



Social Dances of the Lenape and Other North-Eastern Indian Tribes

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It is a beautiful night. Somewhere in the Lenape homeland there is a large gathering of people who have come together for a ceremonial. It took place during the day, and now the sun has set. Inside the dance area the attendants have brought in the fire. People are sitting around visiting, and waiting. Then, the deep, resonant sound of the water drum begins. A steady beat is soon followed by the singing of the drummer. He is singing a song for the women to come out and dance. On either side of him sit other singers. They have gourd rattles, or other types of rattles, and they too sing along. The world is a wonderful place, the year is 1494, and the world of the Lenape and other Native people is about to suffer a drastic change.

The scene we set above could have taken place almost anywhere in the east, from New York on south, perhaps as far as the Gulf of Mexico. Even to this day many of the old "Social Dance Songs" are remembered, and are still used by some tribes. What type of music is this, and how does it differ from modern-day pow-wow songs? Dr. Charlotte Heth, a Cherokee and an ethnomusicologist has stated some of the common aspects:

We can generalize fairly easily about the characteristics of Eastern and Southeastern music and dance today:

1. Dances are performed in a counter-clockwise manner, for the most part.
2. Instruments are either worn on the body, held in the hand and shaken, blown, or beaten upon. The primary drum was and is the water drum.
3. Singing is either responsorial with leader-chorus alternation, or is unison chorus after the leader has "lined out" the beginning of the song. Strophic songs with alternating chorus and verse parts are also common.
4. Songs tend to be short, while performances are long, have many repetitions, and/or are arranged in cycles (Heth 1992:174).

The Musical Instruments

The drum the main singer uses is what is called a "water drum." Many of these were made from a small hollowed log, and there is some water placed in the bottom to create the resonance. For some



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tribes this drum may be made from pottery, and for still others it may be a cypress knee which has been hollowed out (Medford 1972:14).

The earliest description we have of the water drum is from the Powhatan tribe of Virginia in 1612. We find that the drums “were made of deep wooden platters covered with animal skin. To the corners of the skins were attached walnuts, which were then pulled beneath the platter and tied with a cord.” There is no mention of whether the platter contained water, but later in the same century there is a mention of the Powhatans using “drums consisting of skins stretched over pots half filled with water” (Rountree 1989:97).

In later years the drum was made from crocks, barrels, or three-legged kettles with a drumhide stretched over them. For example, the drum used by the Delawares in 1780 was described as, “The drum which keeps the time is a thin deer-skin stretched across a barrel, or, in lieu of this, a kettle” (Zeisberger 1910:18). Today the preferred drum is a made from no. 6 cast iron kettle. One of the most common uses nowadays for the water drum is as the drum used in the Native American Church. However, long before the Native American Church was organized, water drums sounded throughout the East and Southeast.

In addition to the water drum, the other principal musical instrument was the rattle. Among the Iroquois and Delaware rattles could be made of gourds, bark, horn, and turtle shells; however, turtle shell rattles were most often used in ceremonies and not for Social Dances. In addition to using all of these materials, in more recent times the Shawnees and Delawares adopted the use of coconut shells for rattles. Among the Powhatans the “rattles ... were made of gourds and graded in size and pitch” (Rountree 1989:97).

The Social Dance Songs

The songs which the water drum accompanied, the “social dance songs,” cover an immense area, and the same basic songs are used from tribe to tribe to tribe. At this late date it is very difficult to try to determine a tribal origin for most of these songs. It is made even more difficult as most of these songs have vocables instead of words.

Some songs take the names of foods, such as Bean Dance or Corn Dance. Some are named after animals, like the Raccoon Dance and Duck Dance. Even the Alligator Dance spread as far north as New York and Canada among the Iroquois people, but what was the origin? We can probably say with a certain degree of safety that alligators did not exist in New York State, so it must have been brought north by one of the Southeastern tribes. Some of these tribes were taken into the Iroquois Confederacy.

Some of the dances were named for other tribes, such as the Cherokee Dance. This is used very commonly by the Shawnee, Delaware, and Caddo, but it seems not to be known by the Cherokees. Of more recent origin there is the Quapaw Dance, used by the Delaware, Shawnee, and Caddo.



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Some of the songs have strange names, such as Stirrup Dance, in which a man dances with a woman partner, and at a certain point in the song the man raises his foot and the woman places her foot on top of his, almost as if she was putting her foot in a stirrup, and they hop and dance. Another dance with a peculiar sounding name is the "Go-Get-'Em Dance" in which the women gather in front of the men singers, and sing along with them. After about four songs the men come dancing in and they each get a woman to dance around the fire.

Why the Dissemination

Many of these songs traveled from east to west as various tribes were forced out of their original homelands. Some of these songs, such as the Duck Dance, have a very wide range. It should be mentioned that songs which were of a religious or ceremonial nature to a tribe almost never seem to have been transferred from tribe to tribe.

