A Study of the Musical Culture of the Algonquin Indigenous Peoples of North America

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Abstract

The study of the music of the indigenous peoples of North America has been a topic of research since the late nineteenth century. These studies have mainly focused on the American Indians that lived west of the Mississippi. The Native American groups that lived on the eastern border of North America, known as the Eastern Woodland American Indians, have received much less attention than these other groups. This project focuses on one of the groups associated with the Eastern Woodland tribes, the Algonquins. The purpose of this study is to research their musical culture by focusing on the musical instruments of the Algonquins, the general characteristics of the music of these native peoples, the activities and ceremonies associated with music and dance, and how the Algonquin musical tradition is being carried on today.

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Background on the Algonquin Native Americans

The Algonquin Native Americans are a people group with a rich music culture and history. When discussing the Algonquins it is necessary to define terms. The Algonquin Indians were originally a Native North American tribe from what is now Quebec and Ontario, Canada. However, the term Algonquin is also used in reference to the collection of Native American tribes that are part of the same language family. This language family includes at least twenty-four different tribes. These tribes lived primarily on the Eastern coast of North America and in the plains of the United States. This study has focused on the latter groups of Native Americans, especially those in the Northeast. The boundaries of Northeast Native Americans have been defined by scholars as having a lower boundary of Virginia, extending to southern areas of Canada, and as far west as Michigan and Illinois.[1] Prominent Native American tribes that belong to the Algonquin language family are the Powhatan, Hatteras, Ottawa, Passamaquoddy[2], Massachusetts, Wampanoag, Mohican, Delaware, and Algonquin, as well as many others.[3]

These tribes were related both linguistically and culturally. As these tribes interacted with each other, they developed the same basic cultural elements, including traditions, roles, and practices. These interactions took place in the context of trading, wars, friendships, gatherings to establish peace treaties and alliances among different

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[1] Thomas, David Hurst, Jay Miller, Richard White, Peter Nabokov, and Philip J. Deloria. The Native Americans: An Illustrated History. Atlanta: Turner Publishing, Inc., 1993. p. 467.

[2] Swanton, John. The Indian Tribes of North America. Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1952.

[3] Thomas, et al., p. 466.

tribes, or developing new contacts and neighbors resulting from migrations. Archeological evidence supports the existence of such relationships.[4]

The duties involved with the daily life of these Indians were often divided into separate roles for men and women. These gender boundaries defined the lives and workings of the people. Men were responsible for preparatory duties, including clearing the land for farming and sharpening wood and stone for tools. Hunting was also a responsibility handled by the men. In times of war, men would be the ones engaged in fighting. Most religious duties were also led and performed by the men of the tribe, as they were seen by the culture as the ones fit for these leadership roles.

Women handled the many day-to-day responsibilities of the home. This included taking care of the children, preparing food, tanning animal hides, and taking care of the living quarters. While men handled some of the elements of collecting food through hunting, women also helped in this area by taking care of the fields. In addition, they were responsible for the collecting and gathering of edible items, such as berries, herbs, and shellfish in coastal areas. Women also had other tasks that would only happen on occasion, such as relocating the houses when it was decided to move from one area to another.

There were of course other activities that members of these societies would participate in when not working. Some recreational activities included playing games, gambling, talking, smoking, and story-telling.[5]

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[4] Ibid., p. 80.

[5] Billard, Jules, et al. The World of the American Indian. Washington: National Geographic Society, 1979. pp. 118-121.

Many of these tribes lived in dwelling places known as wigwams. These were homes constructed by bending poles into an arch and then placing coverings on the outside. These coverings were usually either bark or mats made of animal skin. These households could be as large as one hundred feet long. The interior included beds made of platforms that had been raised and covered with animal skins. Additionally, the interior could be decorated with mats that had been ornamented and painted.

While there were many similarities among these Algonquin tribes, the local culture of each tribe was also impacted by the location in which the group resided. This is comparable to the fact that while the tribes all spoke the same Algonquin language, there were regional dialects.

It was generally warmer throughout the year in the southern areas of the region. This warmer climate made it easier to raise both a greater number and a greater variety of crops. This led to a heavier emphasis on agriculture in the southern portion of the area. The northern regions, especially the far northeast, experienced a less hospitable climate and were not able to have the same agricultural success due to a shorter growing season. For this reason, hunting was much more important in the lives of the northern Algonquins, than it was to their southern counterparts.[6]

The religious beliefs and the ceremonies of neighboring tribes are one of the cultural areas in which differences can be noted. While there were general characteristics that were common among Algonquin tribes, the specific views of each group were influenced by interactions with neighboring tribal communities. These different religious opinions led to different ways in which those views were expressed.

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[6] The World of the American Indian, pp. 111, 121.

The general religious practice among the Algonquins was associated with animism. Animism can be defined simply as attributing the qualities of living beings to nonliving objects or forces.[7] However, it also involves the worship of spirits, spirit beings, and forces.[8] Ceremonies, traditions, and rites are often used in an attempt to please these spirits, avoid harm, and to receive good will for a tribe. The Algonquins believed in a large number of spirits that could guide, direct, and help a tribe. The Algonquins referred to some of these spirits, specifically the ones of humans, as shadows.[9] There was also a belief in a creator. This entity had given the earth its ability to produce, created the animals that inhabited it, and populated the world with human beings.

Communication with these spirits was important, as it is in many animistic cultures; however, such communication generally required a medium of some kind. In the Algonquin culture the person who fulfilled this role was known as the medicine man. This was the religious leader in each area, a person who was able to influence the spiritual realm by communicating directly with those beings. The term “medicine man” was given to the person with this role because of his involvement curing the sick within the community. Finally, the Algonquins believed in an afterlife. This was thought of as a

[7] Guthrie, Stewart. "Rethinking Animism." The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute Vol. 7 No. 1 (2001), http://www.jstor.org/stable/2660842 (accessed February 1, 2013). pp. 156-157.

[8] Bird-David, Nurit. ""Animism" Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology." Current Anthropology Vol. 40 (1999), http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/10.1086/200061.pdf?acceptTC=true (accessed February 2, 2013). p. 67.

[9] Hiebert, Paul, Daniel R. Shaw, and Tite Tienou. Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999. p. 59.

place where life was very close to the same as the life that was experienced on the earth in their day; sometimes in popular literature it was called the happy hunting ground.[10]

This is a basic description of the religion of many of the Algonquins of the Northeast. However, variances did exist among tribal communities. For example, the beliefs of the Algonquins that were located in the far north of the area being discussed were heavily influenced by those Native American tribes to their north, the subarctic tribes. These tribes were located in Canada. This relationship lead to a larger focus on curing and magic associated with hunting.[11] Greater attention to hunting and attempting to use magic to affect the outcome of the hunt in the northern sections may have been related to the greater importance of hunting in the area. While in the southern parts, the Algonquin family could rely on the crops that they were able to produce more of due to a longer growing season; their northern relatives were without the same level of agricultural bounty due to a shorter growing season. They needed to perform well in the area of hunting because it was the main source of the sustenance for the tribesmen.[12]

Shamanism was also a more prominent element of the spiritual rituals of these northern sub-arctic tribes that would have an impact on the religion of the northern Algonquin tribes.[13] Shamanism focuses on accessing the spiritual connections that are believed to exist. A shaman is the person who has the ability to communicate with this spiritual world in which the Algonquins believed. Their intention was to gain greater

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[10] In Cooper's The Last of the Mohicans, the fictional Indian Chingachgook refers to the afterlife as the happy hunting-grounds. Chapter 33.

[11] The World of the American Indian, p. 121.

