

# Tradition, Appropriation, and Mimesis: American Indian Style Pow-wow Singing and Dancing in Denmark

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***Abstract:** Beginning in the mid 1990s, a pow-wow circuit developed in Northern Europe that was distinct from the “hobbyist” events of earlier decades. As defined by Renae Watchman (2005), European pow-wow’ers consider themselves to be devotees of a contemporary dance and music practice, while hobbyists are dedicated to “authentic” recreations of an (often imaginary) Native North American past. The existence of these events, so far from their indigenous cultural origins, elicits questions about whether or not Native North American traditions and protocols of performance apply at events so far outside of Indian County, and about the extent of differences in regional pow-wow music and dance styles within Europe. In an attempt to answer these questions, the author has attended and danced at pow-wows in Taucha (Germany), and Aarhus (Denmark), documenting the performances, discussing with European dancers and singers what it means to them to express themselves performatively as American Indians, and examining performance practices through the lens of Northern European regional cultures.*

***Keywords:** Pow-wow—performance practice—Native American—hobbyist—hybridity—imitation—authenticity—music—heritage—gender*

In the last twenty-plus years, a nascent pow-wow circuit has developed in Northern Europe that is distinct from, yet related to, the Indian hobbyist events of earlier decades in the region. As defined by Renae Watchman (2005), European pow-wow participants consider themselves to be devo-

tees of a contemporary dance and music practice, as contrasted with hobbyists, who are dedicated to “authentic” recreations of the (often imaginary) Native North American past. Although the European pow-wow circuit is still small, its very existence provokes questions about whether Native American traditions and protocols of song and dance ownership, creation, and performance apply at events so far from North America, and if Indian practices which in and of themselves are hybrid and intertribal in nature can be considered distinctly Native American intellectual property. This is an ongoing and difficult question in the United States and Canada, where a longstanding practice of appropriating and imitating the cultures of indigenous peoples by the members of the dominant society—characterized by Philip Deloria as “Playing Indian”—has caused Indians to become extremely sensitive to emulation of any kind (Deloria 1998).

In an attempt to confront these questions, I have attended and danced at pow-wows in Taucha (Germany), and Aarhus (Denmark), ethnographically documenting the performances through photographs, video, and recording interviews with participants, with the goal of discussing with European singers how they learn pow-wow songs and why singing Indian style is meaningful to them.<sup>1</sup> Participating as a dancer both wearing traditional regalia (in Taucha) and street clothes (in Aarhus) was also necessary in order to physically feel the music, particularly whether or not it would synchronize with normative Indian dance steps and possess the interpretive nuance that distinguishes both intertribal song genres and tribal-specific styles from one another. Being a participant/observer also allowed an intimacy of experience that observation alone could not provide.

Even though the primary focus of this article is on Danish events, the comparative model I will use triangulates somewhat between North America, Denmark, and to a lesser extent Germany. While “authenticity” is a loaded term in contemporary academic circles, there is no question in this case study that the authentic is located in North America, and the mimetic in Europe. Ethnographers and journalists have documented contemporary pow-wows in Germany on a limited basis, but pow-wows have not been covered nearly as extensively as German Indian hobbyist events, which

1 As an American Indian pow-wow dancer, I have danced in over one hundred pow-wows in North America and Canada, and attended four more European events in addition to those documented in this article. Unfortunately, due to the pre-conditions imposed by the Office for Protection of Human Subjects at my institution, I may only directly discuss those events where I received permission to conduct research.

are to a certain extent different—although the two participant groups seem somewhat interconnected, especially in the former German Democratic Republic. For either group, very little research emphasis has been placed on song learning and performance, and there is really no mention of musical expression in the literature as part of the overall performative nature of contemporary dance events.<sup>2</sup> Danish pow-wows, as compared to those in Germany, have been given essentially no scholarly attention, in part because there are so few of them, but also due to an absence of any grounding in a hobbyist movement or literary origin: There was no Danish Karl May, and Denmark does not have the same system of organized and state recognized “Indian clubs” that can be found in Germany (Culman 2007, 66).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the Danish way of holding a pow-wow is of interest because it reflects a particularly Danish approach to musical performance practices distinctive from the German one. Indeed, how the Danes and Germans approach the entire pow-wow experience, mapping their own layers of cultural metaphor onto their respective presentations, is in effect a display of performing Germanness and Danishness as much as it is an exhibition representing a widespread form of American Indian cultural expression.

