

**Boy Scouts of America and its History of Cultural Appropriation**  
**Brian Conn**  
**4 February 2024**

**Presented to United Church of Broomfield**  
**Broomfield, Colorado**

Boy Scouts of America was established in 1910, 114 years ago. It remains one of America's premier organizations focused on youth development, and focused on teaching values critical to living a moral life. Even now, forty years after earning the rank of Eagle Scout, the scout oath and law inform my daily decisions. Will my action be viewed as trustworthy, loyal, or helpful, or one of the other 9 points of the scout law? Does my decision fulfill my duty to my God, to other people or myself, as I have sworn many times through the scout oath? With such principled guiding values, I wonder how Boy Scouts of America can get major issues wrong, like exclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community or appropriation of the first people's sacred religious ceremonies.

Almost from the inception of Boy Scouts of America, the program incorporated elements that are borrowed from the first peoples of America, often without the first peoples' knowledge or approval. Boy Scouts of America has ignored the requests of the first peoples to stop using their sacred ceremonies and dances, and to stop dressing in costumes that are disrespectful to their traditions and religion and to stop perpetuating tropes about their tribes.

Throughout the message today, I will refer to the Indigenous peoples of America as **first peoples**. This term is used commonly in Canada to refer to all of the indigenous people of the Americas. However, where Boy Scouts of America uses the term Indian in its program I will continue to use that term.

A fossilized footprint in White Sands National Park establishes that the first peoples migrated to what we now call New Mexico at least 21000 years ago, and may be as early as 23000 years ago. The first peoples who immigrated to North America traveled across the land bridge during the interglacial of approximately 30000 years ago, or more. This means that the first peoples were here in America likely 25000 years before God commanded Abraham to build the altar to sacrifice Isaac. The Zuni people of New Mexico and their language separated from their ancestors probably 2000 or 3000 years before God gave Moses the 10 commandments on slabs of stone.

So it is odd to consider the scripture we heard today as teaching us how to treat the first peoples here in America. We are the immigrants. Nevertheless, the scripture teaches us, as the dominant economic and cultural force, how we should treat others - including

the first peoples of the Americas. We should love those people who are marginalized and excluded from the power structure living among us as God loves them.

From The Voice translation of Deuteronomy, Ch 10, verses 18 and 19:

“He enforces His justice for *the powerless, such as orphans and widows*, and He loves foreigners, making sure they have food and clothing. **19** You must love those foreigners *living with you* in the same way. Remember how you were foreigners in the land of Egypt!”

Or rather, you must love those foreigners living with you in the same way. Remember how you were foreigners in the land of America.

Since we are celebrating scout Sunday today, I'll share a poem written by a scoutmaster from La Junta, Colorado.

A little boy came knocking At my Scout room door.  
An awfully little fellow Just twelve and no more.  
His eyes danced as he watched My gang at rowdy play.  
"I would like to be a Scout," he said, "I'm just 12 just yesterday."  
In the weeks to come he found his place, A trim young Scout he made.  
The tests he passed with eagerness, A thorough job sure paid.  
The oath, the laws, the knots and flag. Were taken to his heart.  
A better man he was sure to be Tho he'd just begun to start  
By the candle-lighted darkness I watched his round face beam  
As the oath and law he pledged to keep--Just like a prayer it seemed.  
The years to come were happy ones As we followed the trail--  
That greater man had laid for us Far up where eagles sail.  
I watched him grow from boy to man The days were far too few,  
To try to teach the important things That Scouting said were true.  
I didn't know so long ago Our nation he would defend,  
I only saw a job to do, A helping hand to lend.  
Now he's flying higher still With silver wings up there.  
I pray to God the job I did Was better than just fair.  
He thanked me once for what I did So many years ago.  
It was not his thanks that paid me Because he did not know  
That greater thanks he'd given me A thousand times before  
By his dancing eyes and smiling face--Could one ask for more?  
There are other boys a-knocking, I must invite them in.  
Please, God, give me strength To make them better men.

A Scoutmaster's Prayer, by James "Buck" Burshears

Buck Burshears wrote A Scoutmaster's Prayer during World War II, for a Christmas party for the Koshare Indian Dancers, an interpretative American Indian dance troop associated with boy scout troop 232 of La Junta, Colorado. Buck founded the Koshare Indian Dancers in 1933. The troop traveled to the many Pueblo and Navajo reservations in the early 1930s, observing the first peoples dances at pow-wows and ceremonies and recording their dress and dances.

