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## A Reexamination of the *Peji Waci*

*Peji Waci* is the traditional name used by Lakota people for the Grass Dance, a popular form of dancing at modern intertribal pow-wows held in the United States and Canada. Unlike many other contemporary pow-wow dances, the origin and diffusion of the Grass Dance was carefully documented and published in *Societies of the Plains Indians*, volume nine of the *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* (published by the Society in New York during the years 1912-16). The research and conclusions found in this document have been accepted with little debate by contemporary scholars in both ethnomusicology and anthropology, even though the theories of cultural diffusion that shaped this formative study are today considered dated by both disciplines. Use of data collected in this era of American anthropology, and the acceptance of the findings of its collectors, raises a number of issues, centered around both the cultural biases embedded in earlier methodologies, and perceptions, common at the time, that Indians were a “vanishing race.” It is my belief that now, three quarters of a century after initial publication, it is time for a second look at the work of the “diffusionists,” and its impact on modern scholarship. (“Diffusionism,” in general, holds that cultural traits tend to diffuse outward from a single point of origin rather than arise in identical forms in separate areas.)

Research into Native North American cultures by non-Native anthropologists and ethnologists in its earlier years was based upon a power relationship in which Indian people were summarily identified as members of conquered nations, while the Euro-Americans who studied them were associated with the conquerors. This categorization and the climate in which it found support enabled Euro-Americans to write about Indians without concern for reaction or criticism from those whose lives they depicted. As Toni Morrison observes:

Mainstream writers in Young America understood their competition to be national, cultural, but only in relationship to the Old World, certainly not vis-à-vis an ancient race (whether Native American or African) that was stripped of articulateness and intellectual thought, rendered, in D.H. Lawrence’s term, ‘uncreate.’ For these early American writers, how could there be competition with nations or peoples who were presumed unable or uninterested in handling the written word? One could write about them, but there was never the danger of their ‘writing back.’<sup>1</sup>

After the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee, Indians were perceived as a defeated race, not only by the Federal government, but also in the eyes of American anthropology. Capturing the cultures of the “vanishing Americans”

became a major priority, in order to preserve fading images and broken artifacts for Euro-American posterity before the Indians themselves disappeared into the twilight, that ultimate destination for those who had stood in the way of progress. The American Museum of Natural History was one of the primary institutions participating in this comprehensive project, first under the direction of Franz Boas, one of the leaders of modern anthropology and later under his successor Clark Wissler, the father of diffusionism. In 1907, Wissler and his staff planned an enormous undertaking: a systematic field survey of all Indian nations who had occupied the Great Plains.<sup>2</sup> The survey's conclusions from the years 1912-16 were published in a single volume. One-thousand and thirty-one pages long, it is generally considered the definitive work on the warrior and ceremonial societies of the Plains Indian nations, and is still widely cited today. Thomas Vennum, an ethnomusicologist with the Smithsonian Institution, comments upon Wissler's work:

The Grass Dance and its diffusion have been carefully covered in anthropological literature. One of its most thorough researchers was Clark Wissler. In preparing an early and important paper, he sifted through an enormous amount of data covering twenty-five tribal groups in an attempt to discover the origin of the dance and the extent of its spread.<sup>3</sup>

Numerous other contemporary scholars use the findings of Wissler as the basis of their writings on Native American dance and music. In their search for written accounts that might lend authority to their work, many Native writers also look to Wissler's research. Recently an Ojibwe friend, busily exploring the literature for inclusion in his pow-wow program, informed me that he had learned the true origins of Grass Dancing from an ethnomusicologist who based a section of a recent book upon the findings of Wissler. The work of Clark Wissler has come full circle, first deriving from his (and others') observations of Indians, gaining strength through the authority of anthropology and the written word, and finally, re-emerging as the new Indian tradition. Yet, many Lakota who have never encountered Wissler's writings tell a different tale about the Grass Dance. Unfortunately, in a world where history must be written to be real and valid, their voices are not readily heard.

