ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance:An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol. – VI, Issue-3, December 2025

31

THE HISTORICAL JOURNEY OF NATIVE AMERICAN DRAMA: FROM RITUAL TO THEATRE

Dr. Durgesh B. Ravande[1]
Principal & Research Supervisor, Indira Gandhi Senior College, Cidco, New Nanded, MS, India
&
Anna Abarao Muley[2]
Assistant Professor, Department of English, Arts, Commerce & Science, College, Navapur, Dist. Nandurbar, MS, India

Abstract

Native American drama originated in the oral and ritual traditions of Native American culture. It arose as a recognised and well-known theatrical form after a long and complicated history. Initially, Native American plays were religious in nature. Storytelling, dance, and religious ceremonies were used to convey Native American social values, culture, and beliefs, create a spiritual environment, provide education, and preserve Native American culture. Despite facing marginalisation as a result of colonisation and the imposition of Western cultural paradigms, it has succeeded in preserving its cultural character by adopting new modern theatrical standards and norms. The efforts of Native playwrights to blend traditional and contemporary playwriting in modern Native American theatre highlight the vibrant cultural endurance and expressions of Native communities. This transition underscores the shift of Indigenous performances from their ritualistic roots to refined art forms that continue to reclaim Native identity, challenge stereotypes of Native people as inferior and savage, and enhance the scope of connecting with larger audiences.

Keywords

Colonisation, Indigenous, Native American Culture, Religious, and Modern Native American Theatre, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

The journey of Native American drama has been highly complex and historical. It started from oral and religious ritual traditions and transformed into modern Native American theatre after being suppressed by colonial forces. Although uniquely situated within the context of North America, the journey of Native American theatre resonates with other Indigenous performing arts traditions, such as the oral traditions of Aboriginal Australians and Chinese Nanyin music, where the boundaries between storytelling, ritual, and artistic expression are fluid and deeply interwoven (Hamacher and Goldsmith, 1; Xiahou et al., 1). The interaction of performance, memory, cultural survival, and opposition to prevailing narratives is essential to the trajectory of decolonisation. This research paper studies the journey of Native American drama throughout history, from its beginning in oral tradition and ritual to its rise in vibrant innovative Native American theatre in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The emergence of modern Native American theatre provided a platform for unheard indigenous playwrights with powerful medium to reclaim their histories, challenge colonial narratives, and preserve cultural traditions. Through this modern drama, native writers started to address themes of identity, resilience, displacement, and social justice.

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance:An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol. – VI, Issue-3, December 2025

Oral Tradition and Ritual: The Foundations of Native American Drama:

Storytelling as Performance and Cultural Transmission:

Before the White colonial power, Native American culture was rich in oral tradition and literature as it used songs, dances, storytelling tradition, and ceremonial performances for the transmission of community knowledge to future generations. These traditions, especially oral storytelling, play a crucial role in preserving history, culture, and native identity. For centuries, Indigenous communities have relied on oral tradition for the transmission of knowledge, history, and social values from one generation to the next. These traditions, while non-literate in the Western sense, constituted sophisticated systems of memory and pedagogy in which the boundaries between narrative, ritual, and theatre were porous (Hamacher and Goldsmith, 2). As in the oral traditions of Aboriginal Australians, where knowledge is passed "in the form of story, song, dance, art, and material culture" (Hamacher and Goldsmith, 2), these were the principal means by which Native American societies preserved their cultural traditions and beliefs.

The storytelling tradition was not a solitary act but was often a common community performance in Native American culture. Therefore, it often involves the active participation of the audience in physical enactment and the invocation of spirits. The functions of these performances were multifaceted: they preserved cultural heritage, marked rites of passage, negotiated relationships with the environment, and invoked spiritual beings (Hamacher and Goldsmith, 2; Hamacher and Visuvanathan, 1). The uses of music, gestures, and ritual artefacts have given social significance to the dramatic effect.

Forms and Functions: From the Communal to the Ceremonial:

Native American stage performance traditions are characterised by informal communal storytelling, more structured didactic narratives, and highly ceremonial rituals. In addition to being sacred occasions, these rituals—like the Lakota Sun Dance or the Pueblo Kachina dances—also incorporated dramaturgies, which are performance systems containing roles, sequences, symbolic acts, and audience participation. In many cases, these performances blur the distinction between the sacred and the profane, the ordinary and the extraordinary, and the human and the more-than-human (Hamacher and Visuvanathan, 2–3).

