

Children's Dances at First Nation Powwows in Atlantic Canada A Preliminary Inquiry

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Article abstract

In this article, based on ethnographic research conducted at Mi'kmaw powwows throughout Atlantic Canada between 2004 and 2010, I will begin to address the lacuna in literature on First Nation children's dances. I will describe the various children's dances observed at powwows in Eastern Canada, as well as songs that are specifically used for children's dances, contextualizing them within the traditional powwow event and in relation to emcee stage talk. I will also illuminate the socio-cultural functions of children's dance at powwows and the relationship between dance and play. Finally, by focussing specifically on the living dance tradition of Mi'kmaq at cultural events in the Atlantic provinces, I will elucidate some of the forces that act upon informal culture, shaping and re-shaping it through time. This approach will highlight the relationship between popular culture and tradition in this context, revealing the emergent nature of lived traditions.

CHILDREN'S DANCES AT FIRST NATION POWWOWS IN ATLANTIC CANADA

A Preliminary Inquiry

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In the context of a traditional powwow – a family-oriented and multi-generational event – children’s dances are an important means of engaging younger participants. Despite this, relatively little work has been done on the types of children’s dances that occur at powwows and their functions within the context of such an event. Instead, some authors have focussed their attention on the categories of competitive dance seen at contest powwows and the styles of regalia associated with each (for example, Browner 2002; Ellis 2003; Scales 2012), while others have directed their attention to forms of nation-specific dance at traditional powwows (such as Tulk 2007). Children’s dances, however, are a salient space for observation of the complex interplay between “tradition” and modernity encompassed by the powwow as a cultural event in the twenty-first century.

Based on ethnographic research conducted at Mi’kmaw¹ powwows throughout Atlantic Canada between 2004 and 2010, I begin to address the lacuna in literature on First Nation children’s dances.² I describe the various children’s dances observed at powwows in Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and the Gaspé Peninsula in Québec, as well as songs that are specifically used for children’s dances, contextualizing them within the traditional powwow event (Albers and Medicine 2005; Tulk 2006) and in relation to emcee stage talk (Gelo 1999; Mattern 1998). I will

1. In the Smith-Francis orthography, Mi’kmaw is the singular noun and adjectival form and Mi’kmaq is the plural noun and the name of the language.
2. I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the JR Smallwood Foundation for Newfoundland and Labrador Studies, and the Institute of Social and Economic Research for their financial support of the fieldwork upon which this study draws. It was conducted during my doctoral studies at Memorial University. I would also like to thank my consultants for sharing their experiences with me and for reviewing the this paper prior to publication.

illuminate the socio-cultural functions of children's dance at powwows and the relationship between dance and play (Lindqvist 2010; Jiesamfoek 2012). Finally, by focussing specifically on the living dance tradition of Mi'kmaq at cultural events in the Atlantic Provinces, I elucidate some of the forces that act upon informal culture, shaping and re-shaping it through time. This approach will highlight the relationship between popular culture and tradition in this context, revealing the emergent nature of lived traditions.³

Powwows

A powwow is a social and cultural event held in First Nation communities. It may include a variety of elements, including drumming, dancing, speech-making, ceremonies, feasts, gifting, and other social and cultural elements.⁴ A powwow may last only a few hours or one day, or, more often, for two to three days in a community. During the summer powwow season, a powwow trail develops in Mi'kma'ki, the traditional territory of the Mi'kmaq (and other powwow trails cross other regions of Canada and the United States). This means that normally each community has a designated weekend on which their powwow usually occurs each year, and drum groups, dancers, vendors, and other participants travel from one powwow to the next each weekend during the summer.

There are two general types of powwow, traditional and contest, though there is significant over-lap between the two.⁵ The primary difference is that contest powwows feature competitive dancing according to age groups, as well as drum competitions.⁶ In addition to honoraria for dancers and singers, then, there is also prize money available and a points system is used to determine winners. There are also two basic layouts of powwow grounds, referred to as sacred fire and sacred hoop. In sacred fire layout, the drum groups are in the centre of the dance grounds, often under an arbour, and there are concentric circles of participants around the drums (first dancers, then spectators, then vendors). In sacred hoop, flags are often posted in the

3. For discussion of how the term "tradition" is deployed in the context of Mi'kmaq powwows and its multiple meanings, a topic which is beyond the scope of the present study, see Tulk (2008).
4. For detailed descriptions of this cultural event, consult Browner (2002) or Ellis (2003).
5. For a detailed description of the two types of powwow in Mi'kmaq territory, consult Tulk (2006).
6. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed discussion of competitive dancing at powwows. Those interested in the subject might begin with Scales (2007, 2012).

centre of the dance grounds, with dancers around them, followed by a circle of drum groups, then spectators, and vendors (see Tulk 2006 for diagrams).

Children's Dances

There are many types of children's dances observed within the context of a Mi'kmaw powwow. In the following pages, I describe the ones that I observed⁷ during fieldwork at powwows in Mi'kma'ki, including those dances that were clearly directed at children (i.e. children were invited to dance by the emcee), as well as other dances that were popular among children (but were not specifically directed at them). In all cases, these dances are organized by adults and are not spontaneous dance acts initiated by children; however, the children who participate in these dances generally decide for themselves whether and how they will participate, often in small groups of friends. Further, within the context of children's dances at a powwow, they are free to express themselves in any form of movement they prefer, as will be described below. Thus, where others studying children's folklore have excluded activities "organised by adults for children which have health or education, for instance, as their aim" (Whittaker 2012: 275), I take a more inclusive approach. As Mechling observed, "A folk group exists if a folk culture exists, and autonomous children's folk cultures can emerge within informal groups as well as in groups highly structured by adults" (Mechling 1986: 96).

