



CULTURAL BORROWING/ CULTURAL APPROPRIATION: A RELATIONSHIP MODEL FOR RESPECTFUL BORROWING

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heritage, such as Wiccan popularizer Gerald Gardner, admit to supplementing received material with more contemporary sources.

Where, however, is the line between respectful cultural borrowing and disrespectful cultural appropriation? Pagans fall on both sides of this equation as borrowers and the borrowed-from.

In particular, British Traditional Wiccans have frequently expressed anger at the appropriation and commodification of "Wicca." The word "Wicca" is now frequently used interchangeably with "eclectic contemporary Paganism" and has been applied in popular Pagan books to practices that bear little or no resemblance to the duotheistic, highly liturgical, lineaged mystery religion that Gerald Gardner's coven practiced. Dismayed and bitter at the association of their sacred traditions with faddish Teen Witch spell books, most of which lack any clear theology or mention of central rituals such as the Great Rite, some British Traditional covens have become doubly secretive, irritated by seekers whose interest springs not from an authentic spiritual calling, but from

an adolescent rebellion against their parents' Christianity.

I first encountered the term "Neo-Wicca" (used to describe any Wiccan-derived tradition that deviates heavily from the work of Gerald Gardner and lacks initiatory lineage) on British Traditional Wiccan listservs in the early 2000s, along with the far more derogatory term "McWicca." Detractors of these Wiccan innovations often point fingers at Silver Ravenwolf, Scott Cunningham, or even Raymond Buckland for the watering-down of their practices. Some of those who use the term "Neo-Wicca" see it as a valid religious path, but insist that the initiations and experiential training received in a lineaged Wiccan coven are unique and cannot be learned from a book. Others imply that the training involved in eclectic covens is simply so lax that the result is a fast food version of the religion. On one humor site, an aspiring young witch named Raven Ravensong places her order to be a witch at the drive-thru and then adds, "[C]an I get a first degree Initiation on that?"¹

As borrowers, contemporary Pagans and those identifying as "New Age" practitioners have most often offended Native American groups by using their spiritual practices out of context and without any kind of relationship to living Native American

We Pagans often understand ourselves as reconstituting the spirit of pre-Christian, earth-based polytheistic or Goddess-centered traditions through a combination of historical research, creativity, and divine inspiration. Some of us also bring family traditions, experiences with traditional shamanic or ecstatic practices, or familiarity with other major world religions such as Christianity, Judaism, or Buddhism. Regardless of how we come to Paganism, however, the need for creative reconstruction is a real one. Although all religions are syncretistic to an extent, Paganism is a self-consciously *combinative* religion (to use scholar of American religion Catherine Albanese's term). Even those who claim an ancient

1 *The Cauldron: A Pagan Forum*, <<http://www.ccauldron.net/humor39.php>>. A good summary of one British Traditional witch's take on Neo-Wicca vs. Wicca can be found at <<http://community.livejournal.com/craftofthewise/37060.html>>, in the LiveJournal community "craftofthewise." See also the term "fluffy bunny" as defined by the *Urban Dictionary* (<<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=fluffy%20bunny>>):

1. Used as a derogatory term for someone who is ignorant, willfully ignorant and/or disrespectful towards Wicca yet claims to be Wicca[n].

communities. Religious studies scholar Sarah Pike writes of the 1993 "Declaration of War against Exploiters of Lakota Spirituality," a statement that accuses New Age practitioners and Neo-Pagans of "cultural genocide" through commodification, dilution, and misinterpretation of Lakota practices (124-5; also York, 368 and Magliocco, 216). Native American leaders such as poet and anthropologist Wendy Rose accuse whites of stereotyping Native peoples and then profiting off these misrepresentations in books and workshops, as in the example of bestselling author Lynn Andrews, whose eighteen books include titles such as *Medicine Woman* and *Jaguar Woman*. Others fear that acts of cultural appropriation will endanger Native Americans' legal rights to their religious practices. As increasing numbers of whites imitatively use the feathers and claws of endangered species for ritual purposes, a commercial demand for these objects arises and potentially threatens Native Americans' exemption from endangered species laws. New Agers and Pagans have also interfered with the growth of sacred plants and overused sites sacred to Native Americans (Pike, 136).

