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Cultural Appropriation Of Native American Spirituality: A Closer Look At The Methods Of Appropriation And Effects

This essay will examine the appropriation of Native American spirituality and the effects on Native identity. Appropriation of spirituality can take place in many forms. For the purposes of this essay we are going to focus on three main modes of appropriation, the New Age Movement, selling it, and earthen spirituality. Finally exploring the effects on Native identity followed with an example.

First off, what is cultural appropriation? Cultural appropriation is the act of one taking effects, conceptualizations, and or practices from a culture that is not theirs. In this process an individual who is appropriating culture does so in a way that is without respect and understanding for the culture they are taking from ("Cultural Appropriation"). This means that appropriation can be anything from traditional garb, ceremonies, to how people are thinking about the transcendent and acting upon those thoughts.

Spiritual appropriation has become more and more popular throughout western culture as it becomes, "...part of a wider trend in Western society..." (Möller). However, for Natives and non-Natives, spirituality is very different. For Natives, spirituality is something that is a part of their everyday lives and cannot be separated. On the other hand, most non-natives or people with a more Western perspective have, "...tended to oppose it [spirituality] with 'materiality'." (Möller). This can be seen in the ways in which non-Natives are appropriating spirituality, but first let us look at how Native traditions have become so widespread.

A lot of what is being appropriated has originated with Lakota tradition. A large part of this is because Lakota people had to, at different points in time, release their traditions to the larger public for a number of reasons (Möller). History shows that two main reasons were so that the traditions would not disappear, and so Lakota people could build stronger community ties with other Native tribes (Möller). However, as time has passed these reasons have been either forgotten or ignored. Even though the cultural practices were made more widely known, it does not mean that people can still come in and practice these traditions without serious forethought. In fighting the fine lines between presenting spirituality to look like a, “ ‘world religion’ or as a source of ‘authentic tradition’ ” (Owen Book) these actions have led to many conversations about what it means for non-Natives to participate in these traditions.

Native American spirituality is being appropriated in a number of ways such as the New Age Movement, marketing and selling, and earthen spirituality. In Susann Miskimmin’s essay, *The New Age Movement's Appropriation of Native Spirituality: Some Political Implications for the Algonquian Nation*, Miskimmin explores what a New Ager is and the effects they have on Natives. New Agers are people primarily of white Euro-Canadian decent that believe that they are missing something within their spiritual lives that only Native spirituality can fill. Miskimmin argues that their platform may seem positive but in fact it is based off of cultural appropriation, stereotyping and, “the politics of primitivism” (Miskimmin, 1996). As Miskimmin discusses, history has created a space in which the New Age movement was able to grow because the representation of Native Americans was contradicting the lived experiences of tribes and projecting to the dominant culture an image of subordination. Due to this disconnect between what Natives are and what the dominant culture believes them to be, the New Age

movement has appropriated spiritual practices and is performing them superficially. The New Age movement has appropriated different aspects from Native American spirituality, they take what they want and leave what they don't; "with an emphasis on Algonquian and Plains spiritual belief combined with holistic healing and "human potential" language." (Miskimmin, 1996).

The New Age movement has created many challenges by appropriating Native American spirituality. They are harming Native identity in a number of ways. First, they are further creating false images of Native Americans by not acknowledging cultural diversity throughout Native American tribes which creates an image of a "generic Indian" (Miskimmin, 1996). This further feeds into the dominant culture's perception of Natives that they are not a complex people with many different aspects and meanings in their lives; but that they exist merely as spiritual leaders and protectors of the Earth. This is a gross simplification and radical shift from what they are, people with their own diversity, culture, and lives deserving of respect and space within the dominant culture. By New Age people appropriating Native spirituality they are doing more than stealing aspects of a culture, but they are in fact running from their own identities and escaping the, "responsibility and accountability for "white" racism (Smith1994:70)." while still benefiting from colonialism (Miskimmin, 1996). Looking beyond the New Age Movement to a more general outlook on appropriation, any appropriation of culture is bringing about challenges for a number of people.

Not only is the New Age Movement appropriating Native culture, but it is selling it as well. People in the New Age movement are primarily from a culture of consumption, and in attempts of escaping that culture they are pursuing another, ironically, through the use of consumption (Aldred). This is done through purchasing products that are supposed to help aid in

spiritual finding. New Agers have been seen marketing several aspects of Native culture and spiritual practices, some of which are, sweat lodges, Native “tarot cards”, and “care crystals” (Aldred).

In 2009 James Arther Ray had become a popular new age secular preacher and visited shows such as Oprah and Larry King that made him popular amongst the American people. He went around offering spiritual retreats that promised spiritual cleansing with a cost of around 9,000 to participate in weekend retreats. Ray lead a “spiritual ceremony” in Sedona, Arizona where he set up a sweat lodge for his “spiritual cleansing” practice. In the course of this action several deaths and injuries of participants occurred (Gumbel Guardian Site). Not only has this traditional ceremony been appropriated, but it resulted in people dying. This is traditionally a Native American ceremony, and Ray’s supposed claim to Native American lineage does not grant him the right to this tradition, he simply has not been apart of any Native community and has appropriated their spiritual practices.