## **The Origin of the Grass Dance: Scholarship Versus Oral Tradition**

The Grass Dance is a Northern Plains style of men's pow-wow dancing. It is a young man's dance, athletic and strenuous, and most men who perform it change over to the less vigorous Traditional Dance by their late thirties. Grass Dancing has unique footwork, found in no other form of Indian dancing, with the performer moving in a controlled fall, shoulders swaying as the feet "flatten

the grass.” William Powers, an anthropologist and specialist in Lakota culture, currently at Rutgers University, relates this version of how the Dance came by its name:

Basically, the Grass Dance is the same as the Omaha Dance of the Sioux . . . the war dance of the plains. The name “Grass Dance” comes from the custom of some tribes wearing braided grass in their belts to symbolize the scalps of their enemies. Among the Sioux, the older form of dance was called *peji ipiyaka oyna wacipi* (they dance with the grass in their belts). The Sioux of North Dakota nowadays call the dance simply *Peji Waci* or Grass Dance.<sup>4</sup>

Norma Rendon, an Oglala Lakota, gives a different account of the Dance’s name, saying, “As they [the dancers after returning from a successful raid or war party] went into the dance arena before the People, they would stomp down the grass with their feet.”<sup>5</sup> Her version explains the distinctive footwork of Grass Dancers, so unlike that of the Traditional war dancer. More significant is Powers’s statement that Grass and Omaha dancing are the same thing with different names. If so, then Wissler’s notion of a Grass Dance complex centered on the Great Plains would perhaps have validity. But what if the contemporary Grass and Omaha dances are in reality two separate entities, with a single overlapping musical style, generically referred to as the “Omaha Dance”?

The premise put forth by Wissler in his study is that Grass Dancing originated among the Pawnee circa 1840, and was first called *Iruska*, meaning “the fire is in me.”<sup>6</sup> From the Pawnee the dance spread to the Omaha, then to the Nakota (Santee), and finally to the Lakota, who named it the “Omaha Dance,” in honor of the Omaha people from whom they felt the dance originated. From the Lakota, Omaha/Grass Dancing diffused outwards to other Plains Indian nations, most of whom referred to it as the Grass Dance.

The Pawnee *Iruska* Dance is, as most Plains male dances, associated with a men’s warrior society, and it is said to have been first given to a man named Crow-Feather through a vision. In this vision, Crow-Feather was given a deer-hair roach, a crow-bustle (crow-belt), and special medicine empowering him to pull out chunks of meat from a boiling kettle without burning himself. Also implied is that these items had never before been seen by the Pawnee, and had come to them for the first time via Crow-Feather’s vision. In addition to the aforementioned items, the spirits granted Crow-Feather forty songs to sing during the *Iruska* ceremony, to be accompanied by four water drums. When this warrior society was given to the Omaha nation (who also claim to have originated it themselves), the four water drums were replaced by a single large drum, commonly referred to as the “big drum.” Ornamental whips and, in some cases, one or two United States Army swords, were added to the ceremonial regalia. Following the spread of these items, together with the roach and crow-belt, Wissler leapt to the conclusion that he was tracing the diffusion of the Omaha/Grass Dance as a song/dance ritual entity. He makes no mention, however, of

what the dance actually looked like in its footwork, or how its accompanying songs sounded.

Tracing the dispersion of a warrior society around the Great Plains by the spread of its regalia presents some significant difficulties. One such is identifiable in the narrative of an unknown Lakota man, recorded by Thomas Tyon (also Lakota). According to the informant, there are many different warrior societies in each Indian nation, and all have similar regalia.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Wissler did not differentiate between indigenous regalia and articles introduced from the outside, such as swords, iron cooking kettles, and perhaps even the large drum (“big drum”) which he claims to have been the Omaha contribution to the ceremony. These external objects served as cultural leveling devices, making many dance types appear identical to an outside observer, distracted by the more colorful aspects of a ceremony. Combined with a basic similarity of Native regalia, external elements could mask salient differences among societies. The illusion of only one society was fostered, when in fact there were many. A tendency to observe a unity where it did not exist is well illustrated in comments by observers at the turn of the century, such as Helen Marie Bennett, the superintendent of schools in Deadwood, South Dakota. In a 1902 article, titled “The Indian Dances,” she writes, “The Omaha is the only dance now practiced among the Sioux.”<sup>8</sup>

Two major items of regalia, the crow-belt and the roach, were commonly found on the Northern Plains well before the advent of the Omaha Dance. The paintings of George Catlin show the crow-belt being used by the Lakota in the so-called “Beggars Dance” in 1832, almost thirty years before the purchase of the Omaha Dance and its regalia by the Nakota.<sup>9</sup> Museum specimens of roaches from the Great Lakes area date back to 1800.<sup>10</sup> Since the roach was part of the regalia of the Kit-Fox Society, its presence among the Lakota before the coming of the Omaha Dance is a possibility.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the war insignia of the Kit-Fox Society bears a striking resemblance to that worn by another man in an early photograph who was labeled as an Omaha Dancer.<sup>12</sup>