I do not, however, include descriptions of the category dances that are common to both traditional and contest powwows: Women's Traditional, Fancy Shawl, Jingle Dress, Men's Traditional, Men's Fancy, and Grass Dance. These dances are popular among youth and adults at powwows throughout North America and have been the focus of many studies (see Browner 2002; Ellis 2003). Children sometimes learn these dances formally in school or at after-school programs, and sometimes informally through observation of and mentorship by other dancers within the context of a powwow (Jeff Ward, personal communication, July 16, 2015). They may begin competing in them at a very young age, for example, in a Tiny Tots or Juniors category at a contest powwow. At traditional powwows that I have attended, however, children have not been separated from adults in

7. The dances included in this study are by no means an exhaustive list of the children's dances at powwows. Dance styles and practices vary from community to community; consequently, there is significant room for variation. I have not included children's dances that I have heard of, but not observed, nor dances described in secondary sources.

category dances; rather, a child who dances Jingle Dress dances with all Jingle Dress dancers present. Children who dance a particular category will also usually dance this style during intertribals.

For those children who do participate in a particular category of dance, often they are given more flexibility to deviate from expectations for that category of dance because they are young and still acquiring the teachings related to their chosen style of dance. For example, as Michael R. Denny, an emcee, arena director, drummer, and dancer from Eskasoni, Nova Scotia, pointed out, in some dances, like a men's traditional, a dancer should not spin around or do a complete 360 degree turn, because it represents that he is lost or retreating. Children, however, often incorporate spinning into their dances and this is considered acceptable because they are still learning (personal communication, July 16, 2015). Also important for dancing is the concept of balance, so what is done on one side of the body is often repeated on the other. As noted by Jeff Ward, an emcee, drummer, and dancer from Red Bank, New Brunswick, young children often do not strictly follow this aesthetic (personal communication, July 16, 2015).⁸

While movements from the aforementioned categories of dance may be seen during children's dances, far more common is what might be called a straight traditional style of dancing – a pat-step (or double step) pattern, in which one pats the ground with the right foot and then places the foot down on the ground, and then repeats this with the left, moving forward around the circle of dance in a clockwise fashion. Children have more freedom to move however they want to, since their movements are not restricted by the expectations for a particular category of dance (Michael R. Denny, personal communication, July 16, 2015). Indeed, as will be demonstrated in the description of children's dances below, sometimes the movements cannot easily be categorized as dance.

Children's Intertribal

An intertribal dance at a powwow is one during which all dancers are welcome, whether wearing regalia or not. Dancers may dance their "own style," meaning that at the same time, one sees Women's and Men's Traditional, Fancy Shawl, Men's Fancy, Jingle Dress, and Grass Dance, along with any other nation-specific or personal dance styles. As well,

8. Additional ethnographic research at contest powwows may reveal how this affects judging and scoring practices; however, this is beyond the scope of the current research, which focusses on traditional powwows.

at traditional powwows, an intertribal is often the appropriate time for a non-Aboriginal person to dance (other appropriate times may be during Round Dances or Two-Steps). A Children's Intertribal, then, is one in which all children are invited to dance their own styles. Generally this is not a competitive dance, nor are there prizes or rewards presented.

I observed a Children's Intertribal at the 2004 powwow in Miawpukek (Conne River, Newfoundland), the theme of which was "Honouring Our Youth." Following Grand Entry, emcee Jimmy Augustine called on the drum group Thunder Moose for a Children's Intertribal to honour the youth of the community. Some children danced their categories of Women's Traditional and Fancy Shawl. Others ran, skipped, hopped, and walked around the grounds. Young girls in small groups moved around the arena holding hands and, in some cases, mothers held the hands of very young children as they walked during the intertribal. One child carried a balloon, while another carried a stick of cotton candy (items which would not normally be seen within the dance area of the powwow). At the edge of the dance grounds, family members, friends, community members, and visitors watched the Children's Intertribal. This dance demonstrates the breadth of practice in and the inclusive approach to children's dances.

Candy Dance

The Candy Dance is one of the most popular dances observed at a powwow. While many variations exist, three elements are always present: music, movement, and candy. Children are called to the dance grounds. In one variation, candy has been tossed on the ground. Children dance around until the music stops and then pick up whatever candy is near them. When the music begins again, they return to dancing. This continues until the song is over (usually four repetitions or "push-ups").⁹ A variation on this sees the children dropping the candy once they start dancing again and they end up making piles of candy on the powwow grounds. A slightly different version allows children to pick up candy anytime while dancing without the starting and stopping previously described. In yet another version, there is no candy on the ground, but it is handed out after the dance is completed (Michael R. Denny, personal communication, July 16, 2015; Jeff Ward, personal communication, July 16, 2015).