To become a Koshare dancer, the scout must advance to the rank of Star, which is two ranks below Eagle. When scouts first join the dance troop, they are called papooses. The scout advances to brave after crafting their costume and learning dances. To become the "Chief" of the dancers, the scout must also earn the rank of Eagle scout.

The Koshare dancers sought to learn the first peoples dance to preserve the first people's culture and share the first people's culture and dance across America. The Koshare dancers have been so successful in doing so that in 1948 they were able to fund the building of a museum with a Kiva that boasts the largest self-supporting log roof in the world. The museum hosts a large collection of first peoples art and artifacts. The museum and collection are reported to be worth millions of dollars. All of this came from scouts learning and interpreting and performing the first peoples ceremonial dances.

In 1981 I traveled across the US in a bus with 35 other scouts, from San Diego to Ft AP Hill, Virginia for the National Jamboree. One hostel we stayed at was in La Junta, Colorado, at the Koshare Indian Dancers museum and Kiva. The night we stayed at the Koshare Indian Dancers Kiva, we attended the dancer's performance. I have few specific memories of the dancing, but I recall scouting aged youth wearing costumes, headdress, and dancing first peoples dances. The costumes were homemade, and to my eyes, looked authentic, as did the dances.

The Koshare Indian Dancers perform the ceremonial dances of the Pueblo and Navajo peoples. The Eagle dance, the snake dance, the hoop dance, and in the 1950s, the Koshare Indian Dancers performed the Shalako. Some of the dances are for show, such as the hoop dance. But many of the dances have deep cultural and religious significance to the first peoples from whom the dance was appropriated. In 1981, I didn't understand cultural appropriation, and so to me, the dances I saw were just that - dances.

In our white American culture I can think of no dance that is sacred. In the Abrahamic religions I can think of only one example of where choreography is included in sacred worship - the Sufi Whirling of the Sufi sect of Islam. This practice is also known as

Whirling Dervishes, and is said to imitate the orbit of the planets around the sun, while also placing the person into a very deep meditative state. The practitioner of this form of worship will literally whirl in place for 15 minutes or more. To the white American, dance performed before an audience may be high art, like ballet, or may be burlesque, like the Radio City Rockettes, or maybe folk dance like clogging or line or square dance. Dance is often for performance and to be viewed. But dance is never sacred. It is through this lens that I believe Buck Burshears and the Koshare dancers viewed the first people's costumes and dance.

Today we understand that much of what Koshare Indian dancers perform is truly cultural appropriation. The first peoples have objected to the Koshare Indian Dancers' use of their sacred ceremonies and dances for at least 70 years. In one case captured in the fictionalized account of a conflict between the Zuni and the Koshare Indian Dancers, *Behind the Zuni Masks*, the author documents how the Koshare Indian Dancers very accurately replicated the sacred Shalako costumes, masks, and dance. To the Zuni, the Shalako are not just masks and costumes, but are embodiments of the gods, themselves.

In the Zuni creation story, the Zuni emerged into this world in Grand Canyon at Ribbon Falls along with the Zuni gods, they call the Shalako. The gods left the Shalako masks as their embodiments with the Zuni and taught the Zunis the Shalako dance and ceremony. The Shalako are powerful gods in the Zuni religion that bring good harvest and good fortunes to the Zuni people. Roughly corresponding to the beginning of winter, the Zuni hold the Shalako ceremony and dance each December to give thanks for the past harvest and to ask for a good next harvest and good year to come.

I considered sharing some images of the Zuni Shalako to help us understand the Zunis and their beliefs better. But as I learn more about the Zunis and their beliefs, I find that my understanding of the Zunis is not sufficient to determine what images are appropriate to share. Certainly there are images of the Shalako in the public domain, such as a painting in the Smithsonian. There's a documentary of the Shalako ceremony floating around on the internet. The film was recorded in 1923 without the knowledge or approval of the Zuni, and was only discovered by the Zuni in 2012. The Zuni have spent decades trying to claw back these sorts of materials - the film of the Shalako ceremony, and other instances where white people have recorded or replicated their sacred ceremonies, in order to protect their culture, religion, and heritage. If you are interested in learning more about the Zuni, the Zuni museum has an online presence where you can learn from the Zunis what they want outside cultures to understand about them.

