

# Complicating Spiritual Appropriation: North American Indian Agency in Western Alternative Spiritual Practice

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*This paper explores the role of North American Indian agency in western alternative spiritual practice with a focus on the UK pow-wow scene and an emphasis upon complicating spiritual appropriation discourse. By examining grassroots native/non-native relationships, the generally levelled accusation of neo-colonial theft by exploitative Indian-wannabes is overturned. In accepting indigenous agency in appropriative activity, the passive native victim role is marginalised in favour of a people engaged in post-colonial dialogue that negates the hegemony of normative Euro-centric narrative. Further, in opposition to the typical allegation levelled at practitioners of western alternative spiritualities of naïvety and a-politicalism, I suggest that this label applies to those who marginalise and/or simplify indigenous agency in spiritual appropriation discourse.*

## 1. Introduction

Practitioners of western alternative spiritualities are routinely castigated by academics and traditional North American Indian peoples for their appropriative practices (AAGA nd; Aldred 2000; Anon 2001, Deloria 1998, Green 1988, Mesteth, Standing Elk & Swift Hawk 1993, Miskimmin 1996, Root 1997, Rose 1992, Smith 1993). Regularly accused of taking aspects of North American Indian spiritualities that were/are not theirs to take, and then misusing them and/or misrepresenting them to the wider public, practitioners of alternative spiritualities are typically perceived of as neo-colonialist thieves. This opinion is understandable.

The overt consumerism that surrounds much western alternative spiritual practice would appear to support this charge, particularly in connection with North American Indian spirituality where dream catchers have been transformed into fashion accessories, and where 'T-shirt Indians' recite popular environmental and spiritual messages. Further, the numerous North American Indian do-it-yourself (DIY) spirituality guides (McGaa 1989, Sun Bear 1989, Wa-Na-Nee-Che & Freke 1996) and the plethora of non-native<sup>1</sup> sweat lodges, vision quest and medicine weekends, along with the activities

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of hobbyists (herein defined as non-native people with a strong interest in aspects of North American Indian lifeways) who pow-wow, both in private gatherings and public events using North American Indian prayers and rituals, would seem to indicate that the accusations may be valid.

Yet more than a few practitioners of western alternative spiritualities are not only anti-consumerist and sincere in their beliefs, but have meaningful contact with North American Indians of various nations, often sensing profound spiritual experiences under their tutelage. Traditionalists argue, “Indians don’t sell their spirituality to anybody, for any price” (McCloud in Churchill 1992:218), but simple accusations of neo-colonialism elide the complexity of indigenous agency in cultural encounters (see amongst others, Deloria 1998, Jenkins 2004, Whitt 1999). In addition, these accusations negate the reciprocal and respectful interactions between native and non-native peoples that occur at grassroots level, and effectively belittle the perceptions of both practitioners of western alternative spiritualities and those North American Indians who share their knowledge with them. In highlighting these grassroots native/non-native relationships, I aim to complicate spiritual appropriation narratives and demonstrate that the usual pernicious dichotomy of ‘bad western alternative spiritual appropriator’ and ‘good native victim’ is false. Not only is this dualism inaccurate, but it furthers neo-colonialism and Euro-centrism by continuing to cast native peoples in a passive light and westerners as dominant.

In exploring indigenous agency in western alternative spiritual practice, I shall focus upon those who appropriate a pan-Indian style of spirituality and identity (based largely on Plains practice) through western alternative pow-wowing (the practitioners I have herein termed pow-wowers) and practitioners of western alternative spiritualities who utilise aspects of a North American Indian Plains style of ritual in their own (non pow-wow based) spiritual practice. Information for this article has been gained through several years of participant-observation fieldwork with pow-wowers in the UK, through interviews with practitioners of western alternative spiritualities and pow-wowers,<sup>2</sup> and discussions with their native teachers.

Before embarking on the exploration, I would like to clarify some terminology. West herein refers not purely to a geographical location, but to the hierarchically driven politically, culturally and economically based ideology of colonialism (Hesse 2002:161), neo-colonialism and globalism; a potentially contentious classification but useful in the context of this work. North American Indian (and occasionally Indian) is used as a homogenous

signifier of pan-Indian-ness and is typically utilised in the context of the originating source. Further, as my methodological approaches draw heavily on post-, de- and anti-colonialism, I have endeavoured to avoid the Eurocentricism of assuming a western identity to be normative and as such have identified scholars as North American Indian (NAI) or non-North American Indian (non-NAI).

## **2. The Spiritual Appropriation Debate**

Appropriation is not new – artefacts, ideas and ideologies have been traded for millennia. However, in the wake of colonialism, the western alternative spiritual appropriation of indigenous identities is problematic. With a legacy of genocide, land theft and the prohibition of traditional lifeways, alongside the imposition of Christianity and western ideological worldviews, the taking on of North American Indian-ness by practitioners of western alternative spiritualities has largely been viewed negatively by North American Indian peoples and academics alike. With the Federal ban on North American Indian spiritual practice only being rescinded in 1978 by the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, neo-colonialism is perhaps a reasonable, although somewhat polemical, cry.

