

WHAT IS A...

Pow-Wow

**... AND SHOULD I
ATTEND ONE?**





Pow-Wow

Part: 1





Important Note



Pow-Wow



There are over 500 federally recognized tribes in the United States, and several more who are not recognized, so the information presented in this zine cannot possibly represent them all. Everything written here is a generality from my lived experience as an Indigenous person and former Pow-Wow organizer. Please listen if someone says that their tribe or community does things differently than what is listed here. That said, please know that there are many fake Pow-Wows out there put on by Pretendians so if something seems really off feel free to check in with me or someone else in the Native community.

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CAUTION



What is a Pow-Wow?



Pow-Wow



A Pow-Wow is an ***intertribal*** cultural gathering.

When nations would gather prior to colonization it was common to dance. So, as an edict of colonization dance was made illegal for Native people. During this period some dances were lost to us but many were kept in secret. Social dances were less regulated than Ceremonial dances so during the reservation era when tribes, including warring tribes, were often thrust together, the Pow-Wow was re-born. This helped us both preserve culture and bring together tribes that otherwise might not have much in common. The first formal Pow-Wow was held by the Ponca nation in 1879.

Note: Pow-Wows are not Ceremony. They are open community events whereas Ceremonies are closed invitation-only events.

***intertribal** - not specific to one tribe

What does Pow-Wow mean?



Pow-Wow



Pow-wow is a word that comes from the Algonquian 'pau wau'/'pauau' which translates directly as "he dreams" but refers largely to Medicine People. It is believed this term was misunderstood by colonizers as a term for spiritual gatherings vs. the person holding them. The term, to colonizers, then came to mean large gatherings of Native people. Natives later reclaimed this colonizer's term but with our own 'spin'. Now, the term Pow-Wow does not refer to just any large gathering but a very specific event.

Note: Many Natives consider it offensive to use the word Pow-Wow to refer to a random social gathering, this reinforces the colonizer's theft of our languages.



What can I expect?



Pow-Wow



The main themes of Pow-Wow are music, dance and kinship.

It's also common to see:

Art, Jewelry,
Clothing, & Food
(Frybread!) Vendors



Ample Diversity in
Age, Appearance,
and Ability

Private Gifting &
Giveaway Circles



Campgrounds



Raffles





What would I do?



Pow-Wow



A Pow-Wow is, generally speaking, a come-and-go event. This means you are free to enter or leave at anytime. While there is general etiquette to follow, what you do at Pow-Wow is largely up to you. Most folks new to the event come as observers. This looks like sitting in bleachers/chairs and watching the dancers while listening to the music. If you brought money you might buy trinkets from vendors, enter a raffle, or buy a piece of frybread. That said at most Pow-Wows you don't have to 'just observe', there are several times when the audience is welcome to come onto the dance floor and dance. You might even bring some tobacco and gift a drum circle.

Note: It's perfectly acceptable to come to Pow-Wow, just observe, and not spend any money.

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Are they all the same?



Pow-Wow



All Pow-Wows are different. That said, Pow-Wows generally fall into one of two categories:

Social Pow-Wow

Main theme is audience participation

Best for people who want to get involved/prefer casual spaces

Competition Pow-Wow

Main theme is competitive dance

Best for people who want to watch the many different dance styles

Note: Information about what type of Pow-Wow is happening can be found on the flyer



What is Grand Entry?



Pow-Wow Terminology[★]

Grand Entry -

When Pow-Wow formalities begin and dancers enter the arena.

Note: Grand Entry is some observer's favorite part of Pow-Wow but there is specific etiquette to follow at this time. If you would like to skip formalities then plan to come about an hour late.



Are there sensory triggers?



Pow-Wow



Not all Pow-Wows are large but it is best to expect them to be crowded.

Pow-Wows are loud. Even so, it might be considered rude to wear sound blocking headphones. If needed use loops or plugs instead.

There are a lot of bright vibrant colors at Pow-Wow.

Seats at Pow-Wow are often uncomfortable. It is very normal to bring blankets and cushions to make your seat better (and to seat-save 😊).

Don't move anybody's seat-savers!

While Disabled folks are exempt , for everyone else there is a lot of expected standing and focused attention during Grand Entry.



