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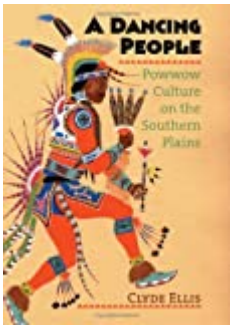

Clyde Ellis. *A Dancing People: Powwow Culture on the Southern Plains.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003. vii + 232 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1274-1.

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Powwows and Power

Clyde Ellis, professor at Elon College, adds to the dynamic body of work on Native American dance in his latest book, *A Dancing People: Powwow Culture on the Southern Plains*. Dance has long been recognized as a fundamental element of Native American culture, and for over thirty years scholars have studied its regalia, dance styles, religious significance, and importance as a form of cultural resistance. The intent of this book is to fill a gap in the literature by providing a history of the modern powwow phenomenon. Ellis carefully constructs the story from pre-reservation dance to the present, arguing that "the emergence of powwow is a logical, evolutionary step in a history of dances and societies that were present among, and deliberately shared by, many Plains tribes" (p. 30).

Pre-reservation dance societies, roughly grouped into military, social, and religious categories, provided important and complex functions in Plains tribes. The war societies, however, played a particularly significant role in the development of powwow culture. The O-homah Dance (also known as the Grass Dance) and the Drum Dance both emerged shortly before the reservation era and were widely practiced across the Plains. These dances later formed the basis of what Ellis considers the departure point for the "war dances" performed in Wild West shows and agency-sanctioned Indian exhibitions. More importantly, the cultural importance of war dances was adapted to reservation restrictions as skill in dance replaced war honors for young Indian men who sought to attain status. Later, Native American involvement in the two World Wars reinvigorated dance societies and the martial ethos as "Indian communities rushed to resurrect old society dances and rituals that now had renewed meaning" (p. 74).

Ellis builds on the work of earlier ethno-historians and anthropologists to show how the powwow culture provided an important basis for preserving traditional cultural ways. From the early reservation period until the 1930s, during the most intense period of federal Indian assimilation policy, dancing was forbidden. Native Americans worked to circumvent agency policy through a combination of resistance, accommodation, and the exploitation of unevenly enforced federal policies. The fight to keep dancing was helped by two factors. First, de-

spite the ban on dancing in the United States, the government sanctioned exhibits and fairs, and also gave permission for Indians to participate in Wild West shows. This allowed Indians to continue dancing. The Wild West shows, in particular, encouraged both the development of new dance styles, such as "fancy dancing," "feather dancing," and "war dancing," and the competitive aspect of dance found in powwows (p. 111). White spectators, fascinated by exhibitions of exotic culture, created a demand for Indian dances, and as Ellis notes, "Across the Southern Plains, there was no shortage of opportunists planning shows where the public could see 'real Indians' doing what real Indians did best: dance" (p. 63).

The second factor was Indians' awareness of their legal rights. In 1915, Red Buffalo, a Kiowa Indian, sought legal advice on how to challenge dance bans, and learned that no federal laws existed that actually prohibited dance. Other tribes, too, became increasingly assertive against reservation agents' efforts to prohibit dance. By 1917 competitive dancing among Plains tribes had begun, and by the early 1920s a nascent form of powwow, including use of the term, emerged. When Congress mandated U.S. citizenship for Indians in 1924, their right to dance became protected under the First Amendment, and "citizenship, so long a goal of the assimilationists, endowed the Indians with a right to perform the activities that the agents had for long tried to control and suppress" (p. 110). The formation of the American Indian Exposition in 1932 (first known as the Southwest Indian Fair) became a defining moment, as Native Americans took full control of dance exhibitions and the direction of the powwow circuit. From the 1930s to the present, powwow culture has continued to grow, adjusting to changing demographics and living patterns of Native American life, but still grounded in traditions, values, and practices shared by Plains tribes.

The success of powwow culture, however, was never a forgone conclusion. In addition to challenges from the federal government, proponents faced opposition from within the Native American community. "Powwow culture," Ellis notes, "reminds participants that order and hierarchy are important, and that dance can create, maintain, modify, and revive certain values and practices so that they stand fast as a cultural mooring post" (p. 39). But concepts of order, hierarchy, and tradition are all contestable points. During the early reservation era some Indians saw accommodation as their best hope for survival and worked with reservation agents to oppose dance. Christian Indians argued against traditional forms of religious expression. Today, Indian religious leaders voice resentment that some Indians choose to spend their Sundays dancing instead of in church. And debates continue over who or what powwows represent, and if powwow culture can accurately reflect what it means to be Indian among Native Americans today. Despite the divergent views Ellis remains optimistic that powwows will continue, arguing, "Whether understood as a pan-Indian or tribally specific event, dancing often satisfies needs and obligations that are not adequately met in any another way" (p. 7).

This is an excellent book. While conducting research for this project, Ellis received a piece of advice from an Indian friend: "Remember son, don't forget to put us in the story. We want to be heard. And do what you can to get it right" (p. 10). He obviously took the counsel to heart. Native American views on dance and powwow are beautifully integrated with scholarly works, giving this history credibility, life, and even humor that would have been impossible to achieve otherwise. *A Dancing People*, well researched and written in an engaging style, will be not only informative for scholars but a fascinating book for anyone interested in Native American culture and history.

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