

DOCUMENT NAME/INFORMANT: POWWOW (CREE) WORKSHOP 3  
ELI BEAR

INFORMANT'S ADDRESS:

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- The custom of gift-giving at traditional ceremonies.
- How some ceremonies have been changed and abused.

POWWOW WORKSHOP 3

ELI BEAR:

We will now talk about one thing and that is the give-aways we perform at powwows by highly respected people. For you are all aware that it is like an offering. I have heard one old man say, if a person is given just a small thing, he should not resent it. You see when one old man gets up and says a prayer, he is blessing the stuff the persons are giving away. Therefore, when a person receives a small item and takes it home, it is just like taking home long life and good health, for the one man that prays asks for this in conjunction with the give-aways. This is why give-aways were highly respected. And long ago there was no money involved, just very little was used, just enough to cover his expenses. Today lots of money is used; it amounts to quite a bit when one is told to get up and talk two or three times at once.

There was one time I witnessed a give away at Thunderchild reserve at a Sundance. There were eight horses being given, and when they were performing this the horses had ribbons on them, also blankets. These people that perform that were singing ahead of the horses and one was carrying a picture. When they came in the Sundance tent, one old man was chosen to

speak and after he spoke he took one set of the ribbons off one horse and one set still on the horse which was given to him. And as for the blankets they were taken off and given to different people. After this old man spoke he led the horse around inside the Sundance tent and when he got to the entrance he sang a song and started his horse around with him until he came around towards the south and led his horse out that way to where his camp was. The rest of them did the same thing. This is what I seen done at that time. And there was another give-away I seen, this one was performed differently. I have seen this happen too. The leader of the powwow picks a garment and gives it to the announcer, the announcer gives it to the "okichetaw," a man of importance, and he is the one who gives out the give-aways.

Today when they do this, any one of the servants which he never worked for the position gives them away. He gives them to his relations or he does not know which way to give them out. I have seen this. There is times that people who give away get things back and they cannot return them for there are too many people there. I have seen this happen in Poundmaker's reserve. This person gave a gun and the servant gave it back to him but later this man gave it to an elder person from Alberta and told him what happened; also told the old person to pray for him. And I have seen this happen. And here not very long ago at Sweet Grass, the veterans put up a dance and there was an old lady there that her boy was killed in action overseas. And

they were having a dance in conjunction with it and also the dance hall was named after him too. And there are still four of her boys alive. So the family went ahead amongst themselves to gather money for give-away so the old lady and her husband put in money too. It came up to about a thousand dollars. And this is one thing that I was against for I was running the dance, also emcee, but later I went and talked to the old people about it. So there was a lot of stuff for give-away. Also this old lady had two hundred dollars separate. And the real leader of the dance was under the influence of alcohol so he started to call anybody for servants, and me I was emceeing. I did not like it but I had to do what I was told. So the servants started giving stuff out and the person that brought these gifts was sitting out. So I called him over and set a chair for him to sit down. And there I did not like what I seen. They called a person from Hobbema, Alberta. In turn this person gave out the gifts to what people came from there.

So this old lady that had the two hundred dollars kept it for she seen things did not turn out the way they should have. For everything was planned for an all around, the Indian way of powwow, also the give away. It was planned at first to have a feast like old times but it never happened that way. There were lots of drunks with plates, helping themselves. Also the cooks were drunk. There was lots of stuff not cooked so we had to give this stuff out. From there you can see what caused that; it was liquor. Later on I heard that the old lady was very upset about the whole thing so I figured it was up to me

to go and see her for I always think I work for old people in the position I am in. So I went in her home and I asked her what was bothering her. This is what she told me, just what I finished telling you about. She had tears in her eyes. She said, "It looks like they made a fool of my deceased boy when they were using alcohol. I tried to give out as much as I can and it seems like they played around with them." And then I said, "Just wait, my auntie. Not this Sunday but the next one I myself will ask for some funds used for this purpose of making a feast. And also from my own money let's make a feast. And when we make this feast we will compensate for the thing they just done wrong. So try and forget what just happened and we will look forward to this feast," I said to her. So she agreed to this. So this Sunday we are holding the feast at Sweet Grass in memory of this young man that was killed because at the dance there it wasn't carried out proper; it was wasted and played with. There was too much alcohol involved. This is why I say when I'm in charge of a dance and it's not run rights I get hurt and I don't like it. If I see it being run right but I can't do nothing about it as I can't lay down the law to anything. That is why I say how are we going to show

these people that are leaders in these dances how to run them properly. The elders used to say that the person putting up a dance, feast, etc. if he doesn't do it properly he will hurt the one that's depending on him. He is strong; he's the one that's given this God-given power but the one that depends on him, he will have harmed if he uses alcohol or things like that, as he is supposed to be good and clean.

