

TRADITIONAL MUSICAL CULTURE AT THE NATIVE CANADIAN CENTRE IN TORONTO

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The rate of increase in urbanization of Native Canadian Peoples has been substantial in recent years. In Toronto alone, the Native Canadian population has grown from 1,196 in 1961 to 24,000 in 1970. To meet the needs of Indians in the cities, urban Friendship Centres have been established at a rapid rate. These Centres (there are now fifty-four in Canada) tend to be staffed by Natives who offer alternatives to the role of the paternalistic social worker helping the 'problem' Indians. Indian Centres today attempt to foster a 'positive' ethnic identity through the cultivation of a sense of pride in past Indian heritage. Traditional music, unlike tribal economies and social life, is one aspect of the past which can be revived and maintained. In addition, music evidently serves as a special cherished symbol of Indianness which links the young native to his past and assists him in dealing with his present place in society.

Fieldwork conducted at the Native Canadian Centre in Toronto, January to May 1976, indicates that traditional music is being revitalized among a group of young Ojibwa Indians. My purpose is to examine the nature of musical culture being presently revived at the Toronto Centre, to outline specific Pan-Indian and other elements which appear in music, and to attempt to present possible underlying reasons why this group of Ojibwa in Toronto identify with the idea of "Indian Brotherhood."

The following three quotations suggest that music can be viewed as signalling stress, and expressing emotion, and that it is shaped by values, attitudes, and beliefs.

"Music tends to occur at points of conflict, uncertainty or stress within the social fabric."¹

"... when a distinctive and consistent musical style lives in a culture or runs through several cultures, one can posit the existence of a distinctive set of emotional needs or drives that are somehow satisfied or evoked by this music."²

"Music sound is the result of human behavioral processes that are shaped by values, attitudes and beliefs of the people who comprise a particular culture."³

The writer sees much merit in these assumptions and in the present paper attempts to view the musical life at the Canadian Native Centre in the context of these ideas.

¹Norma McLeod, "Ethnomusicological Research and Anthropology," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 1974, p. 113

²Alan Lomax, "Song Structure and Social Structure," *Ethnology*, 1962, p. 425.

³Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 6.

The Native Canadian Centre of Toronto

The Indian Centre was established in 1963 as a social agency to provide a focal point for the growing number of Indians visiting, relocating, or residing in the city; in 1966 its name was changed to Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, so as not to exclude Inuit and Métis. The centre, located on Beverly Street, serves some 2,000 people weekly. According to the present executive director, Roger Obonsawin, representation at the Centre is primarily southern Ontario Ojibwa.

The Centre has its own sixteen-member Board of Directors, drawn from the Native community, which acts as the policy-making body. Obonsawin, the chief administrator, has a staff consisting of a community development officer, a program director, a secretary, a bookkeeper, two court workers, two counsellors, a driver, and an editor.

Activities involve a youth crafts program, a native housing corporation, an alcoholic rehabilitation centre, a mother's group, a native Elders' Club, a Ladies' auxiliary, a monthly newspaper: *The Toronto Native Times*, participation at powwows, sports programs, and numerous social events. The most regular social events occur on Wednesday evenings with traditional dancing and singing.

Traditional Dance and Music at the Centre

There was little regular participation in traditional dance and music until three years ago when Larry Johnson, an Ojibwa in his mid 20s, became involved in activities at the centre. Johnson's parents, Potawotomis from a Delaware reserve near Windsor, had moved to Windsor and then to Detroit while Larry was young. In Detroit, Larry had spent a good deal of time participating in activities at the Detroit Friendship Centre. Though he danced regularly at powwows in Detroit and the surrounding area, he did not begin to sing until 1971. An old Taos Pueblo, named Tiflo, leader of the Detroit Drum, introduced Larry to Indian singing. Tiflo's repertory consisted of songs from the Plains, as well as the southwestern U.S.A.

Because the Toronto Centre lacked a song and dance group, Johnson offered his services voluntarily and began to instruct members of the Youth Group. His sister, Theresa, an experienced dancer, began to teach the group various dance steps. Soon Johnson was urged to establish an official "Toronto Drum" (the term used to identify the Centre's drumming and singing group). It was felt that a "Drum" would not only provide a focus for weekly social gatherings, but could also represent the Centre at powwows and various public functions.

The group obtained a second-hand military bass drum, and an Indian drummer from Sudbury strung it with a skin head. Johnson then began to teach his repertory of songs and technique of drumming to a small group of Indians. Gradually young people began to participate weekly as dancers, drummers, or spectators.

