Growing up in Calgary, Maya Pankalla was fascinated by the rich cultural heritage of Canada's First Nations. Now, she takes us along as she attends two traditional powwows—one in the east and one out west.

Drumbeat of the Heart

Numbered dancers shuffle rhythmically in a large circle at the Tsuu T'ina powwow west of Calgary.

The procession of cars and trucks winds down the road for more than two kilometres, shimmering in the midday July sun, kicking up more dry ground than it covers. We roll down our windows and feel for any hint of a breeze. The hypnotic chanting and thrumming of drums, now more than just a faint hum, tell us that we're nearly there.

A long half-hour—and at least one failed shortcut—later, I'm ambling from our parked car towards visions of cool strawberry lemonades and the aroma of Indian tacos. Around me, hundreds of vendors offer everything from beaded bracelets, miniature dream catchers and neon warrior art to—perhaps even more valuable—first-hand insight into a complex history of a proud people's cultural persistence.

It's powwow weekend and Kahnawake, Que., a modern Mohawk reserve of about 8,000 on the southern edge of the St. Lawrence River across from Montreal, swells with movement and colour. Travelling Iroquois artisans, dancers clad in traditional "jingle dress" and visitors—both Native and non-Native alike—in shorts and T-shirts, have turned up from as far away as the northeastern United States to enjoy the show.

"Fancy dancers, step right up!" booms a male carnival voice. Cheers erupt from the bleachers, arranged in a semicircle around the grassy performance grounds, and dancers as young as five and as old as 85 emerge from under shady awnings and leafy trees. Though they'll dance together in the intertribal round, most will compete in separate age groups and dance categories, including fancy, jingle, grass and traditional dances. There are cash prizes to be won; there is an age-old rhythm to uphold. Behind me, a leather-skinned elder reclines in a foldout canvas chair and watches his grandchildren prepare for competition, taming colourful ribbons and making last-minute fixes to thick black braids. "The drum is the heartbeat of Mother Earth," he tells me, the rhythm of his earthy voice the very timbre of the rawhide drums. "So when you hear that, you just gotta get out there and dance."

If Mother Earth has called in her low, rumbling tones, then the people have answered: True to its name, the yearly Echoes of a Proud Nation powwow has once again gathered members of the local First Nations communities in celebration. For a people that traditionally resided in stationary longhouses, many of today's Mohawks move around quite a bit. While vendors drive hundreds of kilometres to sell wares at weekend gatherings, others travel shorter distances seeking anything from artistic expression and friendly, even lucrative, competition to community therapy and a sense of belonging. The powwow is an extended family reunion, a weekend in which leaving one's physical, individual home ensures the building up of a communal one.

Clockwise from top: A dancer takes a much-needed water break in Kahnawake; a male dancer, clad in beadwork, ribbons and animal pelts watches a younger competitor enter the ring; a circle of drummers rest their sticks and their voices.

Old women offer timeless advice, young men beat large drums in tight-knit circles and toddlers take steps that are more dance than walk. It's enough to make a big-city girl like me feel overcome with spontaneous pride for a people who, despite all odds, have managed to retain a oneness with each other and with the Earth. The

Top left: Colourful ribbons and a circular dance motion draw the crowd's attention in this young girls' event. Top right: A Plains Indian showcases the feathers and bone in his traditional regalia.

Echoes of a Proud Nation powwow has stirred something ancient in my soul.

As a kid growing up in Calgary, I spent every free moment in the field behind my house with my cousin and little brother, pretending to be Indians. We collected crusty crow feathers, slept in bush teepees and tended to stubborn rock garden crops. There were no cowboys. But true to pre-colonial history, which I had pieced together through extensive perusing of a variety of Indian-themed picture books, there were spells of bad weather and the occasional need to migrate to other parts of our field, as well as some imagined intertribal disagreements. At these times, my five-year-old brother slicked back his blond hair, gathered his tree-branch arrows, put on a grim face and went to war. Though, more often than not, he'd return minutes later reporting that a truce had been reached.

Our little game grew more complex the year my parents took us to Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the southern foothills of Alberta that showcases the way in which local Indians once hunted the mighty buffalo: by herding them together and stampeding them off a cliff. While other children teared up at the plight of the large, fluffy animals—the vivid name of the place didn't help—I marvelled at the efficient ingenuity. Days later, our backyard tribe was mounting horse-shaped sticks—we were pretty loose with our definition of "horse"—and rounding up imaginary bison to lead off a small hill for dinner.

Coincidentally, in my preteen years, I spent several summers sleeping in a real teepee, attending "tribal councils" and riding a horse called Vision Quest at the YMCA's Camp Chief Hector, an Indian-themed summer getaway that was either a cultural homage or was hugely politically incorrect.

By my mid-20s, big, grassy fields and sleep-away camps had lost their appeal in favour of the larger world: places such as California, Europe and South America. Eventually, I left my city home on the range, put my old Indian picture books in storage and moved to Montreal. But in summer, visions of wildflowers on mountaintops and lazy afternoons drifting down the Bow River called me back, and whether by drumbeat or the sight of printed posters, so did the local powwow. My Plains Indian dreams had been nurtured by my nature-loving mom—I suspect had we been playing our games somewhere more secluded, she, too, would have fashioned a feathered headdress and bow. So, in June 2010, she organized a small convoy and we drove west of Calgary to the Tsuu T'ina Nation reserve, like we used to when I was a kid. There, smells of bannock—a traditional aboriginal sweet bread—permeated the air and dancers' ribbons caught the wind, though they were now in the neon fabrics and graphic prints of a younger generation building on the old to create the new.

Like the Mohawk powwow, it's a gathering of a nation, though at Tsuu T'ina, many Plains Indian visitors camp on site in RVs, tents and even traditional teepees. The dance is performed under a high-roofed wooden dome, with hundreds of competitors circling tightly around the centre with spectators making up the outer walls. There's also a rodeo element, complete with steer-wrestling, calf-roping and bucking broncos. And, of course, rodeo clowns. Not surprisingly, these Prairie-bred Indians are champion riders even on the world circuit. The weekend is a welcome balance to the Calgary Stampede, which occurs only weeks prior and an hour's drive away.

Dancers become spectators at the Kahnawake powwow.

Back in Kahnawake, a young American Mohawk is preparing to dance. He's comfortable, even optimistic and he should be: He travels to various Indian gatherings almost every weekend. "This is home right here," he admits, his plainly clothed friends nodding in agreement. "Every weekend, this is home."

Though my life in Montreal is just 30 minutes away from Kahnawake, this First Nations home reveals little of the sidewalk terraces and Parisian-style cafés that I've come to frequent with the utmost devotion. Here in Kahnawake, the steady thump of the drum calls me back to a similar place just 25 kilometres from Calgary, where brittle wheat grasses thread together plaid fields, warm Chinook winds drift in and out like a passing tide and the culture evolves with the land. For one scorching, dusty afternoon I, too, am home. ■