

Guidelines and Protocol

The Drum Philosophy by David Rattray

Please note these comments are “general comments” and in specific communities some/all of these comments may not apply. Please check with local Elders concerning what applies in your region.

Importance

- Drum beats are the heartbeats of mother earth.
- It is believed, we are the drum. The drum is our culture, it unifies us and reflects who we are.
- Drums draw communities together. Drums bind, and do not separate.
- Drums are used in many different circumstances... weddings, feasts, funerals, etc... (almost any time Aboriginal people gather)
- Drums are round to reflect the circle of life.
- It is often wise to check with several Elders about an issue concerning drums before coming to any conclusion.
- Sharing of knowledge about drums is crucial.
- Drums teach many lesson

Spirituality

- Drums can be used as a connection to the spiritual world. Drumming is a spiritual experience. The spiritual importance cannot be overstated.
- Drums can heal. Some medicine people drum near a person’s body to help the person heal.
- When a person is in pain, be it emotional or physical, drumming helps the person get recentered.
- The spiritual component of a drum is extremely powerful, and often special/specific to an individual.

Respect

- The drum has power way beyond “making music” and to understand some of this power is to understand some of what it is to be Aboriginal.
- One never “beats” or “pounds” on a drum. Instead, one makes a drum speak. Sometimes one speaks softly, other times one speaks with power and conviction.
- Almost everything one does can be related back to the drum. That’s how powerful drums are.
- To have a drum is an extreme honour and it must always be treated with the utmost of respect. You are to treat yourself, others, and everything else in the world the way you treat your drum.
- Remember, the drum symbolizes what we are, and what we can become.

Singing & Dancing

- When a drum speaks, everyone is to honour it.
- When learning to sing and dance, it’s important to learn the local traditions around who can, and who can’t use certain songs, and dances.
- One can never use another person’s drum without permission.
- A person from one clan can never use the drum of another clan.

- When drums are not used, Aboriginal people usually “put the drum away”.
- It is not usually hung on a wall where its energy can leave it. It may be considered “bragging” if a drum is hung on the wall. This does not apply to non-Aboriginal people.
- Songs/dances may belong to specific people and no one else is allowed to use them.
- Some songs/dances have, over the years, become “community songs/dances”. Be sure to check with the elders before using a song/dance you think is a community song.
- When a person passes away, some communities do not allow that person’s songs to be sung for a year, unless special permission is given by designated spokesperson who has become the keeper of those songs and dances.
- When a person passes away, some communities do not allow people to drum until after the person is buried. In these communities, singing and dancing is considered extremely disrespectful to the person, and their family, and by extension, to their clan. Again, check local beliefs.
- In many Aboriginal cultures performing songs and dances is the highest level of respect that can be shown to another person as they are sharing the very best of what their culture has to offer. To share by singing and dancing is to share, and to show what an honour is to have you visit.
- There is much more to learn about drums....

Remember: These are “general statements” and there is much left out. It is the responsibility of each one of us to come to terms with the drums and their importance to our community and to our lives.

Drum Making

- When making drums, it’s important to consult elders in the community. Different areas have different ways to approaching the creating of a drum.
- You can’t sell, or trade the first drum you make. You can give it away when you expect nothing back in return.
- When you create a drum, you cannot work on it while angry. First deal with the anger then return to the drum.
- When you are creating a drum, put in only good thoughts. Create the drum with honour, integrity, peace, dignity, etc, so the drum will hold all that which makes people special. So when the drum speaks, it brings out all of these values.
- Drums from different areas have different tones. Some areas, the tone is high, in other areas, the tone may be low.
- Sometimes, drums are used only for specific activities. For example, small, high tuned drums may be used only for stick gambling.
- In some areas, before a drum is made, there may be certain ceremonies that accompany “bringing a drum to life”. Some ceremonies may include having sweats, prayers, fasting, blessing of the materials, etc. Check with local elders on what they would like to see.
- When elders are present at drum making workshops, it is respectful to present them with their own drums as a sign of respect for them, and for what they have to offer. They are usually not charged for the drum.
- Drum making is time to connect.