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Native Women Drumming

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Native Women Drumming

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Editor's Note: Because Margaret Bruchac's comments about an FYI we featured on Native Women Drumming were sent just as many of our subscribers were taking vacations, I have held-off running the discussion thread until now. I am placing Margaret's original comments first as a reminder to everyone what she said and then the responses follow. Cordially, Justina Parsons-Bernstein, Editor, H-AmIndian

Original Commentary:

Date: Thu, 20 Dec 2001 18:51:33 -0500
From: Margaret Bruchac <mbruchac@javanet.com>
Subject: REPLY: Native Women Drumming

Re: Native Women Drumming


The problem is not the divide between male and female, but the divide between (1) the contemporary idea that one pan-Indian "traditional" protocol regarding cultural practices applies to all tribes and (2) the reality that, historically, there was (and is) an enormous amount of diversity in traditional and sacred practices.

The following statement:

"Drumming is historically a sacred art performed only by men, though a handful of female groups recently have risked ostracism to challenge convention."

...is historically inaccurate and misleading. There IS one particular form of drumming that is exclusive to men. But Native women who choose to drum are not just "challenging" convention. They may be demanding a return to traditional practices, in tribes where drumming was practiced by women and/or men. They might be countering the trend toward domination of Native women that was started by Euro-Americans, and has been perpetuated, in some communities, by Native men. They may also be calling attention to the fact that pow-wow drumming, as it is practiced on the pow-wow circuit today, is a modern adaptation of a traditional practice that holds many different meanings for different communities of Native people.

Historically, among some northeastern tribes, women played drums and men rattled; among others, men and women collaborated on crafting and playing drums and/or rattles. Among many western Native peoples, men alone do the drumming. ALL of these practices are historically traditional and equally sacred. Oral traditions, recorded practices, and surviving instruments of northeastern Native peoples show the use of small water drums, hand-held skin frame drums, slit logs, large pieces of bark, and even drums taken from the American military. The big dance drum suspended on a frame, with
many drummers seated in a circle around it, that's seen on the pow-wow circuit today, was unknown to northeastern peoples until the late 19th century, when it was imported into social events, along with such other western-Plains-style customs as tipis and big feather headdresses. Most Native Nations today practice "selective traditionalism," as elders and tribal leaders, formally or informally, select and transmit particular versions of cultural practices. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as different tribes came into increasing contact at social events that came to be called "pow-wows," a cultural protocol emerged regarding respectful behavior at these pan-Indian events. The selection process that created contemporary pow-wow etiquette has inadvertently created some myths about correct behavior and dress, leading to the widespread notions that "all chiefs wear feather headdresses" and "women don't drum." The confusion over what is traditionally "Native American" extends even to the term "pow-wow" itself. In the Narragansett language, "pauwau" originally referred to a spiritual healer who effected miraculous cures on behalf of groups or individuals. That healer could be male or female, and it was not uncommon for both men and women in the northeast to use drums in social dancing and/or healing spiritual ceremonies.

Ethnologists think that Euro-American observers mistook the word "pauwau" to mean the gathering of people who visited the healer at large ceremonies. Yankees spelled it "pow-wow," and the term stuck - it is now used by Indians all across the country to mean a big event where people sell craftwork and dance and drum competitively for cash prizes.

Anishnabe traditions hold that a woman created the first drum. The story relates how, in a time of war, an Anishnabekwe fasted and prayed to the creator for many days for an end to the warfare that was destroying her people. She was given instructions, and she made a drum, and then gathered the men around it and showed them how to use it as a tool for peace. At a 1986 drum-making workshop on Birch Island, Anishinabe elder Eddie Benton Benai related this story, and noted: "Creator looked down and saw one Anishnabekwe sitting alone at the top of a hill...She prayed for Anishnabe man to get back to what he was supposed to be - a man of peace, a man of honor...We must remember that the drum came to us through a woman. It didn't come to us through a music store. It wasn't brought over here by pilgrims." Among some of the Anishnabe, women traditionally don't play on the drum, but they do dictate how and where the drum will be used. It is important to remember that one of the largest changes in Native societies after contact with Europeans was the change in the balanced relationship between men and women. Native women lost power and men gained more influence, as a result of exposure to European values and patriarchal systems. Those systems still affect us today, when women are forced into roles that may be more the result of modern pan-Indian protocols and mythologies of docile females, than a reflection of historic traditions. We need to consider, as Native peoples, how best to demonstrate tolerance for our natural diversity, and acceptance of historically authentic traditions, while showing respect for the social needs of contemporary pan-Indian gatherings.

An excellent source for technical and historical information about northeastern drums and rattles, with extensive interviews with elders and tradition-bearers is "Visions of Sound: Musical Instruments of First Nations Communities in Northeastern America," by Beverly Diamond, M. Sam Cronk, and Franziska von Rosen, University of Chicago Press, 1994. All royalties from this publishing project go to First Nations musicians and artists.

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