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## Review of Mother Earth Spirituality: Native American Paths to Healing Ourselves and Our World

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*Mother Earth Spirituality: Native American Paths to Healing Ourselves and Our World.* By Ed McGaa, Eagle Man. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990. Foreword, introduction, illustrations, appendices, notes, suggested readings. xviii + 231 pp. \$14.95.

When I was a little boy, my mother, bless her heart, used to buy me books like Ben Hunt's *Indian Crafts and Lore* in a forlorn effort to keep me somewhat "in touch" with the indigenous aspect of my heritage. Hence, early on, I was exposed to such boy scoutish "homages" to things Indian as using uncooked macaroni to simulate the bone employed in making chokers and breastplates, making "peace pipes" out of wooden dowels, and pasting carefully colored bits of graph paper to tee-shirts in an effort to create the appearance of a beaded "Indian costume." It was, mom's best intentions notwithstanding, the stuff of John Ford movies, "Koshari" dancers, and little white kids dressed in paint and turkey feathers during the nation's annual pre-Thanksgiving classroom "sensitivity" exercises, an unconscionably arrogant trivialization and degradation by the dominant society of everything meaningful in Native material culture.

Of course, there were always more than a few straight-off-the-nickle-looking Indians willing—for a fee—to say the exact opposite. They'd shuffle in with their crewcuts and VFW me-

dallions, carrying “tom-toms” and wearing their “genuine” Cherokee “war bonnets,” announce that they were the “hereditary chiefs” of some real or invented Native people, mumble a few “traditional chants” as a benediction, and then solemnly thank the assembled Euroamericans for the “respect and understanding” they demonstrated by having become Indian hobbyists. With that, they’d pocket the \$50 or so they’d thus “earned,” and head for the nearest bar to prepare for the next day’s appearance at the local museum. There, they’d tearfully bless the curator for his complicity in expropriating and displaying everything of physical significance, including the bones of their ancestors, for non-Indian edification. The rubric employed at museums and burial mounds was usually “intercultural communication.” The rate charged for such endorsements and “authentications” was typically a bit higher than that charged for addressing hobby groups.

At a certain point in my life, all this became a matter of great confusion and anxiety for me. How could I—or anyone else—reconcile the craven image presented by these beings with the ideals of fierce and undeviating Native pride embodied in the historical resistance of Tecumseh and Osceola, Crazy Horse and Santana, Sitting Bull and Mangus Colorado, Victorio and Dull Knife, Satank, Geronimo, Gall, and so many others? Surely, the legacy of such struggles and suffering could not reasonably be said to have transformed itself into the transparently accommodationist posturing of those individuals wandering the “Friends of the Indian” lecture and performance circuits or whooping it up in Walt Disney productions like *Tonka*. How to make sense of this non sequitur? Indeed, could sense actually be made of such a seeming paradox?

It was not until my mid-twenties, after I’d been to Vietnam and subsequently become part of the American Indian Movement, that I was able to figure it out. The answer resides in the fact that, for every indigenous nation on the continent, the point of first contact with Euroamericans marks the end of their own ho-

mogeneous histories and traditions. Instead, when confronted with white imperial pretensions, each nation quickly came to manifest at least two mutually exclusive histories and traditions. On the one hand is the reality of Native patriotism signified by those who fought back against overwhelming odds to defend their people’s rights and ways of life. On the other is an equally important, if much less discussed, history of those who weren’t up to the task, who obediently, and often for petty reasons of perceived self-interest, joined hands with the invaders to destroy their people’s ability to resist colonization. Both histories are real and both are ongoing. The question is merely who is part of which heritage.

