

NINA FOX

I am a Native American woman (Cherokee and Shawnee) who is a member of the Kentucky Indigenous Peoples Council. By profession, I am a Clinical Social Worker (CSW), a therapist, and a photographer. I am also a mother and grandmother, and an avid advocate for equality and religious rights all across the country.

I was invited to participate in an interfaith educational program organized by *The Salaam Network* entitled “*WOMEN IN THE NATIVE AMERICAN, JEWISH, CHRISTIAN AND ISLAMIC TRADITIONS: JOURNEY FROM FRAGMENTATION TOWARD WHOLENESS.*” This program was held at Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Church in April 2018. I led my family in a Family Dance to prepare the space for our important conversation and discussion. I was asked later to share a brief narrative describing some aspects of traditional Indian dancing and I have done that in the account below.

I am a Women’s Traditional Southern style dancer, which is the oldest form of dance for women. There are two styles - Northern and Southern - ways of dancing. When moving in the Circle, the Northern style is danced by remaining in one spot, lightly bouncing in rhythm with the drum. In the Southern style the women walk slowly and gracefully around the Circle in time with the drum, gently stepping toe-heel, toe-heel with the feet appearing to “walk on clouds”. Both styles carry a fringed shawl folded over the bent left arm, a purse in the left hand, and a feather fan, usually eagle or hawk, in the right hand.

The women hold themselves tall and proud, their bodies straight. The fringe on the shawl is to sway naturally with the movements of the women's feet, not from upper body bending or swinging. The fan is raised in salute when the women hear the drum giving honor beats. Some women will also bend at the waist at this time, remaining in one spot or taking a certain number of steps inward toward the middle of the Circle. At all times, the dancers are to stay in time with the drum and stop precisely when the drumming ends.

The women wear knee-length beaded moccasins, leggings, and either a buckskin or cloth dress that has long, open sleeves. There are two styles of buckskin dress: once again, Northern and Southern. The Northern style is to completely bead the shoulder or cape part of the dress, whereas, the Southern style uses beadwork mainly as an accent. Also in buckskin regalia, the moccasins are either fully beaded (Northern) or accent-beaded (Southern).

Both cloth and buckskin dancers wear a leather concho belt from which they hang a knife in its case and a tobacco pouch situated at the sides or back of the waist. Each style also wears a breastplate made from bone pipe and glass beads that can drape to the waist (Southern) or all the way to the ankles (Northern). However, cloth dancers typically wear their breastplates over the front and back, unlike the buckskin dancers who wear just a front-sided style. At the neck, women wear either a scarf or a choker. Other jewelry is optional and usually is in designs and colors that have either personal, tribal, or family significance.