

4-30-2021

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Recommended Citation

Arregi, Joseba I. PhD (2021) "Plastic Shamans, Intellectual Colonialism and Intellectual Appropriation in New Age Movements," *The International Journal of Ecopsychology (IJE)*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/ije/vol2/iss1/10>

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Imaginose dhas Casas d'auto step ... en ... d'auto step ...
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 Señalar los tiempos ...
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Plastic Shamans, Intellectual Colonialism and Intellectual Appropriation in New Age Movements

Joseba I. Arregi

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Abstract

The reality of colonialism plagues indigenous populations and continues into the present, generating new scenarios of oppression. This new oppression is tied to so-called alternative models of progress, to the success of sustainable development, and to the recognition of the importance of biodiversity in the 21st Century. This work presents three processes of biological and cultural appropriation which constitute a new chapter in the long history of colonial aggression and indigenous resistance.

Key terms: Plastic shamans, colonialism, intellectual appropriation, New Age movement

1. Introduction

From the beginning of the meeting of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in 1492, the Euro-American culture has demonstrated a dismal incapacity to understand indigenous cultures on their own terms. It is a history of un-meeting (*desencuentro*), a great crashing with overwhelming ethnic diversity, and finally, of the failure to see the “the other” as an equal, but at the same time, as different—as having rights (Todorov, 1992:42). As a consequence of this un-meeting (*desencuentro*), colonial dynamics arose rooted on an image of the “Indian” constructed from unequal power sharing and the predominance of the dominant society.

There have been debates in the Euro-American society, vis a vis indigenous peoples, alternating between *alterofobia* and *alterofilia* (Arregi, 2006), that is, between the idealized *good savage* who populates our utopias, and the *cruel savage* who elicits our most profound fears. In both representations indigenous peoples have been viewed as populations on the way to extinction, “erasable Indians,” underdeveloped primitive entities all belonging to inchoate states of human evolution.

The myth of the indigenous person on h/her way to extinction has generated a framework of colonial oppression which has pillaged, alienated, and subjugated indigenous peoples around the world. As a consequence of this situation, dominant societies suffer from a cultural and political blindness vis a vis indigenous peoples, which is an obstacle to seeing them as singular entities with complex cultures and political realities that are also contemporary (Spicer, 1992:47).

This colonial reality continues to be present today, generating new scenarios of oppression linked to alternative projects of growth, the success of sustainable development and the acknowledging of the importance of biodiversity in the 21st Century.

2. Conservation Mediated Through the Confiscation of Indigenous Territories

We are talking about old colonialism dressed up in new clothes. Since the Rio de Janeiro summit in 1992, many of the attacks against indigenous peoples were promoted by various nations and a variety of international organizations in an attempt to ensure the occupation, control and management of ecosystems and indigenous resources by means of non-indigenous agents (Nietschmann, 1990), this time undertaken under the banner of “sustainable development” and environmental conservation. These projects have been developed with the help of various national and international conservation groups (Andrade, 2001; Ramachandra, 1997). The participation of ecological NGOs is the result of the great influence developed by these types of organizations and of their ubiquitous involvement in environmental projects launched by and under the auspices of international organizations.

Their presence and influence, together with other organizations within the UN, is particularly evident in the management of national parks (Rodríguez, 2000), where there exists a principal conservationist vision which tends to limit the presence in and use of traditional ecosystems by indigenous populations. The result is what Andrade (2001) refers to as “conservation mediated through the confiscation of ecosystems.” These trends are not at all surprising if one takes into account the fact that one of the world’s template for global conservationism is Yellowstone Park,

which was itself created from lands confiscated from alienated Native Americans (Spence, 1999), occurring during the colonial period of 1872-1961, when the idea of creating national parks becomes a world-wide phenomenon (Igoe, 2005:6).

Igoe (2005) describes this approach as *fortified conservation*, an inchoate model highly punitive which foments the imposition of scientific and foreign approaches to the exclusion and detriment of traditional models based on indigenous knowledge, and also limits access to human populations who have traditionally utilized those ecosystems. No better are the new methods and approaches which dress themselves up as *participative conservation* since their “management,” zoning practices limit and even forbid human presence or activities (Igoe, 2005). In such cases, the zoning of a territory takes place without taking into consideration models of environmental utilization and the political, cultural, economic, social or religious significance these regions have for the indigenous populations. Zoning leads to the imposition of patterns of utilization extant from indigenous realities (see “ontologies” in this issue—Kaliana Conesa). Additionally, little by little, “managers” decide who is “indigenous,” which elements of an indigenous culture “have value,” what is preserved, and what is promoted within territories under their control (Dumoulin, 2005), until, in the end, a stage is reached of defining what type of *ecological behavior* (Hames, 2007) indigenous people must develop or exhibit in order to continue having access to their original territories under the new park administration.

