

Casino-Powwows: The Effects of Gaming on Tradition (München, 11.04.2005)

Since the 1970s, and before gaming became an issue, there has been a strong trend for offering substantial cash prizes amounting to several thousands of dollars in the powwow. Up to that time, only small sums were competed for – like \$ 1.50 first place at the Oglala Fair of 1941 or \$ 15 at the Oto Powwow in 1950.

Prize money was and is mostly offered in connection with other non-monetary forms of prizes, the original form of showing appreciation. Some of these non-monetary prize-forms were re-evaluated according to the change of moral standards in the course of time. The Canadian Cree Fancy Dance Champion Les Goforth recalls an interesting aspect of price-transformation in the history of powwow:

„And back then you were given a prize like a horse, or you're given blankets or you were given something from the person's home [...]. I remember a lot of times first place was a jug of wine, or a jug of whisky or a case of wine, because drinking was popular back then. And I even remember 15 years ago [about 1985] there was still a... 'Case of Corn First Place' in Carry the Kettle [Saskatchewan..]. So you didn't get a trophy [or a jacket]. You got 500 bucks and a case of corn...“

There have been a number of trendsetter-powwows for big contest money. The earliest were some major fair and reservation powwows like White Swan, on the Yakima Reservation, Washington State. Here, prize money was already up to \$ 2.000 in 1976. Other trendsetters were some urban powwows that became a dominant force in the 1980s, like United Tribes in Bismarck ND, Gathering of Nations in Albuquerque New Mexico or Red Earth in Oklahoma.

Casino powwows, that is Powwows that are known for offering high prize-money coming from gaming, did not emerge until the late 1980s and especially the early 1990s. The Schemitzun Powwow of the Mashantucket Pequot in Connecticut - on which I would like to focus - was not the first but one of the early ones. It became the prototype example of the somewhat vague category of “Casino-Powwow”. If one looks at the amount of efforts and money invested in this event, it should be clear why it became such an important force in the 1990s. The input of money was unprecedented: At a time when singing groups received up to \$ 5000 at major powwows, the Schemitzun offered \$ 7.000 first-place in 1993, an amount that soared to \$ 25.000 within three years. Furthermore, additional contests for singers and dancers, new dance categories and specials raised the chances of placing and winning big money tremendously.

Generally speaking, the phenomenon of big-money-powwows – and I don't restrict what I am saying to “casino-powwows” – have led to a boost of the contest powwow phenomenon. The younger generations and especially most of the good dancers and singers are drawn to the big spectacular powwows which has caused other forms of community celebrations to diminish in importance. Ralph Zotigh, a well-known Kiowa singer from Albuquerque, puts it that way:

Everybody is going for contest [...]. And that's sad, because like in the old days, they had benefit powwows and people would go for the purpose of supporting. But you can't hardly have a benefit powwow anymore, because all these young generations want, is money. They will not go to a powwow unless there is a big prize money. It's changing in a way that I don't really [like...]. I can remember when powwows were honor powwows, victory powwows or benefit powwows. Now it is money, money. Money this and money that.“

On the other hand, there is a clear connection between the increase of money, the focus on innovation and the attractiveness of powwows for the younger generations. In contrast to other forms of traditional activities, change has always been an important and accepted part of the contest powwow. One effect of money and the resulting increase in contest related activities was the professionalization of dance and music which included a conscious and constant strive for innovation. The latter aspect has gained importance to such a degree, that this dimension is increasingly being viewed negatively, especially by elderly powwow-activists such as Ralph Zotigh:

„[P]owwows are getting trendy [...]. Everybody wants to start a fad [...]. People are looking for something new. It seems [that there is a general attitude like]: ‘I am gonna go to the big powwow. I want to see something new [...]. I am tired of the same old [stuff...].’ [...]. It seems [that there is a trend to] the more spectacular [...]. These younger ones are wanting to start a fad [...], a new style. [...]. I don’t like it [...], but whether I like it or not, that is what is happening.“

It is in this context that one has to view the role of casino-powwows in general and the innovations introduced by major powwows such as the Schemitzun in particular. I shall limit the following overview to some innovations introduced or supported by the Schemitzun to the period between 1993 and 2000, the years in which the Schemitzun was most dominating. I would like to apologize beforehand for using names of dances and singing styles that I do not explain due to the lack of time, but in this context their sole use is to name some of the changes that took place.

In 1993, the visitors of the Schemitzun encountered a „normal“, though big powwow. Dance contests were offered in all of the typical “western powwow” categories. The specification “western” is important, as there has been a somewhat independent “eastern” powwow tradition, which in many respects was based on the western powwow model but that had clearly tried root the powwow in regional tribal cultures.

Starting in 1994, major changes with regard to the content of “typical” powwows took place. On the one hand “eastern powwow” traditions were firmly established in the standard contest complex of the Schemitzun, such as Men’s and Ladies’ Smoke Dance, Women’s Blanket Dance and Men’s Eastern Calumet Dance. The latter has been replaced in 1998 by the so called Eastern Straight Dance, which according to the powwow-program resembles the old form of Woodland War Dance which in turn was closer in Concept to the Standard Western powwow categories that are rooted in warrior traditions. On the other hand a number of standard western contest categories were split up into two styles labelled as “Old-“ and “Contemporary”. This re-evaluation effected the categories Men’s Northern Traditional, Mens Grass Dance and Ladies Jingle Dress.

In 2000, the most interesting innovation was the introduction of a so called Women’s Back Up Singing Contest which was obviously inspired by the “Wicaglata”-Contests that sporadically emerged since the Mid-1990s in the Dakotas. It was the first time in the Schemitzun that women’s singing was recognized separately. By 2001 Women singing contests were incorporated in the standard contest program and were offered for all styles of powwow singing: Southern, Northern and Contemporary.