What about accessibility?



Pow-Wow



It is generally expected that Disabled people will be at Pow-Wow.

Front row seating is reserved for folks who can't sit in the Bleachers.

You can call the phone number on the flyer to ask specific accessibility questions.

Pow-Wows do not usually have sign language interpreters.

There are always bathrooms and water at Pow-Wows.

It is absolutely okay to bring food, medicine, or accessibility devices.



Other Considerations?



Pow-Wow



- Pow-Wow is meant to be free. If a Pow-Wow is charging an entry fee it may not be legitimate. One exception is the Gathering of Nations Pow-Wow.
- Most Pow-Wows have two 'Grand Entries', one in the early afternoon and one in the early evening. You can come anytime. There's a food break in between. Pow-Wows rarely have a set end time.
- Pow-Wows are family friendly events. Your kids are welcome and it's okay if they act like kids! Just don't let them on the Arena alone.
- Vendors are mostly Native people so please buy from them if you can, and enter the raffles which largely are fundraisers for families in need.

Reminder: It's not cultural appropriation to wear jewelry you buy at Pow-Wow.



Are there rules to follow?



Pow-Wow



Pow-Wows do have a code of etiquette we expect people to know before coming to the event. That said most of it boils down to being respectful. There is always an M.C. at Pow-Wows, listen to what they say.

1. It's considered offensive to be inebriated at a Pow-Wow. No alcohol or drugs are allowed.
2. Kids are allowed to play and sleep at Pow-Wow, please refrain from correcting someone else's kid.
3. There are special people at Pow-Wows that pick up dropped feathers. If you see one don't grab it for yourself but notify a Vendor or the M.C.
4. The first couple rows of seating are reserved for Elders, Dancers, and the Disabled community.



Are there rules to follow?



Pow-Wow



5. We do not touch other people's hair or regalia. Regalia is not called a costume.

6. There are times when photo taking is restricted, please listen carefully for these announcements.



We don't walk across the arena

7. Avoid the dance arena unless invited into it or dancing in it during a community dance.

8. If dancing then please dance like everyone else, not uniquely.

9. If dancing with a baby please support their head. You will get called out if it bounces around.

10. You may gift a Drum Circle tobacco or stand quietly behind one but please do not sit in their chairs or touch the Drums.



Am I really welcome?



Pow-Wow



Should You Go to Pow-Wow?

Absolutely! Go enjoy yourself and practice being in Native spaces where we are in charge and our culture is predominant. Know that new folks going to Pow-Wow is not seen as an intrusion. We welcome you to respectfully share this with us.

P.S. Most people like it!

Where do you find one ?

The same place you find any community event.

There are Pow-Wows in all 50 U.S. States + Canada

- Google
- Facebook Event Search
- Powwows.com (be sure to search by state not use the fill-in bar at the top of the page)

Pow-Wows occur at the same time/place every year so if you see one listed May 2023 expect to see the current listing in April 2024.