Wissler’s other major evidence for a single style diffused is constructed from the terms used to describe a series of ritual actions in the ceremony which culminated with the snatching of pieces of meat from a kettle of boiling water. These actions are a central part of the Pawnee *Iruska*, Omaha *Hethushka*, and Lakota *Heyoka* ceremonies, and Wissler glosses the three ceremony names (*Iruska*, *Hethushka*, and *Heyoka*) as having the same origins and meaning, which he finds to have been derived from the above ritual action.<sup>13</sup> Yet, he gives credit for the origination of the notion to the Dakota.<sup>14</sup> Wissler implies that the Dakota, Nakota, and Lakota had this portion of the ceremony first, and that it spread from those nations to the Pawnee, *after* which the Siouian tribes changed the word for their ceremony, adopting Pawnee terminology. This unlikely chain of events will not bear close scrutiny.

Although the Pawnee *Iruska* ceremony did involve snatching chunks of meat from a kettle of boiling water, other indigenous American peoples

performed exactly the same act as part of one or more of their ceremonies. The practice is not even confined to the Plains, since the Northeastern Iroquois perform the same action as part of a curing “doing.” The Lakota *Heyoka* is in fact an indigenous dream cult, something very different in nature from the Pawnee *Iruska* or Omaha *Hethushka*, both of which were warrior societies.

Membership in a warrior society is generally based upon the demonstration of valor in battle. For the most part (although not exclusively), warriors in nineteenth-century Plains culture were male; therefore, with the exception of women who performed specific ceremonial duties, the membership of warrior societies was made up of men (in modern Plains culture, female veterans are more common, and more likely to be included). On the other hand the *Heyoka* dream cult was open to all who dreamed of Thunderbeings, regardless of gender, and the element of pulling hot meat from the kettle had an entirely different meaning in the context of the *Heyoka* ceremony. Rather than proving stoic endurance, it displayed the contrary nature of the *Heyoka* dreamer, who would tell all people surrounding him/her that the meat was extremely cold after pulling it out of the boiling water. *Heyoka* means “contrary,” and the cult has little connection to bravery in battle. Instead, its members believe that by their actions they assure that lightning will continue to strike the earth and invigorate it.<sup>15</sup> The common ritual element among all of these ceremonies, the pulling of boiling meat from a kettle, might to an outsider merely imply variations upon one originating event. Although physically it is the obviously the same act, contextually it is radically different. Moreover, any Plains Indian of the nineteenth century would have been well aware of each warrior society’s distinct nature and purpose within their own tribal grouping, as well as the differences between a warrior society and a dream cult.

In describing the music of the Lakota Grass Dance (which is not discussed in any way by Wissler), William Powers states that Grass Dance songs are differentiated from traditional Lakota dance songs by the lack of what he terms the “Sioux yelp.”<sup>16</sup> Powers finds this distinction key to proving that Grass Dance songs came from outside of the Lakota repertoire, probably from the Omaha. He ignores however, the difference between simple vocal embellishment style and the larger formal elements of modern pow-wow songs, and that dance footwork and regalia are often separate from song type. In other words, Grass Dance songs and the Grass dance itself did not necessarily develop hand in hand. At the modern Lakota *Wacipi* (pow-wow or dance event), the Omaha and Grass Dance songs are distinct. The Omaha Dance itself is considered a completely different event from the the Grass Dance, and when performed is categorized as a “special.”<sup>17</sup>

In his study, Wissler footnotes (but otherwise ignores) versions of the Grass Dance origin story different from his preferred tale. One, from missionary and Lakota/English dictionary author Thomas Riggs, describes the Lakota Grass Dance: “It is said to have derived its name from the custom, in ancient times, of dancing naked or with only a wisp of grass around the loins. It is a night dance

and regarded as extremely licentious .<sup>18</sup> In a study conducted three years after Wissler's, ethnologist Frances Densmore took down clues to the possible beginnings of the Grass Dance among the Lakota, but, influenced by Wissler, she failed to draw the obvious conclusion. Referring to a photograph labeled "Omaha Dancers," she states:

Mr. Higheagle said that two kinds of grass dance are now danced on the Standing Rock Reservation—the old men's grass dance and the young men's. The former is shown . . . [in] a photograph taken several years ago on the reservation and identified by Mr. Higheagle. The view undoubtedly presents some of the old features of the dance which have been changed by the present generation.<sup>19</sup>

Wissler also contends that the Omaha Society was reserved for mature, experienced warriors.<sup>20</sup> But if this were so, why the need to tie braids of sweetgrass into their belts to simulate scalps? Being accomplished veterans, they would have possessed the genuine item. Moreover, without scalps simulated by braids or bunches of sweetgrass, why even name the dance Grass Dance? As stated earlier, contemporary Grass Dancing is a strenuous dance performed by younger men. Is it possible the same custom existed in the 1800s, and that rather than one dance changed by the young men, as Densmore claims, there were in reality two separate dances: one from the Omaha, and the other an indigenous Lakota form? A *Peji Waci* distinct from the Omaha Dance?