[12] Ibid., p. 111

[13] Ibid., p. 121

power over circumstances by healing, removing bad spirits, and understanding events that will conspire in the future.[14] While there were elements of these beliefs throughout the Algonquin tribes, there was a more heavy emphasis on shamans, their ability to communicate with the spirit world, and their powers in the more northern bands of the Algonquin family. The interconnectedness of these Algonquin tribes would manifest itself in the music expression of each tribe. In the same way, the religious beliefs of these Native Americans were displayed in ceremonies where music and dance were very important.

The Instruments

Membranophones and idiophones were the main instruments of Native Americans. Membranophones are percussion instruments by which the sound is produced using a vibrating membrane. These membranes can be made out of animal skins, as they were traditionally, or of synthetic materials as is more common in contemporary times.[15] A familiar example of this type of instrument in the western musical culture would be the snare drum. Idiophones are percussion instruments that produce sound by their own vibration. Examples of these include claves, cymbals, rattles, and bells.[16] These two

[14] Turner, Edith. "Shamanism and Spirit." *Expedition* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 12-15. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed January 26, 2013). http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=13379046&site=ehost-live&scope=site

[15] *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, s.v. "Membranophone," accessed January 29, 2013, http://www.liberty.edu:2048/login?url=http://www.credoreference.com/entry/harvdictmusic/membranophone

[16] *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, s.v. "Idiophone," accessed January 29, 2013, http://www.liberty.edu:2048/login?url=http://www.credoreference.com/entry/harvdictmusic/idiophone

classes of percussion instruments, membranophones and idiophones, are primarily used in making Algonquin music.

While it is understood that drums were essential to the music of the Algonquin tribes of the Northeast, it is difficult, if not impossible, to completely understand the characteristics of the drums or how they were created. This is because the early writings of encounters with these tribesmen by explorers usually did not make particular note of the drums used by the Algonquins.

However, Captain John Smith did make reference to the instruments used among the tribes near Jamestown. These peoples were included in the collection of Northeastern Algonquins; however, they were on the southern boundaries. He states: "They cover the mouth (of a "deepe platter of wood") thereof with a skin, at each corner they tie a walnut, which meeting on the backside neere the bottome, with a small rope they twitch them together till it be so taught and stiffe that they may beat upon it as upon a drumme."[17] Although Smith's remark does not give much detail and only references one tribe of Native Americans associated with the Algonquins, it provides at least some information about the type of drum that was used among the peoples. There is also speculation that these tribes used water drums, which are known to have been used throughout the eastern portion of the United States. These types of drums were also popular among Midwestern and plains tribes, in particular the Navajo.[18]

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[17] Smith, John. *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles.* 1624. p. 70.http://books.google.com/books?id=z77xqkcCBOwC&pg=PA70&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=4#v=onepage&q=walnut&f=false

[18] Titon, Jeff Todd et al. *Worlds of Music*. New York: Schrimer Books, 2002. pp. 70-71.

Water drums of the east were crafted from hollowed-out logs that would be plugged on one end. They could be made out of other materials, such as clay. However, this type of pottery water drum was used in other areas of North America, most notably among the Navajos of the Western United States.[19] Then they would be filled partially with water and a skin would be placed on the top and tightened. The preferred skin used as the head of the drum could differ among communities depending on the size of the drum, the natural resources available, and the varying tonal preferences of the tribe. Some examples of common animals skins used were that of deer and woodchucks.

The size of these drums varied. There were very large examples, especially among the Chippewa. These were a foot tall or larger and required a head that would stretch from eight to ten inches across. These would be played in a tilted position on the ground because of their size. These were larger than most of the drums used among the Algonquin tribes of the Northeast. Their neighbors to the south, the Cherokee, crafted much smaller drums that could be held while being played.

Another difference was the amount of water used in the drum. Accounts claim that the drums were filled halfway with water, although this amount of water is unlikely. Other accounts state that among some tribes that used this drum two mouthfuls of water would be placed in the cavity. In order to add to remove water, a small hole would be drilled in the drum.[20] The timbre of the drum could be slightly adjusted by either adding or removing water. While changing the volume of air affected the sound or timbre of the drum, the water in the drum effected how wet the membrane was, which in turn also

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

affected the timbre. This was important because water drums, like all the membranophones from the culture, were said to have their own "voices". A singer was then able to make, use, and play a drum whose voice corresponded with his own voice.[21]

Rattles were also very important to the Algonquins of the Northeast and to Native Americans in general. John Smith commented on these as well: "But their chiefe instruments are rattles made of small gourds, or Pumpeons shels. Of these they have Base, Tenor, Countertenor, Meane, and Treble."[22]

Eastern rattles were usually created using gourds because of their availability in the east. They could be filled with a variety of items to produce the actual rattle, including seeds and pebbles. Seeds were much more commonly used, because small rocks would create a harsher tone that was not as well liked. After it was introduced to the Native Americans, shot would also be used within the gourds. [23]

Other materials could be used to create rattles, such as bark, or the horns of animals where available, and many parts of the turtle. The latter example was rather common throughout the northeast. After filling the turtle shell with a number of small items, the shell could be sealed and a handle applied. Then, these shells would be either painted a dark color or left as their natural color and adorned with brightly painted

[21] Diamond, Beverley, M. Sam Cronk, and Franziska von Rosen. Visions of Sound: Musical Instruments of First Nations Communities in Northeastern America. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. p. 81.

[22] Smith, p. 70.

[23] Laubin, Reginald, and Gladys Laubin, p. 108.

designs. Examples have also been discovered of rattles that have been crafted out of the feet of turtles.[24]

Although much less common, aerophones, or wind instruments, were also believed to have been used in the music of the Native Americans in this area. These instruments could be made out of a variety of materials, such as the horns of animals, wood, and the bones of birds. They were used to call game and to scare away birds.[25] It is also believed that flutes had a special place in the music of some religious ceremonies of the Algonquins.[26]

The Music

There exist many similarities between the musical characteristics the Northeastern Algonquins and their Eastern Woodland neighbors. This is attributed to the interaction that these tribes had with each other. The musical scales used were often made up of four to six tones. These tones would have relatively the same interval separating them. A classically trained western musician might equate this scale to the modern whole-tone scale. These scales were used to construct melodies that rise and fall repeatedly.

The rhythmic elements of the music of the Eastern Native Americans were a foundational component.[27] The Native Americans considered the rhythms of drums, rattles, and overall music to be representative of the great forces that impacted life. These

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[24] Diamond, et al., pp. 97, 131.

[25] Ibid., pp. 84-86.

[26] Levine, Victoria Lindsay. Native American Music: Eastern Woodlands. http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1350772/Native-American-music (accessed January 25, 2013). para. 2.

[27] Ibid., para. 1.

rhythms were believed to mimic the rhythms of the universe.[28] Meter would frequently change within a song. Rhythms often included a heavy use of syncopation.[29] These rhythms of the Eastern Woodland tribes are considered to be relatively simple. However, it was essential for the singers to perform the rhythms in the correct manner.[30]

Form is another basic element of music that should be discussed. The songs from this area mainly took three forms.[31] The first was strophic. In this form, each stanza of lyrics is sung to or over the same music.[32] The second common type of form used was a sectional form. In these types of songs the musical phrases and concepts were broken into closed sections that would change during the songs. Finally, iterative forms were used by the Northeastern Native Americans. Songs that follow iterative forms are songs that consist of short sections of music that are repeated. [33]

The use of the human voice was central to the music of these Native Americans. The voice could always be used; performers were not limited by needing to have an instrument in their possession. The vocal technique of the Eastern Woodland most often utilized the middle section of the vocal range, although there were exceptions. Other techniques were incorporated in order to alter the emotional impact of a song or to in

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[28] Laubin, Reginald, and Gladys Laubin, p. 99.