Pow-Wow

Part: 2

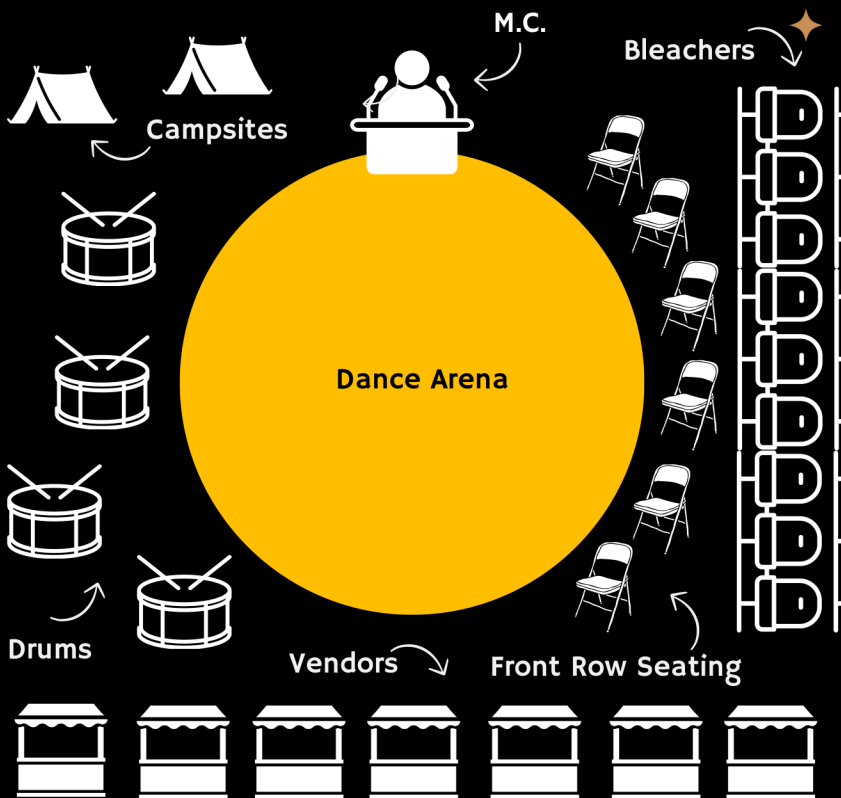




What it Looks Like



Pow-Wow



This is only a generality. All Pow-Wows differ especially between Indoor and Outdoor setups.



Can I walk and talk?



Pow-Wow



While Pow-Wows do have specific etiquette they are meant to be fun! You can walk around during Pow-Wow, you can chat with friends during Pow-Wow, you can eat during Pow-Wow, your kids can even take a nap during Pow-Wow.

With One Major Exception!

During Grand Entry, when all the Dancers enter the Dance Arena, it is expected people will stop chatting or walking around, and stand silently in respect as the formalities ensue. The Disabled community is welcome to sit silently instead of stand or folks are welcome to quietly leave the area if they are unable to be quiet or focus during the formalities. Grand Entries can be long.

Note that there are occasionally other times this is called for, like during Honor Songs. If everyone around you stops what they are doing then follow suite.



What 's up with Frybread?



Pow-Wow



A large majority of Pow-Wows will have a Frybread vendor. It is something people expect like hot dogs at a ballgame or cotton candy at the fair. But, why frybread?

Frybread is a food that is rooted in intertribal culture so it is fitting that it is a staple at intertribal events. It is a struggle food born of resistance to forced poverty. When the government forced Natives onto reservations they largely made subsistence living (living off the land) illegal. Instead Natives were expected to eat commodity food (canned food) brought by the government. The food was often given in low quantities or was rotten. Flour and water go a long way though and as such Frybread was born. It has become a cultural staple to honor our resilience.

Psst.. when frybread is topped with "taco" ingredients we call it an "Indian Taco".

Why an M.C.?



Pow-Wow

M.C. = Master of Ceremonies

The M.C. at Pow-Wows set the tone and timing for the event. They are an extremely significant person in terms of making sure the event runs smoothly.

Some of the responsibilities of the M.C.:

- Direct the order of activities
- Announce beginning and ending of dances
- Announce who will be Drumming for each dance
- Announce the rules and Pow-Wow expectations
- Announce the winners of competitions
- Answer questions between making announcements
- Head up the lost and found
- Be responsible for knowing who is running raffles
- Discipline people in the Native community who break etiquette in severe ways or at family's request (via a public announcement)
- Work closely with Pow-Wow organizers
- Set the mood for Pow-Wow



Are there other special roles?



Pow-Wow



The **Master of Ceremonies** (Announcer) isn't the only important role at Pow-Wow. It takes a lot of people to make a Pow-Wow run smoothly.

Color Guard who holds our Flags

Pow Wow Organizers: who put the event together and run it behind the scenes

Chefs who cook for the Dancers

Arena Director, WhipMan, WhipWoman: who supervise the Dance Arena

Vendors so we can shop

Security: who are not police but people from the community signed up to make sure Pow-Wow is safe

Head Dancers who set example

Drummers and Dancers: who make the vent possible., without them there would be no event

And You!



What is a Drum Circle?



Pow-Wow



A Drum Circle is a group of people who have made a commitment to Drum together. This carries cultural significance. Drummers both drum and sing at the same time. Note: sometimes women will only sing but are still considered part of the 'Drum Circle'.