## Background

In North America, American Indian intertribal dances, known as “pow-wows,” have been occurring since the late 1870s. Defined succinctly as “[a]n event where American Indians of all nations come to celebrate their culture through the medium of music and dance,” contemporary pow-wows range from small community gatherings to multi-day extravaganzas complete with rodeos and beauty contests, and have their roots in song and dance traditions from the Great Plains and Great Lakes regions of the Unit-

2 German “Indian” hobbyists are an exceptionally well-documented sub-culture, who specialize in recreations of North American Indian cultures from what is usually an imaginary past. See Christian Feest (1990), and Birgit Turski (1994), for more detailed accounts. Turski’s study was based on her thesis at the University of Leipzig, which was in turn based upon her status as a founding member of the Jugendclub für Indianistik in Cottbus.

3 While German pow-wow groups claim to operate separately from Indian hobbyist organizations, this is not entirely truthful, as was seen at the Taucha Winter Pow-wow, that, while functioning as a contemporary style pow-wow event (“modernes indianisches Tanzfest”) modeled on dances in the United States and Canada, was sponsored by the Taucha-Leipzig Mandanindianer Interessengemeinschaft, and had a large coterie of Plains Indian hobbyists in full regalia present.

ed States and Canada (Browner 2002, 1-2). Currently, there are approximately three-hundred pow-wows a year happening in the United States and Canada in settings from university campuses to casinos, although the recent economic downturn has caused the cancellation of some major events that were popular with Europeans trying to learn pow-wow songs and dances in intertribal settings.

In contrast, currently there are three pow-wows held every year in Denmark: a summer event which includes a “tipi camp” every August in Aarhus, and a winter (January) pow-wow in Copenhagen, usually followed by a second pow-wow and workshop in May. 2010 marked the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Copenhagen pow-wow, giving the date of the first large-scale organized event in Denmark as 1990. This correlates with the sketchy account of the introduction of pow-wow dancing into Denmark given on the European powwow website, which was corroborated during conversation by one of the core organizers of the 2008 Aarhus event:

Powwows were first introduced in Danemark [*sic*] in the mid 80s, by Lakota people from the Sinte Gleska University and some English Dancers and Singers. Nowadays, a group of approximately 50 dancers carry on organising powwows hosted by one to two drum groups each year. However, Exhibition Dancing is preferred to Contest Dancing... (European Powwows)

Although vague, this story suggests that pow-wows did not migrate to Denmark from Germany, but instead started on their own more or less from scratch. A recent count of other pow-wows in Northern Europe has the numbers at about twelve to fourteen in Germany, three in Great Britain, two in the Czech Republic, one to two in Poland, one to two in Switzerland, and one in Sweden. These figures can vary because the groups sponsoring the events seem to come and go, although Denmark, Germany, and Great Britain are relatively stable in terms of numbers. Without a doubt, Germany is the heartland of the European pow-wow community, and the vast majority of pow-wow singing groups—known as Drums, or Drum groups—make their homes there. Great Britain has only a single working Drum, the Centreland Singers, but the group is quite active, sponsoring its own gatherings several times a year.

Denmark has three active Drums: The Red Calf Singers of Copenhagen, Four Winds Above from Aarhus, and a Drum known as Heartbeat Special, comprised of a number of women who sing in the other two groups, and merge to create a third group using their own instrument to play (an ex-

tremely large drum with a low tone) when the other two Drums are not performing. Both the Red Calf singers and Four Winds Above are associated with specific pow-wows in their home towns, and serve as “host Drums” at these events. Group members in all three Drums are Scandinavian and primarily Danish in ethnicity, and all three groups specialize in Northern Plains singing, with a definite preference for a Lakota singing style, although song origins were varied.<sup>4</sup>

### **The 2009 Sølyst Powwow and Tipi Camp (Powwow og tipidage i Aarhus)**

My choice to attend a small outdoor pow-wow in Aarhus was in large part predicated upon it offering a clear contrast with the Taucha event I had attended in Germany the previous February, which was indoors in a school gymnasium. American Indians differentiate between summer and winter pow-wow circuits, as well as indoor and outdoor events, with outdoor settings considered more in adherence with older dance traditions. Aarhus is a summer pow-wow, held outdoors at a nature center next to the Braband Sø, and with some participants camping on pow-wow grounds for several days in advance—on the surface very much like small traditional pow-wows held in the American Upper Midwest, except that Indians rarely camp in tipis, but instead favor tents and campers (see figure 1). I was able to make contact with the organizers via the Internet before traveling to Denmark, so I was not only expected on the day before the actual pow-wow, but was greeted warmly by the group upon my arrival at the grounds.<sup>5</sup> This included introductions to many of the participants, and being offered both lunch and dinner. The pow-wow grounds themselves were being prepared that day, and were encircled on one side (the west)