And now I will talk about my grandfather, I always like to talk about this old man. He gave me a long talk the last time I went to see him before he died. This old man has given me lots of things to talk about, he gave me lots of things to think about. He also gave me sweetgrass (for incense). This is what he told me. "My grandchild, about these various dances, feasts, etc. You people are forgetting on how to go about doing them. You are the people we are dying for, we old people. Because we have something good we can tell you but we can't because you don't understand. We keep it locked up in our bodies and we are heartbroken hoping that you people would listen. Whenever I'm putting up a dance I'm always in a hurry watching the door in case a drunken person or a young woman will come in and spoil everything (as-kon-ehit - which means loss of power, loss of cleanliness, not effective anymore.) I'm always in a hurry and I don't do things that should be done properly. You are the ones that spoil these traditions because you don't pay attention, you don't think of anything. My grandchild, we are on the run. This is why we look the way we do, we old people. Our minds are gone and that's why we are heartbroken and the things we were supposed to know (kit-as-kon-hitan) you ruin for us what was our God-given powers. This was given us by our forefathers. This you spoil for us by not paying attention, by not listening. The things we tell you are not ours but handed down to us by our forefathers. You people ruin it for us and cut our lives short. That's why today we have no more old people. Even when we take our pipe

to say a prayer the kids imitate us and won't sit still and listen. What can we do, what can we say, my grandchild. It is very hard. Keep up the work you are doing. Don't keep anything to yourself, tell everything to our people. If you are going to keep something to yourself then you will hurt people. But if you see something not going right and tell about it, then you're saving the people that depend on other people. Tell the truth at all times. You are working on the elders' words. This is what you have to talk about to the people but not anymore than you hear. Just take it easy and don't say anymore than what you hear." This is what my grandfather told me. And whenever I hear you people talk I think about it pretty hard. But the way I understand this, this is the way I try to do my work. This is the way I understand the old people when they

speak. I am happy whenever I'm given a chance to speak. I'm sent all over to speak. But when I speak I don't use my word but the words of my elders. I work alongside them. I am just interpreting what the older people say. This is why I usually say if I run short of words, burn incense and light a pipe for an old man and he will show you these traditional dances and what you don't know they will show you. Take for instance, the powwow. This mingles with everything that goes on. This is why we should try to understand. These are the thing that we should really try to understand. These young people today that are leaders in powwows, etc. and these servers - today anyone is picked whether he earns it or not. (In the old days this was usually a very respected person in the community.) Maybe a man picked for a server is being harmed more; maybe he doesn't know how to be a server. This is why we have to have someone who knows, to show us how these things are done. A server has to know just how to go about these traditions. A man has to be very careful about these. But the way I see it myself, I'm always worried. But I've been told by older people to keep going, working for my people, not stop. To see if I could get something going. There are a lot of things and I see lots of people that are hurt because of people who are jealous of each other. There are lots of people I hear as soon as I finish talking. They are already talking about people behind my back and this is not right. This is hard on me, very hard.

There was one time right here in North Battleford. I forget whether it was last year or two years ago. A man from Red Pheasant gave away 2 horses and told the crowd, "Someone from far away should have these horses." This man had lots of horses. Anyone from far away could have these donated horses. But the horses went back to Red Pheasant because people from Red Pheasant grab them before anyone from far away could get them. So there it is. Today we have no respect for one another. Long ago, people had great respect for each other. They were related and friendly with everyone. They had all kinds of relations; today all that is gone. What about the namesake we used to have. (Each Indian child had a name given to him by a grandfather or grandmother or some respected person.) There's nothing anymore. And all the traditional dances are dying out. But we are hoping to be able to help the older people because

these are handed down by our forefathers and should try and hang on to them and keep our culture. They should be respected and this is our main concern today for those of us working here for you older people to be recognized and respected. This is what we hope to get from you, your word. To say what you would like us to do, to not hide anything from yourself.