Non-NAI art historian Deborah Root addresses the issue of appropriation by examining the ethical issues surrounding wannabe-Indians. By stating her own past and present appropriation of cultural exotica, Root's analysis has a particular slant. In admitting a sympathy with contemporary cultural cross-dressers, Root identifies a naïveté in the use of indigenous identity as an outward statement of discontent with what she claims to be the “bankrupt(cy)” and dullness of western culture (1997:232) – a much-noted aspect of typical western alternative spiritual understanding (Bowman 1995, Mulcock 1997, Sherwood 1998). The concept of practitioners of western alternative spiritualities as “culture vultures” is one that NAI (Hopi) poet Wendy Rose highlights (1992:414), while North American Indian Religious Studies scholar Lisa Aldred (2000) furthers this charge by arguing that it is the commercialised obsession with indigenous spiritualities that defines the predominantly suburban and urban middle-class, middle-aged white people who, dissatisfied with consumer capitalism, turn to impersonating North American Indians.

Suggesting that western alternative spiritual interest in North American Indian spirituality is nothing more than “imperialistically nostalgic fetishization” for personal growth and transformation, Aldred justifies her claim by drawing on the theories of non-NAI sociologists: Lauren Langman

regarding “proto-communities [of] shopping mall sel[ves]”, and Zygmunt Bauman in connection with neo-tribal yearnings of (self-)identification through sub-cultural consumerism. Arguing that only through commercial consumption can those dissatisfied with consumer capitalism find spiritual fulfilment and a sense of connection, Aldred suggests that the “entrepreneurs” who service the western alternative spiritual marketplace are nothing more than “shrewd businessmen and women [tapping] into lucrative markets” and cites the NAI (Chippewa) spiritual teacher Sun Bear as a prime example, alongside non-NAI authors Lynn Andrews and Jamie Samms with their “North American Indian tarot cards” and allegedly true experiences of native mentoring (Aldred 2000:329-331, 346).

NAI (Algonquian) anthropologist Suzanne Miskimmin (1996) adds to the charges of materialistic naïveté levelled against practitioners of western alternative spirituality, a lack of respect for native peoples and a virtually non-existent involvement in native politics. Non-NAI scholars Denise Cuthbert and Michele Grossman (Cuthbert & Grossman 1996, Grossman & Cuthbert 1998), while censuring the typical de-historisation and de-politicisation that tends to emerge when native traditions are de-contextualised for the western alternative spiritual scene, note that native peoples are themselves not totally “innocent” with regard to appropriation, and indeed are often complicit in representing themselves and their communities to the wider world (Grossman & Cuthbert 1998: 775). This is particularly noticeable with regard to native authors such as Ed McGaa, an Oglala Sioux lawyer who has published on Sioux religion (1989) and Thomas E Mails (1988) who, although not native himself, has with much native assistance written about the secret and sacred knowledge of North American Indian peoples. Although raising the unevenness of representation and the West’s tendency to view the indigene as a spiritual resource, Grossman and Cuthbert argue that while aboriginality has been and continues to be primarily an identity staged by the West, indigenous agency cannot be totally overlooked in discussions concerning appropriation. Other scholars disagree, with NAI (Minnesota Chippewa [Anishinaabe]) writer Gerald Vizenor arguing that the contemporary western alternative spiritual interest in North American Indians is further evidence of colonial victimisation against a people attempting to survive against the odds – in his term a people in “survivance” (1998:15).

The work of non-NAI scholar Marion Bowman concerning “cardiac Celts” is also significant (1995). Highlighting the issues associated with western alternative spiritual seekers self-identifying as Celtic (Celts also historically

being a colonised people), Bowman notes that such elective affinity is not a recent phenomenon, and that it is often heartfelt. Certainly both of these criteria apply to elective Indian-ness. North American Indians have been imitated by westerners for centuries, as NAI (Dakota Sioux) historian Philip Deloria has noted (1998), and thus western alternative spiritual appropriation must be comprehended with reference to past self-identifiers such as Grey Owl (the English born Archie Belaney) and Black Wolf (Ernest Thomson Seton, founder of the Woodcraft Indian Movement). Both men did much to raise the profile of North American Indian-ness in the late nineteenth and early-to-mid twentieth centuries (Atwood 1995, Billingham 1999, Deloria 1998) and contemporary appropriators echo much in the way of their sincerity towards their host cultures (Green 1988). However, despite the sincerity of many contemporary practitioners of western alternative spiritualities (and western alternative pow-wowers), these people tend to be defined in appropriation discourse as politically naïve (neo-)colonial consumers engaged in appropriative and exploitative activity.

