

Celebrating the Indian Way of Life

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Celebrating the Indian Way of Life

TINA KUCKKAHN

The day of opening ceremonies at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington DC dawned beautiful and cloudless. Little did I know that it would also turn out to be a life-changing experience.

My friend Joan Staples (White Earth Chippewa) and I boarded the DC Metro system in our jingle dresses around 7 a.m. to head down to the Smithsonian Castle, which was near the staging area for the Native Nations Procession. We made quite a commotion with our dresses in the subway, where we had our first experience being photographed by someone's cell phone. We made even more of an impression when we later entered the Fine Art Museum in search of a restroom. We didn't realize we would have to first get past the metal detectors, which created quite a spectacle, given that we were each wearing about four hundred pieces of metal on our dresses.

The primary mood surrounding opening ceremonies was that of celebration. Never before had so many people representing so many different Indigenous nations come together in the nation's capital. Indigenous peoples from North and South America exchanged smiles, photographic moments, and cultural acknowledgement of one another's beauty, pride, and the strength that lifted up our people, despite centuries of colonization and oppression.

Many of us can rejoice in the fact that today we can still identify tribal people by their particular regalia, dances, and songs, proving that many survived the assimilation policies of governments. The spirit of the people had not been vanquished. There was something to be celebrated in understanding that today's surviving Indigenous people are the descendants of the strongest of the strong and that they have not only sur-

vived but in many instances have learned how to adapt and thrive while continuing to maintain the essence of what it is to be an Indigenous person in this world. As renowned Maori artist Darcy Nicholas says, “I can never be my ancestor, and at the same time, he could never be me. Yet, ironically, I am he and he is me.”

I wondered with amusement how the procession organizers planned to get twenty-five thousand Indians in alphabetical order by tribe in time for the 9:30 a.m. grand entry, but despite a few exasperated “Tighten the lines!” coming over the PA system, it seemed that almost all the participants found a place and were reasonably in order by the time it began.

I encountered my first tribal member from Lac du Flambeau while exiting the port-a-potty line. My cousin Bagwajikwe called out my name, and we were pleased to have family to walk with during the procession. Next I saw my high school friend Nils “Buster” Landin. His family, representing three generations, always danced in unison at our annual homecoming pow wow. Today, his children would carry in the Lac du Flambeau Ojibwe Nation flag, leading our contingent of about a dozen tribal members from Flambeau.

There can be no dancing without a song, and our brothers from Flambeau were one of the few groups to carry in a big drum, drawing a flurry of cameras and video footage wherever they sounded the heartbeat. Our band of Ojibwes came in right behind the band from Lac Courte Oreilles, also from northern Wisconsin. If all of the bands of Ojibwes from Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, North Dakota, and Canada had come in as one group, we would have made quite a contingent of Anishinaabegs.

As the Lac du Flambeau band joined the procession, our men began to drum. The crowd on both sides began to cheer, and it was such an odd feeling; later on I would recall how it contrasted with what many of our tribal members experienced back in the early 1990s, as our men and women exercised our treaty right to spear fish in the ceded territories in northern and central Wisconsin. At that time the angry crowds of protestors who gathered at the boat landings didn’t cheer—they jeered and hurled epithets along with rocks, bottles, and ball bearings. Ironically, the state motto at that time was “Wisconsin: You’re among friends.”

Having grown up in the nearly all-white elementary school of Minocqua, Hazelhurst, and Lake Tomahawk, I recalled how my locker was defaced, how I was nicknamed “Chucker” (for spear chucker), and how

classmates would bring back books about Indians and make fun of the images, without intervention from the adult educators. I recalled hearing many similar disparaging remarks made to Makah tribal members as they attempted, and later succeeded, in exercising their treaty rights in Washington State. And now thousands of people were applauding, shouting out words of encouragement, smiling, and celebrating with us. A new day seemed to have dawned on the National Mall.

