

Exploring Native American Cultures through Powwow Songs & Dance

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Land Acknowledgement = Honoring & Asking Permission (<https://native-land.ca/>)

Want more information?

<http://landacknowledgements.org/> Handout

<https://usdac.us/nativeland/> Video and Resource Guide

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I always begin by **asking permission and giving thanks** to the original and current caretakers of this land, water, fire, and air. Where I reside, the spaces belong to the Cahuilla, Tongva, Luiseno, and Serrano peoples, past, present, and future. Most of us live on **unceded territory**, meaning that the territories were never signed away by the Indigenous people who inhabited them before Europeans. In other words, [this land](#) was stolen. I encourage you to look up whose lands you are on using the website <https://native-land.ca/>.

I use the term **honor** as a verb here to represent the act of recognizing peoples or events in a meaningful and respectful way. It's imperative that we have these honest and brave conversations about our country's history of colonial violence towards Indigenous peoples so that we can collectively heal, and create a better future for all. I offer some additional resources: I recommend the video on this site for understanding why this practice is important and how collectively listening to these kinds of statements can have a positive (<https://usdac.us/nativeland/>) Also my go-to website for those looking to implement Land Acknowledgement practices in their classrooms (<http://landacknowledgements.org/>).

How to honor?

(<https://www.pbssocal.org/education/at-home-learning/honoring-indigenous-peoples-children-today-every-day/>)

Learn Cahuilla !

Miyaxwe! -(mee-yahh-weh)- Hello!

Ne'netew -(Ne-netao) Jessica Gutierrez Masini- I call myself [your name here]

Ne'nepulive -(Ne-nepoolevé)- Orange-nga (place ending signifier) I dropped/fell/was born in [your birthplace here]

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One way I honor the peoples of this land/water/fire/air is by practicing a Native American language called Cahuilla. I have had the opportunity to learn Cahuilla language at UC Riverside and share how to introduce oneself here. Please replace my name and birthplace with your own.

Learn Cahuilla ! (See youtube videos for pronunciation; also hyperlinked to underlined Cahuilla words on the slide)

Miyaxwe! (mee-yahh-weh) - Hello!

<https://youtu.be/fLBqTBXypL4>

Ne'netew (Ne-netao) Jessica Gutierrez Masini - I call myself [your name here]

<https://youtu.be/XZoR0wvhPZE>

Ne'nepulive (Ne-nepoolevé) Orange-nga (place ending signifier, add to the end of the location you were born) - I dropped/fell/was born in [your birthplace here]

<https://youtu.be/hVDeXhbkusK>

Congratulations! Now you can introduce yourself in Cahuilla :)

Native American Identities



36th Annual UCR Powwow (May 2017)

Native Americans represent thousands of different tribal **Nations** and communities across the Americas

- *Political and social sovereignty*

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Native American peoples represent thousands of different tribal **Nations** and communities across the Americas. The term Nation has become widely accepted to reinforce Native American groups as political entities. Just as the United States is a separate Nation from Canada or Mexico, with its own government, population, and defined territory, so are differing tribal Nations like Pueblo peoples in the Southwest or Inuit peoples in Alaska. I want to emphasize that the category of “Native American” represents thousands of different tribal Nations. There are over 500 federally recognized tribal Nations in the U.S. alone, with over 600 more recognized at the state level in California, and thousands more across the American continent.

These communities desire to live their lives as peoples of their individual Nations. This ongoing concern is often referred to as **political and social sovereignty**, which includes the right to self-govern and self-determination. In other words, speaking their own Indigenous languages, learning about their unique histories or creation stories, and mostly importantly, the freedom to maintain, revive, and produce their cultural and religious traditions.

A Brief History of the Powwow

- Powwow does not emanate from a single **historical narrative**
- Mid to late 1800s, the U.S. government forcefully relocated Native American peoples onto **reservations**
 - ◆ Secretly practiced their cultural traditions and shared them with other tribes
- Indian Relocation Act (1956) brought powwow to urban centers
- American Indian Religious Freedom Act (1978)



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Powwow does not emanate from a single **historical narrative**, meaning that it does not come from one person or single moment or even one tribal Nation. In other words, you could ask 10 different long-time powwow practitioners the origins to powwow and you would likely hear 10 different stories of how powwow came to be.