The Candy Dance at the 2007 Eskasoni (Nova Scotia) powwow combined several of these variations, ensuring that every participant left

9. A push-up is one complete rendition of a song. Usually four push-ups are sung before a song ends.

with candy. There was candy scattered on the dance grounds for children to pick up as they danced and candy was also handed out when the dance was finished. Dancers were encouraged by the emcee, as he told him, “Show us your moves!” and “Find all the candy, now!” At the end of the dance, the emcee encouraged a round of applause, saying, “That’s our future.” The theme of children being “our future” is quite common in relation to children’s dances, reinforcing the importance of their involvement in traditional practice and customs.

While it is not surprising that variations of this dance exist, the reason for one of the variations demonstrates that the forces of change can sometimes be unexpected and of great social and historical significance. Michael R. Denny explained to me that in the past when he emceed at a powwow he would feature a version of the candy dance that involved tossing candy on the ground; however, he has since stopped that practice. Several years ago while emceeding a powwow, an Elder was triggered by a candy dance. When Michael, a support worker for residential school survivors, spoke with the Elder, that Elder recalled how nuns had tossed candy on the ground for the children to fight over.¹⁰ As a result, when Michael emcees, the only version of the candy dance he will permit is one where candy is handed out to children after the dance (Michael R. Denny, personal communication, July 16, 2015). Jeff also noted that candy in general and Candy Dances specifically may not be appropriate in some circumstances, because some First Nation individuals hold the grounds on which the event takes place to be sacred, some believe candy should only be offered to the “little people” (supernatural beings in Mi’kmaw narratives), and some are concerned about high rates of diabetes in Aboriginal communities (Jeff Ward, July 16, 2015).¹¹ Thus, emcees are often tasked with understanding complex and divergent belief systems and community experiences, and

10. When I presented an earlier version of this paper during Research Month at Cape Breton University in March 2016, Ron Labelle noted that this description could be referencing a French Canadian tradition celebrating Saint Catherine’s Day (November 25th). He later shared with me his own experience with the tradition of diving for candy kisses that were tossed on the floor of his classroom as a school-age child. He suggested that a similar observation of Saint Catherine’s Day may have occurred in residential schools (personal communication, March 29, 2016). For more on the impact and legacy of residential schools, particularly in a Mi’kmaw context, see Knockwood (1992).

11. The Public Health Agency of Canada (2011: 92) notes: “After adjusting for this difference in age structure, the prevalence of diabetes was 17.2% among First Nations individuals living on reserve, 10.3% among First Nations individuals living off-reserve, and 7.3% among Métis.”

proceeding with children's dances in a way that is respectful and appropriate to the local context.

Spot Dance

In a Spot Dance, the emcee or someone chosen by the emcee selects a spot somewhere on the dance grounds, but does not reveal it. For example, an emcee might write down "directions" for a spot that is five paces from a particular point on the arbour and then three paces to the left. Children in particular are invited to dance and when the song ends, the child closest to the predetermined spot wins a prize, normally cash. While a Spot Dance may be announced as an all-ages dance, usually only a child can win the prize. Alternatively, two Spot Dances may be held, one for children and one for adults.

At the 2005 Miawpukek powwow, the Spot Dance was for children 14 years and under, though adults were permitted to dance for fun. This dance was the most popular dance of the powwow and had the most dancers on the grounds at one time. Asked for a children's song, one of the drum groups sang "Mickey Mouse" (discussed below), to which emcee Mike Doucette responded, "Whoa, nice song!" While Saqamaw Mi'sel Joe¹² and a local Jingle Dress dancer selected two spots (one for a boy and one for a girl), and one of the drummers walked around the perimeter of the dance grounds soliciting donations for a prize, Doucette encouraged children to walk, dance, crawl, or hop around. "I need more dancers! This is real money!" he exclaimed. The drum group kept singing until Doucette yelled, "Stop!" The two children closest to the chosen spots each walked away with \$51.75. Doucette's specific encouragement for any kind of movement demonstrates a concern for inclusivity and provides an open space for children to express themselves through movement.

Indian Breakdancing

Indian Breakdancing¹³ is a competitive children's dance held at some Mi'kmaw powwows. The name "Indian Breakdancing" doesn't necessarily imply that hip-hop style breakdancing will occur (though it may be incorporated), but does allude to the "battle" style associated with

12. Saqamaw is the Mi'kmaw term for chief.

13. Note that this is the name of the dance as announced by the emcee and not one ascribed to it by the author.

breakdancing.¹⁴ This dance is more challenging than other children's dances at powwows because it requires the imitation of successively more difficult movements. In Indian Breakdancing, dancers are divided into two groups, often according to gender. While a drum group sings (or a CD plays, discussed below), the two "teams" take turns showing off their best dance moves in a sort of powwow battle. A dance move is demonstrated by the first team and the second team is expected to then copy it. Then the second team challenges the first, and so on. This test of skill can continue for quite a long time and incorporate any dance moves, powwow or otherwise. Female dancers will often try to stump their male opponents by dancing complicated Fancy Shawl steps. Male dancers may present steps from Grass or Fancy Dance styles. Both groups may also draw on other styles of popular dance. Eventually, a team is declared the winner, usually by a show of audience support. This dance occurs less frequently than other children's dances; I have only observed it at powwows emceed by Jimmy Augustine, such as the Miawpukek powwow in 2004 and Michael R. Denny attributes this dance to Jimmy Augustine. Thus, some children's dances at powwows may be associated with specific emcees who introduced them as part of their own personal repertoire. One force acting upon a powwow to shape and re-shape it through time, then, is the personal preferences, background, and innovations of the emcees.