### **3. Western Alternative Spiritual Pow-wowing**

#### *Introduction*

Pow-wows are essentially highly symbolic North American Indian ceremonial social events with spiritual elements (Brewer 2000:255, 262; King 2000:232). Although their roots lie with the Plains and Prairie people (Hatoum 1999:47), pow-wows have become a pan-Indian phenomenon, a dynamic and evolving tradition that features drumming, singing and dance. Pow-wows act as an opportunity for North American Indian people to honour their culture and heritage, and stand as a major signifier of North American Indian-ness for North American Indians and western alternative spiritual pow-wowers alike.

No pow-wow can take place without a drum, regardless of its location. Considered the “heartbeat of the [North American Indian] people, [and/or] the heartbeat of the earth” (Brown & Toelken 1987:53), its role in pow-wow is central. The drum, typically quite large and played by at least four people, provides both the rhythm for the dancers and the backdrop for the songs sung by the drumming team (known as singers). However, the drum is not understood as just being a musical instrument, as its circular shape is considered sacred and representative of unity and the circle of life. Often decorated with an eagle feather (a sacred and potent item), the drum typically has a specific keeper whose role it is to ensure it receives due deference – the drum should never left unattended at events and should be regularly

ceremonially smudged with sacred herbs as warrants its status as a respected and sacred being. In the language of non-NAI anthropologist Alfred Irving Hallowell, the drum is an “other-than-human-person” (Hallowell 2002). Traditionally singing teams are male only, and although there are several mixed-sex teams and some all female singers, these groups are not uncontroversial (Hatton 1986).

Alongside the singers, the dancers are of crucial importance to any pow-wow event. All dances take place within a sacred circle regardless of the location of the pow-wow (often a school gymnasium). Further, although there are many different styles of dance several are common to almost all events from small traditional family ceremonial pow-wows to large inter-tribal pan-Indian competitions. The majority of these dances are single-sex only, with mixed-sex dances unusual due to traditional restrictions on physical contact between genders. Characteristically, dances are single-style, with each having symbolic steps and garb (termed regalia and frequently hand-made by the dancer) that typify notions of appropriate gender behaviour in a culture where men and women traditionally have clearly defined roles – men’s dances typically signifying the masculine pursuits of hunting and warfare, such as the Omaha (or War) dance, while women’s dances tend toward reinforcing notions of domesticity and a closeness to nature. The Northern Traditional women’s dance enshrines this notion, as the delicacy of the dance steps are said to be in keeping with a woman’s demureness (her feet remaining close to the ground signifying closeness with the earth), while her regalia fringes represent the rocking of a baby’s cradle, and her garb accoutrements of awl case, knife and fire-striker signifying industriousness, generosity and hospitality respectively (St Pierre & Long Soldier 1995:77).

### *Western Alternative Spiritual Pow-wows*

Often termed hobbyists, some western alternative spiritual individuals dress, dance and/or sing as North American Indians in enactments of contemporary native pow-wow gatherings. Non-native pow-wowing is a predominantly white-western pursuit and, although not a mass activity, is one to be found in North America, Canada, Australia and across large stretches of Europe, with regular gatherings in Germany, Denmark, Bulgaria, Poland, the former USSR and Britain (there is also a small number of pow-wows in Japan). In recent years, two anthropological/ethnographic films have been made concerning pow-wowing. NAI (Sihasapa Lakota) anthropologist Beatrice Medicine, together with her non-NAI (Lithuanian) counterpart Liucija Baskauskas, made a short film concerning Russian pow-wows entitled *Seeking the Spirit: Plains Indians in Russia* (1999). This film includes

interviews with Russian pow-wowers and responses to their activities from members of the Wakpala community of Standing Rock, South Dakota. In the second film, non-NAI (Ukrainian-Canadian) film maker John Paskievich, together with non-NAI anthropologist David Scheffel, examines the Czech scene in *If Only I were an Indian* (1995). In this film, three native people, a Cree couple and an Obijway woman, are brought to Czechoslovakia to witness the pow-wow activities there.

Both films offer an exposé of pow-wow as perceived by the non-native pow-wowers and by members of the host culture, whilst shedding light on the complexity of identity formation and the power of representation in spiritual identity construction. These films also raise issues with regard to the appropriation debate, for the pow-wowers tend to view native culture as static, whereas the North American Indian people interviewed noted, and indeed embodied, the dynamic side of traditional life. There seems a strange irony in the Wakpala people, wearing jeans and T-shirts, in the luxury of their centrally-heated reservation community centre, watching ethnographic footage of Russians living rough in tipis and off the land for the weekend, whilst wearing loin clothes (including the women who typically in native society dressed modestly). Here, Aldred's charges of nostalgic fetishisation and neo-tribalism are accurate.

The meeting of disparate but like-minded individuals through pow-wow activity and their unified conception of North American Indians as typified by western imperial constructs of pre-colonial times, particularly those represented by the nineteenth century non-NAI (German) novelist Karl May, is notable. However, as both countries lacked at the time of filming western shopping-mall consumerism, this charge would be unfairly applied. The filmed Russians and Czechs were sub-cultural but not consumerist, hardly the 'culture vultures' of Rose, but without doubt they were culturally cross-dressing in accordance with Root et al's theory of discontentment with life.

