

Essay: Native American Gourd Dance

Living in New Mexico has many advantages; wide open spaces, mountains, deserts, and diversity of culture.

A real treat was watching a Native American Gourd Dance. It's a dance performed in honor of a warrior. Late last year, a Pueblo Indian from the Tiwa ethnic group, named Bernard Duran, a U.S Army veteran from the Picuris Pueblo in Taos County, was being honored. The Gourd Dance is thought to have originated with the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes, but many tribes perform it.

There wasn't much in the way of "dancing." First, a group of men gathered in a circle around several large drums and beat them in a simple pounding rhythm. There was no counter-rhythm of any kind, just a fixed pounding of the drums in what I would describe as steady eighth notes. The drums were accompanied by surrounding tribe members with various hand-held percussion instruments following the same rhythm while they sang in a familiar Native American chant style. Ironically, there were very few who were actually using authentic "gourds" to accompany the beating drums (I saw only one). Most of them had some kind of metallic shaker attached to a rod which was decorated with tassels.

At times the volume would diminish, but the steady rhythm would remain constant. The "melody" changed often as well. Sometimes the men would drop out from singing, and the women would take over in a distinctly different melody (to those familiar with western music, I would describe their rise in pitch to about a fifth above the male melody, and the melodies were sung in something resembling a pentatonic scale). There were Pueblo women wrapped in blankets who would "dance" but it was more like a shuffling of the feet rather than an outright dance. At first, the singing sounds random and without structure, but after listening and observing for a time, patterns began to emerge which suggested a "part 1, part 2, part 3" structure.

After the dance, a man prayed. Interestingly enough, he sounded like a Christian, specifically praying to Jesus and invoking the sacrificial atonement of Christ (perhaps because of past missionary work, they've integrated their Native heritage with Christian teachings).

I love New Mexico. I've lived here almost all my life. I've explored virtually every major mountain range in the state. After this semester, I am taking a trip to explore the Magdalena Mountains. I love the skies, the culture, the space, and the freedom!