Under this new model of *ecological behavior*, the harmonious interaction between humans and nature, which solely conforms to an ideal perception from ecological groups, constitutes a precondition in order to inhabit areas in national parks. This expectation, which is also the result of an ideal and modern stereotype of the *good savage*, is palpably real in the next Sri Lanka case that we are about to describe. Under this fiction and stereotype, some Sri Lankan government functionaries believe that natives must dress in loincloths and live in a simple hut. According to the same functionaries, hunting can only take place with bows and arrows, while canned salmon and bicycles are considered incompatible with traditional *vedda* traditions. Other Sri Lankan functionaries argue that it is acceptable for the *wanniyala-aetto* local residents to wear a sarong, ride bicycles, or use firearms for hunting but only for personal consumption of resources—there can be no sales of forest products to foreigners/outside (IWGIA, 2000, 331-332).

3. Tourism: The Colonization of Indigenous Exoticism

We live in a world which is globalized and profoundly interconnected, where culture, ecosystems, arts and crafts or religious beliefs have become consumer products aided by a global tourist industry. Moreover, and partly due to the efforts of international organizations like the World Bank, during the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, investment in tourism became an engine of development in so-called third-world countries.

Additionally, there exists in our global society a desire to visit and consume information about exotic and remote cultures. We live at a time when *becoming an adventurer* is within the reach of many people, contributing to the uprising of modern Marco Polos. Today, to be an explorer is an avocation -- an avocation that not only consists, as one might hope, of *discovery* as a culmination of years of study and in need of additional field experience, but also as an exercise in logging miles, the accumulation of personal experiences, and the presentation and sharing of

audiovisual materials, the latter occurring in front of audiences for whom vulgar and trivial accounts seem as miraculously transmuted revelations of a person who has only and simply travelled 20,000 kilometers. One can say that that our modern Marco Polos bring from these distant lands, today in the form of photos, books, and stories, the moral spices that our empty societies need with greater urgency (Levi-Strauss, 1988:42).

Targeting this select group or club of potential Marco Polos, and in an effort to differentiate their travel packages, the tourism industry has frequently exploited the biological diversity of national parks in connection with the image of their indigenous populations. These travel packages combine the ideas of exoticism, primitivism and attractive virginal paradises, almost lost, and still uncorrupted by globalism. In this context, one is witness to types of cultural tourism, or ecotourism, which are highly lucrative for tour operators who do not hesitate to take advantage of the trope *cultural exoticism* and biological richness at the expense of cheap manual labor and the low standard of living present in third world countries (Carling, 1998). These monetary tradeoffs are not at all beneficial to indigenous populations who lose access to basic resources vital to their subsistence, to their food security, and the continued development of their singular cultural identity.

Concurrent with the exploitative or alienating activities we described earlier as they pertain to national parks, issues of rights related to natural resources existing within the confines of indigenous ecosystems, and their rights over intellectual property, are frequently violated by tourists who visit their territories. At the same time that zoning excludes vital territory, indigenous peoples are prohibited from visiting places that tourists frequent. These prohibitions are even more egregious when native peoples are alienated from places for the practice of their religion (Trask, 1998). Ironically, and occurring in tandem, their religious practices become products for and of tourism.

4. Plastic Shamans and Cultural Appropriation

Continuing this pattern of indigenous territorial exploitation and cultural appropriation, the phenomenon of *plastic shamans* is especially troubling (see J. Fikes in this volume). This phenomenon is another clear example of colonization and violation of indigenous self-determination (Hobson, 1978). While the aforementioned instances of aggression are carried out by organizations and big corporations, the case of the plastic shamans is an act of individual aggression. In a similar vein to other forms of exploitation and alienation, the appropriation of resources and the indigenous “image” by some radical conservation groups is exported to pillaging cultural and spiritual motifs which the indigenous activist Janet McCloud describes as follows:

First, they came to take our land and water, then our fish and game. Now they want our religions as well. All of a sudden, we have a lot of unscrupulous idiots running around saying they're medicine people. And they'll sell you a sweat lodge ceremony for fifty bucks. It's not only wrong, it's obscene. Indians don't sell their spirituality to anybody, for any price. This is just another in the very long series of thefts from Indian people and, in some ways, this is the worst one yet.? (In Churchill 1992: 217).