Musical Chairs

Unlike other children's dances, where adults may be invited to participate even if they are not eligible to win a prize (such as the previously described Spot Dance), Musical Chairs is only for children. About 12-15 chairs are set up around the arbour and children are invited onto the dance grounds. As with the popular party game, while the music plays the children move around and when it stops they race to claim a chair. Anyone left standing is eliminated. One chair is removed and the process continues until there are two children and one chair left. When the music stops, the individual who claims the last chair also claims the prize. Usually a member of one of the drum groups serves as the judge if two children claim the same chair and as a bouncer in case children try to sneak back into the game after being eliminated. Regardless of where the chairs are situated or

14. It is beyond the scope of this paper to conduct a comparison of the "Indian Breakdancing" seen at Mi'kmaw powwows and the hip-hop style of breakdancing that has become popular in Aboriginal communities. Readers interested in such topics might begin with Marsh (2009).

how they are spaced out, normally children are expected to maintain the clockwise direction of dance and circle the arbour, as occurs with powwow dancing.¹⁵ While the prizes for children's dances are often cash, sometimes they may be items donated by vendors at the powwow, such as jewellery or trinkets. This was the case at the 2006 Miawpukek powwow. Children from "one-day old to the age of twelve" were invited to participate. When the music first started and there were many dancers participating, there was diversity in the dance styles observed. Traditional and Fancy Shawl dance steps, for example, were seen alongside skipping and walking. As dancers were eliminated and the event became more competitive, however, the dancing turned into running. The drum group, Eastern Star, used trick endings from time to time to cause children to think the music was stopping. As the dance progressed, the singing segments were shorter and shorter.

Depending on the number of children present, as well as other considerations, such as the amount of time available, Musical Chairs may be held twice – once for girls and once for boys. This was the case at the 2007 Miawpukek powwow. Also of interest at this event was the use of recorded music for the children's dance instead of having one of the drum groups sing. In this case, "Heave Away" by the Fables played over the speaker system. Often when this occurs, it is to give the drum groups a break, particularly if it is a small powwow with only one or two drum groups present. Emcee Mike Doucette started Musical Chairs off with instructions to his assistant: "Give me some juice!" He encouraged the dancers with the promise of "Cold, hard cash," and told them, "Dance hard now. Dance hard." As little girls were eliminated from the game, he commented in a sympathetic voice, "The strong must survive. Nature's cruel!" and "Life's like that," eliciting laughter from those gathered to watch. When the dance ended, the chairs were set up again for the boys.¹⁶ Particularly interesting is just how invested children become in this dance, often leaving the game in tears and trying to sneak back into the game. Further, while the children are focussed on winning, they are largely oblivious to the fact that they and the emcee's comments are serving as entertainment for spectators.

15. This clockwise direction of dance is often said to mimic the direction of the sun, which rises in the east and sets in the west.

16. Readers may note the division of some dances, such as Indian Breakdancing and Musical Chairs, along the lines of gender. While gender analysis may prove productive in future studies, it is outside the scope of the present paper and would require additional ethnographic research to ensure adequate data upon which to base a discussion.

Snake Dance

While it is believed that the Snake Dance once had medicine or “supernatural” associations in the distant past (Sable 1997), today in the context of a powwow it is largely a children’s dance that has lost such meanings.¹⁷ In some cases, depending on the number of participants, there is one mixed line of dancers behind a leader and in other cases there are two lines of dancers (one for boys and one for girls) behind two leaders. Often the leaders of these dances are the head dancers of that particular powwow, but occasionally other participants may volunteer to lead the children. The dancers in each line place their left hand on the shoulder of the dancer ahead of them (a variation on a conga line). The dance movement might be described as a rhythmic shuffle, using the traditional dance step. As the song begins and progresses, the dancers move in a snake-like fashion around the powwow grounds. If there is one line of dancers, the snake may coil and uncoil itself. If there are two lines of dancers, the snakes may move in different directions, cross through each other, and coil and uncoil around each other. In Mi’kmaw territory, there is a specific song that is always used for the Snake Dance; it starts slow, but builds speed. By the end of a push-up, dancers are often struggling to keep up and hold on to the dancer ahead of them. Sometimes dancers fall and jump up to rejoin their line. The song then returns to its original tempo and the push-up is repeated again (usually four times) before the dance is over. Through this dance, knowledge of snake behaviour and life cycle may be shared and learned. Such imitative dances represent different ways of knowing and transmitting traditional ecological knowledge (see Tulk 2012).

When I attended the Miawpukek powwow in 2004, Paul Pike led a Snake Dance with a single line of dancers. At the same powwow in 2007, the head dancers led two separate lines of dancers. Though both times the dance was called by the emcee as all-ages, the participants were children. As the 2007 Snake Dance sung by Kitpu ended, emcee Mike Doucette said it was good to “Burn off some of that energy in those young people.”