After the half-mile procession, I reunited with my traveling companions by giving directions via cell phone. Joan, who had danced in with tribal members from White Earth, found our group near where a man with a live eagle was allowing the crowd to admire one of our most important living symbols. My friend and colleague Mario A. Caro led some family members visiting from Colombia over to our area, where they took respite in some shade. At this point I acted as interpreter and invited them to meet some of the members of my tribe. Carol Brown and the other dancers said to tell them “Welcome”, and I regret that I didn’t share with the guests from Colombia how they could greet an Ojibwe by saying “Boozhoo!”

It was interesting to me that for the first time in my life, many of my worlds within the world of “Indian Country” were intersecting. Beginning with family as represented by my cousin, the bands of Ojibwes from Wisconsin, members of our Three Fires Society from the Midwest and Canada, Native friends from Washington State, Native American artists and Native arts service organizations from around the nation, as well as groups of international Indigenous peoples, composite parts of my Indian universe were all together at one place and time.

We were collectively marking a place in history that would speak to generations of peoples yet to come. Having been witness to the enduring spirit of Native people in the Americas, I began to wonder: “What will the Native Nations Procession of the five-hundred-year anniversary of the National Museum of the American Indian look like?”

One of the highlights of the trip to DC (referred to by Oneida comedian Charlie Hill as Washington D-Ceit) was the opportunity to attend the open house at the Smithsonian’s Center for Cultural Resources in Suitland, Maryland. The CRC opened its extensive collection of ancient artifacts and photo archives to the Native people who attended the week-long opening ceremonies. Joan and I were captivated by the collection of canoes, fully quilled boxes, a beaded hat similar to the ones we were

wearing, and the grand prize: trays and trays filled with precious bandler bags. As we opened each drawer and drank in the beauty of the bags, I wondered what stories they could tell of our history and our people.

The photo archives area had photos from Wisconsin and Minnesota in one binder, and there were at least a dozen photos from Lac du Flambeau. It is possible to order copies of the photos through the CRC. On the way to the center, the tour guide told us that the Smithsonian has a repatriation policy and has already returned thousands of items to tribes who could identify them. I wondered how many of our treasures lay hidden away in trays at the center and what could be done to bring them home. The hour flew by before it was announced that the shuttle was departing, and so with regret and some sadness, we left behind the treasures of our past.¹

We had passes to enter the museum at 9:30 p.m. One of the architects of the NMAI, Johnpaul Jones (Choctaw), had also designed the Longhouse Education and Cultural Center at The Evergreen State College, where I currently work as director of the House of Welcome Longhouse. It was exciting to see how the architects designed the space to reflect Native cultural values and lifeways.

One of the aspects of the museum that I appreciated the most was the inclusion of and emphasis on contemporary Native peoples. One floor of the museum paid homage to the work of George Morrison (Ojibwe) and Allan Houser (Apache), whose contemporary work has influenced generations of Native artists. There can be no doubt, upon witnessing the Native Modernism exhibition, that today's Native American artists can and should express themselves in any discipline of their choosing and should not be confined by other peoples' views of what Native art should look like or represent. Master weaver Hazel Pete of the Chehalis tribe once said, "Native people have always used the materials that were available to them, and today they have access to the world."

I also found the *Our Lives: Contemporary Life and Identities* exhibit to be especially powerful in challenging peoples' perceptions of who Native people are. The questions "Who is Native?" and "Who decides?" are juxtaposed with photos of contemporary Native people. The photos deliberately represent a diverse range of images, some of which would definitely challenge some peoples' views of what an Indian looks like.

The combination of the contemporary and the ancient, the telling of

stories past and present, the dancing, singing, praying, and sharing, all combined to lift up and affirm the people who came in unprecedented numbers to the nation's capital to celebrate the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian. It was a good day to thank the Spirit for the Indian way of life; that gift that we treasure through our songs, dances, ceremonies, and prayers; that gift that we will continue to nurture and pass on to the next generations.

NOTE

1. For more information, visit the National Anthropological Archives Web site at <http://www.nmnh.si.edu/naa>.