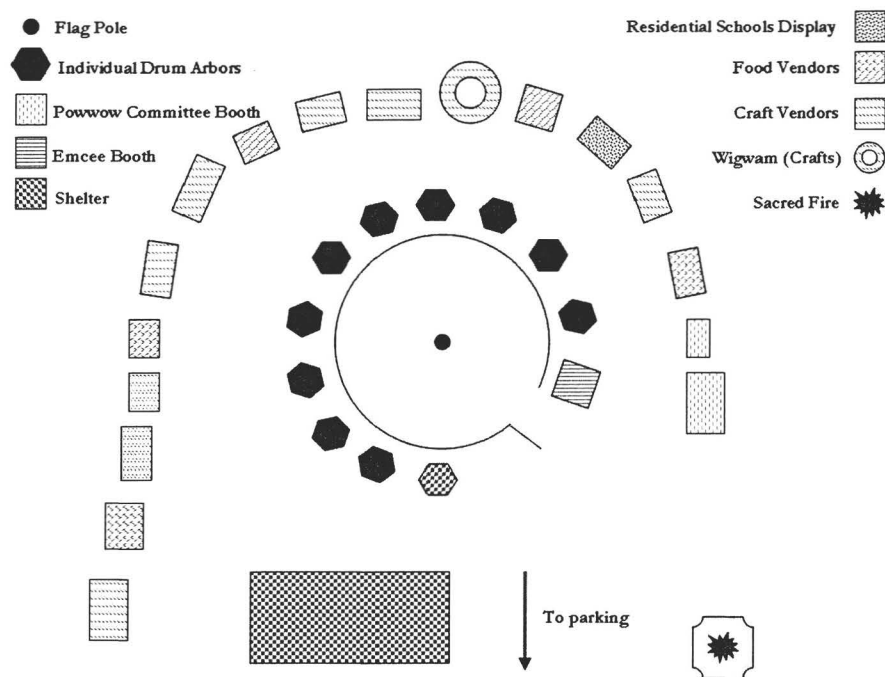
The physical layout of this powwow varies from the Miawpukek powwow in that it is arranged in sacred hoop rather than sacred fire. Consequently, the Drums are in a ring outside the dance area. At the centre of the space is a six foot pole wrapped in evergreens. It is here that the flags and eagle staffs are posted. Surrounding the flags is the dance area, edged with cedar to protect the dancers.³² Next are the drum groups, encircling the dance area, followed by the spectators, then the vendors, and then the campers and tents (see Figure 2).

³⁰ While this is a common understanding of the term "performance," it should be noted that there are dancers who object to calling their dancing a "performance" because of its spiritual significance.

³¹ Having the dancers pose in front of the judges also facilitates the correlation of performances with participants by allowing them to record numbers. However, given the small number of competitors at this powwow and the fact that for the most part everyone knew each other, such a practical reason for viewing regalia was not really necessary. It was clear by the choice of stance and positioning of the body that dancers were strategically posing to display the best aspects of their regalia.

³² The protective function of cedar lining the dance grounds was explained to me by Laverna Augustine (Interview, October 11, 2006). Browner (2002) notes that the grounds may be "blessed by members – usually the elders – of each community, who perform that function by burning tobacco or sage, an act accompanied by prayers and songs. By doing so the grounds are cleared of negative spirits and influences [. . .]" (p. 95).

Figure 2: Elsipogtog powwow layout (September 2006)



While the difference in orientation between sacred hoop and sacred fire may appear to be minor, and indeed sacred hoop is a common layout for drum competitions, it distances the spectators from the action of the dancing. Interestingly, it becomes very difficult to observe the dancers from the space reserved for spectators, which Desjarlait (1997) suggested is one of the important functions of competitive powwow dancing (1997:126). In fact, this layout combined with rules for participation may make even a regular powwow-goer uncomfortable. During a brief conversation with a Mi'kmaq woman visiting from another community, she said to me, "They're more strict here. [. . .] I don't even know where to stand" (Fieldnotes, September 1, 2006). I believe this comment indicates the problem of being a spectator when unfamiliar with the restrictions of contest powwow, but also when confronted with a sacred hoop layout that changes the way one experiences the space and relates to other powwow participants.³³

