
Nee-dash Information Sheet

Overview

The dozens of Tribes and bands forcibly removed to the Coast (Siletz) reservation beginning in the mid-1850s each arrived with unique traditions, celebrations, and beliefs. One of these traditions still practiced today by people at Siletz is called Nee-dash. Nee-dash means “the dance” in the Southern Oregon/Northern California Dené (Athabaskan) dialects spoken by many of the families forced onto the reservation. Sometimes referred to as “Feather Dance” in English, Nee-dash is an important ceremony that today is held twice a year. Although federal officials and teachers at places like boarding schools tried hard to stop the tradition in the past, Nee-dash remains an important part of the calendar for Siletz people today. Nee-dash is a way of giving thanks for the gifts and blessings that sustain us (the interconnected natural cycles, animals, and plants that we rely on to live) and ensuring that those relationships continue for future generations. During Nee-dash, people gather at the Dance House in Siletz to sing, dance, and pray—continuing a tradition of countless generations.

Regalia

Regalia is a fancy English word that means ceremonial clothing. It is the preferred word for talking about the clothing Native people use during dances and ceremonies (instead of “costume,” for example). Nee-dash regalia is specific to the dance and often belongs to the dancemaker or family organizing the event. Nee-dash regalia highlights the wealth of the community by emphasizing the relationships with the natural world around us. Regalia is made from things in the natural environment in Western Oregon and Northern California and shows the ability of the people to care for the land and sea around them and maintain good relationships with their neighbors. Materials in Nee-dash regalia come from all over the landscape—from tall hills and mountains where people gather beargrass to use for the overlay in xee-tr’at, to the near-shore ocean environment where abalone shells are found to give beautiful iridescent color to necklaces and dresses. It takes years of work to gather the materials for regalia and assemble each individual piece. Some of the regalia that Dee-ni’ people dance in are:



Xee-tr’at [Basket Cap]: These finely woven hats are fully overlaid with intricate designs and require an immense amount of skill to create. Women and girls wear xee-tr’at when they dance.

Da’ xvm-ni [Quiver]: Men and boys hold adorned quivers made from otter skins and decorated with red abalone pendants in front of them when they dance.

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Ch'aa-'i [Dress]: Dance dresses worn by women and girls actually wrap around the back, leaving an opening in the front to display a decorated apron, called a *san* (left). Dresses and aprons are built from a foundation of deer or elk hide and decorated with many different materials, including beads made from nuts and seeds, shells, barks, and woven grasses.



Naa-gha'sr-delh-yu [Necklaces]: Dancers wear multi-strand necklaces of many different shells and beads. One specific shell, dentalium, was used as money up and down the Pacific Northwest coast. In the old days, the size of each shell determined its value, with the largest being the most prized and the smallest used for everyday decoration.



Nin'-k'vt-me'-sla: Both men and women wear *nin'-k'vt-me'-sla*, a type of feather headband adorned with shiny green mallard scalps or bright red woodpecker scalps sewn on top of a leather band.

Photographs

A ceremony is a sacred event when a community comes together for a spiritual purpose. Siletz people honor this sacredness by not taking pictures of dancers or singers during ceremonial Nee-dash. Many families don't even allow their regalia to be photographed between dances. For this lesson, some Siletz regalia makers have agreed to share some photographs of their regalia. Please honor this willingness to share by being respectful with these photos and only using them for the purposes described in the lesson.

Resources

Dobkins, R. J. "Exhibit essay: Life stories for new generations—the living art of Oregon Tribal regalia." *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 110(3) 420–439. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20615987>

Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University. (2008, September 28). *The art of ceremony: Regalia of Native Oregon* (teachers guide). <https://willamette.edu/arts/hfma/pdf/teacher-guides/art-of-ceremony.pdf>