Despite these two films (and the widespread geographical if not popular appeal of pow-wow outside its host culture), writing concerning non-native pow-wow is scarce. While NAI scholars Rayna Green (1988), Philip J Deloria (1998), and Mark Mattern (1999), as well as non-NAI anthropologist Teri Brewer (2000), have all touched on the subject in brief, only an article by non-NAI anthropologist Colin F Taylor (1988) addresses non-native pow-wow in any great depth. However, his insider perspective and overtly pro-non-native pow-wow bias marginalises the potential colonialism of this activity – a subject addressed by both NAI (Dakota Sioux) historian Philip

Deloria (1998:128-154), and by NAI (Mohawk) anthropologist Renae Watchman (2002). Their main objection to pow-wowing concerns the a-political nature of pow-wowers' involvement in native life, an aspect they perceive as essentially neo-colonialist. As noted previously, this understanding has much in common with the majority of academic discourse about spiritual appropriation *per se*, and tends to marginalise North American Indian agency and respectful western alternative spiritual engagement – aspects found in both the ethnographic films.

### *UK Pow-wows*

Pow-wowers have been dancing and singing in Britain for at least half a century, although the oldest official pow-wow (the Veterans Pow-wow) is said to be only around thirty years old. Although Taylor attributes the establishment of British pow-wows to exhibitions of North American Indian-ness by himself and fellow "hobbyists" from the English Westerners' Society (est 1954) (1988:564-65) after exhibitions of dancing seen at shows such as Buffalo Bill's Wild West, my research informs me differently. My own informants have asserted that pow-wowing started in England in the late 1940s after North American Indian servicemen stationed in the UK introduced interested locals to their own pow-wow events (personal testimonies 1999-2001).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, there are approximately ten British pow-wows held annually, mostly on regular weekends in the southern half of England, although interest in North American Indians, their lifeways and spiritualities is widespread throughout the UK, with a significant interest group in Scotland. British pow-wows run from spring through to Christmas, with anything between fifty and several hundred dancers, usually accompanied by at least one of the five British singing teams. They are mostly held in school halls, although the annual Bush Farm Bison Centre Pow-wow in Wiltshire, England, takes place in a picturesque lake-side field in July against a backdrop of tipis and roaming bison.

While there are organising committees for each pow-wow event, the overall scene appears to have little in the way of overt organisation, with no official leaders and no formal communication network between the pow-wowers (although one of the singing teams has a web site detailing forthcoming events). However, there is an unofficial hierarchy with the oldest Master of Ceremonies, Kim Elk Oakeshott, tending to guide the direction of this loosely organised collection of individuals due to his generally-perceived, although not unquestioned, authority with regard to aspects of the North

American Indian-ness, particularly with regard to spiritual matters. As with the Russian and Czech pow-wowlers, a non-consumerist neo-tribalism informs this activity, although due to greater access to information beyond that of May, British pow-wowlers rarely dress in loin clothes!

However, it is the relationships of pow-wowlers with North American Indian people that I wish to highlight. Centreland is commonly considered to be the lead singing team in Britain, partly due to their skill but also because they are all-male and therefore considered the most authentic. They also regularly perform Stateside. Centreland hit the headlines in Britain in 1997 when they sang a traditional Lakota memorial song at the exhumation ceremony of Long Wolf (Sunkmanitu Hanska) and Rose Ghost Dog (known as White Star). Long Wolf, a veteran of the Little Big Horn, had been one of Buffalo Bill's show-Indians and had died of pneumonia in London in June 1892. His body was buried, against his wishes, in Brompton Cemetery, London, and was joined two months later by White Star, a twenty-month old performer fatally injured during a show (Gallop 2001:199-201).

NAI acceptance of Centreland is particularly notable, as Centreland may be thought a clear example of native/non-native relations from start to finish. The joint grave was discovered by a British woman, and the exhumation and repatriation arranged and financed by British enthusiasts (personal correspondence 2002). Whilst the singers would not necessarily self-identify as being part of the western alternative spiritual scene, their understanding of the drum as an other-than-human-person and the inherent spiritual dimension to pow-wowling allows for such categorisation. Despite this apparent inauthenticity, Centreland's public performance was accompanied by NAI John Blackfeather, the great grandson of Long Wolf, and was remarked upon favourably by Wilmer Mesteth. Mesteth is a NAI (Lakota) spiritual leader with a well publicised anti-appropriation stance and was a lead signatory to the 1993 Declaration of War against the Exploiters of Lakota Spirituality.