The Elsipogtog powwow in 2006 started on a Friday evening, with registration commencing about 3:00 pm and dancing starting at 5:00 pm. Drum groups and dancers were required to register if they wanted to participate in the contest; however, unlike many contest powwows, there was no fee to participate (nor was there an admission fee to help raise prize money).³⁴ Grand Entry here was in keeping with many powwows, but different in comparison to the Conne River powwow. Before Grand Entry the Grass

³³ It should be noted that music-making is an important part of the powwow. The sacred hoop layout of a powwow may distance the observer from the dancing, but brings one closer to the music-making.

³⁴ While there were no registration or admission fees, a blanket dance was held to raise funds. Other fundraising efforts, such as powwow bingos, took place in the months leading up to the event and donations from businesses were also solicited (Laverna Augustine, interview, October 11, 2006).

Dancers were called upon to bless the grounds before the powwow would start, then Grand Entry took place, followed by a Flag Song and Veteran's Song. This initial Grass Dance does not take place in Conne River because there is generally only one or two Grass Dancers present and the task of blessing the grounds would be an enormous one for so few dancers.³⁵ After Grand Entry, prayers were said and speeches were made, primarily in the Mi'kmaq language. In Elsipogtog, I heard much more Mi'kmaq spoken than is heard at the Miawpukek powwow.³⁶

A variety of category dances took place, as well as intertribals; however, only those wearing regalia danced with few exceptions. This initial day of powwow was quite short, as the flags had to be retired before sunset, around 7:30 pm. However, the powwow did not end at this time; the rotation of intertribals was finished once the flags had been retired and another round of intertribals followed, each Drum being dismissed as they finished their song. Drumming continued informally, many drummers gathering around the Free Spirit³⁷ drum and singing a variety of songs they all knew. This was later followed by karaoke and, for those interested, there was also a powwow bingo at another location.

The following days of powwow observed a similar itinerary, with Grand Entry at 1:00 pm and competition dances and intertribals throughout the day. Additionally, there was a special I have not seen at the Conne River powwow – a Hoop Dance. There were few social dances, most of these being held on the final afternoon (Sunday) once the judging of all contest categories was completed. Because the weekend was filled with competition dances and a drum competition (with four of ten drums competing), there was little time for such commonly seen dances as Ko'jua or the Round Dance. Consequently, Mike Doucette's familiar phrase, "Swing and sway the Mi'kmaq way," often said in relation to Round Dances, was not heard at this powwow. Sunday afternoon saw more dances for children, including a Snake Dance,³⁸ Eagle Dance (Kitpu),³⁹ and a dance involving candy scattered over the dance grounds.⁴⁰ However, during the feast

³⁵ Laverna Augustine, interview, October 11, 2006.

³⁶ By the 1980s in Miawpukek, there were only three members of the community who could speak the Mi'kmaq language. In 1986, Mi'kmaq as a second language was implemented in the school. The music program was one of the primary means of reintroducing the Mi'kmaq language and now when you walk into the school "you can hear drumming, chanting, Mi'kmaq hymns, and songs" (Wetzel 2006).

³⁷ Free Spirit is a Mi'kmaq drum group. Their first recording of traditional Mi'kmaq songs called *MicMac (Mi'Kmaq) Songs* was produced in 1993.

³⁸ The Snake Dance, popular with children, features two lines of dancers (here divided based on gender) that move around the grounds like snakes, sometimes crossing through each others' lines. The song for this dance begins at a moderate tempo, slowly increasing in speed, until it is extremely fast at the end with those at the "tail" of the snake struggling to hold on to the person in front. For a discussion of the serpent dance, see Sable 1997.

³⁹ The Eagle Dance is a children's dance that mimics the flight of an eagle. The children stand in single file and follow their leader, in this case an Elder, who may make soaring movements or spiral into a circle.

⁴⁰ In this dance, the powwow grounds were littered with wrapped candy. Those participating danced around the grounds until the music stopped. When it did, they

there was also an opportunity for additional children's dances, including Anglo-American games such as musical chairs (here set to powwow music). After another hour or so of dancing, the flags were retired at sunset, giving way to evening activities (for example, 49ers and karaoke). As with the Miawpukek powwow, there is no evening Grand Entry at this powwow on any of the days.

