

## RITUAL POWWOW MUSIC: ITS POWER AND POETICS

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In a previous paper\* I showed that the powwow is a ritual which has active, pragmatic qualities within North American society. Although the powwow serves a variety of functions, pure entertainment for one, I have identified two functions which I believe are crucial to its continuance. The first, ascertainable only by looking at the deep structures of the powwow, is that of affirming to the native that the modern socio-economic system really *works*, and that it works for the native. The second function, identifiable on a visible plane, is that of confirming to the native that he has a heritage of which to be proud. This paper continues the theme of the powwow as ritual, but will deal specifically with powwow song as exemplary of ritual music, further elucidating the poetics and affective power of ritual music.

The powwow is part of a revitalization movement, a movement sometimes called Pan-Indianism. It has its genesis in a group that is racially delineated but otherwise uncomfortable about its status both in white society and in a traditional native society. Victor Turner<sup>1</sup> aptly describes persons in such a state as betwixt and between, as deprived of secular power and lacking status and authority — clearly a liminal state, that is a transitional state. The powwow, as a major manifestation of the Pan-Indian movement, is a ritual — a ritual which I believe is helping to transport natives from a liminal state to an affirmation that they can lead successful lives, as defined by North American society and within the structures, physical and mental, of non-native society.

For those of you who have never experienced one, a typical powwow in southern Canada is a gathering of natives which may last several days — they are held on weekends throughout the summer, so that they don't interfere with regular workdays of participants who either watch or compete in the Indian dancing. The dancing is accompanied by drum groups, consisting of four or five singers. The size of the powwow is judged by the number of drum groups present, which, in turn, is related to the size of the cash prizes awarded to the dancers and drummers. The showy music, dance, and outfits derived from traditional plains Indian life make the event a colorful one. At one end of the circular dancing and audience space is a high stage from which the well-amplified comments of the master of ceremonies direct the proceedings. The judges give points and select the winners of the contests.

The large powwows generally begin on time and promptness is rewarded by extra points for those who participate in the Grand Entry. The Grand Entry is awaited in great suspense as the jingle of

the bells on the outfits becomes more sustained and the bright flashes of color begin to take on the completed forms of the dance outfits. All must stand for the Grand Entry which is a solemn procession of dancers, according to dress, sex, and age, accompanied by one of the drum groups. The bearers of the sacred eagle staffs and of the Canadian or the Union Jack and the American flag are invariably veterans. The flags, deposited in the centre of the dancing ground, are followed by the long circular chain of dancers who continue to dance until all the dancers are assembled. When the resplendent group is still, an elder offers a prayer. The responsibility for the smoothness of the proceedings is largely that of the announcer and to a large extent he is teaching people powwow procedure and explaining why they must observe certain rules.

The dancing space is ringed by concessions selling both Indian food such as bannock, and junk food, and all kinds of jewellery, clothing, and other knickknacks. Set apart from the main dance group there is frequently a hastily-constructed shelter where men gamble, accompanied to the sound of traditional hand drums, and there is usually a small selection of rides for the children.

As might be expected with a relatively recent phenomenon, a wide range of individual beliefs is held about the powwow and considerable disagreement among natives about its nature. Those who view it as a sacred ritual try to minimize the competitive nature of the event, in contrast to those who dance in the powwows where the cash prizes are the highest. Although it appears that most natives now accept this competitive, commercial aspect, obviously there are great differences among Indians concerning knowledge of and belief in powwow ritual.

There is much concern, especially among the youth, about the lack of knowledge of the ways which they see as the foundation of the powwow. Elders are constantly sought out and questioned. Another procedure for defining native values is to contrast them to white. The master of ceremonies continually tells anecdotes, often humorous, of non-native and native encounters and misunderstandings. For instance,

Two natives talking:

No. 1 Think I'll move to Montana.

No. 2 Oh no, too many Indians there.

No. 1 Think I'll move to Minneapolis.

No. 2 Oh no, too many Indians there.

Old Indian passing by:

Why don't you go to hell, no Indians there.