Native American drama has the same origin as Aboriginal Australian traditions, as Hamacher and Goldsmith state, where the "Dreaming" provides a mythic framework for understanding the world, and where performances are essential for transmitting laws, customs, and cosmological knowledge (Hamacher and Goldsmith, 2). Similarly, Native American drama has its roots in cosmologies that conceive of time as non-linear, where ancestral beings and mythic events remain ever-present and accessible through ritual performance (Hamacher and Goldsmith, 2; Hamacher and Visuvanathan, 2). These traditions were not performed simply for amusement but have played a significant role in the religious and social awareness of people. They were used as social tools for developing communal harmony, reinforcing kinship ties, passing on ancient knowledge, and fostering bonds between communities, land, and spirits.

Embodied Knowledge and the Oral Archive:

Native American oral traditions are inherently performing, underscoring the value of embodied knowledge —learning expressed through actions, vocalisation, gestures, and the community's collective memory**.** Just as "Nanyin instrumentalists introduce variations based on the characteristics of their instruments" and performance techniques are "passed down orally, presenting challenges for both preservation and contemporary innovation" (Xiahou et al., 1), the performances adapted by Native American storytellers and ritual specialists were according to the maturity level of the audience and as per the context and changing circumstances. In the absence

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance:An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol. – VI, Issue-3, December 2025

of a written tradition, this fluidity in the oral archive simultaneously increases its resilience and vulnerability. The capacity to rejuvenate and transform increases the resilience of this archive, but it remains vulnerable not only to disruptions but also to colonisation.

Suppression and Silencing: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries:
Colonial Encounters and the Denigration of Oral Performance:

Colonial invasion of Native American land has disrupted Indigenous performance traditions. The imposition of Western literary norms, which privileged written texts as the only legitimate form of "literature", led to the denigration and marginalisation of Native oral traditions (Hamacher and Goldsmith, 2–3; Hamacher, Twin Suns, 1). The shift to written literature in the West throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries coincided with a nearly complete absence of Native American theatre, a gap often associated with the historical effects of cultural oppression, forced assimilation, and migration.

Native American rites, culture, and ritual performances were often considered savage, inferior, superstitious, and pagan by White colonisers. Therefore, ceremonial gatherings and storytelling traditions were strictly prohibited and restricted in public places. The establishment of boarding schools in America by white settlers began the eradication of ancestral Native American languages, arts, and ceremonial performances. This further diminished the intergenerational transfer of performance traditions. As Hamacher and Goldsmith note in their study of Aboriginal Australia, "the formation of the crater was not witnessed, and stories explaining it as an impact site are coincidental" (Hamacher and Goldsmith, 3). However, in the Native American context, the erasure of performance is often a deliberate act of cultural engineering.

The "Stage Indian" and Stereotypical Representation:

In the nineteenth century, American theatre experienced the emergence of the "stage Indian" stereotype while Native American voices remained unheard. Non-Indigenous writers and actors began creating and performing works that lacked genuine engagement with the actual lives and cultural traditions of Indigenous peoples. These representations, whether noble savage or bloodthirsty villain, perpetuated reductive and often racist caricatures, denying Native agency and authenticity (Hamacher, Recorded Accounts, 3–4). As with the misrepresentation of Aboriginal traditions in colonial Australia, where European interpretations often failed to grasp the symbolic or historical depth of oral accounts (Hamacher and Visuvanathan, 1), the "stage Indian" became a mask that occluded genuine Indigenous dramaturgy.

The fact that a small amount of written drama was produced during this critical period does not mean that Native playwrights produced no drama. Rather, it pointed out unnecessary external pressure and determined to continue to protect ancient cultural heritage, giving importance to oral and ritual performances in private or concealed environments, all of which influenced the situation. The "silence" seen in written records represents loss and resistance, erasure, and resilience.

The Politics of Silence and the Survival of Performance:

Native American traditions of performance did not disappear even after colonial imposition; instead, they emerged in a modified form by adapting to the public point of view. As with Aboriginal Australian oral traditions that "may have once existed but have been lost for whatever reason" (Hamacher and Goldsmith, 3), during this tough time, Native drama was characterised by both rupture and continuity. Under assimilationist domination and policies, Native communities preserved cultural memory by adopting coded storytelling, secret ceremonies, and performance as a form of resistance and opposition. Despite being invisible to the dominant culture, the oral and performative archive continued to play a crucial role in identity, spirituality, and group resiliency.

