



## Hoop Dancing and World Citizenship

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**Known for his revival of the Lakota courting flute and the hoop dance, Kevin Locke, a tireless promoter of indigenous arts and human oneness, takes his art beyond traditional boundaries.**

WHITE RIVER, South Dakota, USA - As the name implies, the annual White River Traditional Pow Wow on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation is one of the most tradition-oriented of such gatherings among the Lakota people. Sitting in the ring-shaped Pow Wow stands, the audience was shaded from the hot August sun by fresh-cut pine boughs. And for supper, members of the Rosebud Sioux tribe feasted on fry bread and buffalo soup - the latter cooked over an open fire and made with the tribe's own range-fed stock.



*Kevin Locke performing last June at the NGO Forum during the United Nations conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) in Istanbul, Turkey. As is typical for him, Mr. Locke asked the audience to participate, teaching them a few steps to the hoop dance.*

So it was not surprising when Master of Ceremonies Francis Morrison asked that young boys come up for a participatory hoop dance lesson by Kevin Locke, a well-known Lakota dancer and flute player: historically, only adult males may perform the traditional hoop dance.

But Mr. Locke, who had dropped by unexpectedly, had quite explicitly offered to teach all young people, both boys and girls. Standing in the announcer's booth with Mr. Morrison, he was quick to ask for a correction. "Could be girls, too," said Mr. Locke, gently prompting Mr. Morrison.

"Okay," Mr. Morrison said good naturedly into the microphone, "girls, too." And in a short time, several dozen young boys and girls were out on the grassy Pow Wow grounds, working with the 42-year-old Mr. Locke and his multicolored hoops, having fun and at the same time learning about their own culture.

The incident reflects the changes occurring today in American Indian society - and Mr. Locke's role in them.

First, the active presence of so many young people at traditional gatherings like the White River Pow Wow speaks of the general revival of Indian culture that is now flourishing on - and off - the reservations in the North American midlands. After many years of poverty, problems with alcohol, and the forced acceptance of the white culture, many Indians are finding hope and spiritual renewal in the rediscovery of native traditions - as are a new generation of non-native spiritual seekers in North American, European and Asian urban centers.

Secondly, as was evident by the welcoming reception given to Mr. Locke by the Pow Wow committee and others in White River, the incident bespeaks his part in this revival. Some 20 years ago, Mr. Locke taught himself to speak Lakota, the language of his ancestors, whose tribe is more commonly known as the Sioux. A few years later, he taught himself to play the Lakota courting flute and the hoop dance, helping to revive two important traditional arts. Today, he is known worldwide for his flute playing and hoop dancing, and hundreds of Indian youth have followed his example.

On yet a third level, the incident reflects a critical aspect of Mr. Locke's approach in this revival: his willingness to take his art beyond traditional boundaries, promoting an inclusiveness that embraces concepts like equality of the sexes, human oneness and world citizenship.

### **A Gift to the World**

Indeed, a few days spent on the road with Mr. Locke as he visited Lakota communities in South Dakota during the late-summer Pow Wow season revealed that he views himself as a world citizen as well as an American Indian. In both his life and his art, he strives first and foremost to show how traditional Lakota arts are not only important to the well-being of his people - but are also a reservoir of joy and healing for people everywhere.



*Lakota flutiest and hoop dancer Kevin Locke performing at the Crow Creek Pow Wow in South Dakota.*

"I see that the Lakota people have many gifts to bring to the world," said Mr. Locke, whose Indian name is Tokeya Inajin (which means "First to Arise"). "The people are desperate for these gifts. We know that humankind is in a crisis. Now we need to draw from all of these wellsprings of knowledge that are within the treasuries of the hearts of the peoples of the world."

Among the offerings of the Lakota, he believes, are certain key spiritual values of giving, nobility, fortitude, and respect, as well as an abiding sense of the interconnection of nature and all peoples - symbolized by the dozens of circular hoops used in the dance he performs.

