

9.

## Hybridity in Transition

EDDIE MADRIL

### **Abstract**

In 1923 a paper was written to describe the traditional Hopi ceremonial ways. The phrase “hybridity in transition” was a descriptor of their process. This was a time when many aspects of Indigenous traditions including language, were illegal or prohibited in many ways. This paper and performance explores the evolution of pseudo-traditional performance practices over the past century. How can a culture maintain its core-values and essence, explicitly or embedded within new forms of presenting and representing its identity and authentic voice? Using empirical evidence, we journey through the transition from an art form a child participates in, the lifelong dancer, and to the artist-educator in order to justify creative modifications to traditions. How can cultural traditions be maintained and celebrated during times of suppression? How and why is tradition important to each generation as it faces major social influences? What is the value and power of collaborative work between tradition and modernity? How can an Indigenous culture explore, decolonize and empower its future thorough performance?

## Paper

In 1979, when I was in fourth grade, I saw myself as no different than any of the children at school. We were differentiated by boys and girls, and by who had money and who did not. Neither ethnicity nor religion was of interest to us, as we had no place or position for any argument on the matter. Though we all had televisions, we didn't see our world reflected in the images there and thought little of it.

America in the 1970s was 'post' the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968) and saw an active American Indian cultural shift.<sup>1</sup> The Termination Period (1953-1964) had also come to pass, where more than one hundred tribes had been legally terminated, which allowed 2.5 million acres of Native land to be sold to non-Natives. The termination process continued throughout the 1970s as an estimated 750,000 Natives were coerced into moving to cities within the United States, therefore losing cultural ties and "dependencies". This action created the "pan-Indian".<sup>2</sup>

It was in 1979, when I was nine years old, that I learned I was *Indian*. Being Indian was a relatively positive position to be in. Due to the influence of movies, the look and style of Natives – in other words the visual image, including everything from clothing to philosophy – became very popular during the late 1960s and into the 1970s. To be the only openly known Indian at school was rare and led to a certain elementary school celebrity status. Wearing handmade Indian jewelry was an

---

<sup>1</sup> For the sake of clarity, throughout this paper I will use the following terms interchangeably to describe the same people: Indian, American Indian, Native American, Native, and Indigenous. Tribe and Nation will also be used interchangeably. While each term has been used over the centuries to categorize and describe the peoples of North America (primarily the United States) for various purposes and also in relationship to changing eras, it should be noted that these descriptors are all in a language foreign to the indigenous groups they are attempting to describe. As such, they are poor descriptors that cannot possibly honor the immense diversity of the currently 567 federally recognized tribes that contain over 50 distinct language families, cultural traditions and worldviews. (According to the current record, which tends to fluctuate. [www.bia.gov](http://www.bia.gov))

<sup>2</sup> These periods have vague beginning and end dates that vary depending on the source.

added bonus to the image and was received well. However, these were all constructs of the ‘Indian’. The look was fabricated from multiple tribal influences, combined into the image of the ‘Indian’ that we are stuck with to this day.<sup>3</sup>

By the following year, in 1980, I learned I was Yaqui – Pascua Yaqui to be precise – and I began to understand the implications of all that meant. Our tribe, our nation, had been federally recognized in 1978 and has a reservation just southwest of Tucson, Arizona. Coming into my family’s traditions and becoming more and more rooted in this heritage of Yaqui held true meaning to me. However, it meant nothing to my peers. This led me to proclaim most often that I was “Indian” and not “Yaqui”; in other words I was identifying as part of a general group rather than as a member of my specific tribe.

Over the past century, the image and popularity of the American Indian, along with the political policies imposed upon Native people, has looked somewhat like a sine function wave, up and down. There have been popular periods for Native people due to books, comics, and films. During these periods the ‘Indian’ was welcomed into the American narrative, but kept at a distance, not seated at the national political table. The image that was welcomed, though, was often of the romanticized Indian on horseback – an image that reflected mainly one group of Native tribes, those that the federal government had the last big battles with and the ones that would be invited to be part of touring Wild West shows.

Our traditional ways, our healing ceremonies, our sciences, our stories, our songs, and our dances, were to be suppressed as they threatened what America wanted to be: modern and industrial in every aspect, including all residents of the country following suit in pursuit of “one Nation under God”. In 1921, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs Charles Burke

---

<sup>3</sup> The name ‘Indian’ itself was a name used to describe and categorize over 550 very distinct tribal groups or Nations, into one homogenous group, and is an image or descriptor that has also stuck to this day.

threatened to ban Indian dances that involved ‘immoral relations between the sexes’ and ‘any disorderly or plainly excessive performance that promotes superstitious cruelty, licentiousness, idleness, danger to health, and shiftless indifference to family welfare.’<sup>43</sup>

This declaration was due to the lack of understanding of the role of the Sacred Clowns in Hopi ceremonies by non-Native observers. The observers were allowed to be present during the ceremonies on the Hopi reservation in Oraibi, Arizona. Yet, because what they saw did not comply with the social and religious conventions of what America was supposed to be at the time, the Hopi ceremonies were investigated by reformers and by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), a federal organization charged with oversight and policy-making of the Native population. The nearly two-hundred page report was known as the Secret Dance File because of the “obscene” nature of the content. This file was not printed en mass, but maintained as a single report, and handed around among those higher governing circles without general access. Gossip ensued compounding the lack of understanding and influencing everything from popular images to Native relations in ways that perpetuated mis-understanding and mis-information.