4 There are a number of tribal-specific singing styles within the Northern Plains region of the United States, with the distinctive Lakota Sioux style of vocal production being the most prominent and influential. The Four Winds Above group sang a Crow-Hop song of Blackfoot tribal origin at one point in a Lakota vocal style, and the drum leader tried to cover this by claiming the song was a Stomp Dance, which is a Southern (Oklahoma) type of song. See Tara Browner (2008) for further discussion of regional and tribal-specific pow-wow singing.

5 Because of my academic affiliation and funding by my university for this research trip, I was required by my institution to submit research plans to an institutional review board (IRB) that approves all work with human subjects. As part of the approval, I am not allowed to refer to any person I spoke with at the Sølyst Powwow by their given names, and instead must either generalize or use pseudonyms.

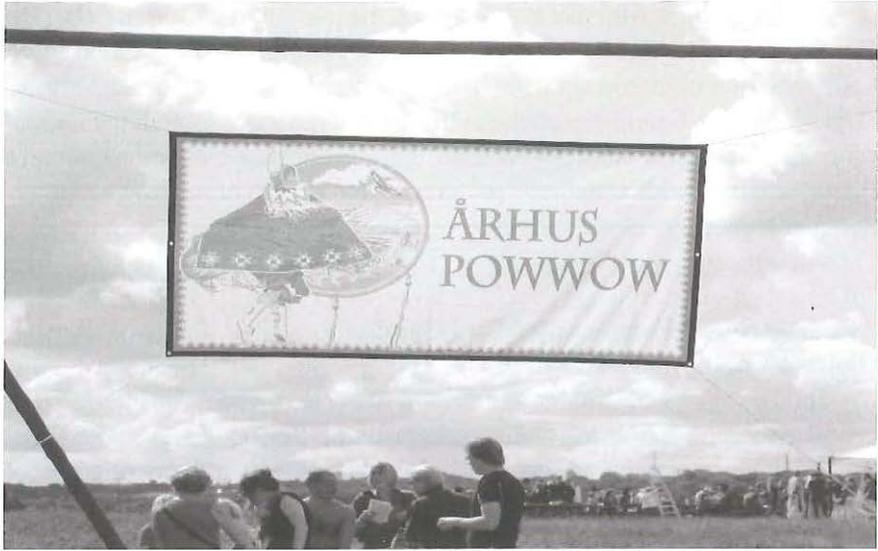


Figure 1. Pow-wow Banner

by carefully made tipis, and a ring of what could best be described as “ground-chairs.” The eastern edge of the pow-wow grounds were the site of a large circular canopy that covered both the singers and traders, who sold a variety of craft objects and Danish snacks. Locating the singing groups on the outside of the dance circle is a specifically Northern Plains tradition (the “Sacred Hoop”).

As in the Great Lakes and Southern Plains the Drums are located under a canopy or arbor in the center of the dance arena (The “Sacred Fire”).

After spending most of Friday afternoon meeting the hosts and observing the pow-wow preparations, I returned Saturday for the event, to see a table set up and a small fee being charged for entrance and a program. Unlike typical American Indian events, this pow-wow started relatively on time, at a few minutes after the appointed hour (1 p.m.). Interestingly enough, the Taucha pow-wow, which was also scheduled to start at 1 p.m., began at exactly 1:15 p.m., in a kind of imposition of *das akademische Viertel* upon what is commonly known among Native North Americans as “Indian time.” As is customary, the first dance at Aarhus, known as the “Grand Entry,” featured all of the dancers in Native regalia dancing into the pow-wow grounds in a specific order of Traditional—Jingle—Fancy styles, followed

by an invocation, posting of colors (various Flags), and a Veteran's Dance.<sup>6</sup> The Veteran's Dance is by tradition open to all armed services veterans of any nationality and gender, and this dance included some Native veterans in attendance as well as a number of Danes. There were in fact a number of American Indians and Inuit participants and audience members, including the announcer (MC), who was a local Ojibwe man married to a Danish woman. All dancers—numbering about twenty-five—were European, as were all but one singer, the exception being a woman of mixed Lakota/Danish heritage.