At the Lakota Summit V (7-11 June 1993), representatives of the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota nations unanimously passed a document accusing "New Age Indian-wannabes" of practising "offensive and harmful pseudo-religious ... ceremoni[es] and ...rituals that desecrate and abuse... Lakota spiritual traditions." Further, they denounced all those who "misrepresent the sacred traditions and spiritual practices of the Lakota people," including native spiritual teachers (Mesteth et al 1993). Mesteth insisted that a "stand to defend our people and our ways" had to be taken against all those whose "practices desecrated, mocked and abused ... our most precious Lakota

ceremonies and spiritual practices" (Mesteth in Taliman 1993:2). However, it would seem that despite the Lakota's censure of spiritual appropriation, Centreland's activity was sanctioned at the highest level and far from being naïve exploitation, Centreland's singing was perceived as honouring the Lakota and their traditions.

Such acceptance is not unique. Centreland and Oakeshott were invited to join an American Indian Movement (AIM) pow-wow in 1990. AIM, a movement known more for its militancy than its leniency toward spiritual appropriators, found the UK pow-wow scene respectful enough of the host culture to honour them with an invitation. Organised by NAI (Leech Lake Ojibwe) Dennis Banks, co-founder of AIM and renowned political activist, as part of that year's Sacred Run (an international, multicultural and spiritual event that supports Native American runners carrying a message that all life is sacred [Sacred Run Foundation nd]), the AIM pow-wow was held in Milton Keynes, UK (personal correspondence 2003), with Centreland taking a central role. With both Means and Mesteth encouraging the team, accusations regarding western alternative spiritual avoidance of political involvement in native affairs needs to be reassessed, as the politics of appropriation were negated in both cases.

A further example of native/non-native interaction on the British pow-wow scene concerns another singing team, the White Horse Nation. Originally known as The Crazy Drumsticks, the team had a chance meeting in North Dakota with a local group of singers, the Horse family. After developing a respectful and reciprocal relationship, the Horse family gave to The Crazy Drumsticks several of their owned songs (pow-wow songs often being passed down through a family), and advised them to re-name their drum due to the recent and unexpected death of a team member. With the Horse family's consent, The Crazy Drumsticks' name was changed to the White Horse Nation, using a traditional drum re-naming ceremony recommended by the family – a ritual sweat to purify the participants and a purification of the drum with sacred herbs (personal correspondence 2003).

These three pow-wow examples hardly speak of colonialist exploitation by westerners, of theft and disrespectful appropriative practices. Indeed, Centreland's inclusion in the exhumation ceremony and Sacred Run Pow-wow, and White Horse Nation's friendship with the Horse family of North Dakota says much about indigenous agency in the process of cultural exchange, and serve as examples of respectful native/non-native relations at grassroots level. Further, as noted, although the historical origins of British

pow-wow seem lost in the mists of time, there is strong evidence of native involvement in its initial stages. Indeed, such native involvement is ongoing, as today it is not uncommon to find British pow-wows attended by either native service-personnel stationed in the UK, or UK-resident North American Indians. Indeed, contemporary native feelings toward the direction of the British pow-wow scene has been a driving force in the implantation of recent changes, particularly with regard to acceptable regalia. Deeply offended by feather headdresses on those without the right to wear them (typically veterans and respected elders), Lakota service-personnel made a public statement concerning the state of British pow-wow in November 2003. This statement was reiterated in Germany, where pow-wowing and general interest in North American Indian people is significant – Silverlake City, a Wild West theme park opened near Berlin in 2004.

Despite the NAI (Lakota) spiritual leader Arvol Looking Horse having recently reiterated the 1993 anti-appropriation sentiment, and furthering the call for non-natives to “no longer take part in Lakota ceremonies in any more than a support capacity” (Looking Horse 2003), at grassroots level non-native pow-wowing is welcomed. In clear defiance of Looking Horse, Lakota service-personnel have continued in Mean’s and Mesteth’s footsteps by marginalising native politics in favour of local interests. While Cuthbert and Grossman are correct in their charges of de-contextualisation in non-native ritualising (as western alternative spiritual pow-wowers are essentially ‘weekend-Indians’), Aldred’s allegation of a deliberate negation of politics needs to be tempered by due recognition of native agency in appropriative activity.

#### **4. Western Alternative Spiritual Practice**

There are further examples in addition to pow-wowning of North American Indian agency in western alternative spiritual practice. The first I wish to highlight concerns Scott Frazier. Frazier claims a Crow/Santee Sioux descent, is an enrolled member of the Crow nation, and a long standing sun dance leader. He heads the Ehnamani Sun Dance Church, which raises funds to help support the buffalo and wolves of Yellowstone Park and provides regular spiritual blessings at the park to this end.

