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Native American Culture: Not For Sale
by Jackie Krogmeier

“First they came to take our land and water. Then they wanted our mineral resources...Now they want to take our religion, as well.”¹ The words of the late Indigenous rights activist Janet McCloud, of the Tulalip Nation, are haunting. Those of us who do not live or witness Native life as it continues today are often guilty of forgetting that Indigenous people are all around us; working, marrying, living and dying the same as us all. It can be easier for us, then, to place the appropriation of Native resources in a time past. Sadly, Native resources continue to be appropriated today, and since the emergence of its popularity in the 1980’s², perhaps the most valuable and sacred of Native resources is now being misused: their culture.

To understand why the appropriation of Native ceremonies and religious practices is harmful, it is important to first understand their significance to Native life. Native festivals or events are usually held for any of three reasons: to give thanks for life’s blessings, to mark important transitions in someone’s life, or to be in communion with the spirits.³ Native holy people or other experienced and qualified Native persons may lead Native religious ceremonies. The most well-known ceremonies are perhaps the sacred pipe ceremony, the sweat lodge, and the vision quest. There are quite possibly thousands of rituals and ceremonies that vary in practice from nation to nation, but these are arguably the most well-known to non-Natives and as a result, the most appropriated.

A Sacred Pipe is a pipe designed for the purpose of a sacred pipe ceremony. The Sacred Pipe is distinguished in that it consists of a separable bowl and stem. The two parts are kept separate from each other except during the actual ceremony. The design of the pipe varies from nation to nation, as does the ceremony. The two separate parts of the pipe and the juncture of the two in ceremony holds great symbolism, and the pipe itself is considered a holy object deserving of respect and reverence.⁴ In fact, two Native artists who make and display pipes as artwork said, in author Jordan Paper’s *Offering Smoke: The Sacred Pipe and Native American Religion*, that although the pipes they sell are authentic and fully functional, the stem is always permanently attached to the bowl, because “to us a pipe whose stem is detachable from the bowl is a spiritual tool, beyond being an art object.”⁵ During a pipe ceremony, tobacco is used to communicate with the spirit world. Jordan Paper writes that, “The primary

purpose of offering tobacco...is for communicating with the spirits.” The spirits are asked for their help and guidance, in return for the offering of tobacco.⁶

The sweat lodge ceremony is used for cleansing.⁷ The authors of *Crying for a Vision: The Native American Sweat Lodge Ceremony as Therapeutic Intervention*, who analyze the use and benefits of the sweat lodge as therapy for Native and non-Native people, describe sweat therapy as “the combination of intense heat exposure with psychotherapy or counseling, ideally incorporating group process.”⁸ The sweat lodge itself represents for Natives the universe and the origins of life, as the circular dome-structure is like the womb. Cardinal directions are typically used in a sweat lodge ceremony. East is characterized as belonging and connection with others, south is the sense of achievement in one’s life and the acknowledgement of one’s skills, west is physical awareness and independence, and north is wisdom and generosity. The sweat lodge is used by Natives to rebalance themselves along these directions and to seek mental and physical wellness within their community, as expressed in the origin stories of many Native tribes where it is often stated that “a sickness came to the First People.” The story goes that to heal the sickness, a council was held and “from every direction, all living beings came together.” Various animals built a fire around which to fast and pray, but the fire grew too large. Raven accidentally knocked Bear’s basket of water onto the flames, and the steam created caused Raven to sweat. But because Raven experienced a vision through the heat, it was decided that this act would be honored and came to be known as the sweat lodge ceremony.⁹

The concept of a vision quest can be found across Native American culture in variation. Vision quests are difficult to define in a single line or with a single definition, but can be considered the process by which a Native person seeks guidance and spiritual power from the spirit world.¹⁰ Depending on the nation, vision quests are undertaken at different times for different reasons. For some tribes, the vision quest is a necessary part of growing up and making the transition from child to adulthood. Others do not go on vision quests until ready to accept adult responsibilities entirely. In different tribes, a vision quest is undergone anytime a person is struggling with the challenges of life and must seek supernatural help. In still others, the vision quest is only intended for those privileged to be called medicine people.¹¹ Generally speaking, a vision quest begins with disrobing outer clothing and removing oneself from the distraction of other people by seeking a secluded, natural place. The person then prays, fasts,

and meditates until a vision is received, or until it becomes clear that a vision will not occur. Visions received are presented to tribal elders or other Native wise persons for scrutiny and interpretation.¹²