However, historical accounts of powwow-like gatherings can be traced to the **mid to late 1800s**. This was during a time when the United States government forcefully relocated Native American peoples from their homelands and onto **reservations**, or an area of land managed by a Native American tribe under the surveillance of a newly formed branch called the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). There are approximately 310 Indian reservations in the United States (demonstrated as green zones on a map [here](#)), although there are more than 550 federally recognized tribal Nations. This is because some Nations have more than one reservation, some share reservations, while others have none, often due to a lack of federal recognition. Native Americans were not allowed to practice cultural traditions, such as language, song, and dance, in order to cut them from heritage. This is because songs and dances reflected Native American worldviews and teachings on themes ranging from birth, death, religion, warfare, and agriculture, to healthcare and alliance-making. This strategy of forcing Native Americans to convert to the dominant U.S. American culture, is called **assimilation**.

These communities didn't stop though, and secretly passed on these dances and songs, while at the same time sharing them with other tribes relocated to the reservations. Some Native American peoples were allowed to perform in popular Wild West shows and other staged productions across the country, creating new songs and dances along the way. When assimilation practices failed at erasing Native American culture, the U.S. government issued the **Indian Relocation Act** in 1956. This encouraged Native American populations to move to metropolitan cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, and San Francisco, by offering incentives to those who chose to relocate. In reality these were tactics to take away peoples from their families and homelands, breaking family structures in hopes they'd convert to mainstream American culture. Powwows continued to create community for Native Americans

in urban areas, while also creating a zone in which non-Native spectators could begin to interact with and learn from.

The year **1978** brought many strides for Native peoples. **The American Indian Religious Freedom Act** was a law that finally allowed Native Americans to practice their traditional religions by ensuring access to sacred sites, use and possession of sacred objects, and the freedom to worship through ceremonials and traditional rites. What sad irony that the original inhabitants of these lands are the last populations to be granted civil liberties like freedom of religion. This Act also led to a rise in Native American language revitalization (bringing Native American languages back into common use) and re-emerging music and dance traditions that had gone underground during the reservation era.



What is a Powwow?

Picture from 2018 UC Davis Powwow

Powwows are intertribal social gatherings between Natives and non-Native peoples that celebrate Native American cultures, and centered around dances, songs, foods, and oral histories. They are public events usually one to three days during the weekend and open to non-Native peoples to spectate.

As you can see in the picture here, powwows are often outside (though this is not always the case). At this powwow you can see families in the middle gathered in tents circling the dance arena and on the right vendors selling handmade jewelry, tools, toys, clothes, bags, and decorative pieces for the home. Vendor tents are arranged in a circle and within that circle there is another circle made up of Native American singers, drummers, and families alongside a spectators' area (which varies from blankets or bleachers to plastic chairs under a tent). The inner circle has an opening facing the East for dancers to enter and dance in the center during the event. The significance of these circles will be explained shortly when introducing powwow elements.

Notice at powwows that there are people dressed in regular street clothes like the man carrying the green tote bag in a red flannel, blue jeans, and baseball cap, as well as people in **regalia**, like the gentlemen in bird feathers and the woman with an orange beaded top and metal accents sewn onto her blue skirt. **Regalia** is what you call an Indigenous persons' outfit and accessories for dancing and ceremony. They are vibrant reflections of tribal Nation history mixed with personal style. They are not costumes.

