
Dancing Identity

The Annual Smoki “Ceremonial Dances” of Prescott, Arizona

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Tourist materials describe Prescott, Arizona, as “everyone’s hometown.”¹ It has a small, historic-frontier town feel, a quaint town square, and an infamous street of saloons known as Whiskey Row. Described as a popular place to retire because of the relatively mild climate and reasonable housing prices, Prescott boasts plenty of civic pride.² Local museums, theatrical performances, and a wide variety of other cultural events celebrate both the town’s past and, more generally, the history of the American Southwest. Although Prescott was built on the traditional lands of the Yavapai Indians, the overwhelming majority of the city’s nearly forty thousand people are white.³ Native Americans constitute less than 1 percent of the population despite the close proximity of Yavapai, Hopi, and Navajo communities. Historically, there was little commixing of the settlers and the Native groups, with the exception of white government officials, known as Indian agents, who were responsible for administering and governing the reservations. Since the 1930s, the Yavapai have lived mainly on the Yavapai-Prescott reservation. Despite this, Native American material culture is a very common feature of Prescott. The streets are decorated with large cut-out figures of Hopi Kachinas and numerous shops specialize in the ubiquitous turquoise jewelry of the Southwest, with which tourists and locals alike bedeck themselves. Ogg’s Hogan, a large store that specializes in Native American rugs, pottery, baskets, and other handcrafts, displays a huge collection of pawned jewelry for sale. Like many places in Arizona, the locals have adopted Native American accoutrements as part of their collective and individual identities.

Since 1888, the Prescott Chamber of Commerce has hosted an annual rodeo, originally known as the Way Out West Rodeo and later as the Prescott Frontier Days. Today, the rodeo is described in local tourist literature and marketing as the world's oldest. The post-World War I economic downturn, which dominated the 1920s and culminated in the stock market crash of 1929, affected the rodeo, resulting in a loss of audience and revenue. In an attempt to increase profits and reenergize its popularity, the rodeo began to include "native dances" in 1921. The impetus for this came from a group of white businessmen and entrepreneurs, who decided to perform a burlesque version of the sacred Hopi Snake Dance.⁴ The dances were popular with audiences and the group was inspired to create its own annual spectacle, which became known as the Smoki Ceremonials. These ceremonials were held every August, from that first performance to the final seventieth show held in 1990; there is little doubt that the group intended to appropriate and parody Hopi culture.

Originally, Smoki was pronounced "Smokey," intended as a reference to the Spanish name for the Hopi, "Moqui." However, the Prescott club members decided to differentiate themselves from "real" Native Americans by changing pronunciation. The emphasis of the Smoki ceremonial dances shifted over time. In the first two years, these were simple burlesque shows with an emphasis on exaggeration and comedic caricatures. But by 1923, the Smoki began to invest significant amounts of energy, time, and money into the production of the annual dances and began to present shows that emphasized a degree of authenticity.

The Smoki museum commemorates the Smoki, and along the streets of downtown Prescott artwork depicting Smoki dancers appears on telegraph poles. Contemporary views of the Smoki vary, and there are many Prescottonians who find them an embarrassing reminder of an earlier time, when dressing up and playing Indian was considered, at least by whites, as more acceptable. Some Prescott locals described the Smoki as merely part of the Southwest frontier town's colorful history. Native Americans also differ in their opinions: some (possibly most) are hostile to the Smoki and their history while others view the Smoki as, in the words of one Hopi man I met, "naïve and misguided, but [ultimately] honoring" native culture.⁵

The 1990 final performance of the Smoki ceremony was deeply emotional and profoundly meaningful for the dancers and other members of the group. Though many acknowledged that it was the right time to stop "borrowing" the Hopi dances, they regretted that their decades-long community was to be

fundamentally changed. In my discussions with many of the old Smoki, they fondly recalled their society and celebrated their generations of involvement. As one previous chief observed: “I grew up Smoki. It was my family” while another reflected, “When it [the dances] ended a part of me felt like it had died.”

The Smoki regret deeply the end of their ceremonials. At a recent reunion several members expressed to me their profound disappointment that the Smoki no longer danced, and several offered to show me their dance steps and movements. As one “old” Smoki emotively described, “I was a *dancer*—and that was everything.” The reasons given for the abandonment of the Smoki dances vary. Some members suggest the end was an inevitable outcome of a shift in social values. Over time, families preferred to stay at home and watch television and the time commitment required to produce the annual dances became onerous. However, the closing of the dances was also the result of decades of Native American protest. Almost from the beginning, there had been Native Americans who objected to the Smoki’s activities. Protest increased, particularly throughout the 1980s, and Hopi people mounted a concerted effort to close the Smoki performances. The Hopi waged a vociferous public campaign in which they clearly and repeatedly asserted that the Smoki were infringing on their cultural rights and insulting their religion by continuing to conduct the dances supposedly based on sacred Hopi ceremonies. The Rodeo, however, continues to this day.