[29] Levine, para. 1.

[30] Laubin, Reginald, and Gladys Laubin, p. 99.

[31] Levine, para. 2.

[32] Tilmouth, Michael. "Strophic." Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press, accessed February 1, 2013, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/26981. para. 1.

[33] Levine, para. 2.

some way change the expressiveness of the music. This was often done through a rapid vibrato or yodeling. The latter is a vocal technique in which a singer quickly changes the pitch from being high to very low, often covering a wide interval and utilizing falsetto and chest tones.[34] Vocables, or audible sounds with no real lexical meaning in a language, were also used as a tool to add to the emotional expression of a song. Songs could be built upon vocables solely or they could be used intermittently in addition to the text with a comprehensible meaning.[35]

Figures 1 and 2 are examples taken from a Passamaquoddy dance song that uses both logogenic text and vocables. Other general characteristics of Algonquin music are also present in this piece. There are two main sections of the song, each of which will be briefly discussed. It was transcribed by Natalie Curtis after much study of the Indians at the turn of the twentieth century. The difficulties associated with placing a song of a different musical background into the western musical notation system should be noted, as well as Curtis' Western background and probably biases. Additionally, this is a single late sample and is not meant to be a representation of the general style of Algonquin music.

[34] *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s. v. "yodel," accessed February 06, 2013, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/653399/yodel.

[35] Levine, para. 2.

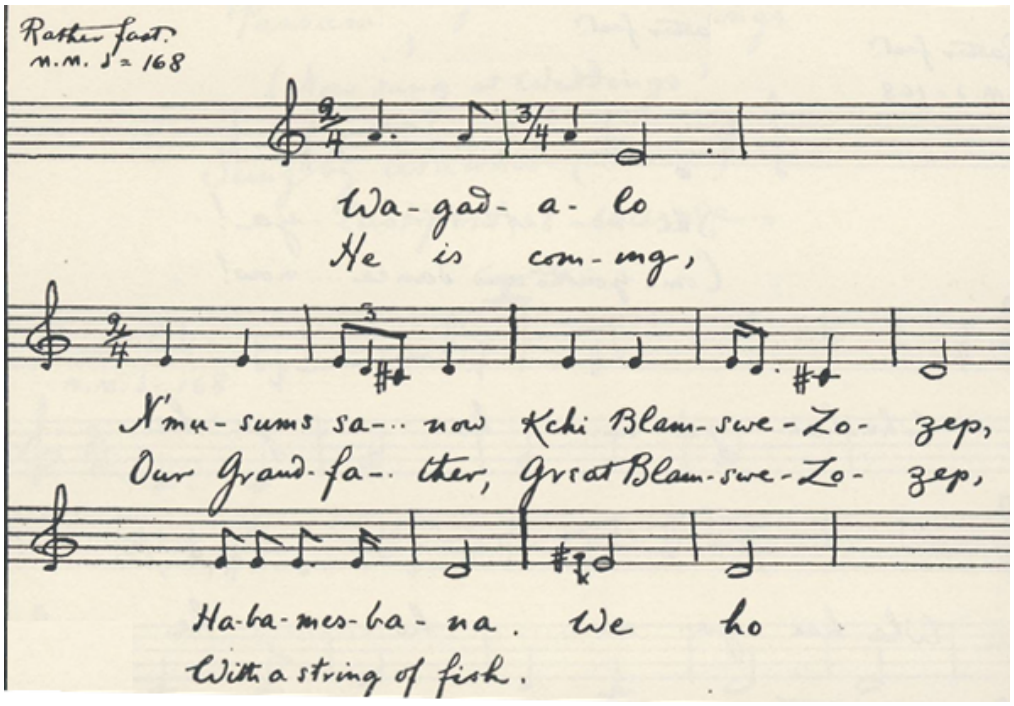

Figure 1. Section of Passamaquoddy dance song[36]

Figure 1 is the first section of this song. The text reads "He is coming, Our Grandfather, Great Blanswe-Zozep, with a string of fish." The word "grandfather" in this song was used as a term that showed admiration for an older man, not necessarily of familial relation.[37] The melody includes four tones, which is a prominent feature of the melodic content of Algonquin music. However, it is primarily focused on two tones, D and E. As shown by the tempo markings, the song was performed "rather fast." The accuracy of Curtis' rhythmic dictation may be questionable because of the limitations of the system.

[36] Curtis, Natalie. *The Indians' Book: Songs and Legends of the American Indians*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1907. p. 26.

[37] Ibid., p. 10.

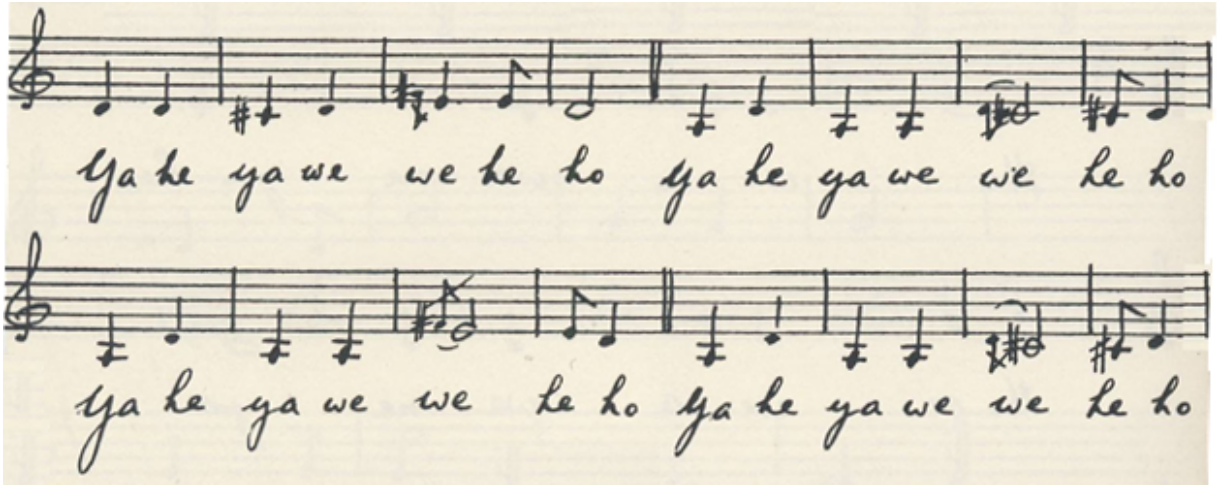

Figure 2. Selection from the second section of a Passamaquoddy dance song[38]

The second section of the song uses voacables, rather than logogenic text, to communicate emotion. This was common among the songs of the Northeastern Native Americans. The same pattern of vocables, "ya he ya we we he ho", is repeated during each four measure phrase. Again, the melody includes the same four notes, with the A being present in the lower octave. No harmony is recorded in this dance song in either section. Harmony, or the simultaneous sounding of two or more pitches, was rare in Algonquin music.

There was a distinctive musical element practiced among the Eastern Woodland tribes that was not as widespread among other tribes through North America. This was an emphasis on call and response singing. This form of singing is often found in dance songs. As the dance would begin, the leader would sing an introduction of a melody with lyrics as a solo. This was often short in length. The introductory phrase could be rather long compared to the response. The dancers would then in turn sing the line in unison. As the song continued, so would this practice. This created an antiphonal texture, which was

[38] Ibid.

not seen often in the musical practices of other Native Americans.[39] A song that has an antiphonal texture involves two parties; these can be solo singers, choirs, or a combination that alternate singing. Other examples of this could be found in many types of folk music and music of the Western musical tradition.[40]

These antiphonal songs would vary in characteristics. For example, the responses of the second singer or group of singers could be monotonic, ditonal, or melodic in its nature. Monotonic phrases were most often utilized at beginning and ending phrases of longer songs. While early recorded examples and dictations of this phenomenon are limited, there are later transcribed examples that clearly confirm this musical practice.