There are considerable problems in defining what is native in origin and therefore acceptable. It's likely that the highly visible dance-steps as well as the style of the dance outfits are traditional. Many dancers wear a personalized color, given to them in conjunction with their Indian name. While the female dancers are not required to dress traditionally, they are careful to show one Indian

item, invariably the large, hand-made shawl. For competition dancing, non-native objects such as watches and eyeglasses are frequently removed. The most prized giveaways are Indian items such as eagle feathers and blankets, particularly the star quilt. Upon close inspection the fabrics, decorations, and colors of the powwow outfits are usually the products of modern technology, but so long as the function remains equivalent, substitution of the object appears to be of no concern to the native.

While the visual is important at the powwow, the sounds impress upon us even more that we are witnessing a ritual Indian event. Powwow music is unique to the native and the tense, high-pitched warbling vocal production of the male drummers is the antithesis of the non-native sound ideal. Second in importance only to the voice are the dominating percussive sounds of the music. Most male dancers wear metal bells which create a noticeable effect when they move. Indeed there is a special dance called the jingle dance in which bells are sewn over the dress of the female dancers. But it is the large bass drum that tells us we are at a powwow. The drums virtually control the progress of the powwow. Not until the drummers are seated can the dance begin. The drums signify the start and finish of each dance event. They are frequently used to punctuate a joke or remark made by the M.C. The drummers help to determine the winners and losers of the competitions. The following quotation from Charles Boilès aptly summarizes the role of the drummer-singers:

In these cases the musician is the paramount magician, for he is the Agent exerting his magical power to transform a Recipient, time and space; and it should be remembered that, because music is a complex of signals, these magical sounds can be used simultaneously to cue as well as to maintain a special temporal-spatial continuum for ceremonial purposes.<sup>2</sup>

If we are to understand the powwow as a ritual serving to reaggregate the native within modern society we must understand the music. How does the music imbue the powwow with power? How does the music help to sacralize the event, making it appear holy?

That the drumming in itself has a strong affective quality is generally recognized. Rodney Needham postulates that "There is a connexion between percussion and transition,"<sup>3</sup> referring to transitions in social life. The literature on rhythmical drumming and psychological states is extensive. The connection between the two has been confirmed, but much work remains to explain the nature of the link — work which is not within the scope of this article. Rather, I would like to examine the structure of powwow song to show that its structure is a basic part of its effectiveness.

Maurice Bloch, in a paper entitled "Symbols, Song, Dance and Features of Articulation," provides valuable insight into why ritual music works. Briefly, his thesis is as follows: The symbols of ritual cannot be understood without a prior study of the nature of the

communication medium of ritual. In ritual events, the syntactic and linguistic freedoms of everyday communication are reduced and replaced by characteristically stylized speech and singing. In a continuum of increasing formalization Bloch discusses formal oratory, intoning, and finally singing. He shows that in speech and music acts, formalization drastically decreases the creativity potential of natural language, and the potential for communication, while on the other hand increasing the authority of the ritual and the potential for social control. In accordance with Bloch's hypothesis, I believe that powwow music does confirm to the Indian that he is strong and that he is secure in his identity. As Bloch writes, "You cannot argue with a song."<sup>4</sup>

Bloch continues by distinguishing two kinds of meaning. One is the propositional force of language, the kind most linguists are concerned with; the second is illocutionary force, also called performative force or the language used "not to report facts but to influence people." Song is characterized by this illocutionary force. To quote Bloch, "Song is, therefore, nothing but the end of the process of transformation from ordinary language which began with formalisation."<sup>5</sup> George List's chart entitled "The Boundaries of Speech and Song"<sup>6</sup> confirms this increasing inflexibility, as it shows pitches and scalar patterns becoming increasingly stabilized as one moves from speech to song.