As with the Conne River powwow, there is a feast each day at the Elsipogtog powwow, occurring around 4:30 pm. Shepherd's pie, stew, corn, and dinner rolls were served, along with cake and sweet breads.⁴¹ Also, many spectators lined up at vendors' stands to purchase fry bread (sometimes topped with whipped cream and berries), Indian tacos, grilled corn on the cob, hotdogs, hamburgers, and french fries. Very popular with children as well was a vendor selling various types of candy and chocolate. During the feast on the last day there was a final push to sell raffle tickets, with the draws taking place just after 5:00 pm and the winners being announced by the emcee. After a few more dances, a giveaway was held, honouring all who participated in the powwow. Next, the winners of the dance and drum competitions were announced and the winning drum group sang a Victory Song. The powwow closed with the retiring of the flags.

While there was no sweat lodge constructed on the powwow grounds, there was an opportunity to participate in one on the Saturday afternoon. The sweat lodge was held at the home of a community member and was listed on the summary of powwow events posted at the canteen.⁴² The ceremonies that occurred at this powwow were similar to those in Conne River, honouring families and individuals, such as a young dancer who was returning into the circle after a year in mourning. These Honour Songs were sung after Grand Entry and usually before the competition began for the day. An eagle fan was dropped at one point, as was a feather, both necessitating a Retrieval Song and the requisite ceremony. There was one instance of fanning the drum and, unlike Conne River, an eagle bone whistle was used at this powwow by the male head dancer to whistle a Drum. This same dancer, also a hoop dancer, introduced a new tradition on the final day of powwow during the Veteran's Song in which he danced in a counter-clockwise motion to honour the soldiers who never returned.⁴³

A historically significant honouring was a Friendship Song on Sunday for Tom Paul, the only Round Dance of the weekend. The late Tom Paul is credited with bringing the powwow drum and its teachings to Mi'kma'ki. The emcee, Mike Doucette, spoke about Tom Paul and his contributions to the Mi'kmaq community:

Kitpu Singers, we have an Honour Song to honour a pioneer that's responsible for bringing back our songs and the drums to our community. The gentleman was a guy by the name of Paul from Eskasoni. His name was Tom Paul. And I'm calling on all you drummers, you older guys, us older guys – when we first started singing, it was Tom Paul who sat us down and taught us the songs, taught us the

grabbed as much candy as possible before the music started again. This continued until all of the candy was picked up. While it was a children's special, adults participated.

⁴¹ The serving order for the feast is Elders, drummers, dancers, and community.

⁴² While no restrictions on participation were listed, I expect that the same protocols surrounding participation were observed here as was described in relation to Miawpukek. One reason for this is that the sweats conducted in Miawpukek are often led by Mi'kmaq visiting from this and other communities in the Maritimes.

⁴³ The explanation was announced by the emcee at the request of the dancer (Fieldnotes, September 3, 2006).

protocols and about the drum, the big drum. [. . .] And an honour song has been requested in memory of Tom, 'cause Tom Paul brought the teachings of the drum, the big drum back to our territory. (Field recording, September 3, 2006)

All drummers who had ever drummed with Tom Paul were invited to join the circle and dance to honour him. Approximately fifteen men entered the dance grounds, including the emcee and the Birch Creek Singers,⁴⁴ the group to which Tom Paul belonged. After one rotation around the circle, spectators and others joined in. This community participation was a fitting tribute to such an important figure in the history of Mi'kmaq powwow. This event, combined with other speeches throughout the weekend, demonstrates an important function of this powwow – to display and state the history of a people and their customs, while honouring key players in that history and helping to create the history of the future.

While one of the functions of this contest powwow was to celebrate twenty years of powwow in the community, the choice of a contest powwow for the most part had the effect of limiting community participation (with a few notable exceptions). While the gate counts would suggest attendance of 2,000 over the weekend,⁴⁵ at any given time there were between 300 and 500 people on the powwow grounds. However, these people largely took on the role of spectator. Because of the large number of contest dances and the rules surrounding registration and participation, only those in regalia participated in the majority of dances on the first two days. The exceptions to this included those dancing for special songs honouring particular families and individuals, and two young women who danced in partial regalia (with shawls) after the flags had been retired. While the emcee encouraged everyone present to dance during intertribals, whether dressed in regalia or not, those not in regalia did not take him up on the offer (Fieldnotes, September 2, 2006).