The Sun Dance, more correctly called the Thirst Dance, traditionally took place in late spring when there was enough grass for many horses to pasture, before the summer drought.¹³ The Dance was a gathering that allowed men and women to meet and friends and relatives who had not seen each other over the winter season to reconnect. Due to the sacred nature of the Sun Dance, relatively few details are known. Typically separate female and male lodges are erected for the ceremony, and a dance arbor consisting of a center pole and usually twelve outer poles is assembled. The top remains open so that the sun can be seen and will reach the dancers inside. The center pole is selected with much deliberation, as it is considered an item of reverence and symbolism, and offerings are tied to the top. Thongs are also attached to the pole for the most well-known and media-portrayed portion of the Sun Dance: the ritualistic piercing, where dancers are attached to the thongs and skewered through the breast or back (traditionally done only to men). Returning dancers who have experienced this three or four times bear scars that grant them a high degree of respect.¹⁴

But where did this desire to experience Native culture stem from? In a society so often called cynical and facts-driven, why have so many Americans begun to consume a culture that stresses the spiritual and natural world? Many historians believe it was the cultural revolution of the 1920's that created an American craving for mysticism and a greater expression of personal spirituality.¹⁵ Hollywood, long guilty of stereotyping Natives on either end of an unrealistic spectrum – either as stupid, brutal savages or omniscient, helpless victims – also played an instrumental role in bringing the American Indian into the limelight, with such films of the 60's and 70's as *Cheyenne Autumn* and *Blue Soldier*, which represent Native societies as idyllic utopias ruthlessly destroyed by militant whites.¹⁶ But perhaps the greatest link Hollywood forged between Native identity and the increasingly popular counter-culture was the 1971-1977 *Billy Jack* trilogy. Author Philip Jenkins describes the protagonist Billy Jack, portrayed by non-Native actor Tom Laughlin, as an “outrageously idealized amalgam of images who blatantly appeals to the wish fulfillment of the white audience.” Billy Jack is a half-Indian ex-Green Beret, who defends local hippies and counter-culture advocates from harassment, racism, and the police. Another key piece of Hollywood wisdom are Billy Jack's frequent travels home to discuss with his

tribal elders the sincerity of white people seeking greater truth, drawing explicit lines between students of white counter-culture and his Native Pueblo people.¹⁷ In one iconic scene, Billy Jack stalks through town barefoot to the not-so-subtle soundtrack of drums and flutes, before being surrounded by an angry crowd of white men. Billy Jack, outnumbered, still manages to give each man a beating with his laughably effective martial arts skills.¹⁸

This early interest in the “other” set the stage for the New Age, a term often used when speaking of the non-Native appropriation of Native culture. The New Age, or New Agers, stems from a movement that rose in popularity and practice during the 1980’s.¹⁹ New Agers are often white middle-class Americans, seeking a sense of identity and unity that they feel their own communities lack.²⁰ New Agers participate amongst themselves (rarely do they interact with Native communities, or seek Native opinions) in their own recreations of Native ceremonies and rituals, often purchasing items that hold relevance to Native religions, such as eagle feathers, pipes, and special stones. The New Age desire for seemingly authentic Native items often results in them being swindled, as the capitalist market is ripe for producing hundreds of different “authentic” Native products, such as a build-your-own sweat lodge or a box filled with tea, sage, and a tribal music CD for the complete “Native experience.” So-called Native experiences are consumed in large quantities by New Agers, from sweat lodge ceremonies to vision quests.²¹ Not only can a misguided non-Native lead a sacred ceremony, especially the sweat lodge ceremony, in such a way that the participants face bodily danger, but their twisted reverence for something they do not understand is an insult to its significance for Native Americans.

Native communities have been out-spoken in their criticism of the New Age movement and the non-Native consumption of Native culture. Many Native American activists have produced and distributed leaflets decrying what are commonly known as “plastic shamans” and Native leadership organizations have held conferences on the issue. The National Congress of American Indians were very clear in what they described as “a declaration of war against ‘wannabees,’ hucksters, cultists, commercial profiteers, and self-styled New Age shamans.”²² With the increasing media coverage of Native protest to the movement, how do New Agers justify themselves? As it turns out, passionately.

Often, New Agers respond with the assertion that their participation in and consumption of Native culture is done with only the highest degree of respect, and actually supports Native communities.²³ This assertion is misguided, as non-

Natives rarely handle objects and ceremonies of Native significance with the same level of understanding as a Native would, and lack the proper background to truly hold the object or ceremony in reverence. Also, the consumption of commercialized Native products rarely sends money to Native communities, as a majority of those products are produced by non-Natives. As to the exceptions, where Natives are participating in the non-Native consumption of Native culture, American Indian Dennis Jennings says in the 1996 documentary *White Shamans & Plastic Medicine Men* that their involvement only “points out the poverty and lack of opportunity in Indian land. People are so frustrated and desperate that they’ll do anything for money.”²⁴

Other times, non-Native producers of Native products claim that so long as they treat the culture with respect, they have no responsibility for what their customers do. Lanell Shephard of the Many Hands Art Gallery featured in *White Shamans & Plastic Medicine Men* says, “I can treat my products with respect, I can know who the artist is, but if someone buys it that doesn’t want to use it respectfully, that’s not my responsibility.”²⁵ Legally, she is correct. But can she excuse herself from the moral implications of participating in the commercialization of a culture whose values are so strongly anti-commercial?