It is worthwhile considering the evolution of the Smoki and the manner in which dance and choreography figured in their group. Over time, the Smoki became a large well-connected organization of up to five hundred people, who described themselves as a “tribe.” Many of the early Smoki were familiar with local Native Americans through their work; a number of the group were employed as Indian agents and regularly visited the reservations. It is this sincerity that leads me to consider that the evolution of the Smoki should not be simply disregarded, but rather, it is worthy of serious study.

Beginning in the mid-1920s, the Smoki began to rehearse, research, and study native dances in an increasing effort to present an “authentic” native experience. The group created leadership roles for men (Chiefs) and women (Squaws or Chieftesses), which they denoted by various regalia and insignias; they also held initiation rites. Full membership was by invitation only and often took many years to achieve. Secret initiation ceremonies, based extensively on anthropological descriptions of sacred and secret Hopi rituals, marked admission. They tattooed their hands with two “snake bite” dots. New dots were

tattooed as the men became council members, and again if they became chiefs. Although the Smoki crossed social boundaries, they never crossed the racial divide. The group admitted all classes of society, including the Prescott mayor; there were doctors, lawyers, council workers, and later, laborers and tradesmen. The Smoki, however, always remained white; membership was initially limited to “white men 21 years or older,”⁶ though within two decades they had begun to include women, several of whom had lived with Indian groups as children with their families. These women—some of whom were the daughters of Indian agents who spent at least part of their earlier lives on reservations—played a key role in developing the Smoki ceremonials even though they never danced themselves.

The Smoki women formed an auxiliary association, whose “by-laws and members had to be approved by the men.”⁷ After two years as a Smoki maiden, a woman could become a squaw. They called the elected head of the women’s auxiliary the Head Squaw, while some of the female leaders preferred to be called Chieftess. On some occasions, such as the “Maiden dances,” the women danced their own dances, such as the Smoki maiden dance or the maiden corn dance. Importantly, a number of women played key roles in the Smoki’s early days. The first of these was artist Kate T. Cory, who in the early twentieth century moved to the pueblo Old Oraibi on the Hopi reservation. Here she witnessed firsthand Hopi ceremonials and dances. For the seven years she resided with the Hopi, she dedicated her artistic practice to painting and photographing images of Hopi culture and their way of life. Another of the women, Marie Tumber, who played a crucial role as choreographer with the early Smoki, had lived on the Hopi reservation for many years and used her familiarity with Hopi culture to initially direct the men in their dances, chants, and drumbeats. She also designed their costumes.⁸ From the very beginning, the Smoki dances were an interpretation of Hopi dances as remembered by these women.

Being a Smoki—and in particular a dancer, rather than support member—was central to the identity of these men and their families. About a quarter of Smoki members were dancers. Their large annual reunions (still held every August) mark the anniversary of the ceremonials and many of the now-elderly Smoki travel significant distances to attend. As Victor Turner suggested in his influential work *The Anthropology of Performance*, “man” (in this case the Smoki) is “*homo performans* . . . in the sense that a man is a self-performing animal—his performances are, in a way, *reflexive*, in performing he reveals himself to himself. This can be in two ways: the actor may come to know himself better



Figure 1.1. Hand tattoo on one of the last Smoki chiefs. This photo was taken at a Smoki reunion in Prescott, Arizona, 2011. Photo by Myles Russell-Cook. By permission of the photographer.

through acting or enactment; or one set of human beings may come to know themselves better through observing and/or participating in performances generated and presented by another set of human beings.”⁹ *Homo performans* and the lens of reenactment theory provide an analytical framework for understanding the historical and social conditions that inspired the Smoki to appropriate, borrow, or even “reinvent” native dances and what their dancing meant to their collective identity.

Appropriation, hobbyism, and reenactments have a lengthy history. Napoleonic, American Civil War, and World War II reenactments continue to be popular, and Medieval and Renaissance fairs feature curated dances, costumes, language, and even food—all carefully chosen for their capacity to evoke the era and place they are called on to represent. In Europe, particularly Germany, there is a popular contemporary phenomenon of Indianism, and its practitioners are known as Indianists, or Indian-hobbyists. On weekends and holidays an estimated sixty thousand Germans become their collective version of nineteenth-century Native Americans.¹⁰ These highly organized groups undertake large-scale and extensive performances of “playing Indian.” Performances