Widespread participation is a goal of many powwows, bringing together family and friends through music and dance to socialize and partake in local customs and traditions. In social dances at a powwow, "participation with friends and family is the key to enjoyment" (Browner 2002:60). However, social dances are not only about entertainment. They serve several functions: demonstrating the continuity of a particular cultural group, integrating members of that group, and renewing social ties. When it comes to a contest powwow, however, as Browner has noted, the social dances (snake dance, round dance, two-step, and so on) may be secondary to the competition dances:

Although contests and traditional events share many of the same characteristics, the demands of competition can alter the basic sequence of events at a pow-wow, sometimes in profound ways. Traditional powwows, not bound by the requirements of holding a certain number of contest rounds (usually four per dance category), have far more flexibility in scheduling specials and more exotic types of intertribal dances such as Snake or Buffalo Dances, where participants can dance who are not wearing regalia. But a contest pow-wow is obligated to have one or two opening contest rounds for all who enter in a specific category and one or two final rounds the next day if requested by the judges. Often, if the point system is designed poorly, dancers who have tied in points for a specific place (either first, second, or third) must participate in a final "dance-off," which further takes the time that could be used for intertribals or specials. (2002: 88-89)

⁴⁴ For a discussion of this group and its repertoire in the mid-1980s, see Cronk et al. 1988: 78-79.

⁴⁵ Laverna Augustine, interview, October 11, 2006.

Powwow, then, as a time in which First Nations “come together to celebrate their culture through the medium of music and dance” (Browner 2002:1) may enable or restrict participation and include or exclude community members depending on the type of powwow chosen.

Traditional, Contest, or Something In-between?

The traditional and contest powwows in Miawpukek and Elsipogtog respectively were both relatively small gatherings that were predominantly attended by Mi'kmaq even though they were intertribal in nature. Thus, the oppositional categories of traditional and contest powwows, one a small, Nation-specific or “in-group” event in which participants hear their own language and practice their own local customs, the other a large, intertribal event sponsored by a community but attended predominantly by members of other First Nations, is not particularly meaningful in the Mi'kmaq context. At the Elsipogtog powwow, nine of the ten participating Drums were from Mi'kma'ki, while the tenth Drum was visiting from Morley, Alberta. Similarly, the Miawpukek powwow featured three visiting Mi'kmaq drum groups and an Anishnaabe drum group visiting from Ontario. Both gatherings were predominantly Mi'kmaq, with some visitors from other First Nations and few tourists. Desjarlait's (1997) distinction between a community hosting a traditional powwow and sponsoring a contest powwow does not seem to be particularly useful in this context, as both were clearly hosted by the communities in which they were based with their own community members being the primary participants.

Prize money, often cited as a factor that lures dancers and drummers to participate in contest powwows, is of questionable significance to the Elsipogtog powwow. Just how “luring” was the contest money in the Elsipogtog context? While I have not observed other powwows in this community, it would seem that while the powwow saw an increase in participation in terms of gate count,⁴⁶ many of those present likely would have participated whether it was a contest powwow or not. While large contest powwows such as Gathering of Nations in Albuquerque, New Mexico give away more than \$150,000 in prizes,⁴⁷ the Elsipogtog committee was working with a budget that was less than one-fifth that amount.⁴⁸ This money largely went towards honoraria for the Drums and dancers, while also paying for the feast, the services of the emcee, the rental of the sound system, and other costs associated with the powwow. Further, monetary rewards for dancers and drummers were mostly spoken of in terms of honoraria, rather than prize money. While the financial aspect of a powwow is an important one, it does not seem to be a determining factor for participation in the Mi'kmaq context. Vendors and dancers with whom I have had brief conversations have expressed that they are content just to earn or receive enough money to defray their travel costs. The normal functions and goals associated with a contest powwow, then, may not take priority when this type of powwow is chosen to celebrate a historic anniversary of a community. Participation to

⁴⁶ Laverna Augustine noted that the attendance at this powwow has been on the rise for the past three years, with a gate count of 1000 at the traditional powwow in 2004, 1500 at the traditional powwow in 2005, and 2000 at the contest powwow in 2006 (Interview, October 11, 2006).