Photo Credit: Ann Paul/CBC





What are they singing?



Pow-Wow



The majority of Pow-Wow songs are sung in vocables. Vocables are specific sounds that replace words. Some songs have tribal language or even English in them as well. There are different songs for different types of dances. Some songs belong only to specific families while others are open for all to use.

Photo Credit: Jonathan Phillips





What are Dance Categories?



Pow-Wow



As a refresher there are two types of Pow-Wow, Social and Competition. Born from competition-style Pow-wow is the "Dance Category". This would be the competition category one enters as a Dancer, but as viewers lets us label the style of dance we are seeing. Most categories are gender, age, and style dependent.

An example: Women's Traditional (age 50+)

Women's Traditional

Women's Traditional (youth)

Men's Traditional (age 50+)

Men's Traditional

Men's Traditional (youth)

Pow-wow categories stay generally the same re: style and gender but age categories tend to differ per region and organizer.

P.S. there is a page about Non-Binary Dancers later.



Traditional Dance



Pow-Wow



Historically after a big hunt or battle the tribe would come together to celebrate their successes or mourn their losses. This often would look similar to what a Pow-Wow looks like today with music, food, and dancing. The Traditional dance categories are thought to be the closest representation to what those historical dances looked like before they were outlawed.

Many people say the Men's Traditional is the dance they would perform as a sort of re-enactment of their hunt and the Women's Traditional was a representation of the woman waiting and looking for their loved ones to return. Over time these dances have become generally homogenized into one dance style for men and one for women.





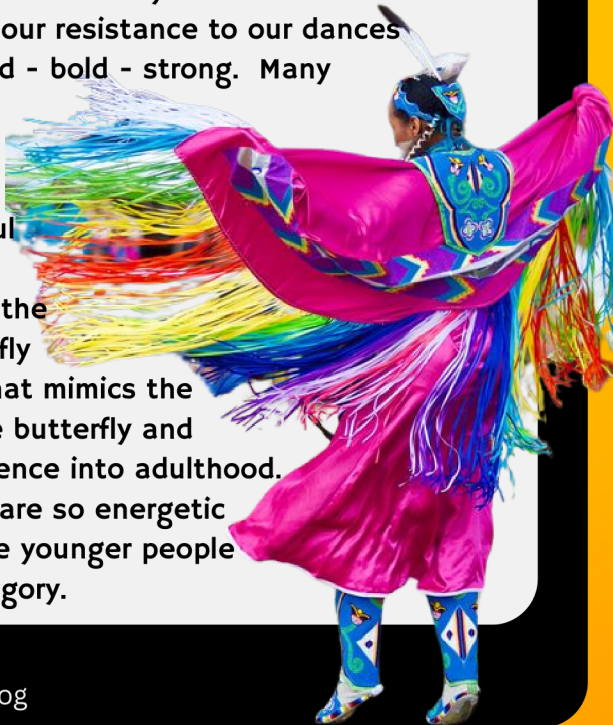
Fancy Dance



Pow-Wow



Fancy Dancing is just like it sounds, it is a modern and fancy interpretation of Traditional Dance styles. You will see brighter colors and fancier footwork. It is thought that the Men's Fancy Dance is a representation of our resistance to our dances being banned, loud - bold - strong. Many people say that the Women's Fancy Dancy, with their bright colorful shawls, is a representation of the Ceremonial Butterfly Dance. A dance that mimics the movements of the butterfly and represents emergence into adulthood. Indeed the steps are so energetic that you often see younger people in this dance category.