A modern Lakota telling of Grass Dance origins, common to Pine Ridge Reservation, supports this straightforward theory:

Grass Dance originated way back. The Lakota, a long time ago, they had these men. They would wear a row of grass around their head, around their arms, around their ankles, and right under their knees. And the reason for that was that they would always be in front . . . And they would creep down with the grass and blend right in with the grass. They would sneak up on the buffalo or the camp they were going to attack. They went up front because they blended right in with the grass. . . Then when the hunt was over, the war party ended, then when they came back to camp they were the first ones to dance. . . the first ones to go into the dance arena. And as they went into the dance arena before the People, they would stomp down the grass with their feet.<sup>21</sup>

The Densmore "Omaha Dance" photograph mentioned earlier shows a group of men dancing in a stiff, upright position and wearing feather bustles, not bunches or braids of grass. Their regalia and bearing seem much closer to the modern Traditional Dancer than the Grass Dancer. Grass Dancers wear no bustle, but instead sew yarn or chainette fringe on their regalia to represent grass. But in a photograph labeled "Omaha Dance" by the photographer, taken on the Pine Ridge reservation in 1891, more than a decade before the one Densmore describes, it can clearly be seen that some of the dancers are wearing

bunches of grass tied around their waists, conforming to Rendon's description.<sup>22</sup> Two distinct dances, two fashions of regalia, but a single name for both?

Figure 1 illustrates typical contemporary "Traditional" dance regalia, which includes a roach with Eagle feathers, a bone-pipe breast-plate, and Eagle feather bustle, all elements of the old "Omaha" dancer's regalia. The dancer seen is a member of the Maherren nation of South Carolina, and has assembled an outfit almost indistinguishable to those currently worn by young (15-35) men from the Lakota reservations in South Dakota. In Figure 2, a Seneca Traditional dancer is seen in the center, also with a roach, breast-plate, and bustle. His regalia conforms to current Iroquoian pow-wow fashion trends, which dictate the use of much more fringe than is seen in Plains outfits. Figure 3 is a contemporary Ojibwe Grass Dancer, whose regalia is trimmed with yarn, which symbolizes grass. He also wears a roach, but not a breast-plate.

It seems most likely that the nineteenth-century Omaha Dance as a footwork and regalia style has been absorbed into the modern all-encompassing category of the men's Traditional Dance, and is not identical to the modern Grass Dance. The two dances do not look the same in period photographs, are not performed by the same age groups, and although they use songs with similar formal structure, are not accompanied by identical or even analogous songs, since traditional Lakota Grass Dance songs involve some playing on the rim of the drum. Even if Powers is correct, and traditional Grass Dance song style came to the Lakota from the Omaha, it does not automatically follow that the dance itself did. Moreover, since the song form and beat pattern are identical in Grass Dance and Omaha Dance songs, it is reasonable to conclude that "Omaha Dance" refers to the song form, meter, and accent patterns, and "Grass Dance" to the footwork and regalia style.

The principal sources of confusion regarding Grass and Omaha Dancing are the innumerable non-Indian observers who wrote about Lakota dance and identified all Lakota dances as Omaha Dances, rather than all Lakota dance songs as Omaha Dances, which in modern song terminology are referred to as "Straight Songs." Unfortunately, with the wealth of information available from earlier research, anthropologists and ethnomusicologists tend to put aside alternative orally transmitted explanations in favor of authoritatively written ethnographic accounts. Thomas Vennum typifies this attitude when he writes:

As the Hethushka model was adapted by other tribes, they called it either the Omaha Dance or Grass Dance. The latter designation was most certainly derived from part of the regalia worn by the Hethushka dancers: along bunch of grass tied to the back of their belts to symbolize scalps taken in battle. But although the name Grass Dance was used, the original significance of the bunch of grass was soon forgotten by the new adherents; or they inferred the name's derivation from some local practice of longstanding. Such an explanation was given by the Hidatsa Edward Goodbird (born circa 1868) for the origin of the term among his people.<sup>23</sup>



Figure 1. Traditional Dancer Marcus Robbins (Maherren) at a 1995 pow-wow in Ann Arbor, Michigan.