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance:An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol. – VI, Issue-3, December 2025

The Re-Emergence of Native American Theatre: Contemporary Innovations:

The Mid-Twentieth Century and the Push for Self-Determination:

The revival of Native American theatre in the middle and late twentieth century was closely connected with Native Americans' civil rights movements, self-determination, and cultural revival. This period witnessed the emergence of Native playwrights, theatre companies, and performance troupes that sought to reclaim dramatic expression and challenge and revise dominant historical narratives (Hamacher and Goldsmith, 8; Xiahou et al., 1).

The transition from oral tradition to stage performance marked an innovative progression, incorporating current media and themes in a manner not bound by Western standards. The emergence of new theatre companies, such as Spiderwoman Theatre, and playwrights, such as Tomson Highway, Vera Manuel, and Marie Clements, marked the beginning of a new wave of Native American playwrights, in which innovation and a blend of styles were prevalent. The playwrights produced work not only based on oral tradition but also deeply rooted in indigenous culture.

Story weaving: Innovation and Continuity:

A hallmark of contemporary Native American theatre is the development of innovative forms such as "storyweaving"a performance technique pioneered by Spiderwoman Theatre that interlaces traditional myths, personal memories, and contemporary songs to structure a play. (Xiahou et al., 2–3). The ability of flow across time, space, and time was made possible by the story weaving technique which was the fusion of oral and modern dramatic techniques. This technique challenges the linear, Aristotelian conventions of Western theatre, instead embracing a narrative logic that is cyclical, multi-vocal, and non-linear—qualities that resonate with the Dreaming of Aboriginal Australia and the improvisational frameworks of Nanyin music (Hamacher and Goldsmith, 2; Xiahou et al., 3).

As Xiahou et al. observe in the context of Nanyin, "Rule-Guided improvisatory practices ensure stylistic consistency, preserving the essence…while allowing performers to introduce expressive nuances" (Hamacher and Goldsmith, 2; Xiahou et al., 2). Similarly, storyweaving and related dramatic techniques in Native American drama serve as innovation and preservation that keep tradition while responding to modern reality.

Challenging Narratives and Reclaiming Identity:

Native American theatre's engagement with issues of culture, history, representation, and cultural survival explicitly sets it apart from other theatrical movements. Through dramatising land rights, social justice, intergenerational trauma, and the politics of identity, Native playwrights and performers seek to "revise history, reclaim identities, and address contemporary issues" (Hamacher and Goldsmith, 8). The stage becomes a platform for counter-narratives, where voices long suppressed by colonisation and misrepresentation can speak back, bear witness, and imagine futures otherwise.

This reclamation of narrative agency is paralleled in the work of Hamacher and Visuvanathan, who note that Aboriginal oral traditions "pay close attention to natural phenomena, assign them social meaning, and incorporate them into oral tradition" (Hamacher and Goldsmith, 1). Native American drama is local and cosmic, individual and collective, and demonstrates an abiding commitment to both localism and universalism in its preoccupation with lived experience, sensitivity to environmental shifts, and blurring of distinctions between the holy and the everyday. In native theatre, a series of distinct forms takes place with a challenges Western tradition in matters of form, aestheticism, and content. Native theatre acts contrary to Western expectations regarding time, space, and narrative. As in the Aboriginal Australian conception of the Dreaming,

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance:An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol. – VI, Issue-3, December 2025

where "stories do not necessarily have an 'origin' in linear time" and where "new events may be incorporated into existing oral traditions" (Hamacher and Goldsmith, 8), Native American theatre is a dynamic, flexible art form that defies categorisation and rigid interpretation.

Comparative Perspectives: Oral Tradition, Performance, and the Politics of Preservation:

A comparative lens illuminates the broader dynamics of oral tradition, performance, and cultural preservation in many Indigenous contexts using the references provided. Oral traditions encode structured information about the natural world, sometimes maintaining historical narratives of meteoritic events and geomythology, as demonstrated by Hamacher and Goldsmith's investigations of Aboriginal Australian ethnoastronomy. that "may provide insight into both the culture that observed and recorded them, and for information about the event that might contribute to our understanding of geological phenomena" (Hamacher, "Recorded Accounts" 1). Native American performance traditions are resilient, reflecting the capacity of oral traditions to convey complicated information over generations despite disturbances. The intersection of oral tradition, embodied practice, and technological innovation raises important questions regarding authenticity, continuity, and adaptation. In Native American theatre, the integration of traditional storytelling forms with new media, languages, and dramaturgical techniques exemplifies a similar negotiation between preservation and invention.

