

# Native American Women Presenting/Preserving Culture through Pageants

By Nicole Daniels

*September 20, 2013. Liberty, North Carolina*— Dancers of all ages, dressed in colorful regalia, circle the arena at the 36<sup>th</sup> Annual Guilford County Pow-wow for the welcoming ceremony. A small boy struts around the field clad in a traditional outfit bearing Mickey Mouse's face— a striking blend of Native American design elements and contemporary popular culture. Later, the emcee introduces three young women, the “princesses,” to the audience.

“Good evening to everyone, it's a privilege and honor to be here representing the United Tribes of North Carolina and all the beautiful Native Americans of this state. I am Olivia Richardson, your Miss Indian North Carolina 2013- 2014. My platform for my reign this year is cultural involvement and being the perfect role model.”

I was enthralled by the composure and conviction she exuded. Hearing from Richardson and the other princesses at the pow-wow raised several questions for me: How did Native American pageants come to fruition, and what purpose do they serve? What does it mean to be a spokesperson for one's culture? How do gender roles come into play?

To gain a better sense of the pageant world, I had conversations with three women involved in Native American pageants. Alexis Locklear, Miss Lumbee 2013-2014, has been in involved pageants since she was three months old. She is an

undergraduate student at University of North Carolina at Pembroke, her hometown. Alyssa Schmidt, the New York State Fair Indian Village Princess 2013- 2014, lives on the Cattaraugus reservation and is a member of the Seneca nation. She is also an undergraduate student at the State University of New York at Fredonia. This is her third pageant title. Olivia Richardson, Miss Indian North Carolina 2013- 2014, is a graduate student at East Carolina University. She hails from Hollister, NC and is and member of the Haliwa-Saponi tribe. Richardson never considered herself as a “pageant person,” but her peers encouraged her to run because of her dedication to the Native American community and ability to be a positive example for others.

In this paper, I argue that Native American pageants serve two important purposes: 1) an external function of educating general public and debunking prevalent stereotypes of Native Americans, and 2) an internal function of providing role models for Native youth and preserving cultural traditions and language among the younger generation. Therefore, Native American pageants should not be conflated with conventional beauty pageants. However, the expectations placed on young women through Native American cultural pageants, as with conventional beauty pageants, enforce complicated responsibilities and gender roles. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the princesses describe their experience as an empowering one.

### **Historicizing the Pageants: Native Americans Carving out an Identity**

My study of Native American pageants began with researching the history of Native Americans in North Carolina. In *The Croatan Indians of Sampson County*,

George Butler examines the racial status of the Native American community in North Carolina from the 1800s to the early 1900s (Butler). Prior to 1835, Native Americans enjoyed a relatively favorable position in the social structure, and even owned slaves (Ibid). After 1835, they entered period of social decline, and were grouped with free blacks and mulattos in the pre-Civil War period. Miscegenation, marriages and relationships between Native Americans and African Americans, created a perceived “taint” to the entire group. Between 1868 and 1885, the government attempted to force Native Americans to attend the Negro schools... however; “Parents would not permit their children to attend the Negro schools, preferring rather that they should grow up in ignorance” (Butler 24). Some groups decided to build their own schools. The first publically supported Indian schools were in Robeson County. Croatan Normal School was established there in 1887.

Scholars J. K. Dane and B. Eugene Griessman explore census data from 1950s to 1970, during which time the only racial categories were “White,” “Negro,” and “Other,” leaving Native Americans into an ambiguous “other” category (Dane and Griessman). In 1965, the Haliwa successfully petitioned the State Legislator for their name, which combines the two counties where they resided, Halifax and Warren. In the same year, almost 400 Haliwas successfully brought suit against the Secretary-Treasurer of the State Board of Health and the Chief of Public Health Statistics to change the racial designations on their birth certificates from “the colored race” to “the Indian race.” Dane and Griessman argue that, “The history of nearly a century of Indian life in various areas of North Carolina could be written

almost entirely along the theme of an effort to promote and maintain ethnic identity” (Dane and Griessman 695- 696).

Native American pageants across the United States emerged largely in response to these issues. According to Wendy Kozol, the pageants first appeared after 1950s when the government encouraged Native Americans to relocate from reservations to urban areas and assimilate to U.S. culture (Kozol). Kozol argues that the pageants were, in part, adaptation of dominant cultural practices. She also contends that Native peoples incorporate both tradition and contemporary popular culture through powwow princess in order to carve out identity and meaning. These efforts reconcile competing forces of commodification from outside society and oppositional knowledge among Native Americans of their culture and traditions.

### **Pageant Representatives Educating the Public**

Many of the fundamental challenges that Native Americans faced decades ago continue to persist today. When I asked Olivia Richardson, Miss Indian North Carolina, about the major issues she worked to address as an undergraduate at ECU, she discussed the prevailing ignorance towards the Native community: "People are not very aware of Native Americans. Just knowing that we still exist, we're still here."

