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# Idle No More and the Round Dance Flash Mob



Drummers for a Round Dance flash mob held at the Eaton Centre shopping mall in Toronto, December 30, 2012. Photo by Kevin Konnyu.

Contributed by [Paul Kuttner](#)

**When:** December, 2012  
**Where:** Shopping malls

In October of 2012, the Canadian government introduced Omnibus Budget Bill C-45, which significantly eroded Indigenous sovereignty and environmental protections. Indigenous communities immediately voiced concerns. In Saskatchewan, four women — three Indigenous and one non-native — launched a teach-in and website in order to raise awareness about the issue. They dubbed their effort *Idle No More*.

By December, the "Idle No More" movement was in full swing. Rallies were being held across Canada and internationally; the hash tag #idlenomore was trending on Twitter; and Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence was on hunger strike seeking a meeting with the Canadian government. The movement had quickly broadened to encompass a collective demand for governments worldwide to "honor Indigenous sovereignty and to protect the land and water," as the group's website declared.

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It was in this context that a group of organizers put out a call to action on Facebook asking “Aboriginal people, non-Aboriginal people, Metis, youth, and anyone willing to dance/sing/drum with us” to meet at the Cornwall Centre shopping mall in Regina, Saskatchewan. At 7:00pm on December 17, Aboriginal activists gathered at the mall and began beating out a steady rhythm on hand drums and singing. Others soon emerged from the holiday shopping crowd to join hands around the mall’s massive Christmas tree, circling clockwise in a traditional Indigenous round dance. By the end, an intergenerational and interracial group of over 500 people had gathered on two floors to take part in the action. Mall security and city police arrived, but the flash mob remained entirely peaceful before melting away.

While the flash mob itself lasted less than 15 minutes, videos and articles about it circulated widely on the Internet. Another round dance took place the following day in the West Edmonton Mall in Alberta. These actions captured the imagination of others in the movement, and dozens of round dance flash mobs began popping up in malls and public spaces across Canada and the United States. On December 29, over 1,000 people gathered for a round dance protest at the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota.

Round dances, often used as a form of celebration and as an expression of friendship and unity, are practiced in different forms by many Indigenous nations in North America. Along with many other aspects of Indigenous culture, the round dance was suppressed in the process of colonization, but it has recently reemerged as a celebratory practice, and recorded round dance music has become increasingly popular. The round dance flash mobs, then, represented both a powerful expression of resistance and a practice of cultural regeneration.

Round dance flash mobs became a strong enough presence in the Idle No More movement for some to begin referring to it as the “round dance revolution.” Organizers had hit upon a way to combine social media and flash mobs — both highly popular forms of activism among young people — with traditional music and dance in a way that bridged generations and cultures, creating space for building a sense of community. The round dances symbolized the movement’s core tenets of peace and unity, while sending the simple message: “We are here, our culture is strong, and we will not be silent in the face of destruction.”

#### Why it worked

The round dance flash mobs addressed multiple movement goals at the same time. To opponents, they demonstrated the grassroots power and the continuing strength of Indigenous nations. For Indigenous participants and viewers, they promoted cultural pride and connection. For newcomers, they offered a welcoming and easy opportunity for involvement. And for the movement as a whole, they served as a powerful visual symbol. The flash mobs carried the resonance of tradition and ceremony, while also being fun, loud, entertaining, and contagious.

#### Key Tactic at work

##### Flash mob

Flash mobs are unrehearsed public actions that can be easily replicated while maintaining a sense of coordination. In this case, Idle No More organizers found synergy between the flash mob and the round dance, itself an improvisational performance that invites observers to join in. Quickly planned and carried out, these events helped drive the rapid spread of the movement in a way that more rehearsed and controlled performances would not have been able to do.

#### Key Principle at work

##### Use the power of ritual

The Idle No More round dances served as collective rituals with deep symbolic resonance. They made it easy for people from many backgrounds to “fall into the rhythm” of the action; they offered participants a direct experience of unity and solidarity; and they spoke viscerally to the strength and vitality of Indigenous cultures.

##### Use your cultural assets

Opponents of social change efforts often have powerful cultural tools at their disposal, mass media in particular. To combat this, groups working for justice must recognize and build upon their own cultural strengths — their stories, symbols, arts, rituals, shared knowledge, and ways of being together. Using these cultural assets can strengthen participants while pushing opponents outside their comfort zones. The Idle No More flash mobs drew effectively on the cultural wealth of Indigenous communities such as traditional music and dance, as well as the social media practices of younger generations.

Paul Kuttner is an educator and researcher, working at the intersection of art, culture, education, and social change. Currently a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Utah College of Education, Paul earned his doctorate from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Prior to his doctoral studies, Paul taught theater, creative writing, and civic engagement in schools and community organizations across Chicago, where he co-founded the non-profit arts organization Communities Creating Change. Paul is a co-author of *A Match on Dry Grass: Community Organizing as a Catalyst for School Reform* (Oxford, 2011), and a co-editor of *Disrupting the School-to-Prison Pipeline* (HER, 2012). His work has been published in academic and popular venues, including *Curriculum Inquiry* and the *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*. He is a former co-chair of the Harvard Educational Review (HER) Editorial Board, a board member of the Mestizo Institute of Culture & Arts, and Minister of Cultural Scholarship for the US Department of Arts & Culture.

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