Figure 2. Traditional Dancer Darwin Sanada (Seneca) at center, at a 1995 Sault St. Marie, Michigan summer pow-wow.



Figure 3. Unidentified Grass Dancer at a 1995 Sault St. Marie, Michigan summer pow-wow.

Goodbird's story involved the carrying and use of dry grass by warriors to start fires in damp weather, and may indeed reveal the origins of the Grass Dance in Hidatsa culture. Vennum, however, responds by saying, "Fortunately for Native American history, information concerning the diffusion and practices of the Grass Dance was collected early enough—not only when the elders were still alive but also when its spread was still underway."<sup>24</sup> The casual dismissal of Goodbird's account is disturbing, for it suggests that in the view of contemporary anthropology, Indians should be grateful that non-Native researchers have been around to record their history before it was lost, that mere oral tradition is an inadequate mechanism for cultural preservation. In the example of the Grass Dance, oral tradition would seem to bear a closer relationship to the collective historic evidence than anthropological theory.<sup>25</sup>

The reexamination of earlier anthropological findings in order to make comparisons with extant oral accounts could make a strong impact upon the discipline of ethnomusicology. Since relatively few recordings or accurate transcriptions exist of Native North American musical repertoires from this era (with the exception of Densmore, Fewkes, and a handful of others), we must rely upon the work of ethnologists who often documented dances without their musical component, and who worked under the assumption that music occurred separately from the dance event. Moreover, we must recognize that research and conclusions based upon misunderstood modes of transmission may be erroneous and/or biased. If these procedures remain unquestioned, our work based upon them may be biased as well. Oral traditions provide a checking point with written accounts and a sounding board for our work within Indian communities. Full-fledged alternate versions of musical traditions require recognition by the discipline because each possesses its own unique authority.

## NOTES

1. Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28 (1989): 13.
2. Clark Wissler, "General Discussion of Shamanistic and Dancing Societies," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* 11 (1916): vi.
3. Thomas Vennum, *The Ojibwa Dance Drum: Its History and Construction* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982), 51.
4. William Powers, *Grass Dance Costume* (Somerset, New Jersey: Pow-wow Trails, 1963), 1. This citation is from a pamphlet for hobbyists, a term that describes non-Indians with an interest in Native dance, and who dress in Native dance regalia and dance at pow-wows, most often those organized by hobbyist organizations. In the pamphlet, Powers gives instructions on how to make the regalia and perform the footwork associated with the Grass Dance style seen at contemporary (post-1960) pow-wows. Powers's most recent major publication dealing with Native music and dance is *War Dance: Plains Indian Musical Performance* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990).
5. Norma Rendon, interview by author, 15 August 1989, Boulder, Colorado.
6. James R. Murie, "Pawnee Indian Societies," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* 11 (1914): 608.
7. James Walker, *Lakota Ritual and Belief* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 265.
8. Helen Marie Bennett, "The Indian Dances," *The Southern Workman* 31 (1902): 346.
9. Harold McCracken, *George Catlin and the Old Frontier* (New York: The Dial Press), 45.
10. Ruth B. Phillips, "Northern Woodlands," in *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples* (Ottawa: The Glenbow Museum, 1987), 62.
11. Walker, *Lakota Ritual*, photograph following p. 226.
12. Ibid., photograph following p. 194.
13. Wissler, "Shamanistic and Dancing Societies," 859.
14. Ibid., 861.
15. Louis Thunder-Hawk, public lecture, 15 October 1989, Ann Arbor, Michigan.
16. Powers, *Grace Dance*, 1.
17. Rendon, interview by author.
18. Stephen Riggs, *Dakota Grammar, Texts, and Ethnography* (Washington D.C.: Contributions to North American Ethnology, 1894), 227.
19. Frances Densmore, "Teton Sioux Music," *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin* 61 (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1918), 470.
20. Wissler, "Shamanistic and Dancing Societies," 866.
21. Rendon, interview by author.
22. Walker, *Lakota Ritual*, photograph following p. 194.
23. Vennum, *Ojibwa Dance*, 53-4.
24. Ibid., 54.
25. Ethnomusicologist Edward Wapp Wahpeconiah (Comanche/Sac and Fox) has suggested that some of contemporary Grass Dance regalia and footwork style has Cree origins, having heard while attending Wyoming pow-wows in the mid-1950s that the dance and its (at the time) all-black regalia had been imported from the North (conversation with the author 1 April 1995).