Bloch believes that song exhibits a range of creativity. He cites the innovation in Eskimo song contests, for example, but states that in general, ". . . the propositional force of all songs is less than that of spoken words in an ordinary context."<sup>7</sup>

Before agreeing with Bloch's general statement I would wish to consider individually, and in context, the manifold genres of song which are used for argumentation. In this paper I am confining my remarks to ritual music. Also, in anticipation of arguments that ritual is a creative event I would like to make several suggestions. Obviously ritual is creative during the liminal period of a rite of passage — great outpourings of creative art seem to typify groups in transition. But what of the final phase of Van Gennep's ritual aggregation? Surely here we find expressive culture which is rigid, and necessarily definitive of the group's newly attained status. This, I postulate, typifies powwow music. A.F.C. Wallace writes, "In fact it can be argued that all organized religions are relics of old revitalization movements."<sup>8</sup> The powwow has become an important manifestation, the organized expression of belief for the Pan-Indian movement, which originated as a revitalization movement, but which, in my opinion, now serves, not so much as a revitalizing movement, but as a movement reaffirming the acceptance of the North American lifestyle by the native. This reaffirmation occurs despite the disagreement over many details of the myth which provides the foundation for the Pan-Indian movement.

Also, in connection with creativity, John Galaty suggests that

As texts, rituals are like extended metaphors that creatively use aesthetic vehicles to bring into being novel and often penetrating insights with respect to their conceptual tenors, and produce signifiers that seek out but never quite attain their signifieds: in this process lies the generativity of symbols.<sup>9</sup>

This may partially serve to explain the disagreement among the native philosophers when asked to explain the meaning of certain elements of the ritual. One native explained the differences to me as a result of borrowing: "Years ago that's the way our people used to live. They're borrowing from other cultures and there was nothing wrong with that."

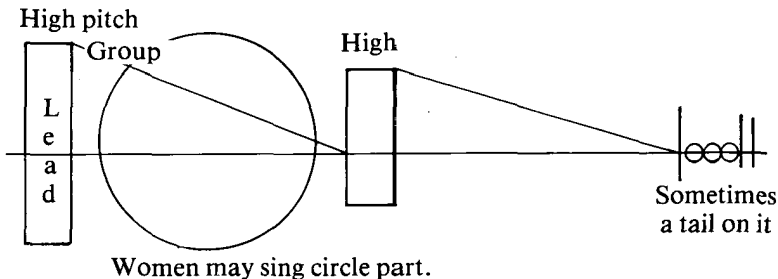
I agree with Galaty that as metaphors serve to clarify verbal concepts, so do rituals act to focus thought about social concepts, but I question, at least in the context of the powwow, the generativity of the powwow symbols. During the liminal phase, ritual generates new symbols, but when the ritual is established and calcified Bloch's explanation of why ritual seems to be creative may be more appropriate. Bloch states that the generative processes of language are normally unconscious and so complicated they are not usually raised to a conscious level. "However, when nearly all this generative potential of language (or bodily movement) has been forbidden, removed, the remaining choices left are so simple that they can suddenly be apprehended consciously."<sup>10</sup> The restrictions applied to nearly every aspect of the powwow, for example, dress, dance-steps, the music, audience conduct, render individual creativity impossible. These restrictions are necessary, since large cash prizes are involved and rules must be observed for the harmonious conduct of the event. In addition, for most participants the powwow is a religious ceremony and for this reason careful adherence to protocol is necessary. Thus I see little creativity of a far-reaching nature occurring at the powwow, although on the surface it is a dazzling display of color, movement, and sound. Yet the visual and aural elements are all codified and carefully controlled. Perhaps Bloch is correct when he states, "Creativity has suddenly become controllable, hence enjoyable."<sup>11</sup>

To determine if powwow music does exhibit the formalization and concomitant illocutionary force of ritual music postulated by Bloch, I analyzed some of its elements. The form of a sacred powwow song is rigidly structured and unvarying. This probably accounts for the fact that one singer can remember hundreds of these songs and learn new ones very quickly, often within one or two hours. As yet, I have not heard a variation of this form, probably because each part has a specified religious meaning, and for this reason, will not be carelessly manipulated or changed (to serve individual desire for creativity, for example).

The form of the sacred powwow song was analyzed for me by a

native singer. Following is his diagram and explanation of a powwow song.