In the 1950s, a new member of the Koshare Indian Dancers was fascinated by the Zuni. The scouts researched the Zuni Shalako ceremony and re-created the Zuni Shalako

masks and costumes and dances. When the Zuni discovered that the boy scout group had recreated the Shalako masks, costumes, and dance, they traveled to La Junta to observe the dance. Although the scouts had accurately replicated the masks, costumes and dances, the ceremony and dance are sacred to Zuni, and are not performed for entertainment. The Zuni leaders asked the scouts to stop performing the dance, and to give the masks and costumes to the Zuni.

Let's put historical context around this meeting of the Zuni and boy scouts in La Junta in the early 1950s. Recall that the white government slaughtered the Arapaho and Cheyenne peoples at Sand Creek only 90 years before this meeting. Sand Creek is only 80 miles from La Junta. The Arapaho and Cheyenne were encamped near Fort Bragg, as directed by the US army, and expecting to negotiate peace terms with the US army and receive food and other supplies due to them, when they were slaughtered by the US Army. The Zuni understood this history when they went to see the Koshares dance the Shalako. The Zuni knew that they were essentially powerless in the discussion. If the Koshare Indian Dancers chose to continue wearing the sacred costumes and dancing the sacred dances, there was nothing the Zuni could do to stop them.

Again, the Zuni believe that the Shalako are embodiments of the gods, and must be treated according to the Zuni religious practices. When the Zuni create the Shalako, they fast and pray throughout the process of creating the robes and masks. The Zuni house the Shalako in specific houses in the village, and they feed the Shalako corn meal. The Shalako do not belong in the boy scout Kiva in La Junta. The Shalako belong only in sacred houses at the Zuni village.

Ultimately the scouts relinquished the Shalako and stopped performing the dance. But in the decades since the Koshare Indian Dancers appropriated the Zuni Shalako dance, other first peoples groups have objected to the Koshares performing their sacred dances. The American Indian Movement protested a performance in the 1970s. The Hopi continue to request that the Koshare Indian Dancers stop performing their sacred Hopi - Tewa dances as well. The Koshare continue to ignore these requests. It appears that the COVID-19 pandemic paused the dance performances, and the Koshares Indian Dancers, perhaps due to heightened public outcry over their cultural appropriation of the dances, have not restarted the dance performances.

Unfortunately, appropriation of first people's sacred dance and ceremony is not limited to the Koshare Indian Dancers. The Boy Scouts of America have promoted its "honor society" called "Order of the Arrow" since 1913. The Order of the Arrow performs dances and ceremonies taken from various first peoples and also perpetuates disrespectful tropes about the first peoples as seen in white popular culture. The scouts wear costumes that are out of context for the ceremony and speak in broken English in

the ceremonies. And there is yet another American Indian dance group, called Mic-o-Say used by two boy scouts councils, similar to Order of the Arrow.

There are signs that BSA will end the appropriation of first people's sacred dance and ceremony, and end the use of disrespectful tropes. In 2023, boy scouts surveyed its members about the use of first peoples ceremonies and costumes in boy scouts programs. It appears that the BSA national leadership, after decades of complaints from the first peoples groups, are finally listening to the complaints of the first people, amplified by members within the organization, and considering changes to its programs.

The national leadership recently directed that use of first peoples styled ceremonies and costumes may no longer be used during the ceremony employed to initiate cub scout youth into the scouts BSA program. Regarding Order of the Arrow programs, the national leadership now requests that local council Order of the Arrow group work with the local first people groups to make sure that any dance or ceremony is performed respectfully and accurately. The national leadership stops well short of requiring that the local first peoples government approve of the use of their cultural resources. The national leadership only requests that each Order of the Arrow group do its best to work with the local first peoples government to gain approval.

The Boy Scouts of America programs have progressed over the past decade. The policies of the national Boy Scouts of America organization no longer prohibits membership in its programs based on gender identity or sexual orientation. Youth of all gender identities or sexual orientations are allowed to participate. Adult leaders are also allowed to participate with their children, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation. Last year I spoke about the UCC committee almost being ejected from the National Jamboree in 2017 for providing colorful sunglasses to visitors in its booth. This year I can report that the 2023 National Jamboree hosted a safe space for the LGBTQIA+ and allied scouts and adults. There is more progress to be made, to ensure justice, or in this case, safety and respect, for the powerless - the LGBTQIA+ community or the first peoples community. But progress is being made. I pray that BSA moves forward on issues of cultural appropriation guided by principles of respecting and loving the powerless, as we are instructed in Deuteronomy.