Deloria (1999) believes that this phenomenon has everything to do with a historical characteristic unique to North American whites who tend to idealize and emulate Indians in an attempt to naturalize (root) themselves in the American continent. The antecedents of an interest in indigenous spirituality go back to end of the 19th Century and the beginnings of the 20th Century, when spiritualism as a movement adopts indigenous spirituality in its practices (Aldred, 2000).

But it is perhaps during the 1970s (see J. Fikes in this issue) when the writings of Carlos Castaneda awaken the more recent interest in indigenous spirituality. His writings, which combine spiritual growth with the ingestion of peyote, open the door to other plastic shamans capable of producing bestsellers and generating lucrative markets. To this category of prolific writers belong Dyhani Ywahoo and Lynn Andrews, whose books sold in numbers that exceed those of works produced by indigenous authors with similar themes (Hagan, 1992; Johnson, 1994; Churchill, 1996).

According to Hagan (1992), the great explosion of this movement occurs in the decade of the 1980s, when it becomes a phenomenon of mass consumption of native products linked to the birth of New Age. Aldred (2000), points out that its members belong to well-to-do classes who envision the arrival of a new era of spirituality and harmony with nature and other human beings. According to its proponents and followers, this era is considered a period of maximum human development through spiritual growth and personal transformation in physical, mental and spiritual planes catalyzed by the application of these alternative sources of knowledge. Within this movement exists a branch of enthusiasts interested in the spirituality of indigenous peoples who search for a connection with nature and belongingness to an authentic community (Hemachandra, 2003), not easily found in a dominant society of mass consumption. New Age followers attempt to internalize indigeneity via participating in workshops and other outdoor activities and, above all, by consuming texts and products which they consider to be genuinely indigenous (Smith, 1991). Again, and in fact, the heirs of the New Age movement aim to access alternative forms of spirituality and cultural identification with indigenous populations by acquiring products and partaking of services that characterize themselves as indigenous.

At the center of this consumer-oriented structure, one finds the plastic shaman. It is a derogative phrase referring to impostors, to individuals who are self-described “shamans” without being traditional spiritual leaders, and who imitate practices without having links to or profound knowledge of a given tradition. “Shaman” is a descriptor endemic to Siberia and found in no American indigenous group, who refer to their own spiritual leaders as medicine men or women (Takatoka, 2007). Nevertheless, this terminology was adopted by academics who have applied it to a variety of contemporary spiritual traditions that share some similarities and are also referred to as New Age. Also, this terminology is used to refer to any type of spiritual trajectory, independently from other religious traditions hierarchically structured, describing leaders and a certain dogma, and characterized by cultural appropriation, eclecticism, and personal spiritual experiences.

According to Aldred (2000:2), these are movements created, primarily, by consumers of indigenous products. This cultural identification, via the simulation and evocation of the act of consuming “the other,” is fundamental to understanding this phenomenon. Thus, it is a dynamic that emerges within alternative sectors of the dominant culture inclined to consume a new and

imagined version of indigeneity combining exoticism, the illusion of a society possessing greater gender equality, another way of understanding what it is to be human, harmony with nature, and belonging to an alternative spiritual community (Johnson, 1994). These latter communities are thought to have been developed by genuine peoples who have not been corrupted by globalization and who continue to hold ancestral knowledge forgotten by our modern era (Arregi, 2006).

Sadly, the indigenous communities that the above New Age groups idealize are only imagined or constructed, with little or no correspondence to any geographically concrete historical reality, which could have resulted from complex social dynamics and relations. Whatever appears as “indigenous” are decontextualized or reconstructed manifestations which lead to the appropriation and alienation of a once authentic culture and group which is, equally, idealized and disfigured by the consumerism of the new Marco Polos (Levi-Straus, 1997) or seekers of alternative systems of being (Johnson, 1994). This is the fertile ground whence plastic shamans flourish.