The arena director, a local Dane who works at the nature center, had prepared a list of dances in exact sequence, as well as scheduled breaks and story-telling sessions. This kind of strict organization would be anathema at a North American pow-wow, where participants have a general sense of the proceedings mentally mapped out ahead of time, and songs/dances, giveaways, prayers, announcements, etc., go on as is necessary. Rather than events occurring according to a timetable, they simply happen in order, with some occasional spontaneous "surprises" thrown into the mix. There were only two of these "surprises" at Aarhus: first, when a short break was taken so that audience members could interact with some horses and riders who had entered the western side of the meadow near the dance arena, and second, for Tuema, a "Native Shaman from Brazil," in order to conduct a ritual that seemed to be a blessing of the pow-wow grounds and participants. The latter often occurs at North American pow-wows, but is typically before the Grand Entry (usually the day before the pow-wow takes place), always conducted by a member of a local tribe in that tribe's Native language. This practice ensures that the spirits of that locale are placated with offerings of Tobacco, and that local tribes are formally recognized as hosts, even if pow-wows are not part of their cultural traditions.

In general, the skill level of the Aarhus dancers was not as high as that of those whom I saw in Germany. However, a female Jingle Dress dancer of some repute had traveled to Aarhus from the Czech Republic, and in my opinion (as a former Jingle Dress dancer myself), she would be competitive at a North American pow-wow. A female friend who had traveled north with

6 In Germany there was no Veterans Dance, something I had never experienced at a pow-wow in over twenty years of attendance. Instead they substituted an Honor Dance for local university faculty who specialized in the study of American Indian cultures. This included two middle-aged professors and the elderly retired archivist, who later admitted to me that he was a World War II veteran.



*Figure 2. Red Calf Singers*

her had a relatively decent skill level, but overall the Scandinavian dancers, who were primarily clothed in Northern Plains “Traditional” regalia, did not seem to have that much of a physical connection with how American Indian dancers move. And while some dancers had nicely crafted outfits with high quality beadwork, many had hybrid designs with what seemed to be Scandinavian motifs. One Swedish dancer explained to me that her inspiration had been a combination of American Indian design combined with “Viking” elements of her own heritage, and several participants told me, with pride, that while the Vikings had “visited” North America, they had not stayed and colonized. This mythic tale of a Viking-Indian connection and friendship has also been mentioned to me by several Lakota Indians in the United States, who say that when the Vikings came to North America they did not conquer and colonize, and because of this some (Plains) Indians tend to hold Scandinavians in higher regard than they do other Europeans.

The pow-wow itself—from Grand Entry through Retreat, when the dancers leave the arena—lasted from 1 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., although by 3:30 p.m. most of the general audience, consisting primarily of families with children in tow, had departed, and by late afternoon the pow-wow grounds started to feel deserted except for the dancers and singers. While the announcer had done an excellent job of keeping up “pow-wow” patter throughout the

day, even he started to wear out by 5 p.m., and his commentary thinned out. Also, the singers clearly were tiring, as having only two Drums to share the singing duties, plus the occasional interspersed numbers by Heartbeat Special, would cause any singer to experience vocal fatigue. About two thirds of the songs were sung by the Red Calf singers for the purely practical reason that the Head Singer of Four Winds Above was also the Head Male dancer at the pow-wow, and Four Winds Above clearly looked to him for song leadership and repertory choices (see Figure 2). My overall assessment of the Red Calf Drum was that their singing was of a caliber competitive with that of reputable American Indian Drums in the United States, and the highest in terms of authentic sound quality out of the ten European Drums I had encountered during research.

### **Musical Contrasts**

The single largest difference between how the representative German and Danish Drum groups sounded and functioned, respectively, was related to gender roles in singing. In North America, it is common to think of the singing parts as being separated up into the "Men's part," and the "Women's part," with women standing in a circle around the men and singing, but not holding a drum stick and "sitting at the drum" with the men. The different parts are not strictly divided up by gender; they have contrasting vocal ranges and roles in the overall musical sound. In certain circumstances, and specifically in the "Northern" singing tradition where by and large the vocal parts are sung in a much higher range, Indian women can be seen sitting at the drum and singing the men's part, and, rarely, all-female groups form, but in those cases the members who sit at the drum sing the men's vocal part. In Denmark, this pattern seems to be the rule, with the women who sat at the drum with the men singing the men's part, and those standing around the drum singing the women's part. In Germany, however, almost all singers sat at the drum and played regardless of which part they sang, and sonically, the difference was crucial: Because the men's part fits in rhythmically with the actual drum beats, and the women's "floats" over the men's vocal line, having the women sitting at the drum, both playing and singing that part, caused the female singers to line up their voices rhythmically with the men's, imbuing a stiffness to the sound that enthusiasm and high volume could not cover. When I inquired as to why the female musicians were singing the women's part while sitting at the drum, the replies (mul-