For Mr. Locke, the best way to share these values is through traditional Lakota art forms. Since 1978, he has traveled to more than 70 countries to perform, playing in venues ranging from the 1992 Earth Summit's Global Forum in Rio de Janeiro to a recent tour through 12 countries in Asia. Last June, he performed at the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) in Istanbul. His appearances are in increasing demand, and he has sold more than 200,000 recordings worldwide.

"When I go out to different parts of the world," said Mr. Locke, "the people are so receptive, saying 'this is great, this is beautiful.' People say, yes, this affirms who I am and it affirms my nobility as a member of the human family. In this way, these authentic traditions have the power to connect our global civilization."

### **His Path of Discovery**

Mr. Locke's family has long been active in promoting and preserving their heritage. His great-great-grandfather was the famous Dakota patriot, Little Crow. His great-grandmother, Mniyata Ojanjan Win, was a renowned medicine woman. His mother, Patricia Locke, has been an activist for Indian rights and recognition. She was instrumental in lobbying for the milestone American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978, which returned to Indians the right to freely practice their spiritual traditions. She also helped 17 Lakota tribes to establish locally administered Indian colleges. In recognition of such accomplishments, she won a prestigious MacArthur Foundation Grant in 1991.

Mrs. Locke saw to it that her son was well-schooled in his heritage, sending him to the Institute of American Indian Arts in New Mexico for high school. After graduating, he returned to Standing Rock Reservation in South Dakota, the land of his ancestors, and began investigating the teachings of the White Buffalo Calf Woman, the Lakota Prophetess, who came roughly a thousand years ago, prescribing prayer, dance and fasting as a means of spiritual cleansing and preparation.

"As a child, I was exposed to many religious traditions, but then I started getting involved with native spiritual observances and had kind of an awakening," said Mr. Locke. "Back around 1973 or 1974, I started going out fasting every year, in the Indian style, where you go for four days with no food or water, way out alone in the wilderness."

Around the same time, he began to learn to speak Lakota. This, in itself, is a remarkable accomplishment; he rarely heard the language as a child and it was then still illegal to speak it. "Historically, the policy of the United States Government toward the Lakota people was one of eradication and extermination," said Mr. Locke, explaining why the Federal Government had outlawed native language and religious practices. "When that didn't work, they decided on a course of total acculturation or assimilation."

Despite such laws, many Indians continued to practice their religion and speak their languages secretly, and Mr. Locke turned to them. "I made a real nuisance of myself because I was always hanging around with older people who spoke Lakota and I would interrupt them when I heard a word I didn't understand and ask them to repeat and explain it," he said.

During the 1970s, as he plunged ever more into the language and traditions of his people, Mr. Locke also worked as a school teacher and administrator, completing a master's degree in educational administration from the University of South Dakota. He was also accepted into law school, but quickly quit. "By the third day, I realized I did not want to go through the whole process of totally restructuring my thinking along legal lines," he said. "I was really kind of searching for something."

### **Study of the Bahá'í Faith**

Then, in the late 1970s, he was inspired to learn more about the Bahá'í Faith, a world religion founded in Iran in the mid-1800s. "What really motivated me was the anticipation of having our first child and trying to project what kind of a world this little child was coming into, and what were the prospects for the future," he said.

As he explored the history and tenets of the Faith, which teaches that there is only one God and that all of the world's religions, including many indigenous ones, are expressions of the same ancient and eternal faith, he decided that many of the prophecies of the White Buffalo Calf Woman had been fulfilled.

"The central prayer of the Lakota is to be sheltered under the 'Tree of Life,' and the teachings about the great 'Hoop of Life' are that the many hoops of creation, or, peoples of the world are interconnected and destined to come together," he said, pointing out that one of the titles of Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, is the "Tree of Life."

"I realized that the teachings of the Woman were part of a great process of divine revelation that all peoples have taken part of, and that it has reached its culmination in the Bahá'í Faith," he said. "I also realized that what the Bahá'í Faith teaches does not detract from or in anyway negate my own traditional religion. Many people ask me, 'How does the Bahá'í Faith tie in with your Indian spiritual traditions?' Because there is an assumption that people get from their experience with Christianity, at least as practiced here, that you have to renounce your former practices when you join a new religion.