The Limits and Potentials of the Archive:

Comparative materials also highlight the limitations of written archives and the risks of cultural misrepresentation. Hamacher and Goldsmith caution that "asking an Aboriginal person about the 'date of origin' of a story may be inappropriate, as the Dreaming in many Aboriginal cultures still exists and is not restricted to a time in the distant past" (8). The same is true in Native American communities, where the performance of a story or ritual is not simply a re-enactment of the past but an ongoing, living act of world-making.

In these performances, the transition from an oral tradition of performance to written texts and published plays can be both empowering and problematic. While publication brings a work into wider circulation and can bring it into national and international discourse, it may also threaten to separate performance from its communal, ritual, and embodied tradition. The challenge, as stated in both Native and comparative discourses, is to maintain the dynamic tradition of the oral in this new form of literature.

Conclusion:

The history of Native American drama, with its origins in oral tradition and ritual performance, to its present-day manifestation on stage in American theatre culture, is one of resilience and transformation. Based in communal performance, religious narrative, and embodied knowledge, Native drama has lived through colonization, erasure, and the stereotypes of 'stage Indians.' For the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Native theatre artists have reclaimed this tradition and re-crafted a dramatic performance practice based on traditional wellsprings and connected to the imperatives of contemporary realities. This journey is not unique to Native Americans; it echoes in other Indigenous traditions, where oral transmission, performance, and cultural survival are intimately linked. The challenges of preservation, innovation, and representation are shared across contexts, as are the possibilities of renewal and resistance. Contemporary Native American theatre, with its innovations in form, content, and technique, exemplifies the on-going vitality of oral tradition and the enduring power of performance to shape identity, imagine new futures, and speak truth to power. In honouring both the continuities and ruptures of this history, we recognise the complexity, richness, and significance of Native American drama—not only as a field of artistic endeavour but as a living practice of cultural survival and transformation.

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance:An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol. – VI, Issue-3, December 2025

References

- Bigsby, C. W. E. Modern American Drama, 1945–2000. Cambridge University, 21 Dec. 2000, https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511612329.
- Hamacher, Duane W., and John Goldsmith. "Aboriginal Oral Traditions of Australian Impact Craters." Journal of Astronomical History and Heritage, Vol. 16(3), preprint. https://arxiv.org/pdf/1306.0278v2
- Hamacher, Duane W. "Recorded Accounts of Meteoritic Events in the Oral Traditions of Indigenous Australians." Archaeoastronomy – The Journal of Astronomy in Culture, Vol. 25, preprint. https://arxiv.org/pdf/1408.6368v2
- Hamacher, Duane W., and Rubina R. Visuvanathan. "Twin Suns in Australian Aboriginal Traditions." Journal of Astronomical History and Heritage, preprint. https://arxiv.org/pdf/1809.02565v1
- Indigenous North American Drama: A Multivocal History. State university of New York, 2012, https://doi.org/10.1353/book28838.
- Porter, Joy, and Kenneth M. Roemer. The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature. Cambridge UP, 2005. Stanlake, Christy. Native American Drama: A Critical Perspective. Cambridge UP, 2009.
- Stanlake, Christy. Native American Drama: A Critical Perspective. Cambridge UP, 2009.
- Xiahou, Jianbing, Weixi Zhai, and Xu Cui. "Oral Tradition-Encoded NanyinHGNN: Integrating Nanyin Music Preservation and Generation through a Pipa-Centric Dataset." arXiv preprint arXiv:2510.26817v1. https://arxiv.org/pdf/2510.26817v1

Article Received:15/12/2025
Article Accepted:23/12/2025
Published Online: 26/12/2025

To Cite the Article: Ravande, Durgesh and Muley, Anna. "The Historical Journey of Native American Drama: From Ritual to Theatre." *Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism*, Vol.-VI, Issue-3, December, 2025, 192-197. www.literarycogni- zance.com