In some cases the dances were given to other tribes with permission to use them, such as the Caddo giving the Turkey Dance to the Delawares and Shawnees. As this is not a dance of eastern origin, when it is done the dancers move in a clockwise direction (as the Caddo do). The authors feel that, given the evidence presently available, most of the songs which the Caddo dance in a counter-clockwise direction were probably learned from the Delawares and Shawnees. Most likely this took place while the three tribes were together in Texas during the last century. Another example of a dance being given to other tribes is that as recently as 1927 the Quapaws gave the Quapaw Dance to the Delawares and Shawnees (Blalock, pers. comm.).

Sometimes the dances are given to another tribe to "keep" for the tribe doing the giving. At a recent conference in Muncey, Ontario, a Munsee-Delaware woman told how her people had given the "Delaware Skin Beating Song" to the Oneida to keep for them as they were losing their singers. This song continues as part of the songs used by a number of Iroquois singers.

Frank Speck mentions that a Cayuga man from Canada made a trip to visit the Delaware while they were still in Kansas (prior to 1867), and he returned home with the Stirrup Dance. It has since been renamed "Chicken Dance" or "One-Side Male Dance" (Speck 1937:154).

At the end of this page is a list of the common Social Dance Songs. The basis for this is a list (column one) by Lewis Henry Morgan of the songs done by the Delawares in Kansas in 1859. He did a similar list for the Shawnees and it is in column six. Most of the names for the dances as given are taken from Morgan. Songs found on his original list are indicated by an X in the first column marked "Morgan 1859." To this list we have added some of the more recent songs, or songs he neglected to name. The first five columns are of Delaware dances. This is followed by two columns of Shawnee Dances, one column of Iroquois Dances, and one of Caddo Dances.



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The information in this article is just a beginning. It is our hope that our Indian people and the scholars will continue the research into these beautiful songs, and that they will be preserved for the future generations.

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Endnote

The Lenape had many other songs which were used in various ceremonies. They also have war dance songs, songs used for various things around the home, and of more recent times, songs of



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the Native American Church. Over the years the various missionaries working among the Lenape have also translated nearly 1,000 hymns into the Lenape language. The topic of this writing in the Social Dance Songs, so we will not discuss these other songs at this time.

A List of Songs Attributed to the Eastern Indians from Various Sources

TRIBE-->	Delaware	Delaware	Delaware	Delaware	Delaware	Shawnee	Shawnee	Iroquois	Caddo
SOURCE-->	Morgan	Speck	W.Del	E.Del	Lucy	Shawnee	Shawnee	Iroquois	Caddo
DATE-->	1859	1935	1975	1977	1994	1859	1970	1950	1988
Adoption Dance [Dance of Dead]	X	—	—	—	—	X	—	X	—
Alligator Dance	—	—	—	X	—	—	X	X	X
Bean Dance	—	X	—	X	X	X	X	X	X ₁
Bear Dance	X	—	—	—	X	X	X	X	X
Buffalo Dance	X	X	—	—	X	X	X	X	—
Bunch Dance [Drunk Dance] [Morning Dance]	—	—	X	X	X	—	X	?	X
Buzzard Dance	X	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Cherokee Dance	—	X	X	X	X	X	X	—	X
Chicken Dance	X	—	—	X	X	—	—	X	—
Dog Dance	X	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Doll Dance	X	X	X	X	X	—	—	?	—
Duck Dance	X	—	—	X	X	—	—	X	X
Feasting Dance	X	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Fish [Gar] Dance	—	—	—	X	X	X	X	X	X



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Go-Get-'Em Dance	X	—	—	X	X	X	X	?	X
[Horse Dance]									
[Swing Dance]									
Kickapoo Dance	—	—	—	X	?	—	X	—	—
Lead [Stomp] Dance	—	—	—	X	X	—	X	X	X
Mësingw Dance	X	X	—	X	X	X	—	—	—
[False Face Dance]									
Old Religious Dance	X	X	—	X	X	—	—	—	—
Osage Dance	—	—	—	—	X	—	—	—	—
Quapaw Dance	—	—	—	X	X	—	X	?	X
Raccoon Dance	—	—	—	X	X	—	X	X	?
Sheep Dance	—	—	—	X	—	—	—	—	—
Stirrup Dance	—	X	—	X	X	—	X	?	X
Strike Stick Dance	X	—	—	X	—	—	—	X	—
Turkey Dance	X ₂	X	X	X	X	X ₂	—	—	X
Turtle Dance	X	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
War Dance	X	—	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Wolf Dance	X	—	—	—	—	X	—	—	—
Woman Dance	X	X	X	X	X	—	X	X	X
[Shuffle Dance]									

¹ = Known to Caddo as Bell Dance.



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² = Might be different from the dance later known as Turkey Dance and which came from the Caddo.

Sources (see Bibliography): [Morgan = Del. in KS]; [Speck = OK Del.]; [W.Del = W. Del. (Turtle Tales)]; [E.Del = East. Del. (Adams)]; [Lucy = Lucy Blalock]; [Shawnee 1859 = Morgan in KS]; [Shawnee 1970 = Shawnee!]; [Iroq. = Kurath]; [Caddo = Newkumet]