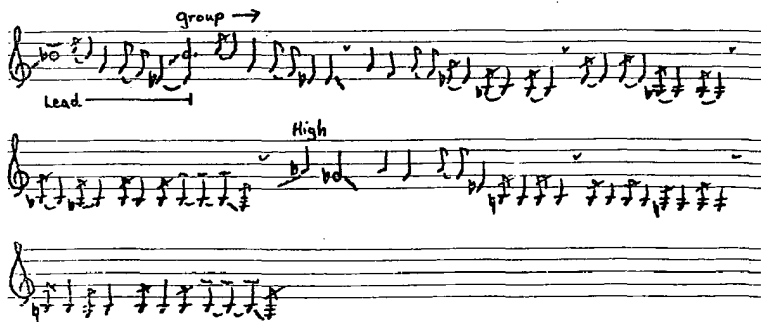
Diagram of a powwow song, 1981:



The meaning of the song:

“The whole song is generally a spiritual song  
 This part here has a lot of spiritual significance (the lead)  
 When the singers sing high it’s a celebration of something  
 When they sing high, they’re calling to those people  
 Who have departed from this earth  
 They’re singing high so that those people up there will hear them  
 Come on down. Come and join us in our celebrations  
 And when they’re singing here (group joins)  
 They’re singing to all the people  
 All over the world to come and join  
 Here, same thing again, high (high)  
 Again calling those people who have passed on  
 Some songs they’ll put a tail on it  
 When they sing the tail they’re sending acknowledgement (tail)  
 To creation in general  
 They’re acknowledging creation, They’re acknowledging earth  
 They’re acknowledging God’s work on this earth  
 That’s what a tail is for — thanking.”

Transcription of a grass dance song:



Much work needs to be done on the use of syllables in powwow music. Although I have heard words of various languages used, they are rare; the preponderance of sounds are patterned syllables. I have been assured by native powwow singers that they had meaning in times past but that they no longer know the meaning. Certainly the words of ritual songs are relatively fixed, and not subject to the more rapid change which everyday discursive language undergoes, rendering the texts rapidly archaic, and understandable only by the older generation. This has been my experience with traditional northern Cree song. In this case each generation has difficulty understanding the previous generation's song language. They affirm that the song has words, but that they cannot understand them. Other studies, such as Halpern's of the Pacific Northwest Indians,<sup>12</sup> demonstrate that the syllables do have meaning. Since the powwow songs have wide distribution across North America, encompassing many tribes and languages, I question whether any meaning can be retained. In any case, the fact that they are believed to have meaning adds to the authority of the song.

A noted feature of ritual is repetition, and native song strongly exhibits two kinds of repetition. The first, repetition through time, is well-evidenced by Ramon Pelinski's Inuit song collection of 1974-76,<sup>12</sup> many songs of which are close versions to those collected by Christian Leden in 1914. Believing that the source of songs was the supernatural, and that the function of song was communication with mystic entities, many groups consciously required that the songs and rituals be repeated, as exactly as oral memory allows. For example, the Northwest Coast Indians punished singers who made mistakes; Pueblo Indians have elaborate codified song ceremonies, as do the Navaho. Individuals had little scope for creativity, for altering music according to individual desires.

The duration and popularity of powwow songs over time is a subject needing study. Certainly natives who have honor songs sung (often at great cost) expect that the songs will be sung for a long time to come, ensuring that the deceased will not be forgotten. On the other hand, there is a powwow "Top Ten" consisting of songs which may be popular for one or two consecutive summer seasons but which are then replaced by different songs.

The second kind of repetition occurs within the performance of the ritual song. Certainly repetition is a noticeable characteristic of powwow music. Maurice Bloch states that repetition is a major source of illocutionary force in ritual text, including music. He says that in logical analysis repetition is mere redundancy, but when ". . . we are not dealing with an argument but with a total bonded experience, repetition is the only possibility for emphasis."<sup>13</sup>

Powwow songs are invariably repeated many times, repetition being part of their very nature. There is even a word coined to indicate repetition. After the announcer has calculated the number of participants and therefore the length of the Grand Entry, he will

direct the drummers to play accordingly, saying something like "Little brothers, Grand Entry, five pushups," meaning five complete repetitions of the song.