Figure 3 is a transcription of a typical song used in the dance cycles of the Iroquois of the Northeast. This specific example is taken from a social dance song. While this tribe was not a part of the Algonquin family, it provides an example of the musical characteristics of antiphonal singing that was common throughout the Northeastern Woodland tribes.

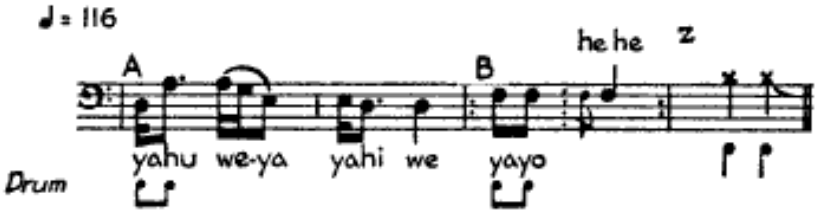

Figure 3. Antiphonal song example of Northeastern Native Americans[41]

[39] Levine, para. 2.

[40] *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s. v. "antiphonal singing," accessed February 06, 2013, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/28484/antiphonal-singing.

[41] Kurath, Gertrude P. "Antiphonal Songs of Eastern Woodland Indians." *The Musical Quarterly* Vol. 42, No. 4 (1956), http://www.jstor.org/stable/740259 (accessed January 29, 2013). p. 521.

This is an antiphonal song that uses the antiphony, or response section, as a coda in reply to a longer melody. It is a simple example compared to some other forms of antiphonal songs because of the style of the antiphony. Instead of repeating a melodic line, the antiphony is monotonic.

The leader would sing a melodic line, labeled 'A'. The text of this section is made of vocables. His singing is accompanied by a drum pattern, also notated in the transcription. The melody is primarily tertiary, with a leap from the tonic of a fourth, followed by a descending passage that pauses on the second degree until again reaching the tonic. Section B is the antiphonal response. This example is monotonic, as the F is the only tone used. This section could be sung as many times as the singers' choose. Finally, the antiphonal call is sung, labeled 'z'. This provides a conclusion to the musical phrase.[42]

This second example of antiphonal singing from the area is a transcription of a more complex antiphonal song. This song is an Iroquois social dance, called the Trotting Dance or *gadasot*.

This example of Northeastern Native American music is comparable to the first example in many ways. Both the melodies in sections A and B are composed of three to four tones. As mentioned, this was common to Native American music of the east coast.[43] The text is made of vocables that would stress the emotion of the singer rather than suggesting meaning.

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[42] Kurath, p. 521.

[43] Levine, para. 1.

However, there are also differences between this and the previous example that further the understanding of typical Native American antiphonal songs. The melody of the song depicted in Figure 4 is more rhythmically complex than that of the first example. In addition, two different melodic phrases are used before the antiphonal statement, with phrase 'A' being repeated. The upward melodic motion of section 'B' is different from the common down drift of Native American music.[44] This could be simply an outlier in the musical phrase that does not follow the usual pattern, or, since this is an example from a later time period, it could reflect the impact of western music on the music of this culture.

The antiphonal response, marked as phrase 'z' is again considerably shorter than the melody that it is echoing. However, this example showcases a ditonal response, beginning on a G and then leaping a fifth to a D.

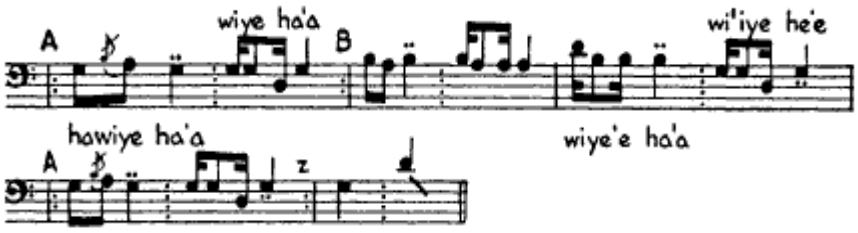

Figure 4. A more complex example of a Native American antiphonal song[45]

These characteristics of singing style, rhythm, scale, and structure provide a basic, while limited, framework of the music of the Algonquins. While it is difficult to fully

[44] Kurath, p. 524.

[45] Ibid.

comprehend what the music of this culture groups sounded like in the past, at least it is possible to explore the elements of its style.

Musical Culture

Music was fundamental to the culture of the Algonquins. The major events in a person's life, annual celebrations, and religious practices all were associated with ceremonies and festivities. These ceremonies would involve music, in which drums and singing were often integrated.

Dancing was also heavily linked to the musical culture of the Algonquins, for them music and dance were inseparable. There were a number of dances with music that were associated with different rituals and ceremonies. Each of these dances had different expressions, qualities, and meanings.

As with many cultures, the Algonquins have rites of passage to symbolize the transitioning of a young child into adulthood. The dance that was a part of the ceremony celebrating this rite was the Vision Dance. This type of dance was a familiar dance that was especially important within three areas of the country, including the plains, the Northwest, and the East. The Delawares provide an example of a Northeastern Algonquin tribe that performed this dance.[46]

Young boys, who had often not yet became teenagers, would have a vision revealed to them. This vision would be cherished by the boy for his entire life because he viewed it as sacred. In order to receive a vision, a boy whose voice was beginning to change would fast. The boys desired that during the fast they would receive the voice of a man and a vision from a guiding spirit. A Vision Dance and the songs associated with it

[46] Laubin, Reginald, and Gladys Laubin, p. 132.

were the means through which a person could express the vision he or she had received. Visions were rarely described using words, but rather dance and music.[47]

The Vision Dance among the Delaware tribes, as in many other tribes, was associated with a ceremony, called the Big House ceremony. Music and dance were intertwined with all of the aspects of this ritual. This ceremony and the rites associated with it would take twelve days to complete and was practiced once a year. Participants in this ceremony were persons who had received a vision in their early childhood or teenage years. Only those that were older than thirty-five were allowed to share in the ceremony because of beliefs on the age of spiritual maturity, until the last days of the celebration, in which younger members were able to share about the vision that they had received.

The Vision Dance was most prominent in the first two nights of the ceremony. It began with the leader repeating his vision. He would do this by talking. However, instead of his normal voice he would use a high-pitched version with little inflection. After stating a phrase, it would be repeated by another person in attendance, acting as his helper or follower. As his personal vision was spoken of, the leader would rapidly shake a rattle constructed out of the shell of a turtle.[48]

A membranophone crafted out of four slats and deerskin that had been dried and prepared was also used. This was played by two members who also would be the singers. This drum would be rapidly beaten at the conclusion of the leader's description of his vision. In addition, the singers would make the exclamation, "Ho-o-o!" multiple times.

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[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid.

Songs played a very important role in this ceremony, with each person sharing their vision having their own unique song based on the vision. The leader at this point would sing a verse of his song as the singers played a beat on the deerskin drum. The leader would then proceed to dance around two large fires while the drummers and singers continued to play. The leader could, when needed, stop the drummers by whooping. He was then able to sing or state another verse, which the singers would repeat as the dance continued. This was repeated an estimated six or seven times, as each verse added to the story of his personal vision.[49]

As the leader would dance, men would often stand up and join him creating a line. After the men had joined, the women were free to join the line as well. As the leader passed the singers, he would stop and greet them. The dancers following the leader would look towards the singers as they passed them. This was a symbol of respect. The leader would perform the last verse of the song to a post in the center of the room. This post had been carved with a face that represented the Great Spirit.