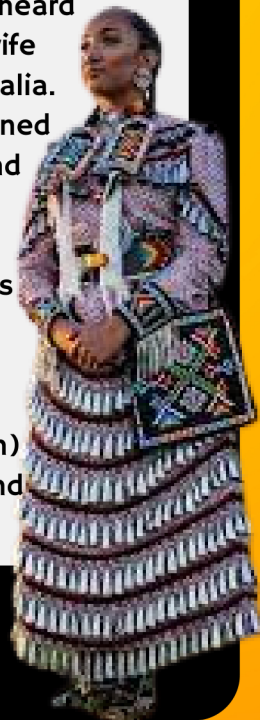
Jingle Dance



Pow-Wow



The Jingle Dance has a beautiful story behind it. It is a healing dance. There are different variations of the story but it generally said the dance and regalia came in a vision to a holy person who was desperate to heal his sick daughter. The version I have heard most is that he showed the steps to his wife and explained to her how to make the regalia. She and the other women of the tribe learned the dance and adorned the new regalia and danced for the sick daughter who then recovered and was able to dance herself. Regardless of what happened long ago it is still considered a healing dance today. Dresses have as many as 365 jingles and the dance itself is characterized by having one foot connected with the ground (Earth) at all times, as well as the distinctive sound of the jingles themselves.





Grass Dance



Pow-Wow

When dances and Ceremonies were held outside in plains and tall grasses it was the Grass Dancers who would come and “dance down” the grass so there would be a place to hold Ceremony. Indeed if you see a Grass Dancer perform in tall grass you will be impressed by how their feet weave the grass into a matted flat space. Today the Grass Dance is carried on.. just without the grass present. The fringe on the Dancers regalia represents the grass itself. That said there are alternative variations to where the Grass Dance comes from and it is possible that all variations are true and over time each of these similar dances became homogenized into one style. The variations state that the Grass Dance symbolizes the braids of sweetgrass men would wear in their belts as they prepared land for rituals. Others say it is a healing dance that came in a dream to a young boy in need of healing.





Owl & Rabbit Dances



Pow-Wow



An Owl Dance is a common participatory dance at Pow-Wows. It is a couple's dance.... with a kicker! The kicker is that this is a woman's choice dance. Women choose their partner from the audience. If the person they ask says 'no' that person will likely be embarrassed by the M.C. in front of everyone (it's a big no-no to refuse). In the past someone who refused would actually have to pay the woman's family. A Rabbit Dance is similar but with more "typical" gender roles and different dance steps. This one is less common.

Pssst... hide in the bathroom if you don't want to get chosen.





Pow-Wow

Tiny Tots is my favorite dance category. It is for small children (usually 5 and under, sometimes 8 and under). When the M.C. calls "Tiny Tots" parents bring their toddlers and little kids out onto the Dance Arena. Parents can stay with them, or if old enough, wait on the sidelines. The kids will "dance" for a full song. Most kids don't know how to dance at this age so this is mostly about getting them comfortable on the dance floor and rewarding them for participating. At the end of the dance the Drum stops and the kids line up and receive a prize (money, books, stuffies are common). The reward at the end is very important we want our kids to feel happy at Pow-Wow.





Blanket Dance



Pow-Wow



A Blanket Dance is common at Pow-Wows. This is a fundraising tool. Four people will hold each corner of a blanket and dance around the Arena with it. As they dance people come from the audience to throw money on the blanket. In the end the family collects the funds to support their cause (usually medical or funeral expenses).

Note: People put dollars (or more) on the Blanket, not change. When you put money on the blanket nobody pays attention to how much you put in.

There are no protocols for contributing money, just walk up and put some on the blanket before the music stops.





Tribe Specific Dance



Pow-Wow



In addition to the common Dance Categories there are also tribe-specific dance categories and tribe-specific showcase dances.

Showcase dances, for lack of a better term, are dances where a group performs vs. dances Pow-Wow style. A common example is to have our Aztec cousins show us a Traditional dance from their people.

Tribe-Specific Dance Categories will vary per Pow-Wow but are usually open to all registered Dancers regardless of tribe. Some examples are: Hoop Dance, Chicken Dance, Crow-Hop, Sneak-Up, and Smoke Dances.

You can look up these dance category names online to see video clips of what they look like.





InterTribal Dance



Pow-Wow



Intertribal dances are non-category dances. That means all people are welcome onto the Dance Arena during Intertribals. These happen at all Pow-Wows but are most common at Social Pow-Wows. If you are a Native new to Pow-Wows and want to learn to dance, this is the category for you. If you are non-Native and like to participate in cultural events then is the dance for you. If you aren't new to Pow-Wow but don't have full regalia this is the dance for you.