"But the Bahá'í writings say that all peoples have received a portion of the divine bounty, and that this bounty is all from the same source," he said. "In other words, the truly valid and beautiful spiritual traditions are from one source and they all have prophetic traditions that point to the same point of unity and to the same glorious future for humanity, which is the unfoldment of an all-embracing world civilization. So there is no need to deny or negate or invalidate each other's spiritual heritage."

### **Learning from Old Recordings**

At about the same time he became a Bahá'í, Mr. Locke began to learn to play the traditional Lakota courting flute. He discovered an old flute at his mother's home and proceeded to teach himself two traditional songs by listening, over and over, to recordings made by a Library of Congress ethnomusicologist in the 1930s. Through experimentation, he taught himself proper breathing and fingering. "When I started playing the flute, there was only one other practitioner of the Lakota-Dakota style of flute playing, and he was quite elderly," he said.

To learn more songs, Mr. Locke again queried his elders, who often remembered the songs and the melodies even though they did not play the flute themselves. "In this way, I began to gather songs and build my repertoire," Mr. Locke said.

Mr. Locke soon became well known for his sensitive and charismatic performances. He became a regular on the traditional music scene and in 1980 the United States Information Agency began to send him around the world on cultural exchange tours. In 1990, he won a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, the highest award granted to such traditional artists.

He has also done nearly a dozen recordings of his flute playing, and one of his recent tapes has sold more than 175,000 copies worldwide. "That is a huge number for an album of traditional music," said Andy Wallace, associate director of the National Council for the Traditional Arts, which has sponsored Mr. Locke on a number of tours. "He is a remarkable artist. And what Kevin has done more than most other people is to take his art outside the world of the Pow Wow circuit to the general public."

### **Reviving the Hoop Dance**

Mr. Locke learned the hoop dance, which had nearly died out, from Arlo Good Bear, a Mandan Hidatsa Indian from North Dakota. "We were doing a couple of performances in New York City and we were rooming together and he said, 'I'm going to teach you the hoop dance. I'm going to give you four lessons. And I will give you one lesson now and the rest later. And after I give you these lessons, you are going to be on your own. And it is going to take you a long way.' And then he got out his hoops and he made some designs and the whole thing took about 15 minutes. And the next day he took off and I took off.

"A few days later, Arlo's mom called and said he had died in an accident. So I went to his funeral. And after I returned home I had a very vivid dream - several vivid dreams - and I saw him, dancing with the hoops a very beautiful, a very powerful dance, making all of these designs, so fluid and spontaneous."

Mr. Locke later came to believe that these dreams were the promised lessons, being communicated from the next world. "They were not mechanical lessons. The message I got was that this is a way that you can connect the past with the present, the present with the future, and the spiritual world with the material world."

He then began to teach himself the hoop dance in much the same way he taught himself the flute, by studying ancient dance forms and symbols and then gradually working out the footwork and the movements of the hoops. "There are certain standard designs that everybody does, and Arlo showed me those and made sure I knew them that first night," he said.

Now Mr. Locke is renowned as much for the hoop dance as for the flute - and for his willingness to teach both arts. "Pretty much every time I do a performance, I also teach it," he said.

Dr. Wayne Evans, a professor of education at the University of South Dakota at Vermillion, said Mr. Locke has indeed spurred many young Indians to take up traditional arts. "In his way, Kevin is really making a contribution to our culture, and having an impact on our young people," said Dr. Evans, who is also a member of the Rosebud Sioux tribe. "Instead of keeping it to himself, he is giving it to others and that is the Lakota way."

For his part, Mr. Locke believes that the work of preserving and sharing his culture is extremely important. He compares the folk arts and traditions of each of the many peoples and cultures of the world to chapters in a great book - the book of humanity. "If you don't include all of the peoples and their traditions," he said, "humanity is much the poorer. "You are missing some chapters of the book."