

Who Does Own Native Sacred Rites?

By Siobhán Houston

When GNOSIS asked me to cover a conference focusing on the theme, “Who Owns Native Sacred Rites?” I accepted with alacrity. Sponsored by the New England periodical *Spirit of Change*, the discussions planned for “Harvest Gathering ‘97” pivoted around the contentious topic of the appropriation of Native teachings and ceremonies by non-Natives. I was excited about participating in this historic event, to be held on Mt. Washington in southwestern Massachusetts September 26-28. The organizers billed it as the first gathering to bring together Native and non-Native peoples to pray, drum, dance and, most importantly, to air opinions in a council setting.

A council, in the Native American tradition, is a sacred circle in which people are invited to share their opinions on a certain topic. No time limit is set for the council, and only one person speaks at a time. It is not a discussion and the goal is not consensus, but rather the sharing of one’s truth. As Morwen Two Feathers wrote in *Spirit of Change*, “We hope that in this Council we can move beyond the naiveté and the fear of conflict, and lay a foundation for real understanding, respect and healing.”

Carol Bedrosian, the magazine’s visionary editor and publisher, in association with conference organizers Jimi and Morwen Two Feathers, did an impressive job in putting together the weekend agenda. Participants could attend a variety of workshops and lectures, and council meetings were held both Saturday and Sunday mornings. Numerous teachers of shamanic and Native spirituality attended, including Brant Secunda (Huichol shamanism), Hi-ah Park (Korean shamanism), Alberto Villoldo (Inka medicine teachings), Oscar Miro-Quesada (Peruvian shamanism), Andras Corban Arthen (the Celtic Wiccan tradition), Cerridwen (shamanic healing), and Medicine Story (a Wampanoag elder).

While mingling with the crowd during Friday night dinner, I noticed the conference-goers (250 in all) seemed predominately white and middle-aged, with a fair number of Native participants. Becoming better acquainted with various individuals, however, challenged many of my presumptions about the attendees. First, I realized that many of the “white people” also had Native blood. Just like the philosophical and political questions that fueled the conference discussions, the question of ancestry was not clear-cut. I also assumed, to be honest, a certain superficiality of intention on the part of the non-Native participants. During my conversations with a number of non-Natives, though, their sincerity and commitment to the “red path” impressed me.

For example, I spoke at length with Dennis, a white man now living in Maine who has studied the Plains Indian religion for many years. He felt that Spirit impelled him to follow the red path, and that nothing would dissuade him from it. He told me, “The only way you will take my pipe away from me is out of my cold dead hands.”

He conceded that Westerners must maintain a delicate balance as they approach Native spirituality. He also noted that many elders worry about their knowledge dying with them, as most young Native Americans are not interested in undergoing the stringent apprenticeship required to become carriers of the lineage.

Dennis contended that the whites that are seriously committed to the red path are a spark of hope for the continuation of the tradition.

During the Saturday morning breakfast, Carol Bedrosian welcomed the assemblage and thanked Nanatasis, a Native woman from Vermont who inadvertently inspired the conference (Nanatasis was not able to attend). Nanatasis wrote a stinging letter to Carol (published in the May/June 1997 issue of *Spirit of Change*), condemning the magazine and its editor for exploiting Native culture. This letter motivated Carol to include more council time during a planned conference on present day shamanism, enabling participants to vent their opinions on these contentious issues.

On Saturday morning, we randomly divided into seven groups and embarked upon the council process. My group of about twenty people hunkered down on the rocky ground of a forest glade and talked in council fashion for about two-and-a-half hours. No fireworks here--we agreed it was permissible for non-Natives to appropriate tribal traditions as long as it was done respectfully and with sincere intention. One Native elder in his 70s shook his head and remarked, "Those [Native Americans] who are screaming and angry about this issue are all young people. Once you become an elder, you learn to ease up and be tolerant." At least one other council group I heard of was not so congenial, though, as angered Native Americans loudly voiced their resentment at the desecration of their culture by whites.

The dawning of Sunday morning heralded the major event of the gathering, the council of 22 teachers representing a diversity of traditions. They sat within a consecrated circle cordoned off by rope, one empty chair in the ring signifying the presence of Spirit. The rest of the community sat on the ground or on chairs around the consecrated circle, acting as non-speaking witnesses to the proceedings. For three hours we watched, silent and transfixed, as these teachers, one by one, took up the talking stick.

Many articulated their desire for Natives and non-Natives to learn from each other and some advocated the training of committed non-Natives in the Native traditions. One Native teacher from Quebec recited an Algonquin prophecy that a generation of white people would come looking to the elders for guidance. At that time, many elders would be fearful of sharing information with them, but a few would dedicate themselves to guide non-Natives. He believes that the prophecy has come true, and that it is time to share Native teachings with other seekers.

Others, disturbed by the mass marketing of indigenous spirituality, argued against charging money for sacred ceremonies, such as sweat lodges and vision quests. One teacher cautioned students of Native ways to beware of a little knowledge, noting that learning the tradition takes time and commitment. Another, a Wampanoag elder, called for less concentration on these divisive issues and more attention to rectifying the greed-driven destruction of the earth.

The participants shared many profound and deeply felt words in the circle, but unfortunately not all were able to talk because of time constraints. In future gatherings, the conference organizers plan to allow more time for councils as well as to invite other ethnic groups, including African teachers. Carol Bedrosian remarked, "We need to have more events like this, as touchpoints to refer to, embers that burn in your heart, to remind yourself that it [a gathering of the tribes] is possible."

Harvest Gathering '97 concluded on Sunday afternoon with a group circle dance around a fire, led by Brant Secunda. To me, the dance symbolized the ways in which this diverse group coalesced into a community, drawn together by a desire to candidly explore difficult questions. I think the conference gave rise to great hope for continued dialogue and reconciliation, and served as an auspicious beginning in a planned series of councils (one is tentatively set for May 1998). As one Algonquin teacher so wisely put it, "We don't have to hurt each other anymore. We can now open the doors to our hearts."

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