

IROQUOIS SOCIAL DANCING

This is written from a local, Buffalo, NY perspective and with the assumption that whoever reads this book can generalize from these paragraphs to answer the question: what could children be learning about indigenous people via their music-dance from the indigenous people in our locality?

The best way to learn more about Iroquois social dance and its relation to Iroquois people, their society, culture and history is to keep your eyes and ears open for events where social dancing will be part of the action and then go there. When Iroquois social dances occur sponsored by local Indian organizations, they are sometimes part of an organizing campaign of some kind, a community center keeping its doors open, a fundraiser for a person, an issue to discuss, a problem to be solved. "Social dancing" occurs in a larger social context and to understand the dancing more fully you need to become part of the context. And in its own context social dancing really is SOCIAL; that is, people do spend as much time talking to each other, getting the latest news and gossip, hanging out, sharing food, as they do dancing. There is usually a lot of time between dances to socialize.

Social dancing is defined by the Iroquois as "secular," not part of the most sacred traditions. It is therefore open to the public at large. But there is an important sense in which many Iroquois people believe that all dancing is sacred. I remember hearing the late Fleeta Hill talking to students in the hall outside American Studies as I passed by; she said something about "there's no wrong way to sing or wrong way to dance and no one laughs at someone who is dancing because that would be to laugh at the Creator." Hearing Fleeta Hill say that gave me the courage to go to the next social dance and take part in it. And it still gives me courage and confidence to try any kind of singing or dancing that comes my way.

The drum beat of the social dances, the sound of the voice, the words in songs, the dance steps, are all traditional, practiced over many generations and so each dance does give participants access to the sound, the movement, the feelings of solidarity that belong to the original people in this part of the world. The water drum is an ancient instrument and has remarkable power, for such a small instrument, to bring people together and moving in time. Each dance has its own story and can be learned by joining in, following the line, humming along, letting the feet follow other feet, going with the flow.

Another step to take in learning about Native American music and dance is to visit a pow-wow. These traditions are coming from the peoples of the Plains, but the pow-wow movement includes Native Americans from all parts of the country and has been spreading in popularity. There are usually times when everyone can participate in the dancing, but most of the events are competitive in a variety of dance and regalia categories.

Bibliography

Gertrude Kurath has written extensively about Iroquois dances; look for her work in any library. To learn more about Seneca, Tuscarora, Onondaga ways, the ways of other Six Nations or Iroquois peoples and Native American philosophy generally, you can read *The Basic Call to Consciousness*, published by Akwesasne Notes.

The State of Native America by Annette Jaines, and *Exiled in the Land of the Free* edited by John Mohawk and Oren Lyons are books that address a range of issues facing Native Americans. *Ne'Ho Niyo' De:No' : That's What It Was Like (1988)* contains the statements of many Iroquois elders compiled by Alberta Austin.

Hazel Hertzberg's *The Great Tree and the Longhouse* is written for children. See also Hertzberg's *Teaching a Pre-Columbian Culture: The Iroquois* (a guide unit for 7th grade social studies) [1968].

The Social Studies Department of the Buffalo schools provides *The Iroquois People: A Reference Guide* [1973], an introduction to Iroquois culture and lists of materials (books, films, filmstrips, tapes, recordings) that have been reviewed by representatives of the Iroquois people for their accuracy.

Pat Campbell:

Reaching out to the local musicians is key to education that is relevant to the community in which children live. "Who's local?" is an important question that requires going beyond the schoolyard and into the neighborhood and sometimes the wider region, so as to see about connecting young people to those whose music expresses the cultural thoughts and values of place—that is, community. Local musicians vary from one place to the next, too, where one community may include Greeks and Italians, another may be mixed with Spanish-speaking families from Mexico and Central America, and still another may be historically African American.

Just as citizens of Buffalo, NY, may reach out to the Iroquois people who live locally, some in the Pacific Northwest are keen to consider how Native American ideals from their region might be brought into their classrooms. For several years running, this has seemed an important lesson for prospective music teachers—music education majors at the University of Washington—to learn. So, enrolled in a music education methods course, and with funding from the Minority Affairs Office, off we go across the Cascade mountains to the big river country of the Yakama Indians. We are invited by teachers from an elementary school on the Yakama reservation to stay awhile, and so we spend a sunrise-to-sunset day, or a few days at a time, or even a week. Our sense is that we need to know the lived experience of the people, the rhythms of their lives, their principal values, their songs. We stay with families on the reservation and in the Yakima Valley-- Indian families, Spanish-speaking families (an important cultural group whose families have been arriving for several generations from Mexico to pick Washington state apples), and white rancher families. We teach the school children some of the music we know, and we prepare them with songs to sing for their all-school assemblies. We perform at

the tribal high school, we listen to their songs of the youth there, and we share meals and chat-time with children and youth, their teachers and families. We accept what invitations we get to participate in tribal pow-wows, meetings, and gatherings. Our visit to the Yakama is an intensive albeit short-lived immersion within reservation culture, and while we bring no artifacts (and not even their songs) back across the mountains to the classrooms, we are becoming conscious of another way of life in the region, and are learning through experience something more of the cultural expressions of people in a community not so very far from home.

* One account of this cultural immersion experience is found in The Mountain Lake Reader (Spring 2001), "Lessons from the Yakama", pp. 46-51, by Patricia Shehan Campbell..