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Tim Giago: Beware of fake medicine men and fake medicine women



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Black Elk Peak in South Dakota. Photo: [Austin Matherne](#)

Notes from Indian Country

Beware of fake medicine men and women

By Tim Giago (Nanwica Kciji - Stands Up For Them)

For more than 100 years the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota, plus the many other tribes of the Northern Plains, have opened up many of their most sacred ceremonies to non-Indians. They did so out of their sense of generosity and sharing.

However, that generosity has been badly abused by non-Indians over the past 50 years and spiritual leaders from all over the Northern Plains met on the Cheyenne River Reservation in Central South Dakota several years ago to discuss ways and means of protecting these most sacred ceremonies.

Arvol Looking Horse, 19th Generation Keeper of the Sacred White Buffalo Calf Pipe, was present along with the spiritual leaders, medicine bundle keepers, and holy men of the Northern Plains and Canada when they met to talk about protecting the sacred ceremonies of the Indian nations.

They were most interested in protecting the seven sacred rites: Wiwanyang wacipi, Sun Dance; Hanbleciya, Vision Quest; Inipi, Purification Ceremony, often misunderstood as Sweatlodge ceremony; Hunka kag, Making of a relative; Tapakah go ya, Throwing of the Sacred Ball, Wiyan isnati, Womanhood Ceremony; and Nagi gluha, Keeping the Spirit Ceremony.

It was the consensus of the holy men and women that only legitimate Lakota, Dakota and Nakota Medicine Bundle Keepers should handle any other ceremonies connected to the Hocoka or Center of the Sun Dance Ceremony.

Looking Horse acknowledged the fact that his father, Stanley Looking Horse, and the Lakota leader Fools Crow, had decided to allow other Native Nations to participate in the Sacred Rites of the Lakota. He said, "Their reasons were based on the fact that most Indian Nations had lost their ways through assimilation or the lack of teachers to teach them their indigenous ways. I cannot undo their decision out of respect for our Chief and Elder. It has also been in our history that our ancestors have respectfully shared our ceremonies with other Indigenous Nations."

The spiritual leaders and elders began to fear what was happening to their sacred ceremonies because of this openness.

In the 1970s, white people attending the sacred ceremonies decided they would become Medicine Bundle Keepers, Medicine Men and Women, and some even believed they had been called upon by a greater power to conduct ceremonies in English for New Agers and other non-Indians. Oftentimes they created their own version of a sacred ceremony based more on showmanship than authenticity.

In 1989 I heard about a ceremony about to be conducted at Telluride, Colorado. As a journalist and syndicated columnist I decided to check it out. When I got to the site I was surprised to see that nearly all of the participants were from Japan. The ceremony they were offered for large sums of money was the Sacred Hanblechiya, or Vision Quest.

Several places on the surrounding hills had been prepared with circles of stones and the Japanese participants were scattered around the hills at these sites. They had people coming around to check on them to see if they were comfortable, thirsty or hungry. Of course, in the traditional vision quest the participant goes without food or water for four days.

The center of the vision quest was a large camp fully stocked with a cook tent to prepare meals and the Japanese visitors all had modern tents and vehicles. They went out to the vision quest sites for a few hours and then returned to camp only to go out again the next day.

Events such as this have been happening across America, Europe and in other countries now for several years. They are advertised in brochures and Shaman magazines geared to this very purpose.

One false medicine man even got a show on HBO's Real Sex claiming he was a Cherokee Holy Man who could teach the ancient sexual rites of the Cherokee Nation. Then Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, Wilma Mankiller (now deceased), threatened HBO with a lawsuit.

In countries such as Germany, Norway, and Sweden and in some Asian countries fake medicine men and women began to make a lot of money off of the half-baked ceremonies they had created out of whole cloth. The New Agers fell into line like so many ducks.

Several years ago Indian students from the University of Main heard about a ceremony about to be conducted in the woods near their campus. They went there and saw a large sweatlodge set up with many naked white people about to enter. The Indian students held up a sign that read, "We are watching. Now you can sweat."

The point I am making is that Arvol Looking Horse and the other legitimate holy men and women of the Northern Plains had no choice but to try and bring these false practices to an end. Their fears are genuine. When outsiders are invited in to partake of and share the sacred ceremonies, they too often take it upon themselves to believe that a god has called upon them to take what they have learned to the world.

Unfortunately, what they have learned is nothing. It takes generations for traditional Lakota and other holy men and women to even touch the surface of the sacred ceremonies they have been called upon to lead.

Most traditional holy men and women believe that a ceremony has meaning only when it is conducted in the traditional language. Since the ceremonies themselves are thousands of years old they believe they have been conducted in the Native tongue for all of these years because it is the language understood by Tunkasila (Grandfather), the ancient people, the natural elements and the animals.

What was given freely was abused and the traditional pipe carriers and medicine bundle keepers have had it. They are angry that what they gave from their hearts has been exploited in the name of fame and money. One said, "You stole our land and now you are stealing our sacred rites."

Looking Horse once said that the Catholic Church would be very upset if a man put on a black robe and white collar and went about the countryside conducting Catholic Church services. He feels the sacred ceremonies of the Lakota deserve the same respect.

There are already many attacking the traditionalists who attended this meeting and who made the decision to close some of their ceremonies to white people and other outsiders. But those outside of the circle must understand that it is up to the Spiritual Leader to decide whether to allow them to attend and support ceremonies. Many traditional Lakota, Dakota and Nakota stand behind Arvol Looking Horse and the other spiritual leaders all the way. When what was offered from the heart is abused so badly, it deserves to be taken away or at least protected.

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