White fascination with Native Americans often lacks an awareness of power inequalities. Ritual studies scholar Ronald Grimes writes of The Improved Order of Red Men, a fraternal society of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America. Members dressed as Native Americans and engaged in "Indian" initiation rites intended to solidify social relationships and prove the candidate's masculinity. Ironically, Native American peoples were, during this time, still being removed at gunpoint from their land by state and national armed forces. Quasi-Indian ritual societies remain

active in the United States today, over Native American objections that they represent a spiritual version of the same imperialism that destroyed their communities economically and culturally and confined them to reservations (117-9). These "plastic shamans" (a term coined in the Native American activist community) include organizations such as Chuluaqui-Quodoushka, a sexually oriented New Age organization that founder Harley Reagan claimed was of Cherokee origin when he appeared on HBO's *Real Sex* in 1992.² After being threatened with a lawsuit by Cherokee leaders, Reagan relabeled his practice as a blend of ancient traditions. Workshops in "the Q" are still available today.

Even borrowers in active relationship with Native communities sometimes commit profound blunders. Bron Taylor writes of EarthFirst! activists who created tensions with Native American activist allies by offering sweat lodges for menstruating women and lodges where alcohol was allowed, practices that are utterly taboo in traditional sweats (195). Pagans and New Agers often see living, earth-based religious paths such as those practiced by Native American groups as potential sources of effective, authentic shamanic practices. To borrow these practices without sufficient relationship or context, however, easily leads to variations that the source groups see as desecration or mockery.

Objections from practitioners of traditional earth-based religions have increased sincere Pagans' desire to borrow respectfully from other cultures, particularly because the *need* to borrow is often deeply felt. Many Pagans feel that with the advent of mass communication technology, humanity is entering a period of rapid evolutionary change in which a greater connection

to the earth, to our bodies, and to the spirits and deities of the land is essential for our health. We may resist the idea that practices can be claimed and owned only by those with a certain ethnic heritage because we see the free flow of ideas as a necessary part of our growth, perhaps even our salvation (Magliocco, 234-6; York, 371). Further, those of us who experience the gods as objectively real often feel that the divine transcends cultural boundaries, and that the gods choose to whom they speak without regard to blood ancestry. To reject an approach from a divine being because one's skin is the wrong color seems an act of disrespect equally as profound as the desecration of a traditional practice through ignorance (Magliocco, 228).

To cease borrowing entirely is both undesirable and impossible. All religions are combinative, and it is often in encounter with other cultures that creative and exciting religious advances take place. The religions of the African Diaspora—Voudou, Candomblé, Santería, and more—are living proof of how oppressed religious traditions can fuse with the religion of the dominant culture in a way that increases the power and influence of its practitioners. Even the Protestant Christianity that I was raised in, and that no one would contradict my claim to, is the product of two thousand years of cultural encounter and adaptation that began when a tiny Jewish sect first offended and then fascinated the elite of the Roman Empire. As a product of this same kind of cultural churning, our Paganism is not and can never be "pure," but it can be authentic. Whether we are witches concerned with the commodification of our religion into "McWicca" or eclectic Pagans concerned to honor the integrity of the Voudou, Native American shamanism, Hinduism, or ancient Hellenism that inspires us, I believe

2. Used as a derogatory term for someone who takes a 'Love & light' approach to Wicca - i.e. lives in a make-believe world of fairies and unicorns, or someone who has an unrealistic view of the good within the world.

3. Often a teen who becomes 'Wicca' in order to follow a fad, also known as 'McWiccans' or *Charmed* fans. Often identified by their oversized pentagrams, 'gothic' clothing and the belief that spells given to them by other Fluffy Bunnies online have some sort of power.

2 NationMaster.com, *Encyclopedia: Deer Tribe Metis* <<http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Deer-Tribe-Metis>>.

we can all benefit by borrowing in a framework of relationship.

Fundamentally, borrowing can and should be a sign of respect—we see something we admire and seek to emulate it. The complaints of Native Americans about cultural appropriation center primarily on the lack of energy exchange between Native communities and borrowers—whites are seen as selfishly taking without giving back, harvesting Native practices as spiritual status symbols but not coming to a place of empathy, understanding, or social solidarity. To avoid this kind of cut-and-run cultural appropriation, I suggest the following model for respectful borrowing:

1. Personal encounter/attraction
2. Research and community engagement
3. Evaluation of power/energy exchange

In the “attraction” stage, we are seekers encountering a new practice or entity for the first time. Perhaps a film or novel has turned us on to a ritual we’ve never encountered before; perhaps we have visited a new religious group with a friend or lover and felt a strange, exhilarating stirring. It is easy, at this point, to experience the religious equivalent of New Relationship Energy—allowing our excitement and infatuation with the experience to lead us to believe that the connection is deep and permanent, and that we have found our One True Religious Love. But as exciting as the new connection is, it lacks a deep foundation, the kind

of grounded context that can turn an exciting love affair into a successful marriage.