If on the Dance floor please respect dance protocol by dancing in the same direction as everyone else (unless your tribe permits otherwise), not touching others while dancing, and by not touching loose feathers on the dance floor.

Note: Some Pow-Wows are strict and do not allow anyone on the Arena if not in Regalia. A good rule is to see if someone is in jeans on the dance floor, if so then you too can wear plain clothes while dancing.



Round Dance



Pow-Wow



There are different types of Round Dances but the most common one you will see at a Pow-Wow is the Friendship Dance. A Round Dance is a dance where people form a circle, face one another, and dance together. There are Round Dances in most cultures across the world.

The Friendship dance is a Round Dance with two circles, one moving clockwise and the other moving counter clockwise. As people two-step to the side around the circle they shake hands with folks in the other circle.

If you don't feel like it will compromise your immune system I highly recommend that you participate in this dance. It is the most common audience participation dance and meant for you to join.



Honor Dance



Pow-Wow



Honor Dances are held to recognize certain individuals within the community. For example, if a Pow-Wow is being held at a University then the Honor Dance might be for graduates. If it is a Veteran's Day Pow-Wow the Honor Dance will certainly be for Veterans.

The style of Honor Dances vary per Pow-Wow but generally they are similar to a Round Dance. Typically the person being honored will dance or stand center for the first verse of music and then for the rest of the song people will circle dance around them and shake their hand.

Note: Honor Dances receive full formalities so it is required that the audience stop what they are doing, talking - shopping - sitting, and stand up to show respect for those being Honored. Remember, the Disabled community is exempted from standing.



Dancing for Fun



Pow-Wow



Not all dances at Pow-Wow have hidden significance, some dances we do just for the fun of it. Typically, fun dances are open to the public to participate in if they would like.

Potato Dance

A partner dance.
Two people hold a potato between their foreheads and dance while trying not to drop it. No hands allowed. The last group standing wins.

Snake Dance

A group dance.
People hold hands and dance in a circle and then someone breaks the circle and leads the group, dancing, around the Pow-Wow wildly in a snake like chain.



What about Non-Binary People?



Pow-Wow



Both Non-Binary and Trans identity are traditional to Native community. While some of our community has biases to work through because they've been colonially socialized it is generally accepted that not everyone will "fit" into gendered categories. Trans, Non-Binary, and Two-Spirit people are welcome to be part of the dance category they feel most comfortable in. While this is a Traditional role it is only now becoming more common to see folks deviate from the colonially gendered dance categories.. so if that is you please know that the Arena Director might ask you what is up and you just have to tell them that this is your identity. If you are very concerned you can check in with the MC beforehand. I've personally never seen anyone denied the right to choose the category that fits them best although sometimes people do get dress-code suggestions.

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How to Play 50/50



Pow-Wow



50/50 is a raffle game played with cards at Pow-Wows. Usually you will see a person walking around with a deck of cards or hear the M.C. announce a 50/50. You pay and the person holding the cards gives you only half a card, the other half is put in a basket to be pulled for winner. After all cards have been sold the MC will pull a card and announce the winner. Sometimes the winner gets a special raffle gift and other times they get some (or all) of the profits from the card sales.





How to Gift Tobacco



Pow-Wow



People frequently ask me about the appropriate way to gift Tobacco to a Drum. This is a traditional gift, like giving respect to their labor. While the appropriate way to give such gifts is tribe specific I can tell you what I learned from my personal experience.

When tobacco is gifted:

- loose leaf tobacco is used (not cigarettes)
- any brand is fine, ironically we tend to like "Native Spirit" brand the most
- to be left in it's pouch but also... it's traditional to wrap in a bandana or nice cloth of any color except black (red preferred)
- leave on a Drummers chair or say a quick thank you and hand it to them personally.





Make Friends & Come Again



Pow-Wow



Pow-Wows are a great place to make friends. The quickest way to do that, or get more involved in the Native community, is to offer to volunteer. There are many ways to volunteer but for beginners there are three primary options:

1. Call ahead and ask if they need help with set-up
2. Show up for evening session and ask if they need help with clean-up
3. Show up around 5pm and ask if anyone needs help in the kitchen (that feeds the Dancers and sometimes the whole community).

If you enjoyed yourself please come again!





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