Ray is by far not the only person to sell Native spiritual practices. Another example from 2017 demonstrates a person with more “claim” to Native practices doing the same thing. Carrie Chilcott of Ojibway descent from her father's side, has been marketing Anishinaabe traditional practices through Luminous Energetic Pathways Sacred Centre and has received serious backlash. The center claims that they did not know the full meaning behind the sacredness of the practices that Chilcott was selling at their center. The classes being offered for \$1,111 for an “introductory level” have now been taken off of the center's offerings (Monkman). This complicates the argument of appropriation even more because Chilcott has ties to the Ojibway tribe, so some argue that her actions would not be considered appropriation. However,

traditional Native spiritual practices revolve around community, which means that charging for such ceremonies would be against common practice and discouraged. Furthermore, she is taking practices that are meant for the people of that tribe and marketing them to those who do not have the right to participate in those practices. Which then in turn creates a precedent to the larger society that it is acceptable to participate in sacred spiritual rituals of another's culture.

In the book *The Appropriation of Native American Spirituality* by Susanne Owen it is noted that the "Lakota Prophecy" has been a subject of debate ever since Wallace Black Elk began commercializing the Sacred Pipe (Owen). This debate is focused around whether or not the pipe was intended for Lakota or all people, and therefore whether or not the marketing of sacred pipe ceremonies would be appropriation. This is just another example of creating a precedent for participating in another's culture. These precedents have led to more and more groups emerging and claiming Native spiritual practices.

Earthen spirituality is becoming more popular among the dominant American society. An interesting case is with Paganism. One paganist man noted that there are no teachers for his spirituality due to oppression and the closest thing were indigenous people. He claimed that they needed to work with Native Americans in order to have any hope of restoring their spirituality and do so in an "Earth way." (Taylor). Another is the Earth First movement which is also a branch of earthen spirituality which believes that it is creating a counter culture to the dominant American society and that, "precolonial America is a sacred place...and American Indian attitudes" about nature is what is going to save the American culture (Taylor). They do this by performing different spiritual practices that they claim are "inspired by and borrowed" from different religions, and native spirituality (Taylor). As author of, *Earthen spirituality or cultural*

genocide?: Radical environmentalism's appropriation of native american spirituality, Taylor shows that there are many aspects of Native spirituality that are appropriated:

“Among the practices borrowed (explicitly or implicitly) from Native American cultures are the sweat lodge, the burning of purifying sage, the passing of a talking stick during community meetings, ritual processes such as the Council of All Beings which involve a solitary seeking of nature spirits in a way that resembles vision quests, the taking (or discovery) of ‘earth names’, group and solitary wilderness experiences undertaken under the influence of peyote or hallucinogenic mushrooms, ‘tribal unity’ and war dances characterized by ecstatic dancing and prolonged drumming (which bear no resemblance, as far as I can discern, to Native American dancing);” (Taylor).

However, even though they are saying that it is only inspired, the reactions of some Earth Firsters are proving otherwise. Taylor found that one Earth Firster felt that the sweat lodge, “...was not led by a Native American and therefore was not ‘traditional’ enough.” (Taylor). This just goes to show that they are “participating” in a way that is centered around Native identity and spirituality. This proves that there is a grounded belief within the Earth First movement that it is only beneficial if it is a Native practice that is being held “traditionally”. Therefore there is a clear distinction that shows that the Earth First movement is rooted in the appropriation of Native American spirituality.

The opposition to earthen spiritualities has some variation in opinions but there is a clear majority that indigenous people feel that their spirituality is being stolen and therefore their culture is becoming threatened. In response to this, another earth first person said that they did not want to harm the integrity of their culture, but ultimately he was finding his own spirituality

that no one could take away from him (Taylor). Furthermore, defending the earth first movement, Jim O'Conner is a man who often facilitates rituals for the earth first movement gatherings. He believes that they are making their own spiritual path that is linked with nature (Taylor). This is, quite frankly, laughable because they are clearly actively taking from natives and admitting it in some circles, yet still trying to claim that they are building something new themselves. This creates many implications for people who hold Native identity.

As one article illustrates, there are three main groups, (cultural appropriation, the public domain, and research), that play into conflict revolving around the discussion of appropriation of intellectual property (Nicholas). When overlapped, these groups create conflict because of the ways in which they act, and what they are each trying to pursue individually. An example of a conflict that arises from cultural appropriation is cultural tourism. When done improperly, this tourism can lead to the overall harming of cultural integrity and create an environment where the cultural knowledge group must now censor what they do within the public eye. Not only does it harm the culture but it creates a precedent in American society that this behavior is okay, when clearly it is not. Another conflict that can arise is the clashing of two different systems of law. When culture is being appropriated, especially intellectual property, the public domain and the cultural knowledge groups fight over who has the right to that knowledge and how their governing systems should be involved in protecting that knowledge.

In general, this conflict is harming Natives, this can be seen going back to a previously discussed example involving Carrie Chilcott and her claims to be an indigenous healer and selling it as a service. An Anishinaabe elder, Chickadee Richard, said that Chilcott was exploiting Anishinaabe culture and that, "There's certain lines that you don't cross," (Monkman).

Furthermore, Richard said, ““I'm not saying don't use our [spirituality], I'm saying don't use our ways to advance yourself.”” (Monkman).

All in all, there are no benefits to cultural appropriation, just conflict that spreads throughout societies at large. Due to the widespread conflict this issue is creating, there are many people being affected. The appropriation of Native American Spirituality has taken place through the New Age Movement, selling it, and earthen spirituality. As well as many other facets not discussed in this paper. These congregations need to be corrected and dismantled in order to stop the appropriation of Native American Spirituality.

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