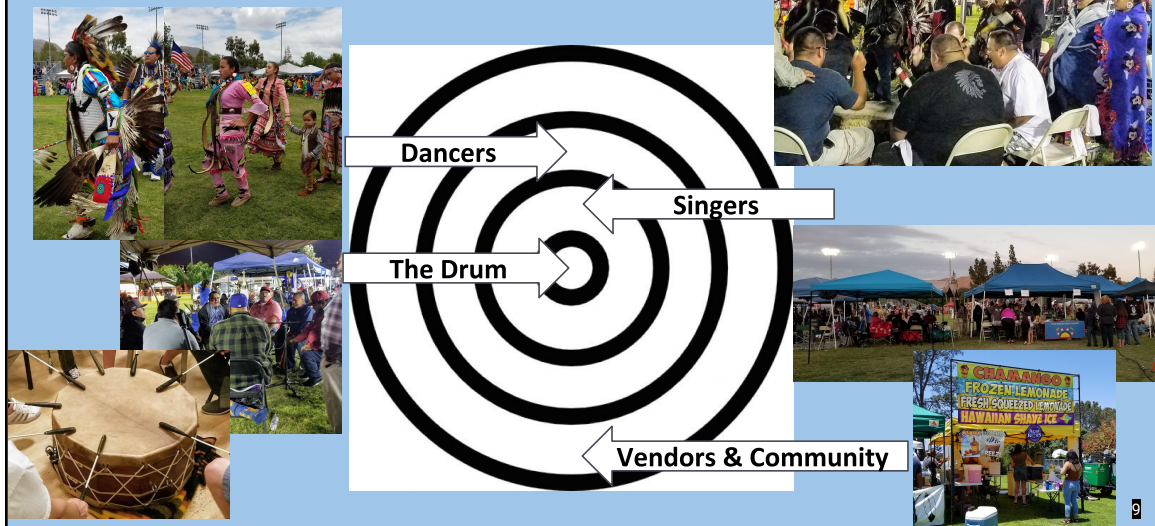


When are Powwows?

Picture and Flyer from the 2018 UC Riverside Powwow

When are powwows? Powwow season starts in February and ends in September (sometimes October or November in warmer climates). Powwow committees, or the body responsible for planning and facilitating the powwow, advertise on social media (Facebook, Instagram, etc.), by word of mouth, and on the dedicated website: Powwows.com. **Powwow committees** take months or even a whole year to plan an annual powwow event. Who can participate in them depends on who sponsors the powwow event. Sometimes powwow committees are composed of Native American students, and other student and community volunteers, like the one pictured here at UC Riverside, while other sometimes they are sponsored and organized by members of a Native American-led Nonprofit Organization, a city or town, or a particular tribal Nation. The COVID-19 pandemic has cancelled many powwows from happening in person. However, Native American peoples continually adapt and now offer virtual and social distance powwow experiences both synchronously and asynchronously using electronic communications (e.g., Zoom, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube etc.). I encourage you to attend a local powwow when they return in-person or check out the [Social Distance Powwow Facebook Group](#), which host powwow songs, dancers, and drummers in virtual powwow events online.

Powwow Elements



Many powwows are often described metaphorically as four concentric circles (or four circles within each other), even if they are not structured exactly that way at the powwow event.

The Drum represents the first circle in the center because it is the heartbeat of the powwow. Whether referring to the physical, spiritual, or musical aspect, there would be no powwow without the drum. Its beats gathers singers, dancers, and other community members together to participate in the powwow.

Surrounding the Drum are **Singers** representing the second circle. Traditionally, males singers sit around the drum and sing at the drum while female singers stand behind the Drum. Traditionally only men would drum and women would sit behind the men singing high harmonies. Beginning in the mid-1970s, women began drumming with men and singing powwow songs an octave higher. There are differing explanations for this depending on the tribal Nation, but I was taught that women stand behind the Drum and do not play out of respect for the power of their role as mothers. In other words, women have their own powers naturally given to them that allow them to create life, whereas men do not have that so they can play the Drum without disrupting its power. Just as a mother encircles her baby in the womb the women circle the drum. Today, there are mixed-gender and all-female drum groups. While these drum groups are still uncommon, they give women the freedom to lead in music-making.

The **Dancers** represent the third circle of the powwow, encircling the singers and Drum. Powwow music is a form of dance music so it is important to think about music and dance happening together. The Dancers each have their own dance styles like Women's Jingle, Men's Grass Dance, Women's Fancy Shawl. In contest settings, they are judged by their ability to stop and start, and recognize its special beats as if they know the song by memory.

Around all of this drumming, singing, and dancing, you have the **Vendors and Community**. Far from being an audience, spectators fulfill a variety of roles in the process of creating a powwow community. Powwow spectators, dancers, and singers all contribute to the economic potential of a powwow by exercising or not exercising their purchasing power. In

addition to music, dance, and socializing, a large part of powwow culture revolves around vendors who sell arts, food, crafts, and other items. This all comes together to create powwow events.

Other Powwow Elements

Master of Ceremonies (aka Emcee)



Giveaways and honor songs

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If the Drum is the heartbeat of the powwow then the **Master of Ceremonies** (also known as Emcee) is the voice. The emcee is often an older male, very entertaining, and deeply rooted in the community. His responsibility is keeping the event moving by providing explanations of the different dances, introducing honored guests, dancers, and most importantly, making sure that all spectators are kept aware of what is taking place in a respectful and informative way. His announcements cite historical experiences of Native American peoples and lessons in conversation with the practices seen in the arena, and how Indigenous peoples envision their future.