The rapid changes in the complex of standard dance categories were also reflected in the Grand Entry of the Schemitzun. Since the beginning of the 1970s, when Dance Contest according to contest categories became dominant, the Grand Entry as an opening ceremonial featuring all dance categories was introduced to the world of powwow. Before, powwows

were either opened by an opening/or calling song or by so called processions organized according to tribes (Anadarko), were – for example - the dancers came in singing. So, Grand Entries organized according to dance categories are a novelty that began to develop since 1970s.

Due to the rapid increase of standard dance categories in the Schemitzun – from 8 in 1993 to 18 in 2000 – the Grand Entries of the Schemitzun reflected these dramatic changes that went well beyond the boundaries of “typical” western powwow grand entries.

But, it was not only the regular, expanded form of Grand Entry that made these opening ceremonies of the Schemitzun so special. Being far away from the classical centres of “powwow-tradition” in the Mid-West, the Schemitzun has proven to be an ideal field for experimentation as may also be readily seen from the innovations mentioned above.

One of these experiments affected the most important Grand Entry of a powwow, the Saturday Night Grand Entry 2000. Although there has been a tendency at some northern plains powwows to “reintroduce” the Grass Dance to the powwow-opening ceremonies and thereby stressing a religious interpretation of powwow – and I am talking of the Grass dance in the sense of the ceremonially flattening of grass at the beginning of a major ritual such as the Sun Dance and not of the military Omaha Society dance that is also often being called Grass Dance (and to which the leaders of this special Grass Dance-Grand Entry belonged) -, these attempts have never affected the actual Grand Entry, as they were separately performed before. This time, the whole Schemitzun Grand Entry was devoted to this ceremonial reinterpretation of powwow. This became also quite obvious in the comments of the MC Kenny Skabbyrobe, Blackfeet:

„Alright, and now ladies and gentlemen, this is what we [call the...] ‘Grass Dance.’ We make tribute to the Omaha nation [...]. This is the way it was a loong time ago, in the late 17th century amongst our people, the Omaha people. This was the Grass Dance [...]. We’re walking in the footsteps of our ancestors here tonight. It may be difficult but we got to try, we got to continue [...]. It makes me feel proud!“

CONCLUSIONS

Concluding my paper, I would like to point out, that the inclusion of money into what many label “traditional activities” is itself a hotly debated issue in Indian Country today. Howard Bad Hand’s opinion – he is a well know Lakota singer and composer - is just one of many:

„Even though the concept of fair still exists on the northern plains [...], the competition has really overtaken it. And really you have to separate that from tradition, even though the tradition is practiced at the local fairs [...]. Because of that reality, as a singer, I never got into the battle of the old singers, you know being down on the case of the young singers who are singing ‘potato chips’ songs, or whatever they call them. That [criticism] came from an idea of tradition, even if the situation was competition. What I saw the young people doing was really like we have rap music now and we have the all alternative rock, which is an evolution of that music based on the kids experience up to that time. [...] And to me, in competition you started to have these songs which are about dancing: ‘Dance! dance! Wacipi! wacipi!’ That to me was what the kids knew. That was their tradition, even though it was money based. That is the tradition that they developed.“

Nevertheless, Howard, like many others, still has a somewhat paradoxical attitude to the concept of tradition

- On the one hand, he accepts the fact that modern powwows reflect both older forms of tradition and those traditions created by younger generation's, even if they are money-based.

-On the other hand, he does have a problem with money in connection with tradition, as he states in a different reflection on contest powwows: „But it's not tradition! It's a form of entertainment. As long as we attach money to it, it is entertainment. “

Whatever attitude one may want to take with regard to the concept of “tradition”, one thing should have become clear, the inclusion of money in general and of high-price gaming money in particular has had both good and negative effects. These have influenced contemporary Indian cultures in many ways far beyond the actual contest powwow setting. And here I am not only talking about the effects on other forms of community events but also of legal issues such as copyright of “traditional knowledge,” for example.

By and large, organizers of major contest powwows - in which many typical casino-powwows have to be included - tend to involve and draw individuals that are noted for their knowledge as well as for their competitive and innovative edge. This makes such powwows – and especially such powwows as the Schemitzun that are far away from traditional western powwow-centers – especially apt as trendsetters and role-models. It is important to note two points:

Firstly, most “innovations” introduced at the Schemitzun were stimulated by discourses and trends that have been locally lingering on for some time somewhere in the powwow world.

Secondly, it became clear that the trend for innovations has also triggered a counterprocess that could be labeled as “re-traditionalization” of “traditional activities”.

As to the first point, I would like to argue that powwows such as the Schemitzun, are just outlets of time- and context-bound materializations of complex discourses on tradition. With regard to theory discussing concepts of knowledge and culture, I would like to point to the general importance of such specific materializations as role-models and to the importance of periodical shifts of public attention-focus.

Referring to the second point, I would like to add, that the process of “re-traditionalization” in Indian country does have a religious-ideological connotation. On a theoretical level, therefore, this trend has to be put into a broader picture and may have to be seen in connection with other similar phenomena around the world.

Now, returning to the issue of Gaming and Tradition; I would like to conclude my paper by citing Wayne Goodwill who is a well known Canadian traditional dancer:

„Not casino money [ruins the powwow], but I think it's the powwow politics. Big prize money makes people ‘greedy.’ It causes jealousy. [...Greed] was always there [...but] if you're competing for thousands of dollars then [...] people start to get mad.“