Today Johnson continues to act as leader of the Drum which consists of about fifteen drummers, most of whom had little or no previous experience in traditional song and dance activities. The Centre now owns two drums —

the original old military bass drum and a newly constructed wooden war drum. Their repertory has grown to about sixty songs. A youth group continues to learn songs and drumming, appearing occasionally in youth talent programs on television and at various functions held at the Centre. The Toronto Drum performs each Wednesday evening at the Centre, at public functions, dance-a-thons, mini-powwows in Toronto, and intertribal powwows from Detroit to Manitoulin Island during the spring and summer months.

The Wednesday Night 'Drum Practice'

Until 8 or 8:30 when sufficient drummers have gathered, young people simply socialize or play quiet games in the Centre's main room. Eventually, the drum is placed in the corner of the room and the drummers – usually ten or twelve – assemble around it seated on chairs. The overhead lights are dimmed and the drummers begin to sing. Each song is about five to ten minutes long and about fifteen songs are sung in an evening with very short breaks between them.

Two or three competent and confident dancers initiate the dancing usually half an hour after the drummers have assembled. Gradually others join in until there are fifteen or twenty participating in the dance. No costumes are worn by either the drummers or the male dancers, though women generally wear fringed shawls while dancing.

The average number who gather at the Centre on Wednesday evenings ranges from twenty to sixty. Most are from eighteen to thirty-five years of age, though a small number of elderly members drop in to observe. There is always a group of children playing, dancing, or wandering amongst the drummers and dancers.

The atmosphere varies from week to week, usually depending upon the number present. When the singers are excited, momentum builds gradually to a climactic ending as the singers, dancers, and spectators become almost hypnotically propelled by the steady beat of the drum.

Pan-Indian Elements in the Musical Culture

Traditional Ojibwa culture, particularly in southern Ontario, has suffered greatly during the reservation period. Those contemporary Ojibwa interested in cultivating a Native musical expression today must look toward the general Pan-Indian musical culture which is readily accessible through frequent powwows and intertribal gatherings of Plains and Great Lakes groups. Because singing and drumming are both primarily group activities based upon repetitions of melodic phrases and drum patterns, newcomers find it relatively easy to join in. The use of vocables instead of texts also facilitates the song-learning process. Instead of a series of texted strophes, a song consists of many repetitions of a single strophe with set vocables.

Elements of the general Pan-Indian complex which can be detected in the musical culture of the Toronto Centre are as follows:

(1) *Intertribal powwow participation*: Anticipated participation in regional summer powwows, the nucleus for general Pan-Indian celebrations, is an

important stimulus behind winter musical activities at the Toronto Centre. Said to be a vestige of the Grass Dance which spread across the Plains in the mid-nineteenth century, the powwow today is a secular event involving group singing and drumming as an accompaniment for social dancing. The Toronto Drum participates in powwows from Detroit to Manitoulin Island during the summer season. In addition, mini-powwows and dance-a-thons are held at the Centre during winter months. Powwow participation is an outward symbol of Pan-Indian identification.

(2) *War Dance*: The War Dance is the most prominent dance at powwows, performed by men, women, and children. Either a simple walking step or free-style individualistic steps may be employed in clockwise motion by both men and women. At the Centre, almost all use the simple walking step. Only at dance-a-thons and mini-powwows do some women and most of the men employ the 'fancy-dance' style.

(3) *Round Dance*: The Round, or Owl, Dance is performed by the mixed group, in a circular formation, moving in a clockwise direction with a simple 'step-draw-step-draw' leading with the left foot drawing the right foot to it. It covers the circumference of the circle.

(4) *War Dance Songs*: War Dance Songs dominate the repertory of the Toronto Native Centre drummers. Stylistically homogeneous, all songs have a similar form. Each phrase descends and begins somewhat lower than the previous one. Most phrases follow the same melodic contour, which is usually 'terraced'. Drumming provides a metronomic pulse of evenly stressed beats. Scales are predominantly pentatonic and tetratonic. War Dance song texts consist entirely of vocables and are passed freely from tribe to tribe.

(5) *Round Dance Songs*: Round Dance songs are similar to War Dance songs. The primary difference lies in the slower tempo and drum accents which fall on every other beat. Round Dance songs comprise a much smaller portion of the repertory.