The leader would then pass the rattle to the next man in line, in order for him to lead the singing of his vision while dancing. The man could pass the rattle on to the next visionary if he did not wish to dance. The person that received the rattle and chose to lead would then follow the same procedure as the original leader, with the singers learning the words. This process could continue all night until each person that had wished to share had an opportunity.[50]

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[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid., p. 133

The Vision Dances were important in the lives of the Delawares and others who practiced this dance because it created a communication with the spirits that they worshiped. During this ceremony all participants were viewed as having a direct connection with the spirit world, instead of only the select few, such as priests or medicine men.[51]

Music and dancing played a large role in others areas of the Algonquin society. War was almost a continuous threat in the lives of the Algonquins. Fighting was common between the neighboring tribes and groups, such as the Iroquois. Whether preparing for a coming battle or rejoicing over a victory, music and dancing were integrated with these events.

The War Dance was a dance that was prevalent throughout the Eastern Woodlands, which were the larger group in which the Algonquins were a part. The War Dance of the Algonquin past should not be mistaken for the War Dance that is practiced in Native American culture today, which is truly a version of the Grass Dance.[52] The Grass Dance was a Western War Dance where the performer would wear weaved grass representing the warriors he had fought and killed.[53] Other tribes that practiced the Grass Dance believed that it would provide the dancers the ability to heal burns.[54]

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[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid., p. 138.

[53] Titon, p. 33.

[54] Arant. "American Indian Culture." *Grass Dance*, Edited by Carole Barrett and Harvey Markowitz, p. 328. Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press, Inc., 2004.

Originally, when first encountered by early explorers and colonists, the War Dance struck fear into the hearts of those who saw it. It also was the most intriguing of all of the Native American dances to the foreigners. It symbolized preparation for war.

There was a specific War Dance song that was performed during the dance. McKenney and Hall described the music as a continuous beating of a drum, that they judged as crude, with sticks. All the dancers would participate in the singing during the performance in their account. Additional accompaniment came in the form of rattles made of gourds and the shaking of bells and other items, such as tin, which were worn by the dancers. These writers claim that the songs are constructed of short and abrupt sentences, the subject of which could be hatred, revenge, or in celebration of a memory of a past victory. They described the songs as being without a melody. However, the bias of the writers towards the 'savages' they were witnessing should be noted with the remarks of their music.[55]

Before the dance began, the Native Americans prepared the area by placing a post in the ground. This would become the center, around which the dance was to be performed. This post was sometimes painted various colors, which would be different depending on the tribe. In other accounts, the post was left bare.[56]

The chief would usually start the dance, indicating that he was the one calling for the group to join and fight. He would go to the post and strike it with his weapon, usually either a war club or tomahawk. The other men in the area would encircle the one calling

[55] Laubin, Reginald, and Gladys Laubin, pp. 138-139.

[56] Ibid.

for the fight.[57] Those who would drum would begin the War Dance song. In response, the chief would begin his dancing. One by one, other men would come forward. As a man came, he would talk of his war actions,[58] or the war deeds that their ancestors had a part in,[59] and strike the post. Then he would join the dancers. This was symbolic of him joining the war effort.[60] After every warrior had a chance to tell of the deeds he had done, they would all dance together. This would be erratic, as the men practiced for the fighting they planned on having to use in the coming battle. This would involve yelling and screaming.[61]

Figure 5 provides an example of a song that could have been performed along with the War Dance. This war song was sung for Curtis by Bedagi, also known as Big Thunder, in the early 1900s. Bedagi was a member of the Penobscot tribe, which was associated with the Algonquin family.

[57] Keller, p. 53.

[58] Laubin, Reginald, and Gladys Laubin, pp. 138-139.

[59] Keller, p. 53.

[60] Laubin, Reginald, and Gladys Laubin, pp. 139-140.

[61] Keller, p. 53.

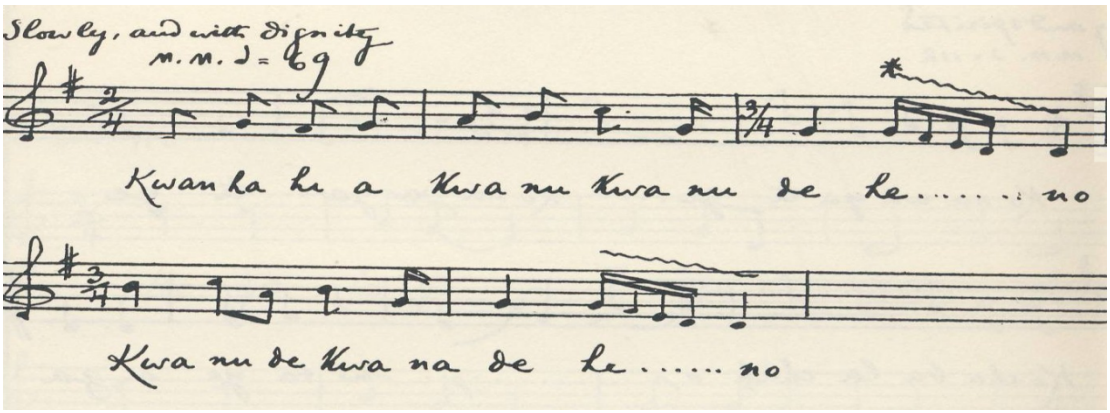

Figure 5: Penobscot war song[62]

The song is composed of this musical statement repeated twice. This demonstrates another important element of the music of the Algonquins, often songs or musical phrases would be repeated multiple times until the end of the dance or cermony. This was a major part of the war dance as multiple men would tell of their war deeds repeatedly. In order to compensate so that the rhythm of the song could be notated in this system, Curtis had to alternate between 2/4 and 3/4. This piece also provides an example of another popular musical element of Algonquin music: A higher tone would be sung and then passed to another tone by sliding of the voice. This is seen in this musical example in measures three and four. Curtis described this as "A downward slur of the voice."[63]

After a victorious battle, the Algonquins would also celebrate with music. The dances practiced in this situation among the Algonquin family were Scalp or Victory Dances. While very similar, the former title seems to more often reference a dance performed by female dancers. This dance would eventually be practiced among many Native Americans throughout North America, with forms being showcased among the

[62] Curtis, p. 18.

[63] Ibid.

Crow, Blackfoot, Chippewa, Cheyenne, and the Lakota or Teton peoples, which were recorded by Lewis and Clark. However, it had its beginnings among the Algonquins.

The practice of scalping originated in the Northeast and was limited to a small number of tribes. It is believed that the originating group was the Mohicans. A collection of people broke from this tribe, migrated to what is now Connecticut, and settled. This group would eventually be called the Pequot tribe, which would be a major part of the Algonquin family in the northeast. [64]

Samuel de Champlain made one of the earliest references to this type of dance on June 9th, 1615 when he was observing Native Americans on the coast of Maine. A large feast was being prepared in celebration of a great defeat of the Iroquois, in which hundreds of men were reported to have been killed. In attendance were Algonquins, Passamoquoddies, and Montagnais.[65]

The ceremony was taking place in a cabin. Within this cabin were large containers in which various kinds of meat were being boiled. In one location sat the *Sagamore*, a word that means great prince in early American literature. In front of this man were the wives and daughters that were in attendance and two wooden poles. On these poles were the heads of enemies that had been killed.