Many indigenous peoples maintain that their shamans are valued insofar as they emerge in the context of a mysticism grounded in cultural traditions within a complex social milieu (Noguerol, 1999) characterized by:

- a) Generalized *anomie*
- b) A negation of a long history of oppression
- c) Indigenous resistance to dominant cultures
- d) Their right to spiritual and political autonomy (Smith, 1994)
- e) A sense of guilt (Johnson, 1994)
- f) A legitimate interest from sincere seekers, looking for alternative belief systems that could aid personal growth (Johnson, 1994)

Within these complex dynamics, exploitation soon follows and could include selling false “traditional” spiritual ceremonies, the sale of false artifacts and books, and illegitimate trips and journeys to sacred sites, including visiting authentic shamans. In addition to the appropriation of spiritual motifs, appropriation includes other aspects of culture, from literature to music (Hemachandra, 2003). This includes the role that artisans play for whom the “authentically indigenous” is a lucrative business directed to this emerging market (Blakeney, 1999). The activities of plastic shamans are evident in the occult sections of libraries and stores around the world (Jean, 2000). The prolific publication of books dedicated to indigenous pseudo-spirituality constitutes a central aspect of activities complemented by conferences, workshops on spirituality and survival (preppers), and retreats (Jenkins, 2005) which include price tags very insulting to indigenous populations who, in their majority, suffer situations of want and severe economic hardship (Churchill, 2003). All the above activities are rejected by indigenous representatives who criticize the exploitation, distortion, and trivialization to which their cultures and spiritual practices are subjected (Ramachandra, 1997).

Another concern is that those who seek help from un reputable plastic shamans expose themselves to potential physical and psychological risks. This could be the case when the practices and methods have been invented or adapted without actual reference to a genuine

tradition, extant from authentic sacred ceremonies, and practiced without the ethical safeguards that ceremonial behaviors entail. Additionally, real harm can be done to the reputation of the cultures and communities which are falsely represented. Hagen (1992) denounces, in particular, the appropriation of cultural symbols which are then converted to objects of spirituality and individualized for rapid consumption and marketing. The same author emphasizes the communal character that underlies indigenous religious practices and experiences where individuals, community and the environment create a systemic reality. In the same manner as one encounters “indigenous knowledge,” in the real, it is not possible to separate the parts from the whole and attempt to isolate religious practices from their social and ecological context. In both cases, it is a matter of social realities, generated throughout centuries, whose relevance is, above all, local and profoundly connected with concrete peoples and ecosystems. There is, finally, the more grievous danger of perpetuating a framework of colonial oppression which negates the long history of resistance and the fight for the rights of indigenous peoples. This perpetuation is rooted in the ignorance and idealization reinforcing oppression, alienation, collusive cover-ups, domestication, and invisible-ment (*invisibilización*) suffered for centuries by indigenous peoples, which continue to be our collective imagining -- Vanishing Indians.

Indigenous peoples believe that the abuses perpetuated by spiritual fraud are only possible when there is ignorance about cultures that said “shamans” claim to represent. This leads to a barrier between indigenous and non-indigenous groups which make difficult any type of collaboration to meet global challenges:

Non-Indians have become so used to all this hype on the part of impostors and liars that when a real Indian spiritual leader tries to offer them useful advice, he is rejected. He isn't “Indian” enough for all these non-Indian experts on Indian religion. Now, this is not only degrading to Indian people, it's downright delusional behaviour on the part of the instant experts who think they've got all the answers before they even hear the questions ... The bottom line here is that we have more need for intercultural respect today than at any time in human history. And nothing blocks respect and communication faster and more effectively than delusions by one party about another. We've got real problems today, tremendous problems, problems which threaten the survival of the planet. Indians and non-Indians must confront these problems together, and this means we must have honest dialogue, but this dialogue is impossible so long as non-Indians remain deluded about things as basic as Indian spirituality (Oren Lyons in Churchill, 2003).

5. Warriors Against Cultural Genocide

Indigenous activists tirelessly work to unravel these misunderstandings, not only to expose the distortions and fraudulent exploitation of indigenous traditions, but also to educate spiritual seekers about the differences between traditional cultures and modern spiritual trends. Among the education initiatives to create awareness, there have also been developments in litigation. During the 1990s, many articles were published in the indigenous media which shed light on the problem of plastic shamans (Deloria, 1999). Moreover, one can, today, find reports on websites and articles that are specific to this problem (Norrell, 2002).

Indigenous leaders, like Russel Means, and indigenous academics, like Vine Deloria and Ward Churchill, have unmasked this new form of colonization. To sum up, the activities carried out by plastic shamans and their followers have generated a lot of worry in indigenous populations

(Churchill, 2003) in the United States, to the point of approving open confrontation as well as directly denouncing activities carried out by plastic shamans. In this new chapter of activism, it is worth highlighting the leadership exercised by the Traditional Elders Circle who, between 1980 and 1989, motivated groups of indigenous activists in pursuit of curtailing a practice (plastic shamanism) injurious to indigenous culture and spirituality.