For decades, it was non-Indians who would be seen in films, heard in radio shows or dance, representing American Indians in media. For example, the modern dance pioneer Ted Shawn would be “made up” as an Indian dancer and toured with his dance company reenacting traditional Native dances throughout the 1920s. It was a popular time in America for various ethnic groups to either be put on display for research, or as the oddities that represented the primitive peoples who were certain to go extinct in evolution of the modern world.

---

<sup>4</sup> Margaret D. Jacobs. *Making Savages of Us All: White Women, Pueblo Indians, and the Controversy over Indian Dances in the 1920s* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1996) p179

During such periods, various tribes made use of Western education and developed understandings of federal laws and policies. They refused to give way to incursions or give up in the face of atrocities, even though the speed with which oppressions were enacted made it difficult for tribes to reach any real level of autonomy or freedom. The 'Indian problem' needed to be addressed in order for America to progress. Political policies would be in flux and in order to manage the Indian attention had to be paid to each tribe independently. This meant that each tribe had a different relationship with the federal government. By treaty or other negotiation, each tribe either had resources or did not. Such complexities continue to make it particularly difficult for each tribe to have equal opportunities to negotiate with any power.

As a youth who claimed being Indian, I had a sense of agency that was amplified by participating in powwow dances. These dances are social dances that have been widespread through what is sometimes called the "pan-Indian movement". These dances and songs stem from the Plains tribes of North Dakota through to Oklahoma. These traditions were not specifically of my tribe but it was important that they involved more than solely learning the dance. Embedded in the teaching were histories and responsibilities. These responsibilities would be the foundation for the work I have come to create.

Dancing at powwows gave me an identity. Dancing put me in a position to build bonds with others who were also Indian, and who were often being raised physically removed from reservations but still immersed in culture. Our powwow dancing gave us the opportunity to have something in common, to connect to. We were all from different tribes from across the country, but at powwows we could find ways to identify with each other. The addition of competition made it especially attractive, because we could place 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, or 3<sup>rd</sup>, win money, and be driven to want to get better. I would compete and often place very well during powwow season, the summer months.

Travelling from powwow to powwow gave me the opportunity to meet new people and see the different outfits, or regalia, that each dancer had assembled to their liking. These outfits often represented their tribe, clan, or family, although in recent years, this has faded to some degree. While holding true to the basics of what the dance and outfits were supposed to be, I could design my dance regalia as I chose. Using some traditional parts and motifs was expected, but I was free to use non-traditional materials that reflected trends being set by dancers over many generations.

Winning competitions and designing and making my outfits gave me pride in the work. But there was an even greater pride to be taken in what I was: Indian. My pride in being Indian was a stepping-stone for learning. As I grew older I was no longer satisfied with being an Indian. No longer satisfied with competing for the sake of winning money or gaining popularity. No longer satisfied with representing Indian people, without knowing a good amount of the cultural traditions of my own tribe.

Many Indians at this time were dancing at powwows. But many had also been part of the Indian movement because our parents or grandparents had not been allowed to be themselves, therefore preventing us from being exposed to our tribal cultures explicitly. Due to social pressures, my mother and her sisters were forced by their father to no longer speak their language as children, though it was the only language they knew. These missing pieces in the generational transmission of knowledge are critical in the success of our youth today.

In 1923, the Hopi tribe, located in northeastern Arizona, along with other Puebloan tribes was discussed in a paper written by Aby Warburg, an art historian and cultural theorist. He was witness to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian entering the 20<sup>th</sup> century performing ancient and traditional ceremonies according to their belief systems. Warburg states:

They are clearly no longer primitives dependent on their senses, for whom no action directed toward the future can exist; but neither are they technologically secure Europeans, for whom future events are expected to be organically or mechanically determined.<sup>5</sup>

During this period of suppression, the Hopi, along with other Pueblo tribes, were participating and practicing cultural traditions, maintaining and celebrating their ceremonies. But from Warburg's etic perspective, they were romanticized, and seen as primitive through the lens of cultural comparison.

Rather than view the ceremonial activities as simply a hybridity in transition from the primitive to the modern, perhaps we should refer to the actions of the Pueblo ceremonies from one hundred years ago as an enactment of critical theory, or more appropriately as a performance of critical dance theory. The observable activities involved in the ceremonies were recorded in early research and given value. But there were many aspects of Indian cultures that were unobserved by early ethnographers— unobservable activities, such as the preparations for ceremonies, that have profound significance. Dances and songs kept, and continue to keep, a record of cultural practices and ontologies as part of a living history. Our practices have changed over time, whether because of nature or because of human actions. When cultural changes provoked by a foreign people are taken by choice, this act of acculturation even so can be described as a form of autonomy in the narratives that emerge as a result.