Mark, an English practitioner of western alternative spiritualities, first met Frazier in 1989 at a sun dance in Reigate, Surrey (in South East England). Having gained tribal consent for the Reigate event, Scott ran a three day fast and prayer gathering for western alternative spiritual seekers such as Mark. Having benefited spiritually from the experience, Mark later visited Scott and

his family in Montana, and embarked upon a vision quest there. After a sweat to purify his body and mind, Mark (under Frazier's guidance) spent three nights and days with no food, no water and no shelter in the traditional manner until his vision came. During this period, members of the Crow nation prayed for Mark's safety. After his safe return, Scott interpreted Mark's vision in the traditional way, emphasising both the personal and community aspects of his experience. Finding Mark strong enough and respectful enough for the trials of traditional rituals, Scott allowed Mark to take part in three sun dances over a period of several years. Non-native participation in such rituals, although not common place, is not unheard of, with non-NAI spiritual seeker Michael Hull having written about his sun dancing experiences with the Lakota (2003). Just as Hull was found deserving by his Lakota teachers, so Scott informed me that sun dancing values were not unique to native people. Indeed he informed me that some native individuals were not suited to such intense spiritual ordeals, whereas some westerners were, and as such should not be excluded from participation if that was where Spirit had led them.

Mark told me that although sun dancing was an ordeal, it was an experience he felt at home with. He suggested to me that he may have been a North American Indian in a past life – arguably a concept that could be seen to place him firmly in the naïve neo-colonialist camp. Not only is this form of reincarnation a non-normative belief for many North American Indian people, but given the history of colonialism it may be highly unlikely an Indian-spirit would return to the body of a European (Smith 1993). However, Scott's involvement in Mark's spiritual tuition I believe negates, to a large extent, this categorisation as neo-colonialist. Not only has Scott endorsed Mark's respectful attitude towards North American Indian people and spirituality, but Mark has kept his experiences quiet, telling only a select few of his relationship with Scott – he has not sought to capitalise on the experience by selling his story as Hull has done. Also, Mark has no dream catchers nor other Indian-signifiers in his home, and nor does he wear any of the romanticised Noble Savage T-shirts so beloved of the wannabe-Indians as portrayed by academics such as Root and Aldred. Mark, despite his reincarnation belief, is perhaps not a target of the 1993 Declaration. Further, Scott's involvement negates Looking Horse's call for New Age Indian-wannabes to desist engagement with Lakota spirituality – Scott is hardly a consumer-driven exploitative culture vulture thieving ceremonies from passive native victims!

Scott too hardly fits under Aldred's 'consumerist shrewd businessman' label and as such cannot be placed with Sun Bear as an 'inauthentic plastic medicine man' or 'shame-on shaman' (Anon 2001). Scott has not benefited from the relationship with Mark financially as he did not charge for his services, and although Scott has toured several times in the UK giving lectures and raising funds for his conservation organisation, he has never talked openly about spiritual matters nor actively recruited potential devotees. The worst of his 'crimes' is the de-contextualisation of North American Indian lifeways in his evening lectures, reminiscent of Grossman and Cuthbert's allegation against practitioners of western alternative spiritualities.

Another of Frazier's students is Sam. Sam believes himself to be a member of the 'stolen generation' – taken in infancy by the federal government from native parents to be adopted by westerners who eventually settled in England. In attempting to trace his birth heritage and resolve some of the confusion he experiences living "between two worlds", where the draw of his genetic inheritance conflicts with the lure of contemporary western materialist society (personal communication 2003), Sam has been guided by Scott in pan-Indian ritual and belief. Completing a Chippawa/Cree sun dance in 2003 with Scott, Sam also draws on teachings he received from a Cheyenne whilst training for a role in the stage play *Hiawatha* – learning to smudge and ritually sweat as well as mastering traditional hoop dancing and some native songs (personal communication 2002). Sam firmly believes that these teachers, and in particular Scott, have aided him to come home spiritually and argues that such teachings should be available to all who seek them regardless of their genetic lineage. He holds that by incorporating aspects of North American Indian spirituality into their identity, practitioners of western alternative spiritualities benefit themselves, their communities and the planet through applying traditional wisdom and an earth-centred philosophy to their daily lives and activities – a comment that has much in common with the understandings of Grey Owl and Black Wolf as well as Root with regard to discontented westerners.

In conversation with Sam and Frazier about appropriation, they asserted that the taking on of native spirituality, albeit in a somewhat diluted form through the unavoidable lack of a life-long apprenticeship, deviates little in essence from traditional teachings. They argued that not all native people were called to serve Spirit, and asserted that many native people would have ritualised with only a very limited understanding of traditional beliefs. Therefore, they suggested, practitioners of western alternative spiritualities are not

necessarily much less connected with North American Indian spirituality than many North American Indians themselves, particularly urbanised natives. Further, they argued that practitioners of western alternative spiritualities' desire to learn placed them in a favourable position for receiving sacred knowledges – knowledges which many native people they suggested, have turned away from (personal communication 2002).