As the meat cooked, one by one each man would stand, hop around the area with a dog, and then violently throw the dog towards the ground in front of the leader. This action would be met with an audible response from the other men shouting, “Ho, ho, ho.”

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[64] Laubin, Reginald, and Gladys Laubin, p. 152.

[65] Keller, Kate Van Winkle. *Dance and Its Music in America, 1528-1789*. Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2007. (accessed February 2, 2013). http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.07727.0001.001 p. 290.

This practice continued until the food was prepared. After eating, the men stood and danced with the head of the enemies that had been vanquished over their shoulder. Intermittently, they would stop dancing and again exclaim "Ho, ho, ho."

The women did not dance in the ceremony. They were lined up side by side and all engaged in the singing during the ceremony. At certain points these wives and daughters would remove their clothes, except for their jewelry made of beads, braided strings, and porcupine quills. When the dancers made their proclamation of "Ho, ho, ho", the women would quickly redress. The process would then repeat itself.

This dance was accompanied with music. Some of the men would beat their legs with their hands in order to keep time. The men providing the beat would also sing, pausing to join in the exclamation of "Ho, ho, ho." There was no mention of any other specific characteristics of the music. [66]

As there are times of war, there are also times of peace. These times of peace were also commemorated with celebrations involving music and dance. One example of this would be the Calumet ceremony of the Algonquins.

When Nicolas Perrot encountered the Ottawas in 1665, he became one of the first sources to describe the Calumet dance of an Algonquin tribe.[67] This type of dance was used in many ways for a variety of reasons. It seems as if the most prominent ways were

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[66] Champlain, Samuel de. *Voyages of Samuel de Champlain*. Vol. 1. 1603. http://books.google.com/books?id=eGgU51joVQ4C&printsec=frontcover&dq=voyages+of+champlain&hl=en&sa=X&ei=8-gSUdCiJYH88QSns4DoCQ&ved=0CEwQ6AEwBQ#v=onepage&q=dog&f=false p. 172 (accessed January 31, 2013).

[67] Laubin, Reginald, and Gladys Laubin, p. 231-233.

to greet unfamiliar visitors and ambassadors from an enemy tribe,[68] and in the celebration of ceremonial friendships or alliances. However, it was also often used in order to have a successful hunt or battle, to affect the luck of a group, to call for healing, and in peace ceremonies between tribes that had traditionally been adversaries. While this dance was practiced among the Ottawas, it was also practiced among many other tribes, including the southeastern Algonquins. It is generally believed that the ceremony and dance originated among the Pawnee Indians in the early part of the seventeenth century.

A calumet is a ceremonial pipe. The French named the pipe after the Latin term, *calumus,* meaning "reed." These pipes were crafted out of hollow reeds and were popular among Native Americans throughout North America. When handled by Native Americans, the pipes were treated in a sacred manner. The smoking of calumets was often paired with elaborate ceremony with many songs, of which the Calumet dance was a part.

The calumet included a stone bowl. The bowls were ornamented with golden eagle tail feathers made to look like a fan. Incense was burned in the bowl, so that the smell could travel to the spirits. The eagle tail feathers symbolize the power of the eagle, which was revered by most Native Americans. The eagle was considered to be the dominant and most magnificent creature of the air.

The Calumet Dance was only a part of these ceremonies. The celebration would begin with a parade, in which the pipe and other items would be carried. This symbolized those items welcoming and acknowledging everyone involved with the ceremony. After this, the Calumet Dance would occur.

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[68] Keller, p. 53.

The dance is believed to have originated primarily as a solo dance; however, as time went on the dance would add more participants. To prepare, the dancer would be painted white, again in reference to the powerful eagle. The movements of the dancer mimicked the movements of the eagle, whose power and image was closely linked to both the calumet and the ceremony. The dancer would carry the pipe that had been ornamented. The ceremony would evolve with time. Eventually, a rattle would be carried and shaken with the beat of the drummers. Eagle bone whistles would also later be used to mimic the sound of the eagle call.

After the completion of this dance, the Discovery Dance would be performed. This was another important piece of the ceremony. This dance was done in celebration of the acts that a warrior had done while in battle.[69]

The next part of the ceremony focused on striking a post. This, like the Calumet Dance, was performed by a solo dancer, accompanied by drummers. The warrior would stand and the drums would begin to beat. As they did, the dancer would reenact an experience that he had encountered while in war. The drumbeats, which had begun quite slowly, would continue to accelerate rapidly until it was at a very fast tempo. The music would then halt and fall completely silent. The dancer would approach the post and strike it with the weapon that he carried. This strike symbolized a war deed, which he would describe verbally to his audience. Then the song would begin again and the dancer would reenact another deed, which he would describe after striking the post. This would continue until all of the acts of war from the man had been recounted. He would then pass his weapon off to the next man who would go through the process. Presents would often

[69] Laubin, Reginald and Gladys Laubin, pp. 231-33.

be given to the chiefs that were present at the ceremony after a man had finished his dance.[70]

The last sections of the ceremony had much less involvement of music and dance. Honors would be given for performance in war. After this, presents would be exchanged among the attending parties. The actual smoking of the peace pipe would then happen, which symbolized the friendship or treaty that had been made. Finally, a great feast would be held in celebration.

The animistic culture of these Native Americans is again portrayed through this ceremony. While this same type of ceremony was practiced among many tribes, local culture affected the meaning of these peace ceremonies. Tribes in the west ascribed more power and spiritual importance to the calumet ceremonies. These events would seal relationships of peace and would almost never be broken. However, tribes in the east, such as the Northeastern Algonquins, would break the peace contracts agreed upon by these rituals.[71]

The Calumet ceremony could also be used as a healing ceremony. Figure 6 is an example of a song that was used in healing rituals. Due to these songs' involvement in these ceremonies, the Algonquins called the music used in healing medicine songs. Blamswe-Zozep Tene remembered a specific song of the genre from his youth as he heard his grandfather sing it. The lyrics of the song were mostly real words; however, by the time of Curtis' interview the song was antiquated. Tene was only able to remember the refrain of the song which used vocables. It should be noted that some members of the

[70] Ibid., p. 233.

[71] Ibid.

Wabanakis disagreed with Tene and recognized the song simply as a social song, rather than a medicine song.[72]