It is clear that children enjoy this dance from the way that they rush to join the dance at a powwow. It makes a lasting impression. Michael R. Denny recalled that he did his first Snake Dance as a kid at the Eskasoni powwow in the early 1990s when he was around 6 years old. The following year, he was excited to do it again: “I remember the Snake Dance when I

17. The Snake Dance is found in many First Nation cultures. One early account from the Winnebago in Wisconsin was published along with a collection of other imitative dances by Frances Densmore in 1947.

was a kid. It was the funnest [sic] thing in the world. ... It was just a big part of the powwow. You eventually came to expect it and want to do it." Almost as if transported back to that time, he continued, "I remembered the snake dance. And I never forgot it. So, come to powwow, I'm six years old, I'm expecting it. And I *want* it." He went on to say that when you heard the emcee say "Snake Dance," you would come running, because that was what you had been waiting for all day (Michael R. Denny, personal communication, July 16, 2015).

Eagle Dance

The Eagle Dance is similar to the Snake Dance in terms of its structure and movement. Children line up, often from tallest to shortest, behind a lead dancer who is holding eagle fans. They begin at the eastern door¹⁸ of the dance grounds. When the Eagle Song, "Kitpu," begins, the children follow the lead dancer into the grounds. They mimic his movements, extending their arms to soar and spiral, before bringing them closer to their bodies and crouching on the ground. The line of dance winds its way around the grounds, and surrounds the lead dancer when he kneels. The dance movement is again a shuffling pattern or traditional-style pat-step. When I observed this dance at the 2006 Elsipogtog (New Brunswick) powwow, Free Spirit sang "Kitpu," while Elder Eugene Augustine led the children in the dance. It should be noted that this dance in particular appears to be specific to Mi'kmaw powwows and is not as common as other children's dances. Like the Snake Dance, the Eagle dance is one of the imitative dances that transmits traditional ecological knowledge through kinesthetic learning as children imitate the movements of an eagle soaring.

Round Dance

Round Dances are not specifically for children; however, based on my observations at several powwows, children are more likely to participate in Round Dances than adults are (though the reason for this remains unclear). In a Round Dance, a circle is formed on the dance grounds around the arbour. Everyone holds hands. When the Round Dance starts, accompanied by a song with a dotted rhythm (such as "Ikwanute"), the circle begins to move in a clockwise fashion. In some cases, dancers step to the left with

18. The eastern door refers to the entrance to the dance area of the powwow grounds, which is normally in the east – the direction of the rising sun. It should be noted that the Mi'kmaq were part of the Wabanaki Confederacy, which translates as "the people of the dawn."

their left foot first and then bring the right foot next to it, creating a side-step. In other cases, dancers step with their right foot into the circle and back out, while also taking small steps to the left with their left foot. All the while, arms usually swing gently in and out of the circle.

Depending on the number of participants, several circles may be formed. Sometimes they move in opposite directions. Sometimes the direction of dance may change mid-song, if directed by the emcee or the singer. Sometimes the dancers may be asked to stop where they are, continue holding hands, and then rush the arbour yelling, “Ta’ho!” Practices vary at powwows throughout Mi’kma’ki and often are dependent on the emcee’s preferences.

Two-Step

The Two-Step is a dance for couples and is not specifically for children. Pairs line up behind the head dancers facing each other, with all of the men behind the male head dancer and all of the women behind the female head dancer. The couples cross their wrists and hold hands. They step sideways in a clockwise fashion. This is the basic step which is returned to throughout the dance. The couples then follow the head couple as they take them through a variety of patterns, such as spinning, making arches with their arms and then dancing under the archway, and so on. Perhaps because of the “follow the leader” approach of this dance, as well as the spinning patterns which children tend to like, the Two-Step is popular with young children. Children, however, rarely participate in this dance as mixed-sex couples. Instead, usually girls dance with their friends. Indeed, this was the case when I observed it at the Miawpukek powwow in 2007; about half of the participants were young girls dancing with their friends. At a cultural demonstration in the community in 2013, I was the only adult who participated in the Two-Step with a young girl as my partner.¹⁹

Ko’jua

On a CD of traditional chants, George Paul referred to Ko’jua as “the dance of vigour” (Eagle Call Singers, 1991).²⁰ Normally it is a competitive dance for adults, usually with bragging rights for the year going to the best

19. This demonstration was organized for cruise passengers who were visiting Miawpukek. The presentation was made by the school’s drumming and dancing ensemble. Despite encouragement from the children in the ensemble, the cruise passengers did not participate in the dances.

20. Ko’jua is discussed at length in Tulk (2007, 2012).

dancer. Each community, and even particular family lines, has its own variation on the style of dance. The style I learned from Michael R. Denny, for example, involves taking three small steps forward with the right foot and sliding (or dragging) the left foot behind it, and then switching to take three small steps forward with the left foot and sliding the right behind it. Throughout, bent arms swing back and forth. Because the dance feels like it is in three and the song that accompanies it is unmetered (and therefore “sounds” like it is in two or four), the dance can sometimes feel lopsided or off-beat. It has sometimes been described as imitating the movements of a partridge, an awkward bird, not known for its grace (see Tulk 2012). The direction of dance, unlike powwow dances, is counter-clockwise according to ancient Mi'kmaw tradition.

Despite being considered an adult dance, children do participate in Ko'jua dancing. Indeed, it is considered important that they do so to ensure that traditional Mi'kmaw dances are carried forward by current and future generations. At the Flat Bay (Newfoundland) powwow in 2010, emcee Michael R. Denny along with a few drummers provided instruction in how to dance Ko'jua before the Ko'jua dance began. Noticeably, many of the dancers present for the instruction were children. Then, as Denny sang a series of Ko'jua songs accompanied by *ji'kmaq̃n*²¹, the dance grounds filled with all ages participating in the dance. Prizes were offered for the best dancers as chosen by the emcee. The educational component of powwows is not normally so overt, though teachings are usually shared throughout the event by the emcee, especially in the introductions to dances or through story-telling. In this case, the Newfoundland Mi'kmaw community was going through a period of cultural revitalization, so the mini-workshop offered by Michael within the context of the powwow was an appropriate vehicle for sharing.