Native American pageants produce public figures who serve to educate the general public and debunk stereotypes. November 22 and 23, 2013 marked the 18th Annual American Indian Heritage Celebration at the North Carolina Museum of

History in Raleigh. A pow-wow took place in front of the museum, while crafts, storytelling, lectures, and language classes were held inside. Hundreds were in attendance, including a substantial number of non-Native American families.

Richardson served the esteemed role of Female Head Dancer in the pow-wow, leading each dance. Her “Miss Indian North Carolina” sash hung prominently over her dress.

Keith Colston, Master of Ceremonies and member of the Lumbee tribe, emphasized to the audience that Richardson and the dancers are liaisons for the general public to learn about the Native community: “From the youngest person out there, to the adults, they are all consultants. At some point in time, they’re asked to go to a school system, a university, a government agency, again, to teach, to share, in what we are doing here... Please, continue to visit with our dancers when they are walking around. Speak with them and ask them who they are, where they are from, because this is another reason why we are here, folks— to reach out.” Colson interjected between musical and dance performances to explain their significance and aspects to take note of. He spoke to the audience about several dominant stereotypes.

“We know that during the month of October, children like to dress up... but when you wear those things you call them costumes,” Colson explained as Richardson prepared for her next dance. “Us Indian people, the indigenous people of this country, we are not having to pretend to be anything. This is who we are. So therefore, not costumes but *regalia*. Suits of honor, outfits, traditional clothing,

traditional attire— these are the proper terms to be used for what ... our dancers are wearing here today.”

Alexis Locklear, Miss Lumbee, emphasizes the significance of her regalia when making school visits, which she does several times a week during November for Native American Heritage Month. Children often compliment her, saying, “I like your costume!” She is quick to correct them. Locklear takes her work extremely seriously and considers her reign as Miss Lumbee as a job. She works diligently to highlight Native American culture and particularly the contributions of the Lumbee tribe: “We took a bunch of songs from Willie French Lowery, who was a Lumbee artist, and we revamped his songs, and we sang them at the schools and just really got the students involved.” As a student at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, Locklear has also contributed to the Voices of Lumbee documentary produced by Dr. Michele Fazio and Dr. Jason Hutchens.

Alyssa Schmidt, the New York State Fair Indian Village Princess, also shared an anecdote about her regalia: “This year when I was at the state fair, I had some people come up and ask me—because I was in my traditional dress— if I wear it every single day like normal clothes. And I said to them, I would love to wear it every day but [people would give me strange looks]. ...It’s kind of funny to me, but it feels nice to explain to them we actually are just normal people. We dress in jeans, we dress in our sweaters and everything. We have houses. We don’t live in teepees.” Schmidt takes pride in educating others, adding, “It feels good to let them know who we are.”

## **Serving the Native American Community**

In addition to educating non-Native people, the pageants contribute to the internal Native American community. The pageant women I spoke with emphasized the importance of serving as a positive role model to the youth in their hometowns and local communities. In my conversation with Richardson, she lamented the harsh statistics that affect her community such as high school dropout rates for Native Americans and low college enrollment. She encourages young people to get good grades and pursue higher education, as she has done.

Similarly, Schmidt advises youth about the social obstacles Native Americans face: “You come off the reservation and it’s a completely different world. I think it’s one thing that a lot of our young people have trouble with because we go to school off the reservations. In a way it’s transitioning from our world to the white world, and I think that’s really hard for people to do. And that’s why they find outlets like drinking or partying.” As a commuter student at SUNY Fredonia from her home in the Cattaraugus Indian Territory, Schmidt lives through this experience personally. She has faced some uncomfortable moments as the only Native American student in her classes.

Native American pageants also help preserve cultural traditions and language among the younger generation. The 2007 documentary film *Miss Navajo* follows the Miss Navajo pageant, which has been held annually in the Navajo Nation since 1952 (Luther). The pageant requires its contestants to speak fluent Navajo, answer questions about historical and contemporary customs and issues,

and even properly butcher a sheep. In doing so, the pageant confronts historical oppression from the U.S. government, which administered assimilation of the Native Americans through institutions like boarding schools.

Sarah John Luther, a former Miss Navajo, describes how her Native American identity was suppressed as a child, “When I went away to boarding school, a different belief was forced upon me— not only the language but also religion. In those two key areas I was told to forget. You feel like you’re being stripped and then you’re almost told that you should be ashamed of yourself for who you are.”

Marilyn Help Hood, another former Miss Navajo adds, “If we were caught talking Navajo, they would actually make us wash our mouths out with soap... or sometimes we’d have to scrub the floor with a toothbrush. A lot of it has to do with the boarding school where our traditional teachings were taken away. ...There are a lot of our people that do not want to teach their children because for fear that they might be punished for it too. Linguists say that a language can be lost within twenty years. If a language is lost, a culture will be lost.”