tuple) were that in Germany, unlike in North American Indian communities, gender equality was more valued than “tradition,” and that while Germans respected Indian norms, they felt it imperative that they applied their own ideals to performance practices. This is a significant difference between German pow-wow goers and German Indian hobbyists, as the latter have used the German “Indian” (Karl May) mythology as their cultural guide, which paints Native women as essentially tipi drudges, and has resulted in women assuming secondary roles at hobbyist gatherings.<sup>7</sup>

The other major divergence in musical expression was that the Danes seemed to have a clear concept of how song tempos mesh with dance type, while the German and Czech Republic singers at Taucha did not. There is a certain interchangeability between melodies in pow-wow songs, and a song can be recontextualized to fit multiple dance types provided that the text is either generic or adapted to the new performance circumstances, and that the song does not have very specific historical connotations. But the Germans seemed almost oblivious to the relationship between specific dances and appropriate tempos for those dances, and at Taucha, for example, performed a song for Grand Entry at a tempo approximately ten beats per minute faster than is customary.<sup>8</sup> When I pointed this out to the other dancers they just shrugged, and in a later discussion with a bystander who often sings with one of the Drum groups, I was told that Drums play a tempo that is comfortable *for them* when singing any particular song, because the skill level of the dancers was so low that essentially it did not matter what the singers did. If singers anywhere in North America exhibited this attitude, the dancers present would simply refuse to get up and dance when that Drum performed.

### Experiences and Interpretations

As an American Indian looking at European pow-wow performance practices from the outside, the differences between Danish and German aesthetics and sound production models when singing pow-wow songs were for me striking, especially given that both ethnic groups overlap in singing at Northern European pow-wows. Christian Feest suggests that European

7 See Sieg (2008), 141-142.

8 The standard tempo for a Grand Entry song in the Northern style is about 74 beats per minute, while the tempo for the Taucha Grand Entry song clocked at about 84 beats per minute, or a bit over 13% faster.

ways of playing Indian stem from old colonial ties, stating: "The question of the infusion of national characteristics into the Indian stereotypes of various European countries is related to another perennial issue in the study of Indian-European relations: whether or not there were any differences in the attitudes of the various colonial powers towards the native populations of North America" (Feest 1990, 316). This is undoubtedly the case with hobbyists, but more questionable with pow-wow participants, who construct their practices as truly post-colonial. Further travel and study in both Germany and Denmark have given me better insight, I think, into how each nationality maps its own culture onto Native American performative practices, and how the underlying framework of these "indigenous" (to Europe) concepts might affect the way Native American music sounds in European contexts.

While traveling through Denmark on my way to Germany after the Aarhus pow-wow, I took the time to stop at two different theme parks that double as research facilities—The Medieval Center (Middelaldercentret) on Lolland, and the "Land of Legends" (Sagnlandet) at Lejre—in part because I wanted to see how Danes perform their own indigenous heritage.<sup>9</sup> These Centers are part of a larger network of "Heritage Tourism" sites that have developed in Scandinavia since the 1970s, and can be viewed within the taxonomy of heritage tourism created by Halewood and Hannam as being of the "fourth type," that is, village reconstructions (2001, 572).<sup>10</sup> During my visit to the Medieval Center (which promotes itself as an experimental archaeological facility), I noticed that the chickens running loose around the grounds were of an American variety known as "Rhode Island Reds," which I knew had not existed as a breed during the late Middle Ages, the time period so carefully represented at the Center. Approaching the shoemaker's hut with this knowledge, I imparted it using my limited Danish language skills to the inhabitants, who instead of thanking me for my insight started waving their hands and yelling (in English) that the previous chickens had disappeared, and that these new ones had shown up out of nowhere to take their place and were a "Gift from God." At that moment, two Swedish women in period dress working and living at the Center pulled me into their hut, bolted the door, and proceeded to tell me that the Danes

9 When I visited Sagnlandet at Lejre for the first time in 2005, it was known as the Lejre Forsøgscenter, and advertised itself more as a center for experimental archaeology.