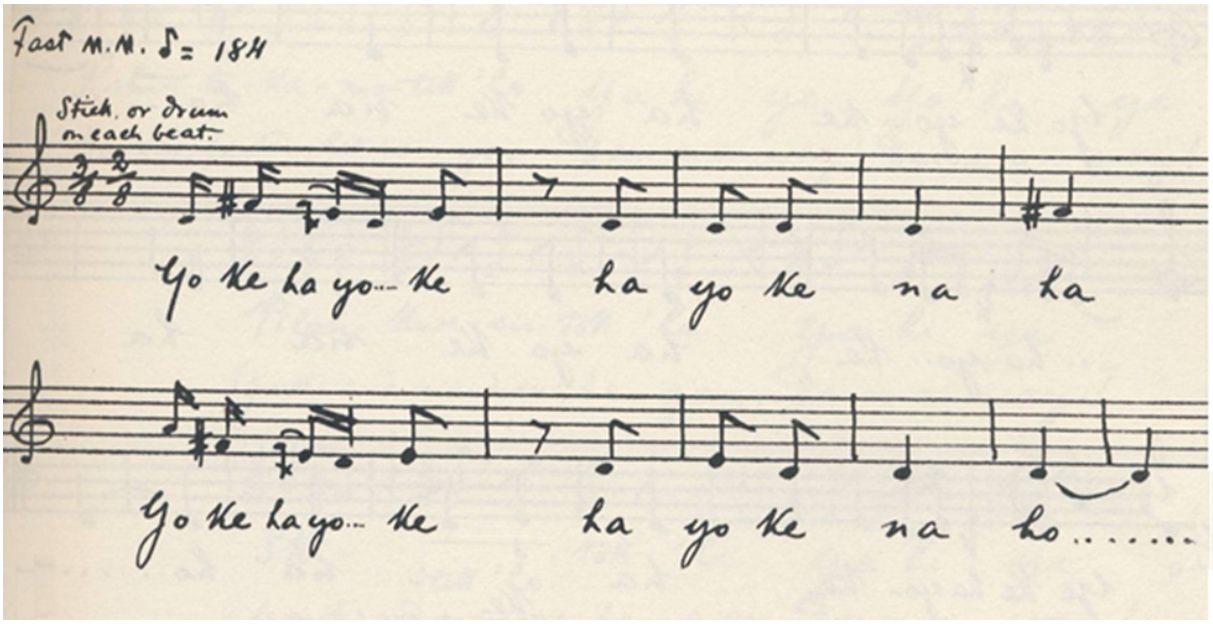

Figure 6. Penobscot medicine song[73]

This melody of each of these lines is similar. Differences include the starting pitch in measures one and the starting pitch of measure six. Additionally, there is a slight difference in the melody of the third measure and melody of the eighth measure. The conclusions of the phrases, measures five and ten and eleven are also different. The same vocable phrase is repeated through each line of music. This entire musical example was repeated one time in order to complete the song.

Music and dance were important in other areas of life as well. Songs of greeting would be performed when two tribes would meet. These songs, referred to N'Skawewintuagunul by some of the Northern Algonquins, were important in

[72] Curtis, p. 9.

[73] Ibid., p. 21.

establishing connections between tribes. In the early 1900s Curtis interviewed two members of the Algonquin family named Blamswe-Zozep Tene and Asawhis from Maine. These Native Americans reflected on the process involved with these greeting songs. The following summary is taken from their joint account, recorded by Curtis.

Other Native Americans would travel to their tribe by canoe. When the people of the tribe saw this, they would all gather on the shore in preparation for meeting the unknown men. As the boat drew towards land, an unfamiliar man would leave the boat and begin to sing his greeting song. The other persons would join in, repeatedly singing the vocable phrases "hega, hega". The leader would then slowly dance towards the tribe's chief while singing. At the end of his song, he would be standing next to the chief with his hand extended. The men recalled that the visitor would say: "I greet you, chief of the Passamaquoddy." In response to this, the visitors would cheer by shouting and shooting guns. The visitor would then greet each of the leaders of the tribe in this manner. In response, the tribe would sing a song of welcome while performing a similar ceremony. Upon completion, they would all gather and feast together.[74]

Figure 7 is a written example, sung by these men, demonstrating the greeting song that they had used. As in many of the Algonquin musical examples that have been provided the melody is tetra-tonal. Repetition is also prominent in this piece. The melodic phrase from the first two bars is repeated in measures six and seven, and again in measures sixteen and seventeen. The lyrical content of the songs is comprised of a series of vocables, "hega, hega, hega, ne he", that are repeated in each five bar phrase.

[74] Curtis, p. 7.

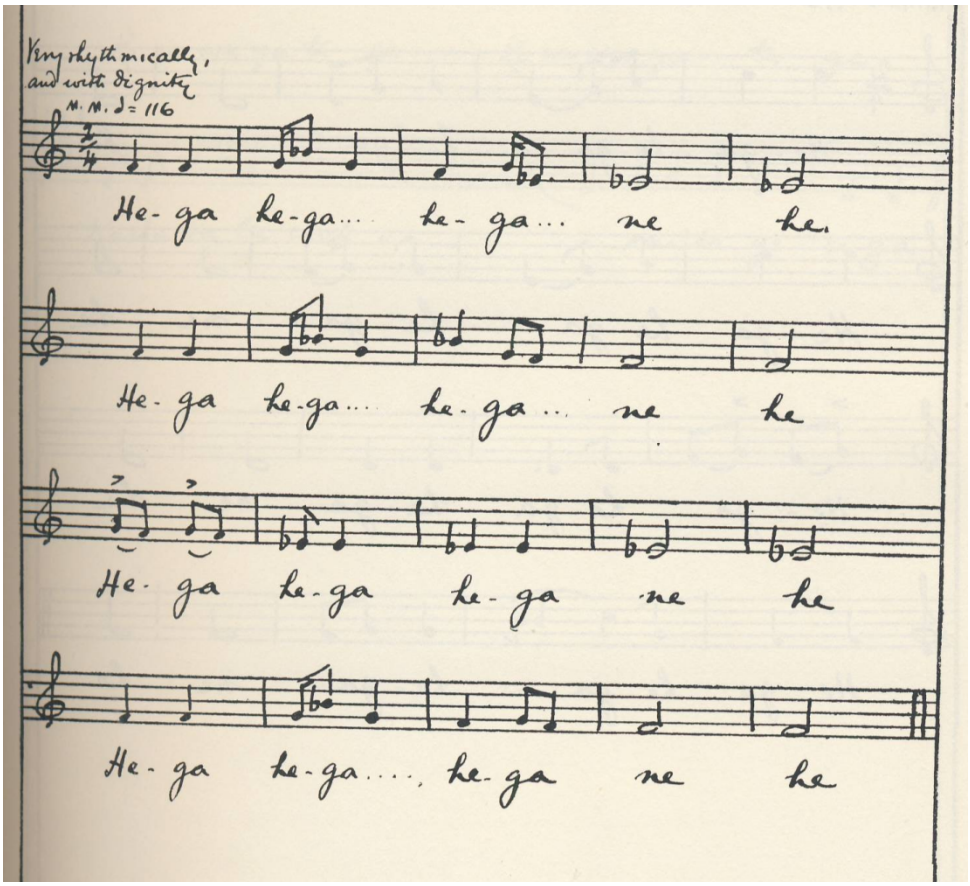

Figure 7. Penobscot song of greeting[75]

Music was also an important factor of the religious ceremonies of the Algonquins. Dances were used in partnership with the music in worship or in celebration of gods, spirits, or deities. The Doll Dance of the Delaware tribe, which is part of the Algonquin family, is a superb example of this type of dance.

Dolls were very important to the Delaware tribesmen. These dolls were believed to possess powers. These powers included preserving one's health and healing the sick. Medicine men would make or have a doll made in order to use the doll in a healing ritual. Additionally, dolls could be associated with black magic and witchcraft. These beliefs in

[75] Curtis, p. 15.

the powers and spirits of these dolls further demonstrate the animistic worldview that was prevalent in the Eastern Algonquin culture.[76]

Legend of the Delaware tribe holds that once a child's doll came to life. The doll commanded the owners to prepare a feast for it, mend new clothes, and have a dance yearly in the spring in its honor. The tribe did this, holding a celebration and dance every spring, known as the Doll Dance. Good luck and blessings would be bestowed upon the participants that took part in the ceremony and whoever owned the doll that was used.

The ceremony involved tying a doll to a pole or stick. The doll was addressed with respect, as "grandmother". The leader of the dance would then take the doll, which was still attached to the pole, and begin to dance in a circle. As he danced, others would join, creating two circles. The women danced on the outside circle and the men danced on the inside circle. After completion, the doll would be passed from the dance leader to another man, whom would dance with it. The process would continue until six men had a chance to join the doll in dance. At this time, the women would be given the doll to dance with. The same process would happen as did with the men until six women had danced with the doll. The reason for this was that the number twelve was believed by the Delaware tribe to be sacred. After the doll had danced with the men and women for six times, it had completed twelve dance sets.[77]

Musicians would sit in the center of these circles from which they would play. The music accompaniment to this dance was slightly peculiar when compared to other

[76] Laubin, Reginald and Gladys Laubin, p. 126.

