

Iroquois Social Dances: A Life of Dance in the Dance of Life

Linley Logan

In traditional communities of the Iroquois, more properly the Haudenosaunee (People of the Longhouse), introduction to dance comes at an early age. Expectant mothers participating in dance introduce the developing infant to the rhythmic movements and melodies. As newborns and infants, children are passed among proud, dancing relatives, accustoming them to the feeling of dance and the lifelong socialization process one embraces through it. Strengthening community solidarity, social dances continue to provide an entertaining environment that binds people together in friendship, courtship, and social identity.

The world is sustained by a continuous renewal of cycles, a balance of life's positive and negative energies. The Ongweh-ohweh-kah (real people), as the Haudenosaunee refer to themselves in ceremony, understand this and the importance of paying tribute to it. Among the people of the Longhouse, ceremonial dances express respect in ritual for the positive energies of renewal in nature. Ceremonial prayer, song, and dance, reinforce each other's significance in the people's expression of gratitude for the life-sustaining gifts from the Creator. In the ceremonial Great Feather Dance, for example, young people are encouraged to dance real hard and young men are told to "yell out in happiness so the Creator will look down to see, hear, and know your joy." Social dance events, like ceremonial events, open with an address recognizing the life-sustaining gifts from the Creator. In both, the importance of all life forms in the natural world is acknowledged, starting with that closest to the Mother Earth and continuing on to that in the male realm of the sky.

Social dances, unlike ceremonials, are not confined behind the doors of Longhouse communities. They may fulfill their purpose of entertainment within a context of ceremonial activities but they may also be held as their own event,

and may even be done outside Iroquois communities, as at this year's Festival.

The Iroquois word for social dances — *guyno,so,ohn anndwadek,note,gawdoe* — literally means "a group of songs for entertainment purposes." Social dance events, or socials, are for everyone's participation within the community and always held in the evening to avoid interfering with the day's responsibilities. In addition to providing entertainment, socials may honor particular events, welcome guests, or raise funds to meet an emergency need. Social dances are sometimes presented outside of their communities and are a useful, educational, and entertaining way of presenting Iroquois culture.

The Longhouse is central to Iroquois culture. Originally developed as the structure for extended matriarchal clan family life among the Iroquois, the Longhouse was the place for all communal activities. At present the Longhouse continues to function in traditional communities as the center for activities such as socials, ceremonies, meetings, condolences, weddings, and funerals. The Longhouse is a humble environment. It has an entrance facing east welcoming the sun, and most Longhouses have separate entrances for men and women. Traditionally, families or clans sit together in the double row of benches along the walls. All Longhouses are heated by woodstoves, and the fire plays an integral role in the observances that are part of the dance. The singers who provide music for the dances usually sit at the center or heart of the activities.

All Iroquois communities have socials even though not all communities have Longhouses. In

Linley B. Logan, an enrolled member of the Cattaraugus Seneca community, grew up in the Tonawanda Seneca community's Longhouse. He is Program Assistant in the Office of Public Programs of the National Museum of the American Indian.



Sheri Waterman, Cecilia Skye, Alan Shennandoah, and Brad Bonaparte dance Shake the Bush. Photo by Karen Furth, courtesy National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution

cities where large Native American urban populations are centered, there are only a few criteria for choosing space, and even church basements have been used in some instances.

There is a definite structure to social dance activities. One man, usually a Faithkeeper — the member of a group chosen by clan Mothers that also includes women — assumes the responsibility to direct the evening's events by conferring with the elders present. Each time a dance is decided on, the singers are told first, then individuals are chosen to lead, and finally, a speaker is informed, who addresses the audience in our language, explaining what will take place. The first dance at a social is the Standing Quiver Dance, which is a call-and-response song and shuffle dance that male singers begin by circling the fire (i.e., the woodstove). Its title comes from a former men's practice at social gatherings of sticking their quivers in the ground, with arrow tips down, forming a cone shape; they would then dance around them.