Furthermore, there is considerable reiteration of tones within the grass songs. Using Kolinski's method,<sup>14</sup> which is to show the proportion between the number of tone reiterations and total number of progressions in a melody I calculated an average reiteration quotient of three powwow grass dance songs at 59. It is interesting to note that Kolinski prepared a chart which shows that the number of reiterations of tones is much higher in the religious songs(65) of the Chippewa than in their social songs(48); calculations which support Bloch's thesis that repetition is an important quality of ritual music.

At all levels repetition is a pervasive characteristic of powwow as ritual music. I contend that part of the power of ritual music derives from its repetitive nature. Repetition of the well-amplified music immediately cues participants that this is a ritual, that sacralized time and space conditions have been created in which extraordinary power exists. Repetition, if you like, symbolizes religion, and in such a context, native concerns about their identity find an answer.

To point out the contrast between the ritual, sacred powwow music, frequently of the grass dance variety, I have compared it to the music which begins after the main competitions have ended. At midnight, young people carry on the powwow, but in their own way. Beer flows freely, in contrast to the strict prohibition of alcohol during the day. The relaxed informality provides opportunity for socializing. These after midnight songs have several names; I will refer to them as forty-niners, one of their more common appellations.

Whereas grass dance music consists of the same patterns of syllables repeated exactly throughout the rendition, forty-niner songs usually insert a verse of words, sometimes in the tribal language, more often in English, such as the following:

I come from Manitoba  
She's from Oklahoma  
Got no one for my own  
Though I come here looking for you honey  
If you'll be my sugar  
I will be your honey by and by  
Hay ya hay ya-a-a Hay ya hay ya-a-a

The daytime dance music invariably retains the form as diagrammed which includes the descending melodic contours. The forty-niner songs employ a variety of forms, even that of the grassdance music, and while they are strophic, like the grass dance songs, they frequently exhibit less internal repetition such as return of certain elements of the phrases.



As I have tried to show, ritual music obtains its authority and power through sheer repetition. Religious music, and music which is contexted in ritual, frequently are highly formalized and show little manipulation of the musical and textual elements — wherein lies its poetics and its power.

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## FOOTNOTES

- \* "The Powwow: A Ritual Enactment of the American Success Model," presented at a Conference de jeudi, Université de Montréal, June 1983. This paper is Chapter Two of a forthcoming book funded by the Secretary of State and entitled *The Way he Walked Was Different: A Study of Cree Music in Northern Manitoba*.
- 1 Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1967).
- 2 Charles Boilès, *Man, Magic and Musical Occasions* (Montreal: L'Univ. de Montreal, 1978), pp. 170-71.
- 3 Rodney Needham, "Percussion and Transition," *Reader in Comparative Religion*, ed. W.A. Lessa and E.Z. Vogt (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 317.
- 4 Maurice Bloch, "Symbols, Song, Dance and Features of Articulation," *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, 15(1974), 71.
- 5 Bloch, p. 70.
- 6 George List, "The Boundaries of Speech and Song," *Ethnomusicology*, 7(1963), 1-16.
- 7 Bloch, p. 70.
- 8 A.F.C. Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," *Reader in Comparative Religion*, eds. W.A. Lessa and E.Z. Vogt (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 424.
- 9 John Galaty,
- 10 Bloch, p. 73.
- 11 Bloch, p. 73.
- 12 Ramon Petinski, *La Musique des Inuit du Caribou* (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Univ. de Montréal, 1981).
- 13 Ida Halpern, "On the Interpretation of Meaningless-Nonsensical Syllables in the Music of the Pacific Northwest Indians," *Ethnomusicology*, 20(1976), 253-71.
- 14 Mieczyslaw Kolinski, "Reiteration Quotients: A Cross-Cultural Comparison," *Ethnomusicology*, 26(1982), 85-93.

**Resumé:** *Lynn Whidden décrit le pouvoir et la poésie qui se dégage de la musique rituelle de Powwow. Elle décrit un powwow typique comme étant un rassemblement d'indigènes qui dure plusieurs jours consécutifs durant lequel les danses sont accompagnées par un groupes de 4 ou 5 joueurs de tambour et chanteurs. En analysant les éléments de la musique de powwow, elle démontre la rigidité de sa structure et son invariabilité, et que celle-ci tire sa force de sa forme répétitive, mettant ainsi en lumière les caractéristiques de cette musique rituelle.*