(6) *Forty-Nine Songs*: These songs are sung exclusively at powwows and employ the Round Dance rhythm and bits of English text. Though the Toronto drummers are familiar with '49ers', they are not performed during Wednesday night sessions.

(7) *The Women's Costume*: Fringed shawls, worn on Wednesday evenings, form one aspect of Pan-Indian costume.

(8) *Secularization*: The high degree of secularization is also Pan-Indian. The occasion is purely social, songs can be freely exchanged among different groups, and members of the white community can participate or observe.

Pan Indianism and the Ojibwa

Musical culture at the Canadian Native Centre in Toronto is an expression not of Ojibwa culture but rather of Pan-Indianism. If music does in fact assist us in understanding the culture and cultural values of which it is a part, participation of Toronto Centre Indians in a Pan-Indian musical revitalization movement should reveal interesting implications about contemporary urban Ojibwa.

Historically Pan-Indianism, a social movement involving expression of a new identity – the brotherhood of the Indian peoples – arose during a time of accelerating change. Pan-Indianism was a manifestation of acculturation for it required a conception of who one was in relation to others. During the mid-1800s Choctaws, Chickasaws, Cherokees, Creeks, and Seminoles were forced to migrate out of their own territory into Kansas and Oklahoma. As a result, political alliances and greater tribal councils were formed to deal with forced assimilation and other conflicts with white society. Plains peoples, through their mobility provided by the horse, had a long history of intertribal contact and a sign language that crossed linguistic boundaries. Forced assimilation during the 1870s provided them with closer contacts with Whites as well as other Indian tribes. Thus, Plains peoples and southeastern tribes residing in Kansas and Oklahoma began to realize and cultivate the idea of ‘commonality’ among American Indian peoples.

Of significance was the fact that those tribes first involved in Pan-Indianism were “far advanced in civilization” as the phrase ran. Three of the tribes had written constitutions or codes of laws and many tribal members spoke and wrote English. In Oklahoma, they built schools, churches, farms, industries, and had a system of government.

Pan-Indianism developed, therefore, as a result of intertribal contact, increased experience in multiple cultures, and a growing awareness of change among peoples who felt the need to establish an Indian identity beyond the tribe yet within the American social order.

Before the reservation period of the late nineteenth century, the Ojibwa were a thinly distributed hunting and gathering population who moved in small impermanent groups. Those in northern Ontario experienced a great deal of uncertainty over food supply and day-to-day survival. Famine was a continuous threat and life in general was precarious. Those inhabiting the more southerly area lived in semi-permanent fishing villages but also experienced a great deal of uncertainty with rapid exhaustion of trapping resources in each newly exploited area. Lacking authority figures and experience in political alliances, members of Ojibwa bands did not, as Plains and Oklahoma-based tribes, experience much acculturation. Nor did they have the strong sense of who they were in relation to other groups. The reservation period, inflicting white governmental authority figures and Christian missionaries upon the Ojibwa, could not help but result in impoverishment of Indian culture. Those reserves which happened to be located near urban centres became more acculturated than those more distant from white communities.

To reveal underlying possibilities for Pan-Indianism expressed musically among the Toronto Centre Ojibwa it is necessary to stress the contrasting cultural backgrounds and levels of acculturation between Ojibwa and adherents of Pan-Indianism in the early twentieth century. However, today a new generation of young Ojibwa is appearing particularly in southern Ontario who have had extensive contact with white culture due to improved travel, communication, and education. Intertribal contacts have also increased. On the one hand they realize the impossibility of turning back into what their great grandparents might have been, but on the other hand they have refused

to resign themselves to the fate of the other way of life – that of becoming ‘red white men.’ In seeking a way to retain certain aspects of non-material Indian culture while simultaneously selecting modern economic patterns and conveniences of white material culture their position is not unlike that of their early twentieth-century Plains and Oklahoma brothers, of being in and between several worlds. Experience in multiple cultures has kindled a desire to establish an Indian identity within the North American present-day social order.

General Analysis of Songs from the Repertory of the Toronto Drummers

Origin: Johnson, the leader of the Drum, is responsible for maintaining the repertory and for introducing new songs. He learned much of the repertory from Tiflo, leader of the Detroit Drum, while other songs were taped at powwows. The cassette tape recorder seems to be an essential piece of ‘musical equipment’ in the song-exchange process.