There are approximately 20 dances in the social dance repertoire of the Haudenosaunee. All are done counterclockwise in a circle, about half in single file, half in partners. About a third of the dances are named for animals and grow from respect the Haudenosaunee have for the

gifts of life the natural world freely shares to insure balance and coexistence. Some dances mimic animal movements — the Robin, Raccoon, Duck, Pigeon, Rabbit, Snake, and Alligator dances.

In partner dances that are Iroquois in origin men and women do not touch, although they may do so in dances in the repertoire from non-Iroquois sources. Traditional Iroquois social dances with partners include the Fish, Moccasin, Raccoon, Pigeon, and Shake the Bush dances. Men almost always begin dances. When women join in the dance line, they file into it in alternate spaces from the head of the line to the end. When partners are required, they are never pre-selected, as women fill their dance line from the head to the rear. When partners form double lines, the male is always positioned to the outside of the circle. Theoretically this represents the male role in protecting the community. When partners switch or rotate positions, the male traditionally circles the female partner, allowing her to remain in the true line of dance.

The Haudenosaunee, a matriarchal society, recognize women's power and sustaining role in the cycles of life, and dedicate dances specifically to them. The ceremonial Women's Dance expresses reverence for "the three sisters" (corn,

beans, and squash) in a procession called "Givers of Life." Women's social dance, the Women's Shuffle, done to a different set of songs, expresses gratitude for the fertility of Mother Earth through furrowing, massaging movements.

The cycles of life and renewal are embraced in the Corn, Robin, and Pigeon dances. Corn is an essential fact of Iroquois life and its dance is performed in a double line that symbolizes planted rows. The Pigeon Dance, done in remembrance of the passenger pigeon, recalls imbalance, loss of life, and the importance of recognizing and acknowledging the cycles of life.

Approximately a third of the Iroquois social dance repertoire results from a willingness to share with other cultures. The Alligator, Friendship, Rabbit, Round, Snake, and the Delaware Skin dances are not of Iroquois origin. The Rabbit Dance, acquired from Western cultural groups, is a partner's choice dance in which women can choose a male partner. Partners hold hands, with the male on the inside of the circle. Other adopted dances that differ from traditional Iroquois norms include the Alligator Dance, borrowed from the Seminoles and Miccasukees from the far Southeast, in which, in a manner similar to the Rabbit Dance, partners lock arms and proceed with the male in the interior of the circle.

The instruments that accompany social dance songs are the water drum played by the lead singer and cow horn rattles played by the back-up singers. The water drum is hollowed out, traditionally, but not always, from a single piece of wood approximately five to seven inches in diameter. Individuals have been known to make them with small, manufactured wooden casks or PVC plumbing pipe. The hollow vessel is covered with a stretched piece of leather, which is secured with a cloth- or leather-wrapped hoop of ash wood. Water is poured into the hollow body, and the drum is set upside down, allowing the leather to soak. The wet leather is then stretched tighter to produce the proper resonance. Water brings the drum to life.

Rattles used for instrumental accompaniment originally were made of elm bark, but European contact and introduction of the cow has led to rattles made of cow horn. The rattle's sound comes from lead shot, beebees, beads, or any combination of these placed inside.

Ceremonial instruments differ from their social counterparts in use, material, size, and ownership. The ceremonial rattles, depending on their application, are made from squash,

gourds, or snapping turtle shells. Ceremonial drums are larger than those used for social dances. Ceremonial instruments are never used for other purposes, and in 1974 the Onondaga Council of Chiefs of the Iroquois Confederacy passed a resolution forbidding the sale of religious objects, expressly including ceremonial rattles.

Protecting cultural interests for the security of the Seventh generation (seven generations into the future), is integral to cultural identity. Through joyous movement, dance expresses the strength and pride in identity that emanate from a relationship of respectful coexistence with the natural world. Children are encouraged to experience the joy in dance at an early age, as our elders, watching our children learning to dance, become proudly encouraged about the future of the Seventh generation.

Further Readings

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