[77] Ibid., pp. 126-127

traditional dances, specifically in reference to the instruments that were used. Instead of the traditional types of membranophones or idiophones that were discussed, musicians performing the doll dance song would use stuffed percussive instruments. The instrument was prepared using a dried animal hide. The hide would then be sewn so that it could be stuffed, usually with grass. The musicians would utilize sticks to beat these stuffed drums.[78] Since the stuffed drums seem to only be recorded as being used in the doll dance, there could have been a correlation between the nature of the drum and the stuffed doll that was being celebrated.

Doll dances were also practiced in the dances and ceremonies of other tribes not related to the Algonquins of the Northeast. Lewis and Clark reported that they had a major role in the Buffalo Dance of the Mandans. They were also used in the Sun Dances of the Crow and the Kiowa.[79]

Music and dance were incorporated into every aspect of Northeastern Algonquin life. The final stage of a person's life, death, also involved music. In the culture of the Northeastern Native Americans, those who had passed would be slowly and steadily separated from the society in which they lived. When a person was approaching death, they would be painted and dressed with the nicest clothes that the family could offer. The person's weapons, trinkets, and other items would be placed around him as his family and the tribe's witchdoctor or shaman gathered. While he or she was passing, the female relations or relatives present would sing mournful songs. These songs often reference the

[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid.

relationships the singers had with the dying individual. If the person seemed to be regaining awareness, the mourning and singing would stop.

After the passing of the individual, he or she would be made to sit up.[80] The body of the person would be left in the area in which he or she had died. This allowed time for people to visit the body before a burial ceremony. In these meetings people would mourn. Part of this process involved singing. One female would begin to sing doleful music while she cried. Others in the room would then join in singing. However, as soon as the leader stopped, everyone else would stop as well. Then they would offer a present to the grieving family, such as food.[81] Although very little can be found on the musical nature of these songs, it is recorded that they were focused on the one who had died.[82]

There were also dances that were part of ceremonies associated with the death of an individual. These are referred to as mourning dances. One such dance that was practiced among the Algonquins was the Skeleton Dance. The Delawares had been impacted culturally by the Nanticokes' treatment of the dead. These groups would remove the flesh from the bones and the keep the bones while the family grieved.[83] It was believed by some tribes that the soul of a person could not make its final journey into the afterlife until the body had been cleaned of all its flesh. This could happen in different

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[80] Axtell, James. *The Indian Peoples of Eastern America: A Documentary of the Sexes*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981. p. 209.

[81] Ibid., p. 211.

[82] Ibid., p. 91.

[83] Howard, James H. "The Nanticoke-Delaware Skeleton Dance." *American Indian Quarterly* Vol. 2, No. 1 (1975), http://www.jstor.org/stable/1184476 (accessed February 4, 2013). pp. 1-13.

manners depending on the tribes' beliefs. Some chose to allow nature to decay the flesh of the individual, while others believed that it should be removed by scraping the bones.[84]

This specific dance was only practiced by the Wolf Clan of the Delawares, after removing the flesh and drying the bones for twelve days. After this period, the bones would be prepared by being placed in white deerskin.

At the ceremony an elected member would be responsible for holding the skeleton. The singers would begin to sing; again, no specifics are available about the music, while the skeleton would be shaken. The bones would act as an idiophone, providing a rattling noise. The men would dance around the bones. After the ceremony, the bones were buried.[85]

The Wolf Clan believed that the treatment of their dead in this manner had been shown to their past leaders in a dream. By the time of Adams account of the story in 1890, the dance was no longer being practiced. The last dance of the Skeleton dance by this group was believed to have been in the mid-nineteenth century. It had been a long lasting tradition, being practiced for many centuries.[86]

Continuation of the Tradition

Not only is music of a people impacted by other communities, with whom they share geographical borders, it is also impacted by temporal changes. As time has passed, there have been changes to the music and the musical culture of the Algonquins, mainly

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[84] Axtell, p. 199.

[85] Adams, R. C. Volume 10: "Notes on the Delaware Indians." In *Report on Indians Taxed and Indians Not Taxed*, the Eleventh Census, U.S. Census. U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 1890. http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1890.html

[86] Howard, p. 5.

due to the colonization of the Americas by Western nations which overwhelmed the Algonquin culture. However, while the musical heritage of these people had been suppressed, it has not been completely abandoned.

Traditional dances, including spiritual dances, ceremonial dances, and social dances are performed at powwows, dances competitions, and at workshops to educate and train further generations in the subject. Research on the music of this culture and other Native American tribes is being conducted by institutions, such as the Smithsonian. Technology is providing opportunities for members of the same heritages to connect, discuss, and become involved with the continuation of their culture. The Internet allows for the contemporary musical culture to be shared, taught, heard, and seen by a much wider audience than has been possible in the past. While the stylistic characteristics and meanings of this musical culture have changed and will continue to develop and evolve, as long as the Algonquin people choose hold onto their musical heritage, the tradition will not be deserted.

Limitations

There were many outside factors that impacted the research and this paper as a whole. Music is in and of itself an aural medium. Musical performances happen at particular places and times, played by certain musicians on certain instruments. No specific musical performance can ever truly be recreated because of the nature of the art form. Thus, research in this area is necessarily limited due to these qualities.

While music of any kind can be notated, the notation can only offer a blue print that gives instructions about how to produce or recreate the musical experience. Additionally, explorers and those persons that had early contact with the Northeastern

Algonquins rarely notated the melodies that were being performed by these musicians. There are a number of reasons why this was so, such as inability or lack of interest. Further, as western culture has become the dominant in North America, the culture of the Algonquins was suppressed. As this happened, much of the character of the culture in its pure stated went unrecorded.

Advances in technology of the last century have allowed the recording of musical performances which can be audited; such resources can aid preservation of what can still be recorded. However, these are recent innovations. The technology that enabled field recording was did not come into use before 1890, so early audio recordings of the music of these Native Americans are unavailable. This means the ability to recover the music in its pure form, before the extensive influence of outsiders of the culture, is questionable.

Beyond the difficulties of finding musical examples from this people group, these limitations made it difficult to develop a fuller understanding of the music related to the context of the ceremonies. Reaching conclusions on the specific music used with particular ceremonies based on such a limited number of available resources would most likely lead to an overstatement of authentic characteristics. The music of the ceremonies can no longer be experienced firsthand, but rather through the limited number of writings of individuals who had the opportunity to witness the music; the observers are also no longer available for interview. Even if it was possible to interview such persons, they could provide little help in the recreating of Algonquin music because of their limited contact with the genre.

Opportunities for Further Study

There are certainly opportunities for future study. This research is meant as an overview of the music and the musical culture of the Northeastern Algonquins. Additional research could further insight into other aspects to the Algonquin musical culture, such as the practice of face painting and the use of regalia and masks in musical ceremonies.[87] More in-depth focus could be given on the specific ceremonies that were mentioned and the elements of culture involved with those ceremonies, such as religious implications. However, it should be noted that this study would be limited due to the inaccessibility of research materials. Additionally, while this was a study of the original music of the Algonquins, future study could concentrate on the impact of Western music and musical traditions on Native American music and the mechanisms of the suppression involved, both direct and indirect.

[87] Laubin, Reginald and Gladys Laubin, pp. 112-122.

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