The next stage of “research and community engagement” is the hard work of the relationship. The work of finding out more, and of returning to that deeper exploration again and again, separates the sincere seeker from the dabbler who takes but gives nothing in return. Does this practice or entity belong to a living tradition? If so, what are that tradition’s attitudes toward borrowing? In some ways, we have less concrete responsibility for religious traditions that lack clear living heirs, such as the traditions of ancient Egypt. The people whose concerns those gods embodied are gone, and our best service to them, perhaps, is to continue to tell their stories. Some living traditions, such as Hinduism, tend to be extremely friendly to non-native seekers and are frequent cross-cultural borrowers themselves; for example, some Indian Vedantists have cheerfully added Jesus to the list of avatars whom they venerate and have taken an active role

in their original cultural context, of course. Since one cannot “appropriate” what is already being freely shared, however, the openness of Hindus towards the practice of borrowing simplifies the issue for Pagans in a way that the hostility of many Native American groups complicates it. Hindus are unlikely to feel that their practices have been desecrated by a Westerner’s clumsy first attempt at puja, but Hindus also do not represent a decimated, economically underprivileged minority in white America. Because of their fraught history with European settlers, Native Americans are less likely to welcome the interest of outsiders in the private spiritual practices of their communities. Any attempt at Native American borrowing, therefore, must be approached with a great deal more care.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of contacting local communities of practitioners whenever possible in order to experience the tradition’s energy and ethos. It may be true that each of us is his or her own priest/ess, and we need no mediator to

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access the divine. Yet a community that works regularly with a given deity can smooth the way for a new devotee, in the same way that a good party hostess can facilitate a cordial introduction. Why would we treat new gods with so little respect as to demand their presence at our rituals without even being properly introduced?

Further, why would we avoid at least introducing ourselves to the existing friends and loved ones of an exciting new divine acquaintance?

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After a relationship has been formed with the practice or deity and its associated tradition, the final step is to consider the power dynamics of the situation. What energy exchange is possible between the borrowing Pagan and the tradition that is borrowed from? If we seek to learn from Native American teachers, it's important to ask ourselves how we might give back financially and politically as their communities continue to struggle for economic health and legal representation with the United States government. Even communities that we do not think of as being economically underprivileged or oppressed may need our political or financial assistance. Jenny Blain and Robert Wallis write of the overuse and even vandalizing of sacred sites in the United Kingdom. Some of this vandalism appears to have been committed with Pagan or New Age ritual intent, but nevertheless such practices have damaged ancient standing stones and their grounds (*Sacred Sites*). Though some of us may claim those sacred sites as part of our ethnic or religious heritage, it is important to understand that they also belong to the local communities who have tended them for millennia; we may want to contribute to public funds to maintain and preserve these sites.

I cannot, in this brief article, address the ethics of borrowing comprehensively. Wiccan listservs and communities are rife with heated discussions about the fate of seekers who crave training in British Traditional Wicca but do not have access to a local coven. If such a person comes to feel that the material in books by Cunningham or Ravenwolf was inappropriately borrowed, must she stop using them in her practice despite the lack of a clear alternative? Or is this a situation in which authenticity is better defined in terms of the practitioner's sincerity and devotion in using the tools available? Some would argue that whether the practices *work*—whether or not they cause meaningful experiences for the practitioner—is the bottom

line when evaluating the spiritual legitimacy of any system. Frequently, this is the response of non-lineaged Wiccans against accusations that what they practice is not "real" (i.e. lineaged British Traditional) Wicca—the efficacy of the practice speaks for itself. No one owns the keys to the temple; access to the divine is a human birthright. I leave these ongoing conflicts over authenticity and ownership to the reader to decide for him- or herself.

As sincere Pagan seekers, we wish to be seen as respectful borrowers, not as cultural strip-miners or hucksters looking to make a quick buck from others' sacred traditions. Those of us practicing clearly delineated Pagan traditions with specific bodies of knowledge and energy currents may well understand Native American rage when we see our own practices incorrectly interpreted in a poorly written popular book. By actively teaching a relationship model for our cultural borrowing, however, we can forge stronger ties with the religious traditions we admire and help protect ourselves from those who would commodify and package Paganism.

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