Powwows often have **giveaways** and honor songs in between dances. Giveaways are just like it sounds, the distribution of gifts. Part of a general emphasis among Native American people on gift giving, a giveaway may refer to a powwow event at which gifts are given to those who contribute to the event, sometimes including virtually all attendees. Other times head dancers, the emcee, or the powwow committee requests special songs from the host Drum to honor someone and a blanket is put out in the arena to collect offerings (money, food, jewelry...). A part of the offering are often shared with the drum as a way for thanking them for playing the requested song.

Powwow: Order of Events



Grand Entry procession then
"Flag Song"

Intertribal Songs/Dances

Exhibition Songs/Dances

Community Feed

More singing and dancing...



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The order of events has been somewhat standardized. Powwows officially begin with **Grand Entry**, an opening procession in which all assembled dancers dance into the arena area together. Some tribal cultures see Grand Entry as having been borrowed from Wild West shows. Grand Entry line-up order is determined by local protocol as mediated by the Arena Director. This is followed by a **Flag song** -- a type of powwow song used to honor and recognize the flags carried in at the beginning of the powwow Grand Entry processional. It is slow and not meant for dancing, and those who are able stand up together while it's played.

Then after the flags are presented and honored, the Emcee asks the host drum groups to play **Intertribal songs**. An Intertribal song is a non-contest song that all dancers may participate in. Usually this refers to all registered powwow dancers, not including spectators. All dancers are encouraged to warm up for the day of dancing ahead. However depending on the powwow, sometimes the Emcee announces that everyone is welcome to dance.

In addition to intertribal songs, powwows might also feature exhibition dancing which comes from **powwow contests** that separate the dances according to gender and sometimes age. Many local communities still powwow that are purely social, but the majority of them now involve contest dancing where dancers compete for cash prizes. Contests are judged by dance styles and age group. The dancers are judged on their regalia as well as their dancing abilities. For example, dancing out of beat, losing regalia, and failing to stop on the last drum beat can disqualify a dancer from winning. Contest dancing has a long history in intertribal powwow culture that has contributed to the professionalization of powwow singers and dancers over time.

In the evening there is a **community feed**, where the powwow committee feeds the drummers, singers, and dancers, sometimes vendors too depending on resources. During the community feed hour, non-powwow entertainment by other Indigenous communities take place like Danza Azteca/Mexica, Kumeyaay Bird Songs, Hoop Dancing, etc. Then powwow members return and powwow singing and dancing resumes until the end of the night.



Grand Entry
UCR Powwow
(2018) with
M.C.
Introductions

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Now that you have a sense of what a powwow is, let's look and listen to one. Here is a video I took with my phone a couple of years ago at the UC Riverside Powwow. It is during the Grand Entry and has a lot of the elements I mentioned earlier -- you will see the flags, dancers, spectators, you will hear the Emcee and the drums. Notice they have numbers on them, these are for the competition part of the powwow. Notice how the dancers are organized, first you'll see the color guard carrying the flag, followed by the Head Woman, Head Man, Head Girl and Head Boy Dancers (these are honored dancers invited by the powwow committee and act role models for other dancers) Then you will see dancers organized by dance style, meaning that the dancers with similar looking regalia are grouped together. After Head Dancers, there is a group of Women's Traditional dancers (these are usually older women, dancing slow and steady, slightly swaying their shawls). The second half of the video highlights the Men's Fancy (these are usually male adult or young adult men dancing really fast, bouncing, and swinging the fringe of their regalia). At the end of the procession you may notice the toddler-aged dancers, they are often referred to as Tiny Tots. (https://youtu.be/sp_BLrk5aqY)

In this DIY Curriculum....

- Drum
- Music
 - Powwow Beats
- Dance
 - Round Dance “All People in Unity”



I hope you have enjoyed this introduction into Native American cultures through powwow music and dance. In the following DIY curriculum, we'll explore more in-depth the parts of a powwow. In the drum video, you'll learn about protocols and the important environmental lessons we learn through drum making. In the music video, you'll learn unique powwow music elements including two different powwow rhythms, honor beats, and vocables. Lastly, to reinforce that powwow music and dance go hand in hand, I'll also be teaching you a social Round song/dance together called “All People in Unity” in the last video.

For More Information...

Buzzfeed Video “Indigenous Life”

Little things in my Native American house that help me stay grounded

<https://fb.watch/1FUjqZdbch/>

Bay Area American Indian Two-Spirit Powwow

First and only LGBTQIA Powwow in San Francisco

<https://youtu.be/N4BQbRnKdIY>

Powwow Dancing Video

Learn more about the different powwow styles of dance and their meanings

<https://youtu.be/MONgmqlpaW8>

More information slide...