Types of Children's Dances

From an “informed” outsider's perspective – someone who is not part of the cultural group, but who has been immersed in the events – some of these dances share common traits and can be grouped accordingly using terminology already existing in the literature. Some children's dances imitate animals and their movements in nature, serving as entertainment while also embodying traditional knowledge about animal life cycles and characteristics, and the term “imitative” has been deployed as a type of First Nation dance throughout the literature (see for example Densmore

21. A *ji'kmaq̃n* is a traditional Mi'kmaw rattle made of split ash.

1947). Others are popular “social” dances that children enjoy for one reason or another (see for example Scales 2012). Some appear to be mainstream party games adapted to the powwow context. Children’s dances at a powwow, then, could be categorized into three broad categories: imitative dances, game dances, and social dances. The game dances category could be subdivided into competitive and non-competitive.

The imitative dances, such as Snake Dance and Eagle Dance, involve dancers collaboratively imitating the movements of animals. The competitive game dances – Indian Breakdancing and Musical Chairs – involve some degree of skill and there is a clear “winner” identified at the end. The non-competitive game dances, such as the Spot Dance and the Candy Dance, are essentially games of chance. There is no skill involved in being crowned the winner of a Spot Dance, since it is based in luck. Regardless of the variation of the Candy Dance, generally everyone “wins” by receiving candy, but luck may increase the amount of candy one leaves the game with, depending on which version of the dance is being done. The social dances include those that are meant to bring people together (Intertribals open to everyone, Round Dances where everyone holds hands and dances together in a circle, or Two-Steps for couples or pairs). It is possible to think of nation-specific dances, such as Ko’jua, as social dances as well, given their power to integrate in the context of a social event.²²

Imitative Dances	Game Dances		Social Dances
Snake Dance Eagle Dance	Competitive	Non-Competitive	Round Dance Two-Step
	Indian Breakdancing Musical Chairs	Spot Dance Candy Dance	

There is some validity to this interpretation of the dances. When I suggested it to Michael R. Denny, he agreed that it was one way of understanding them. For example, he acknowledged that these dances are in some ways party games “integrated within the powwow,” which “reinforces the whole social celebration” (personal communication, July 16, 2015). Similarly, Jeff Ward noted that some of these dances are “just fun games,”

22. It is equally possible to consider them “specials” if they are danced at a powwow, particularly one outside Mi’kmaw traditional territory.

but he was quick to point out that perhaps I had it backwards, saying, “I see it as this is where they came from,” meaning that the party games had been derived from older First Nation traditions (personal communication, July 16, 2015).

Other groupings and ways of understanding these dances, of course, are possible. An alternative approach²³ to categorization could revolve around the style of dance:

Dance Your Own Style	Follow the Leader	Specified Movement
Spot Dance	Snake Dance	Round Dance Ko'jua
Candy Dance	Eagle Dance	
Intertribal	Two-Step	
Musical Chairs	Indian Breakdancing	

While this etic approach to categorization may prove useful to help outsiders understand how these dances are similar and how they differ, the emic approach is also important to consider. When I asked Jeff Ward and Michael R. Denny how they would classify children's dances, they had slightly different interpretations. Jeff saw them as being specials (Snake Dance, Eagle Dance, Ko'jua) and social dances (Round Dance, Two-Step, Spot Dance, Candy Dance) (personal communication, July 16, 2015). This reflects the practice at traditional powwows in Mi'kmaw territory of referring to nation-specific dances as specials.²⁴ All three of the specials identified by Jeff could be considered specifically Mi'kmaw dances, even though the Snake Dance is found elsewhere, because they are danced to Mi'kmaw songs and are considered to be traditional Mi'kmaw dances in comparison to the category powwow dances. The other dances he identifies as “social” are not necessarily specific to the Mi'kmaq (though it is unclear how popular Spot Dances and Candy Dances are outside of Mi'kmaw territory).

Michael R. Denny, however, saw them all as falling under the broad umbrella of social dances, which specifically sets them apart from the category dances and intertribals at contest powwows (personal communication, July 16, 2015). To him, the term “specials” is used in the context of a contest (or competition) powwow and refers to dances

23. As I test different ways of categorizing children's dances, my thinking is informed by the categorization of children's games, which often delineates types of action. See Whittaker (2012) for his type index of children's games, which also includes an overview of other classification schemes.

24. Browner (2002: 48) identifies specials as including exhibitions, honorings, or any other dances that are not intertribals or contest dances.

for which prizes are awarded. The assertion of the dances as social dances also reflects his philosophy that, “powwows are for entertainment” and are primarily social gatherings. Throughout our conversation he frequently reinforced the importance of fun.