Whilst this understanding varies considerably from the traditionalist point of view as expressed by the Lakota Declarations, it is not an uncommon perception. As well as the assistance and support given to the ethnographically-filmed pow-wowers, members of the Bulgarian pow-wow scene have also gained friendships with North American Indians due to their heartfelt desire to respect North American Indian lifeways. My Bulgarian contact has ritualised at both the Lakota Pine Ridge and Rosebud Reservations, was initiated as a sacred Iniskim (Buffalo) keeper by the Blackfoot, and was given a sacred pipe by the Omaha nation to use in Bulgarian pow-wow ceremonies (personal correspondence 2003). Once more, despite official castigation, at grassroots level spiritual appropriation by respectful non-native individuals is often rewarded.

Another spiritual mentor to the western alternative spiritual scene is Tony Dreamwalker Press, who has a following on the British pow-wow circuit. Dreamwalker claims lineage from the Creek and Cherokee nations as well as from the Scottish Cameron and Davidson clans, and in a physical display of cultural exchange embodies his ancestry in a blend of fancy pow-wow garb and brightly coloured tartan. With this hybrid ancestry, Dreamwalker stresses his ties to traditional earth-centred lifeways from both sides of the Atlantic. However, notably he only teaches North American Indian spirituality to westerners not *vice versa*, stating that only the “earthy and grounded people” of his Celtic homeland can “understand and appreciate [his] teachings” (Dreamwalker 2003).

Dreamwalker claims to have been gifted with sacred teachings from a variety of North American Indian elders, including “the last of the O-Tah-Wa teachers” who allegedly passed onto him their knowledge of the Three Sacred Hoops/Circle of Life ritual. Finding support for his teachings through the British pow-wow circuit, Dreamwalker set up the organisation Thunder Warriors UK, which instructed fee-paying members in spiritual rites such as vision questing and sun dancing, and aboriginal wood-craft and survival skills (Dreamwalker 2003). Here Dreamwalker echoes Black Wolf's innate environmentalist understandings of North American Indian, but at a price.

Although not exorbitant, the annual membership fee of thirteen British pounds included a compulsory spiritual teaching and effectively cast North American Indian religion as a saleable commodity. As previously noted, the issue of exchanging money for spirituality is typically conceived of in negative terms, and understood as demeaning to Spirit and the host culture, even in the writings of westerners such as Hull who have been granted access to sacred North American Indian ceremonies (2000:2). After running ceremonies both in the UK and on the tribal lands of the Cherokee for some years, Dreamwalker came to the attention of the North American Indian online anti-appropriation group AAGA (Go-Hi-Yu-Hi: Respect). AAGA have named and shamed Dreamwalker as a fraudster and wannabe-Indian and questioned his ancestry, while the Cherokee of Georgia Tribal Council have stopped him using their land for rituals (predominantly sun dancing and vision questing).

Dreamwalker and Frazier are an interesting comparison, for Dreamwalker's agency in appropriation differs little from that of Frazier's except with regard to cost and despite Aldred's 'shrewd entrepreneur' charge, Dreamwalker's fees were undoubtedly modest. Further, his students were predominantly pow-wowers already known to the Lakota service-personnel, and were already engaged in spiritual appropriation and regularly paid to ritualise as North American Indians through the UK pow-wow scene. The distinction between the two appears to concern finance and formalisation. It would seem that grassroots involvement in appropriation such as Frazier's is tolerated, even encouraged if it actively supports native people, but when this activity becomes more formalised as in the Thunder Warriors and money between the teacher and pupil changes hands, the Declarations of War take precedence.

However, it must be noted that Hull has profited from his book about his sun dancing experiences with the Lakota, an activity which can be perceived as no less appropriative as those undertaken by the Thunder Warriors who preferred to keep their acquisition of spiritual knowledge private. It would seem then that Hull's connections with the Lakota on their tribal lands gives a legitimacy to his actions over and above those taught by Dreamwalker – at least in his eyes and the Lakota who taught him. Authenticity with regard to spiritual appropriation appears intensely hierarchical, with it being more acceptable for sanctioned tribal authority figures such as Means, Mesteth, and Looking Horse (who notably has published work about the sacred pipe ritual [1987]) to teach non-natives despite the Lakota Declarations, while less

prominent North American Indians involved in such activity, such as Dreamwalker, are heavily censured.

## 5. Conclusion

There are many grassroots incidences of North American Indian support for western alternative spiritual practice, despite official declarations that would seem to indicate the contrary. Interaction of the British pow-wow movement as a whole with North American Indians, and particularly the relationships forged by Centreland and White Horse Nation, exemplify respect between divergent groups of people. Indeed, through pow-wow, native individuals in Britain have been actively engaged in longstanding relationships with non-natives, and have assisted in ensuring that representations of native-ness outside its normative context is acceptable, such as with regard to head-dresses. The ethnographic footage and the experiences of the Bulgarian pow-wow scene similarly indicate that grassroots support for appropriative activity is not uncommon, with pow-wow seemingly providing a safe space for appropriate appropriation. However, with the endorsement of Mesteth and Means, UK pow-wowing can be seen to have gone beyond such grassroots acceptance to gain official sanction.