One of the main contrasts between a path or trajectory of resistance and other indigenous peoples' cultural hues is their individualist character and the belief that change will not come via concerted political action directed against existent power structures, but through personal experience and the resulting transformation of the individual. Deloria (1999) believes that there is now a preponderance of individual rights vis a vis social rights of a collective nature emerging since the 1960s and the 1970s.

The seriousness of this threat against, for example, the Lakota culture, led to, in 1993, the Lakota Summit, where more than 500 representatives of forty different Lakota groups, Dakota and Nakota from Canada and the US, unanimously approved the "Declaration of War Against the exploiters of Lakota Spirituality" (DLN Issues). This public posture of active confrontation is clear in the words of Russel Means, a historical leader and indigenous activist:

You can either respect our basic rights or not respect them ... If you do, you're an ally and we're ready and willing to join hands with you on other issues. If you do not, you are at best a thief. More importantly, you are a thief of the sort who is willing to risk undermining our sense of the integrity of our cultures for your own perceived self-interest. That means you are complicit in a process of cultural genocide, or at least attempted cultural genocide, aimed at American Indian people. That makes you an enemy, to say the least. And believe me when I say we're prepared to deal with you as such (Churchill, 2003:4).

It is a case of defending indigenous rights and facing a new threat of cultural colonization. In the words of Pam Colorado, an Oneida activist:

The process is ultimately intended to supplant Indians, even in areas of their own customs and spirituality. In the end, non-Indians will have complete power to define what is and is not Indian. Even for Indians. We are talking here about an absolute ideological/conceptual subordination of Indian people in addition to the total physical subordination they already experience. When this happens, the last vestiges of real Indian society and Indian rights will disappear. Non-Indians will then "own" our heritage and ideas as thoroughly as they now claim to own our land and resources (in Rose, 1992: 405).

Indigenous religions, on the whole, are not universalists nor do they proselytize, but rather are based on the existence of a particular community and a system of physical and spiritual relations between their members. To participate in their lives (when invited) and to share in their struggles is a first step in understanding their religious beliefs. This is the crux and cradle from which indigenous spirituality emanates and it is this communal center which gives rise to and designates sacred men and women. It is through a long period of training, full of prohibitions and responsibilities, and in communion with this social center, that indigenous spirituality is produced.

The right to define and protect their culture belongs only to these communities and their people.

In these times when indigenous groups are witnessing how their cultures are parasitized by dominant cultures, more than ever, it is necessary to establish control over the information, the image, and the manner in which their culture is transmitted, particularly when it comes to traditional rituals and visitation to their sacred locations and stories (Brown, 1998). This right to curate one's own image is closely tied to self-definition and to the right of self-determination, as it is made explicit in Articles 12 and 31 of the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples approved by the general assembly of the UN, September 13, 2007.

Along the same lines, the Mataatua Declaration on Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights of Indigenous Peoples specifies, in Article 1.8, the following: "Establish an appropriate body with appropriate mechanisms to: a) preserve and monitor the commercialism or otherwise of indigenous cultural properties in the public domain b) generally advise and encourage indigenous peoples to take steps to protect their cultural heritage."

6. Conclusion

The ecological and cultural appropriation to which indigenous peoples are subjected takes us away from the idea and realization of a genuinely just and intercultural society, reinforcing a historic model of intercultural domination and subordination which pretends to supplant indigenous peoples as individuals, including the more intimate and personal aspects of their existence. If so, this is the culmination of *ethno-phagocytic* processes described by Díaz-Polanco (2005), which add to physical subordination, ideological and spiritual realms as well.

The alternative is to combat the myth of the disappearing Indian, fight against the erasure of their cultures and the invisible-ment (*invisibilización*) of their plight, to destroy stereotypes in order to construct a real image of their lives, and to express our solidarity in benefit of the Indian. It is a matter of creating awareness of the existence and influence of myths and of the necessity of dismantling enduring colonial racism which impedes the development of knowledge and the genuine interchange between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples.

It is a matter of becoming allies of indigenous peoples in their fight for justice in order to achieve equality in difference. It is not about never visiting their territories or inquiring about their religions, but about doing this with respect and with the knowledge that one does not create the circumstances that become destructive to indigenous peoples. It is to go beyond appropriating their cultures to share in both.



Originally as: Arregi, J.I.: *Chamanes de plástico, colonialismo intelectual y apropiación intelectual entre movimientos de nueva era*, en *Contribuciones a las Ciencias Sociales*, mayo 2011-Translated and reprinted in IJE with the author's permission.

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