In the end, it comes down to understanding. Unlike many other religions, particularly Christianity, evangelization is not a part of Native culture. Dennis Jennings says in *White Shamans & Plastic Medicine Men*, “We want to educate people about Native American issues...That in fact we all have a responsibility to the Earth...and future generations, no matter what race or culture...But we’re absolutely not trying to proselytize. We’re not trying to get people to be practitioners of Native American religion. We’re not trying to get them to adopt our ways.” Instead, when a person is interested in another culture, Native Tony Incashola advises them, “Go to the source. Go to the people. And the people will tell you as much as they’re allowed to tell you. And you’ll get to know the culture. Then you’ll start to respect it. When you understand it, you respect it.”²⁶

The appropriation of Native culture is particularly painful to Native Americans because of how stigmatized and oppressed their own practice of it has been in our history, and continues to be. For a non-Native to take what has been stolen from Native Americans so lightly is offensive, and damaging to Native efforts to re-educate their people in the correct, reverent ways of their culture. Navajo woman Mary Boone said in an interview, “Our children are losing their language in the schools... Parents today are not making their children learn the old

ways. Parents today are not making their children learn Navajo language. Medicine people should be allowed in the schools to teach. This would help the people stay strong.”²⁷

Consumption of Native culture may be so popular today because of a sense of disconnect from one’s own culture. Many Americans may feel as though they have no cultural identity of their own. In fact, the mysticism and shamanism that characterize Native American culture can be found across the world, particularly in Eastern Europe and Asia. Sweat lodges themselves have been used across cultures before recorded history, in present-day Africa, Polynesia, Eastern Europe and other places.²⁸ This is not to say that non-Natives are not being harmful in appropriating religious practices of cultures they do not fully understand, rather to show that with proper understanding, a rich and vibrant culture can be found in all backgrounds. But it is important to study, research, and feel reverence for the rites and practices of any culture before taking part in it. When those steps are taken, an appropriate level of respect has been acquired. In any case, culture is not something that can be purchased, taught over the course of a get-away weekend, or assembled from a kit. Culture is not for sale.

Notes

1. *White Shamans & Plastic Medicine Men*, documentary, directed by Terry Macy and Daniel Hart (1996; USA, Native Voices: uploaded to YouTube, 2013).
2. Lisa Aldred, "Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sun Dances: New Age Commercialism of Native American Spirituality." *American Indian Quarterly* 24, no. 3. (University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 342.
3. Jenna Glatzer, *Native American Festivals & Ceremonies* (Broomall, PA: Mason Crest Publishers, 2003), 8-13.
4. Jordan Paper, *Offering Smoke: The Sacred Pipe and Native American Religion* (Moscow, ID: The University of Idaho Press, 1988), 11-12.
5. Ibid.
6. Jordan Paper, *Native North American Religious Traditions* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2007), 11.
7. Michael Tlanusta Garrett et al., "Crying for a Vision: The Native American Sweat Lodge Ceremony as Therapeutic Intervention." *Journal of Counseling & Development* 89, no. 3. (Peer reviewed journal, 2011), 319.
8. Ibid., 320.
9. Ibid.
10. Kathleen Margaret Dugan, *The Vision Quest of the Plains Indians: Its Spiritual Significance* (Queenston, ON: The Edwin Mellon Press, 1985), 16.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 14-17.
13. Jordan Paper, *Native North American Religious Traditions*, 145.
14. Ibid., 147-148.
15. Philip Jenkins, *Dream Catchers: How Mainstream America Discovered Native Spirituality* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 136.
16. Ibid., 157-158.
17. Ibid.
18. Official Billy Jack Channel, "Billy Jack Right Foot Wops Posner's Face." October 2010. YouTube video, 2:18. Property of Billy Jack Rights, LLC. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVX-voqWuwY>
19. Lisa Aldred, "Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sun Dances," 330.
20. Ibid., 329.
21. Ibid., 335.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 337.
24. *White Shamans & Plastic Medicine Men*, documentary.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Aleticia Tijerina-Jim. Interview with Mary Boone. "Three Native Women Speak About the Significance of Ceremony." *Women & Therapy* 14 no. 1-2. (Peer reviewed journal, 1993), 37.
28. Michael Tlanusta Garrett, "Crying for a Vision," 319.

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