Function: The songs function within a social context as an accompaniment to dancing at powwows, concerts, and evening social gatherings. War Dance songs comprise the greater portion of an evening’s repertory, interspersed occasionally with Round Dance songs. Although the Flag Song is the official opening song of the powwow, it does appear in the repertory of a social evening. Pipe Dance songs, recognizable by the opening drum tremolo, are performed only rarely on Wednesday evenings but do appear frequently at concerts and at more festive gatherings.

Pitch material: Scale can be determined by recording the number of tones used in a song. The majority are pentatonic (CDEGA) and tetratonic (CDEA). An obvious tonal centre is ascertainable in all songs, by virtue of durational and reiterative prominence of one tone over all others.

Range: The average range of the melodic lines falls between an octave and a thirteenth.

Melodic Contour: Melodic contour is generally ‘terraced’ in shape. Songs begin high and gradually descend to the lower octave in a sequential pattern.

Metre: The metre is characterized by asymmetrical groups, i.e., regularly recurring groups of four and eight beat units are rarely encountered, while intermingling of groupings of four, five, and six beats are common.

Tempo: Songs are performed in different tempos according to the functional designation. War Dance songs have the fastest tempo, while Round Dance songs are somewhat slower. Flag Dance songs are performed at approximately the same tempo as Round Dance songs. Midway through the performance of War Dance songs a new faster tempo is intentionally established.

Form: There are variations upon one basic form, AABCBC. The opening phrase (A) is introduced by the leader alone followed by a repetition of that phrase by the full chorus. Two contrasting phrases (B and C) follow and are then repeated. This form is repeated *ad libitum* for the duration of the song. It is common for the leader to signal to various other singers to take the lead phrase throughout the performance of a song. Songs vary in length depending

upon the number of repetitions of the basic form. One song, for example, consists of only a single repetition lasting thirty seconds. Another is nine and a half minutes long and consists of eight repetitions of the basic form. Variations upon the form consist of the interposition of additional contrasting phrases, e.g., AABCDBCD, AABCDEBCDE, and so on.

Accented Beats: In War Dance songs a drum accent formula of five stresses is introduced midway through the performance. It occupies the final few seconds of the strophe, and recurs at that point for all successive strophes. The first appearance of the accent pattern signals the impending establishment of the new faster tempo (see "tempo," above).

Conclusions

During the past three years, a revitalization of traditional music has occurred among a group of predominantly young Ojibwa at the Canadian Native Centre in Toronto. What does an examination of this musical culture reveal about this particular group of people?

(1) Indian music serves as an emblem of "Indianness." In sound and form, it is far removed from the music of the dominant white culture. It is an activity which truly belongs to 'Indians.' Therefore, one aspect of this group of people revealed through their music is that those involved somehow wish to be set apart from the dominant culture. Music is assisting them to create an ethnic minority culture within the context of the city.

(2) Group identification is obviously important to those who are participating in traditional music at the Centre. Drumming and singing both require cooperative conformity to the one melodic line and the uniform drum beat pattern. There is no solo singing and drumming. The leader of the Drum appears to be highly respected among the members of the group. A distinction is sometimes made between 'good' and 'bad' singers but it does not seem to be an important issue. What is important is that they perform cooperatively together. Anyone who wishes can participate and the emphasis is placed upon group pride and solidarity. Those who sing and drum appear to enjoy their status at the Centre, at powwows, and within the Community at large as "members of the Toronto Drum".

(3) The musical activities at the Centre are male-dominated and could be interpreted as an expression of masculinity. Though it is generally acknowledged that the female voice enhances the quality of singing, women are not permitted to join the drum circle. Instead, they stand near the drummers and sing an octave higher at certain points in a song.

(4) Participation in traditional music could indicate that the group involved finds itself at a point of uncertainty regarding its past, present, and future. Within the context of a contemporary city, this group wishes to hold on to a traditional rural-based institution. Therefore, traditional music could be one way of seeing them attempting to 'blend' two worlds at this point in time.

(5) The predominantly young ages of the drummers indicate that this revitalization movement particularly appeals to the younger generation of Indians at the Centre.

(6) Since its establishment three years ago, the Drum has increasingly become the central force behind a great deal of the social activity at the Centre. Some even acknowledge that the Drum has surpassed athletics as a focal point for uniting groups.

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Résumé: Wendy Wickwire parle de la renaissance de la musique traditionnelle Indienne parmi les Ojibwa au Centre Canadien Indigène à Toronto. Un groupe de percussionnistes a développé un répertoire de chants en rapport avec différentes danses traditionnelles et ce groupe est devenu le centre de nombreuses activités sociales à cet endroit.

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