Music for Children's Dances

There is often a close relationship between powwow dances and the songs that accompany them. For example, there are specific songs that are sung for Jingle Dress that would not be sung for other dances. Consequently, when a particular song is sung, it sometimes has the power to indicate the type of dance that will be done. This is true for children's songs in the powwow repertoire. Songs like “Mighty Mouse” or “Sponge Bob Square Pants” sung in a powwow style, have lyrics specifically oriented towards children, and when sung at a powwow have the effect of making the dance a children's dance, even if it was not announced as one by the emcee.

Black Lodge Singers, a popular northern style powwow drum group, composed and recorded *Kid's Pow-Wow Songs* (1996) and *More Kid's Pow-Wow Songs* (2005). With titles like “Ask Your Mom for Fifty Cents” and “Barbie's Round Dance,” the songs are particularly appealing to children. Many of them exhibit the markings of northern style powwow singing, including a descending melodic contour, tense vocal production, and incomplete repetition form (see Browner 2002). Some, however, are freer with their form, such as “Sponge Bob Square Pants,” which employs a military-style cadence (call and response). Most feature a combination of vocables and English lyrics.

The first time I heard one of these songs was at the Chickaloon (Alaska) powwow in 2002. My friend Paul Pike, a Mi'kmaw from Newfoundland, sat at the drum with Sleeping Lady Singers and led two songs. Interspersed between lines of vocables, I heard English lyrics: “Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse, Pluto too. They all work at Disneyland” and later “The all-American family, the Flintstones and the Rubbles too, they all sing yabba dabba doo.” On the dance grounds were young children, some spinning with their shawls and looking like they might take flight at any moment, some walking in small groups, and some holding hands with their mothers as they moved in a clockwise fashion.

While a drum group could choose to sing one of these songs at any time during a powwow, so long as it stylistically fit the particular category of dance at the time, Jeff Ward noted that they are generally reserved

for children's dances. An exception, he joked, was if a drum group was running out of songs (personal communication, July 16, 2015). Michael R. Denny echoed that these songs are really only ever performed for children's dances, saying that you often "giggle" at the groups singing them. They definitely would not be heard in the context of a competition (personal communication, July 16, 2015). Still, these songs are much loved by all ages at powwows. Jeff Ward explained, "I love those songs, because they, you know, there'll be singing and chanting and then all of a sudden you hear the English words and then you hear the cartoon characters. And the kids are like, 'Hey, that's our song!' and some of them will be running across the field to go dance. It's great for them to recognize it" (personal communication, July 16, 2015). The children's "ownership" of these songs is significant, for it demonstrates that these children's dances are more than activities directed by adults.

Timing and Function of Children's Dances

Jeff Ward asserted that Children's dances occur within the context of a powwow when the time is right. If children are on the powwow grounds and they are in the mood to dance, after Grand Entry is complete, he may start the powwow with a children's dance, using it as an opportunity to talk about the importance of traditions being learned and carried on by younger generations. He'll emphasize that the children are the future, "And our future looks gooooooooood!" (personal communication, July 16, 2015). He explained that the way in which children's dances are incorporated into a powwow is generally up to the emcee and the powwow coordinator, and often depends on the community. There usually is no set format²⁵ and the order of dances is often determined by what the emcee thinks will "work" at a particular time based on his assessment of the context. For example, he would not hold a Candy Dance if there were only two children present.

From the perspective of contest powwows, Michael R. Denny noted that, following Grand Entry and a round of intertribals, you usually start with children's dances before proceeding on to category dances. He said part of the reason for this is the fact that the children's dances are "play" (personal communication, July 16, 2015). Following these dances, children receive their "day money" – honoraria for participating in the powwow

25. Although rare, both Jeff Ward and Michael R. Denny indicated that they have experienced powwows for which dances have been scheduled in advance and agendas have been provided by the organizing committee (personal communication, July 16, 2015).

(usually \$10 each). They can then remove their regalia and have fun spending their money at various vendors for the rest of the day.²⁶

Children's dances that occur later during the powwow may also serve a practical function. Joking that it was a "trade secret," Michael R. Denny said that children's dances are often used when an emcee is "killing time" (personal communication, July 16, 2015). As an emcee responsible for the flow of the event, it is important to inject variety into the proceedings in order to keep the attention of crowds that often start to dwindle late in the afternoon. After calling all of the category dances, an emcee would not want to continue only with intertribals. Children's dances, then, are important for reinvigorating the event when it starts to slump during the day. Michael's assertions are confirmed on my recording of the 2007 Miawpukek powwow. Just before Musical Chairs begins, emcee Mike Doucette can be heard saying, "What else can we do? What else can we do? We got about an hour to supper, I believe." A children's dance like Musical Chairs can consume a significant amount of time (for example, the girls' Musical Chairs that year lasted fifteen minutes) and often because of the competitive nature draws in the audience in a way that an intertribal or other dance would not.

This practical consideration aside, children's dances are included in the powwow because it is a multi-generational and community-based event. It is important that everyone have an opportunity to participate in the event, but also that they have fun. Powwows do the work of social integration and maintenance. They are also important for the continuance of cultural practices, since children participating in powwows are exposed to and learn First Nation traditions and protocols in the process. Where children often learn dances and customs in school, the powwow provides them with contextualized, informal learning opportunities. As comments by Jeff Ward point out, this educational component is critical, since the children participating are the future of the culture. Jeff also notes the benefits of children participating in dances at powwows from a holistic perspective: "It's good exercise. It's good physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. It's good in all ways" (personal communication, July 16, 2015). His comments echo the findings of Jiesamfoek (2012) in relation to dance and play as important for cognitive and physical development.²⁷

26. Day money and honoraria are usually provided by the powwow organizing committee, which frequently fundraises and solicits donations throughout the year to run the annual powwow.