If you have something good to say - say it. Don't hold back as what you will say will be going to various schools around the province. Then let us know about various dances and also of servers what their job is and so whenever I'm given a chance to speak at these gatherings I always like to speak for quite a length of time and say as much as I can. This way you get an idea of what to talk about because you yourselves know what you'll talk about. This way I figure I'm helping a little. So therefore, say what you want. You people know what you want to talk about. Many times I sat with my grandfather for great lengths of times and he was telling me these things. I forgot all what he told me while I was using alcohol. Today I see all what he used to tell me. I see it plain of what he used to tell me and whatever I was taught at these dances I forgot. One time I was next in line to the first server of our reserve, his name is Simon King. He was used as server all over the various reserves. Today he took up religion and he's not a server anymore and this man I was next in line to I used to watch how he did these things. How he holds the pipe. And even that I can't do today even though I was taught in two places; that's the pipe ceremony. The only one I can do which was left to me is the Prairie Chicken dance and this is the only one I can do. But the pipe ceremony that my grandfather left me I forgot. My grandfather Ka-pay-uko-piti-ko (Comes In Alone) showed me how to point the peace pipe different directions of the ata-u-k-an-uk (Guardian spirits).

I will have to try and start learning all over again. I guess this happens when a person doesn't live right and uses too much alcohol. He loses all that he has learned but I'm beginnnng to dream back a little at a time. I have a peace pipe but I'm not thinking myself as something mysterious. I don't think myself above other people and I don't think myself as being big. I'm just being very very humble. I will never go and make a fool of any of these traditions. I will not laugh at any of these traditions. I will not say anymore then what I see, just the way it happens. This is why I say I have to get to know myself. When a person knows himself it is easier for him to get to know and recognize other people. These traditions we will have to try find ways to show and tell our people about this. And these are the things I want to talk about, this is the way I see them and I don't like what I see. I don't like to see the way it's being done and of what used to be done long ago. It's been 8 years now since I've been working at announcing or emceeing at these various dances. But I will have to quit that as it's too hard. But I like to see people happy at these dances and I'm very thankful when one of the elders say a prayer for me. My luck pretty near run out at Big River when I went and got sick and nearly died. But the

reason I got sick I believe was I was thinking too much about my grandfather. In my mind I could see this old man that used to tell me all these things standing there and that was where I must have dropped and was taken to the hospital. My heart was giving up because of worrying about this old man that used to try and tell me all these things, to try and change my way of living and live a good life. At that time alcohol had a good hold on me and all the bad things that go with it. I think this was the reason for me being sick, I kept seeing this old man and he was pointing out all bad things that go on. Every time I said something or looked someplace he was there; so I was taken to the hospital. It was during a dance that he called me and told me that he was going to leave, he was going to die and this would be the last time I see him here. I wouldn't see him next year. And this is what he said to me, "Remember all these things and tell all I've told you. You tell these things, my grandchild and they will take you far." And this is true. The people know it. It was where my grandfather used to sit that I came and offered my prayers and thankfulness. Today I feel well. I came there when I was feeling well, where my grandfather used to be, trying to remember the things I was taught and try and do and understand what I was taught. I came there and tried to do the things my grandfather showed me. And this is when I really started to feel good. Today I feel fine.

But I hate it when people tell me about my grandfather. He harmed a lot of people. But I'm also thankful that I was chosen to be the one he picked to tell me the things he knew and wanted done. Because his two sons and a daughter were sitting there with me when he was telling me these things. I'm always surprised and very glad when I hear an old man saying prayers and when I hear an old man talking I'm always glad, I'm very thankful. This helps me a lot. Whenever I hear old men talking they are helping me; it makes me feel I'm not alone trying to speak for the people. You old people are the people that make us human. If it wasn't for the elderly people what would happen to us? And we are slowly getting there. That's why I have great respect for the elderly people. Whenever they speak, I tried to remember all they say. That's why I always say I'll try to do whatever I say; I won't go back on my word. And this is all I have to talk about tomorrow. Remember this is something big to bring to our people. So think about what you heard and prepare yourselves for tomorrow.

What we are hoping to bring out at these workshops is how you people saw these various traditions being conducted and also the leaders of these dances and their helpers how they are picked or what they have to do. And about the various songs and dances and so forth.

(End of Interview)

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