There is also evidence of grassroots support of western alternative spiritual appropriation through the tuition of non-natives by native individuals such as Frazier and Dreamwalker. Under their tutelage, western alternative spiritual seekers have gained knowledge of North American Indian rituals such as vision questing and sun dancing, although it would seem that once spiritual tuition becomes formalised then both teachers and pupils fall into the abusive category as outlined by the Lakota Declaration with Dreamwalker now standing alongside Sun Bear in the (in)-authenticity stakes.

Yet informally, Frazier has been able to teach Mark, who despite his reincarnation belief displays few of the derogatory characteristics attributed by Root and Aldred. Like the pow-wowlers, Mark and the Thunder Warriors have learnt directly from native people, and indigenous agency in appropriation must be seen to negate some of the derogatory allegations. Root accuses practitioners of western alternative spiritualities of naïveté, Miskimmin of a-politics and Aldred of consumerist neo-tribalism. Yet, pow-wowing requires skill and patience, songs and drum beats, and dance steps need to be learnt and regalia made – beaded buckskin is not available off-the-peg and singing is an on-the-job apprenticeship! Vision questing and sun dancing too are not entered into lightly – these rituals require dedication and determination, and are not embarked on naïvely. In addition, although

certainly neo-tribal, none of the western alternative spiritual pow-wowers could be classified as overtly consumerist. Whilst cultural cross-dressing and a discontentment with their everyday lives binds pow-wowers in an echo of Grey Owl's and Black Wolf's heartfelt respect for North American Indian-ness, the typical unavailability of pow-wow related items on the High Street marginalise any opportunities for Aldred's imperialistic and nostalgic consumerism.

The typical western alternative spiritual avoidance of politics is also more complex than Miskimmin suggests, as rarely do native teachers engage their pupils in the appropriation debate. Indeed, only the Lakota service-personnel have discussed appropriateness in appropriation with UK pow-wowers with neither Means nor Mesteth attempting to alter the scene during their involvement. However, the distinction between acceptable appropriation and inappropriate exploitation is more complex still. Indigenous agency appears to be acceptable at grassroots level, particularly if it serves native interests such as with non-native pow-wowing, and when arrangements are informal and low key, as with Frazier and my Bulgarian contact. However, once money changes hands openly and *ad hoc* mentoring becomes prescribed tuition, acceptability in agency develops a pecking order, with appropriateness going to Hull and the Lakota and appropriation to Dreamwalker and the Thunder Warriors. Root may understand a lack of political involvement in appropriation issues by western alternative spiritual seekers as naïve, yet there appears to be a deliberate avoidance of the complexities of and hierarchies in native politics by those involved in grassroots inter-cultural activity.

The issue of westerners practising North American Indian spiritual tradition, then, is more complex than many academic commentators suggest. Without full tribal authority, but with their knowledge, several North American Indians assist non-natives to complete sweat lodges, vision quests and sun dances on and off tribal land. Further, Lakota people have employed the services of British pow-wowers in direct opposition to their Declaration of War. Thus, to brand all those who practise some form of spirituality associated with North American Indians as exploitative Indian-wannabes engaged in neo-colonialism is trivialising not only the experiences of those individuals, but also marginalising any form of indigenous acceptance and agency – a perception that tends to cast native people as passive victims and practitioners of western alternative spiritualities as selfish and greedy cultural imperialists, a pernicious and false dichotomy. Yet, in recognising North American Indian agency in western alternative spiritual practice, passive

victimisation becomes active ‘survivance’, with encounters resonating a post-colonial speaking-back, empowering and enabling discourses that give voice to those often perceived as voiceless in the dominant culture, and allowing for dominant hegemonic discourse to be disrupted.

Spiritual appropriation discourse is complex, and over-simplifying the issues, negates the potency of indigenous agency and marginalises the reality of native/non-native relationships in favour of a Euro-centric approach that ironically continues to victimise North American Indians and place them at the mercy of largely non-existent neo-colonialists. Further, by ignoring the hierarchies within native culture, North American Indians run the risk of being perceived as homogenous and static, again a falsity. Rather than practitioners of western alternative spiritualities and pow-wowlers being naïve and a-political, I suggest that these labels apply to those who continue to discuss spiritual appropriation without reference to North American Indian agency.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Indigenous and native peoples are herein defined specifically as "the existing descendants of the people who inhabited the present territory of the country wholly or partially at the time when persons of a different culture or ethnic origin arrived there from other parts of the world, overcame them and, by conquest, settlement or other means reduced them to a non-dominant or colonial situation; who today live more in conformity with their particular social, economic, and cultural customs and tradition than with the institutions of the country of which they now form a part, under state structure, which incorporates mainly the national, social, and cultural characteristics of other segments of the population which are predominant" (working definition adopted by the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations [1986], cited in Holder & Corntassel 2002:12).

<sup>2</sup> At their request the practitioners of western alternative spiritualities have been anonymised.