⁴⁷ This is the figure stated on the Gathering of Nations' website for the upcoming 2007 powwow. See Gathering of Nations [n.d], <http://www.gatheringofnations.com/powwow/index.htm>. Albers and Medicine (2005) also note that it is common for powwow prize money to exceed \$100,000 at large competitions (38).

⁴⁸ Laverna Augustine, interview, October 11, 2006.

win prize money, to display one's abilities, or to observe the talents of others may be secondary to the desire to celebrate the successes, history, and continuity of a community.

This is not to say, however, that the competitive spirit was not present at the contest powwow. Many dancers endeavoured to perform to their fullest potential during the competition. On the second day of dancing, during a Women's Traditional, this desire to compete to the best of one's abilities in a fair competition was highlighted. On the last pushup⁴⁹ of the song, the drummers unexpectedly decided to sing a cappella, the lead singer beating the drum only on honour beats. The dancers were unclear as to the appropriate action and stood in place, bending their knees in time with the song and raising their eagle fans on honour beats. After leaving the circle, these women voiced their feeling that it was unfair of the Drum to have done this, one dancer saying, "That's not right," while another said, "Why did they do that to us?" (Fieldnotes, September 2, 2006). These women clearly felt that their ability to perform for the judges was impeded by the Drum's actions. Concerns regarding a cappella singing and appropriate dance are unlikely to have such significance at a traditional powwow.

Albers and Medicine (2005) note that, as the terms "traditional" and "contest" imply, the two types of powwow have:

become more differentiated and specialized. The in-group qua traditional powwows, whether small or large in size, are emphasizing old-style protocols and turning away from commercialism and competitive dancing. By contrast the intertribal contest powwows have become much more commercialized, regimented, and "professionalized" in relation to what they do and perform. (pp. 41-42)

This differentiation may indeed be true when comparing traditional powwows to the larger contest powwows and some aspects may prove relevant on the smaller scale. However, as the above case studies of Mi'kmaq powwows have demonstrated, the distinctions between traditional and contest powwows are not always as clear-cut as they may appear, especially when contest regulations are observed but prize money is replaced with honoraria. Further, such distinctions, like those between Northern and Southern singing styles, may be deconstructed to reveal more complex levels of powwow action and participation which may be locally or regionally based.

The Elsipogtog contest powwow is best understood in the context of local history, which identifies the significance of this commemorative powwow for the community, as well as the celebratory function it was meant to fulfill. In this local context, the "sociality and intimacy" (Albers and Medicine 2005) associated with traditional powwows is present, along with Mi'kmaq language, Mi'kmaq customs, and the strengthening of familial and community ties. Competitive dancing without prize money (but with collective bragging rights for the year) may occur at a traditional powwow in the form of "Indian breakdancing," as at the Miawpukek powwow, while games with donated cash (or candy) prizes for children can become more competitive than some contest powwows.

So is there a Nation-specific contest powwow category? Is there a powwow type that combines the local, intimate elements of the traditional powwow with the popular and competitive practices of the contest powwow? I would suggest that the present

⁴⁹ A push-up is one complete rendition of the musical material (sometimes compared to the verse of a strophic song). This push-up (verse) is often repeated four times (a requirement for contest dances, which may be broken if running short on time). Dancers may refer to one complete push-up as a "round" (Browner 73).

examination of two powwow types in the Mi'kmaq context demonstrates the complexity of naming types of powwows, indicates the importance of examining powwows in their local contexts and histories, as noted by Fowler (2005), and presents the need for a more fluid understanding of powwow types, which may be neither entirely traditional- nor contest-focussed. However, while the Elsipogtog powwow demonstrates the way in which a contest powwow may be localized and serve local goals, it remains to be seen whether Nation-specific customs and traditions, such as the Ko'jua dance, will move from the realm of traditional powwow into the realm of contest powwow.

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