Embedded within dances, songs, and stories are traditions and histories that reflect change: a Native concept of time is that it is not linear. What takes place in the past and future is also part of the current time. It would behoove the academy to

---

<sup>5</sup> Aby Warburg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America* (1923; New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), p17.

recognize that, within traditional cultures, the arts are part of the social, political, and spiritual structure of the community and not merely a creative interpretation of it. When the dance, song, or story given by a member of the indigenous community includes a respectfully accepted change or addition to the form, then it should be understood that this process is indeed traditional. These changes and transitions may be minor or major, but they are nonetheless an integral part of a commentary that reflects the Native community and/or the world outside of it. The narrative that is not merely remembered and retold, but rather that performs a part of current Native life, is an act of “expanding our notions of intellectual sovereignties.”<sup>6</sup>

Between 1983 and 2009 I had danced with a group called Four Winds in performances at schools, fairs, conferences, and other social events. We believed we were sharing the beauty of American Indian people through dances, songs, stories, and history. We included audience participation activities and even some American Indian sign language based on a few books on the subject and our own phrases. Our performances were fun, welcoming, and popular. In retrospect, however, we lacked a very crucial element. We did not explain the importance to why we often performed to recorded music, why our outfits or regalia included satin, metal bells, neon colored ribbon, or included pop-culture or modern dance moves within the dances we called traditional.

We were practicing the tradition of adapting to our environments. We were reflecting the world we were a part of and working to navigate through it. We were responding to our need to be proud Indians while at the same time responding to the need of teachers, students, and general audiences to experience Native people as we saw fit. It was our voice, our authentic voices as descendants of our ancestors, who also had

---

<sup>6</sup> Melissa Nelson, 'The Future of Native Studies', *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 35.1 (2011). p40



had to adapt in order to survive physically, politically, emotionally, and socially. What was kept in the midst of all the obstacles and intense measures to prevent our success and even our existence, was the essence of our complete being. The initial purpose for performing our dances and songs was to continue as a people while retaining the information embedded within our oral narratives and oral histories. In Margaret Kovach's words: "Tribal knowledge is pragmatic and ceremonial, physical and metaphysical. Indigenous cultures have sophisticated and complex cultural practices to access that which comes from both the ordinary and the extraordinary."<sup>7</sup>

In the past ten years I have produced plays and stage productions that include American Indian dance with contemporary music, imagery, and choreography. It is important to me, and a vital part of how I produce work, to work in right relations and requesting permission from the elders, to be sure the work is compliant with protocols. The process begins with permission from self, then the ancestors, the elders, and then the community.

There have been others over the past one hundred years who have also found it beneficial to perform Native dances while adding elements of modernity. There is a generation of Native youth who want to learn more about who they are and why they should find this identity important. It is imperative to include the essences, or the elements, of tradition that stem from the ancestors within contemporary works. One of the obstacles to this endeavor are the rules or traditions of what makes art or academia a serious consideration, and the associated language and the restrictions in describing an indigenous worldview and the nuances within that worldview.

I initially stated that this paper explores a "pseudo-tradition". I assert that the term "tradition" is what I must use in order to describe a practice or action that is passed on from

---

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009) p56

generation-to-generation, and it is common to accept that traditions traditionally do not change. But as indigenous people we have varying worldviews, as well as languages that best describe these views, which contribute to our autonomy.

The power in performance is that it demonstrates the continuance of people who have experienced national policies and military efforts to suppress and exterminate them. The power in performance, of dance, is that it surpasses our ideas of movement and music as only sound to include an investigative and interrogative narrative that informs the artist, the audience, and the community. Taking the people as one or as many, to open space or stage and continue the existence of traditional elements within modern themes is empowerment. The move from knowing our crafts to understanding our crafts is empowerment. The power of demonstrating to others freely in our own voice how we choose to represent ourselves respectfully in alignment with our communities is empowerment. The impossible has been made possible throughout Native histories. To take the youth in their formidable years and introduce them to their traditions through the arts first can be the foundation of their pride and their initiation to deeper inquiry.

**References**

- Margaret D. Jacobs. *Making Savages of Us All: White Women, Pueblo Indians, and the Controversy over Indian Dances in the 1920s* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1996).
- Aby Warburg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America* (1923; New York: Cornell University Press, 1997).
- Melissa Nelson, 'The Future of Native Studies', *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 35.1 (2011).
- Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

**Eddie Madril** is a member of the Pascua Yaqui tribe of Southern Arizona and Northern Sonora Mexico. For over thirty years, he's been an active member of the Native American community and a representative of his culture through various aspects. He has been a member of the Board of Directors for Friendship House of American Indians Inc for fifteen years and, for ten years, a member of the advisory committee at the De Young Museum for their Native programming, where he recently produced an all Native fashion show including traditional regalia and his modern designs. He was recently awarded the KQED Community Hero award for his contributions to the Bay Area Native community. He teaches American Indian studies courses at San Francisco State University and the College of Marin. As a dancer and educator he has performed throughout the United States, and he has taken his Native dance group on tour to France. He was also nominated for the prestigious Isadora Duncan Dance Award as a soloist for his hoop dance presentation in the play "Sun Dagger Solstice" and again for visual design at the Ethnic Dance Festival.