10 The facility at Lejre is specifically named as being in this classification.

living there were practicing (obsessively) *urkundskab*, in that they felt that if they lived completely within period “type,” they could somehow gain an “original knowledge” and understanding of how Medieval people lived on Lolland. This was in contrast to the women’s own practical “Swedish” perception of the facility, which centered on performing in roles as actresses (with poor living conditions) because they both needed the work. It was also my first encounter with the idea of *urkundskab*, and the possibility that the Danish pow-wow singers and dancers might think they were doing something other than a recreational activity.

In Germany too, some scientific research is done through experimental archaeology, although many Germans who practice it seem philosophically closer to American “reenactors,” hobbyists who are most often organized into military units from the Civil War era (some groups also dress as Mountain men from the 1820s-30s, and for them participation in organized “rendezvous” events is a popular pastime). Americans who take part in time period reenactments from before the European colonization of North America are members of overlapping groups who sponsor “Renaissance Fairs,” and/or hold events promoted by an organization known as “The Society for Creative Anachronism,” which operates under a Medieval fantasy theme. The closest German counterparts in spirit to the latter group are Indian hobbyists’ (as opposed to German pow-wow participants), and German hobbyists’—much like Danes who practice *urkundskab*—attempt to literally inhabit the bodies of those they imitate.

Germans who sing in pow-wow Drum groups are not, however, hobbyists, and define themselves as performers in a contemporary music and dance practice, which by the very nature of its contemporariness is a candidate for *deutsche Gründlichkeit*, and the “improvement” that can only be had through changing and updating the archaic elements of Indian traditional practices, such as the separation of genders during song performance. German singers also feel that they contemporize Native practices by flexibility in song tempos (some songs sound better if the tempo is quicker), and recontextualization of certain songs with more pleasing melodies. For example, at Taucha, a song known for its political references antagonistic to the United States Government (the “American Indian Movement song”) transposed nicely as a song to accompany a Women’s Eastern Blanket Dance when the tempo was slowed just a bit from that of the popular recording made by the Oglala Lakota Porcupine Singers. Whether or not American Indians might find this offensive is not of concern within the Ger-

man frame of reference, because while they seem to honor Indians as the creators of songs, they do not acknowledge Native American intellectual property rights.

### Conclusions

In Denmark, which has no homegrown Indian hobbyist movement, pow-wow participants seem to perceive the performances within the Danish paradigm of historical reenactment, even though North American pow-wows are contemporary events. Both Danish singers and dancers take special pride in their adherence to Native American cultural norms. While there does exist a sense of Indians as contemporary people, at the same time, the tale of Viking-Indian relationships has transported the interaction into a shared mythic past, and understanding this past requires the application of *urkundskab* in order to truly embody it. The quote below typifies this belief:

By what right do we practice Native American culture? We often ask ourselves that question and there is no easy answer. Maybe the Native American culture offers some of the values that we have lost or forgotten? We are not trying to become Native Americans, but we all share a deep admiration, sympathy and respect for the Native American culture—past and present. (Powwows i Danmark)

Danes, who have no real national history of colonization in North America, and whose large-scale immigration as an ethnic group began after 1880 into the Upper Midwest, can position themselves as a neutral entity in the larger history of Indian-white relations. And holding their event at a site of “Danish Nature” (a concept that came up frequently at Aarhus, which was held at a “nature center” full of farm animals), allowed this group to create a kind of temporary *urkundskab* space, where they could both embody and perform their mythic relationship with Native Americans while inhabiting this specific locale. In accordance with these ideals, an “authentic” sonic environment is an essential part of the recreation of the *imaginary* past, because pow-wows did not exist during the Viking era—they first came about in the 1870s.

German pow-wow participants, in contrast, while conceptualizing Indians as a fellow “nature” people, have no *shared* mythic past to inhabit with them. Although Germans as an ethnic group had large-scale contact with North American indigenous peoples, none of the German nation states engaged in colonization in North America. Moreover, German pow-wow

singers, as opposed to hobbyists, do not consider their musical performances part of any kind of past at all, even though the historic roots of the music they imitate can be traced back to at least the 1820s. The German singers, therefore, feel no obligation to recreate any particular sonic landscape, and instead perceive themselves as contemporary practitioners of a living and changing performance practice, which they have every right to adjust to their needs and desires. The result of these two fundamentally different approaches to performance practice—based upon frames of reference unique to each indigenous European culture—are that internal European cultural concepts are the primary cause of both the Danish stylistic authenticity of sound (by Native American standards), and the German deviation from it.

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