27. Though it is outside the scope of the present study, future research might consider the interconnections between culture, play, and health in the powwow context.

Certainly, children's participation in powwows is not limited to dances either. Children also sing karaoke during social nights, help with registration or tallying points if there are competitions being held, assist emcees and drum groups by bringing tea and water, tend the sacred fire, and sometimes sit with drum groups and sing. In some cases, children take on additional responsibility, serving as junior head dancers or saying the opening prayer for the event in their own language (Michael R. Denny, personal communication, July 16, 2015; Jeff Ward, personal communication, July 16, 2015). Finally, as noted by Jeff Ward, children are "a very big part of the economy." They spend their day money, and often additional money received from their parents, on food and other items sold by vendors. Particularly popular among children are slushies, snow cones, cotton candy, fast food, jewellery, and toys (see Tulk 2006 for description of popular items at two Mi'kmaw powwows).

Dance or Play?

Dance may be thought of as "a complex form of communication that combines the visual, kinesthetic, and aesthetic aspects of human movement with (usually) the aural dimension of musical sounds and sometimes poetry" (Kaeppler 1992: 196). Lindquist notes that in some approaches to dance instruction, this means "children are given a language of movements to use, understand and appreciate" (2001: 46). While this may be true of category dances (as demonstrated by the meaning of "spinning" in the context of a Men's Traditional dance), it does not appear to be true for other children's dances in which children are often invited to dance their style. A "language" for communication is not shared, imposed, or expected in this context. Rather, these dances are flexible and open to improvisation and creativity – characteristics of both dance and play.

Play has been defined in myriad ways, including behaviour "that is voluntary and pleasurable and that results in an altered state of consciousness while leaving one in control of one's actions" (Miracle 1992: 60). Generally, leisure activities, games, and sports fall under this definition (see, for example, Gadbois et al. 2010: 17). It is worth considering, then, whether the activities described in this study are games that feature dance or dances that feature game elements. Gareth Whittaker proposed a type-index of children's games that included three broad categories: purely intellectual activity games, physical activity games, and willpower games. He included dancing (2.4.3) under the sub-category of "no bodily contact

activities,” but did not list dancing in “direct bodily contact activities,” though touching and spinning are included (2012: 282-83). This seems to suggest that there is no dance-type game in which bodily contact occurs, but is perhaps an oversight in his “exercise in speculation” (Whittaker 2012: 284). Nevertheless, some of the children’s dances at powwows could be considered dancing games.

It is perhaps best, then, to think of them as existing along a continuum or spectrum of children’s movement, with some powwow activities being more dance-like (Round Dance, for example) and some activities being more play- or game-like (Musical Chairs, for example). When asked where Michael R. Denny saw children’s dances on the spectrum, he concluded, “Children’s dances are about dance, but it’s more about play. Parents have invested in regalia, but if they’re really small, they just want to run around and have fun” (personal communication, July 16, 2015). Jeff Ward agreed that it was about having fun in a good way (personal communication, July 16, 2015). Importantly, children’s dances at powwows create space for exploration and expression, the sort of “safe, encouraging environment” described by Jiesamfoek (2012: 204) as being critical for children’s development.

Future studies of children’s dances at powwows would benefit from ethnographic research with children to learn more about their perceptions of these activities, their motivations for participating, and the degree of “fun” they experience through them. It might also be productive to ask them about movement to determine whether they consider them to be more like play or games, or dance. A focus on children will move the study of powwow dance and music in new directions: “The problem is that while adults certainly were at one point members of the culture of childhood, they no longer are, and it can’t truly be said that the adult imagination is capable of genuinely recalling the experience of being a child, at least not in the way that a child perceives it” (McNeill 2013: 78-79). Also of interest might be a study of the age-graded competitive category dances at contest powwows. As Mechling observed, “age-grading is a powerful, limiting force on who shall constitute the child’s folk peers” (1986: 96). How might this be true for children who are engaged in powwow dance? More generally, it would be interesting to know which children’s dances are found throughout the broader powwow trail and which ones are specific to particular Nations or regions.

Children’s folklore at powwows more generally could also be pursued. For example, at many Mi’kmaw powwows, there are social nights during

which karaoke is sung and children are welcome to participate, as I have observed in Miawpukek. What songs do children choose? Who do they choose to sing with? And how might this be understood as folk expression? Of particular interest might be a material culture study of the foods and objects on which children spend their day money.

All of these suggested future studies would surely highlight an important characteristic of informal culture at powwows in Atlantic Provinces: that it is living. The children's dances at powwows are not rigid re-enactments that serve to preserve or commemorate the culture of the past; rather, they are vibrant, living traditions that are shaped and re-shaped by a variety of forces and embrace popular culture. The forces of cultural change may not always be expected, as demonstrated by the conscious revision of the Candy Dance by Michael R. Denny. However, the malleability of informal culture makes it no less traditional. As Tedlock and Mannheim have noted, "cultures are continuously produced, reproduced, and revised in dialogues among their members" (1995: 2). Living traditions such as the children's dances at Mi'kmaw powwows in the Atlantic Provinces are not stagnant, but emergent.

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