By requiring that Miss Navajo contestants speak Navajo during the pageant, the community imparts the importance of language and traditions to young people. However, the ramifications of prior language loss among the Navajo are apparent in documentary’s coverage of the modern-day competition. In response to an interview question, contestant Michelle Descheenie replies, “I think it would be better if I explained it in English only because my thoughts will go clearer.” Contestant Roberta James responds to her question, “Well, I’m going to apologize to you guys because my Navajo is not that great. I’m going to admit that now.” After



the competition, a parent commented that his daughter's embarrassment over her language skills during the pageant encouraged her to study more in depth afterwards.

By allowing young people to engage with their heritage, Native American pageants support several principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, a document that the United Nations General Assembly adopted in 2007. According to Article 11, "Indigenous peoples have the right to practise and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures..." (UN General Assembly). Article 13 states, "Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures..." (Ibid). Article 31 declares, "Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions..." (Ibid). With that, Native American pageants affirm the collective rights of Indigenous peoples.

### **The Woman's Body as a Site of Collective Identity**

What does it mean, then, for so many facets of a culture to be placed on the shoulders of young women? Locklear spoke about what it means for her to embody an entire people: "As Miss Lumbee, you go out and you're like a symbol for the Lumbee people. You try to promote a positive outlook of what we're going through.

She is supposed to be the light in the community. You're always looked for, you're always looked at, and you have to have a certain poise about yourself."

Kozol discusses the global phenomenon of beauty pageants, which privilege the female body as both a site of feminine beauty and national identity. However, she warns that in the case of cultural pageants like Native American pageants, it is critical to go beyond conventional feminist critiques of beauty pageants as simply tools for objectification and oppression. She argues that Native American pageants have great merit for blending traditional and modern elements in intentional and thoughtful ways.

Nevertheless, pageants, by their nature, create many added pressures and responsibilities on young women. Locklear added, "We're never allowed to show our skin [except] from the neck up, and your hands— that's all you see. And, there's a sense of dignity that you have to carry as Miss Lumbee, as a Lumbee ambassador. ...You have to be a specific way at all times. She has a lot of responsibility, and so do the other girls, even down to Little Miss Lumbee— she's required to speak in public. You know, she's six years old, but we still try to implement what we're doing into her."

The pageant women I spoke with thought that there should be similar expectations on men. When I asked Schmidt if there was an equivalent to her pageant for young men, she answered, "We don't have any here and I really think we should have some. It doesn't seem fair. To me it seems kind of sexist. I think there should be something for men." The women expressed that positive role models were also important for young Native American men.

The idea that Native American women should act in a particularly dignified manor was reinforced at the American Indian Heritage Celebration in Raleigh. The men's dances were aggressive and dramatic. When introducing the men, the emcee Keith Colston explained, "How they move is truly that of any warrior of any culture or military. And let me tell you why. As these men are out here dancing, they will always be mindful of their surroundings keeping their head moving about. As they dance, they always have their weapons ready to go—not behind them but in front of them for what might come. As they dance as warriors, ladies and gentlemen, they don't dance backwards, because to dance backwards is a sign of cowardliness and a sign of retreat."

The women's dances were far more reserved. When introducing the women, Colston said, "You'll notice the beautiful dresses that cover them completely— that all you that you really see are the hands and faces, as far as the skin is concerned, of our females, dressed accordingly, and in a respectful manner. ...And, then as they move, they stay on the outskirts of the arena, not in the middle, because, once again, the beginning of many of these dances for our ladies took place because they would be on the sidelines watching their men tell the stories of their hunts, and of their battles."

### **Conclusion: The Empowering Nature of Pageants**

Regardless of my observations and the gender differences I perceived, it is far more important for me to emphasize that the pageant women I spoke with overwhelmingly felt empowered by their pageant experiences. Schmidt was

surprised when she won her competition, but afterwards felt inspired to live up to her commitment of being a good role model. Locklear feels that her pageant work is helping her to develop professionally: "I'm thankful that [my mother] put me in because I needed [public speaking skills] for broadcasting and theater."

Richardson found that her reign is an extension of the work she does regardless of being named Miss Indian North Carolina, but her title has generated increased awareness of her efforts: "I'm still going to be involved in my culture [after my reign ends]. It's something I did before the crown, and something that I don't plan on stopping after the crown. I tell people all the time, this crown is just an accessory really. It's just something that brings a lot more attention to yourself. People tend to look at you and ask you more things, things like that. I'm still the same person." Although she remains the same woman involved in the same work, the crown serves as an instrument that makes her platform more prominent.

Ultimately, Richardson declared that the pageant, "provides women the confidence to get out there and talk to people and [is] also just a chance to represent what you are a part of."

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