Viewed in this way, apprehending the meaning of that “Indian” behavior which once perplexed me is not particularly difficult. Those who participate in a song and dance routine for the pleasure of their conquerors, who say upon command what their conquerors wish to hear, are simply part of that time-honored, if not especially honorable, tradition called “hanging around the fort” (in more contemporary parlance, it’s called “selling out”). In the old days, they made a habit of staying rather close to the nearest army post, all the better to be in position to sign instruments conveying “legal title” over other Indians’ land to the United States. In exchange for such “services,” they were officially designated as “leaders of their people” by various government commissions, usually receiving a bit of sugar to sweeten their coffee as “compensation.” A little later, when the land was mostly gone, they began to trade blankets, beadwork, medicine bags—their younger sisters, if need be—for half-pints of rotgut whisky. In their shame and degradation, they actively assisted in the destruction of those who refused to go along; it was an Oglala, after all, who held the arms of Crazy Horse while he was bayoneted by a soldier; a Hunkpapa led the Indian police unit that murdered Sitting Bull; a Chiricahua helped the army track down Geronimo. Unfortunately, there is no shortage of comparable examples occurring in Indian Country even

as these words are written.

Things have, to be sure, "progressed" over the years. Today, not only the land and resources have long since been taken (or brokered away), but also the art and artifacts that formed the fetishes of my youth. Increasingly, the non-Indian commerce in that which belongs to Indians has come to center in our last definable asset, our conceptual property, the spiritual practices and understandings that hold together the last residue of humanity that was once Native America. When these are gone—or hopelessly prostituted—there will truly be nothing left with which we may sustain ourselves. Yet, as always, there are those of Indian lineage who step forward, eagerly offering up that which was never theirs to sell. Already we endure a raft of hucksters, emblamatically represented by "Sun Bear" (Vincent LaDuke), an erstwhile Chipewewa "holy man" and founder of something called the "Bear Tribe," who has made a lucrative career penning New Age texts and peddling ersatz "Indian ceremonies" to an endless gaggle of white groupies.

Now comes Ed McGaa, an Oglala Lakota attorney calling himself "Eagle Man" who has gone Sun Bear one better, publishing *Mother Earth Spirituality*, a Ben Hunt-style "how to" manual on his people's ritual life: by the numbers, now, this is how to do a Sun Dance; one-two-three-four, here's the way to build a sweat lodge (see the "Sweat Lodge Check List" starting at page 223); turn to chapter nine for instruction on how to do a vision quest; read chapters six and eight for a thin "explanatory" veneer concerning what it all means; page 135 begins the lesson on how to construct a sacred pipe (all non-Indians are qualified to be pipe carriers, even if all Lakotas are not); for investment of the \$15 cover price and the time it takes to read this hokey little tome, anyone can purport to have the "inside scoop" on Native religion, even becoming a "medicine man" in his or her "own right." (Eagle Man himself said so.)

On top of all their other contemporary problems, the Lakotas may now expect to shortly be engulfed by a wave of newly enlightened

hippies demanding their "inherent right" to be included in the rituals of their choice or, worse, joining that eternal chorus of pompous Euroamerican academics asserting their "qualifications" to "teach" Indians the "true" meaning of their spiritual traditions. ("We are all related, so we are all the same, which means we are entitled to anything of yours we want.") Nor is there some magic barrier restricting these sorry effects to McGaa's own people, a circumstance readily corroborated by the recently-acquired and growing penchant of groups like the "Rainbow Tribe" to dabble in everything from the Aztec Calendar to Navajo crystal healing ceremonies. Perhaps we should all anticipate that some Mormonized Hopi will soon publish a volume titled *Kiva Classics*, simultaneously breaching the shield of confidentiality with which the traditional priesthood has protected itself for many generations, and bastardizing their worldview beyond any possible redemption.

Ed McGaa knows full well he is peddling a lie, that it takes a lifetime of training to become a genuine Lakota spiritual leader (which he is not), that the ceremonies he describes are at best meaningless when divorced from their proper conceptual context, and that the integrity of Lakota cultural existence is to a large extent contingent upon the people's retention of control over their spiritual knowledge. He has transgressed against Lakota rights and survival in every bit as serious a fashion as those hang around the forts who once professed to legitimate the U.S. expropriation of the Black Hills, the only slight redemption being that most of the information he presents is too sloppy and inaccurate to be as damaging as might otherwise be the case. One can only hope that the author of this culturally genocidal travesty didn't repeat the error of his predecessors by selling himself too cheaply. But that might be expecting a bit much from someone of his evident sensibilities. In any event, now that he's made his money, in whatever amount, it's high time he came to be treated like the sell-out he is. There must be enough *real* Indians left to accomplish *that*. And from there, perhaps we can begin to recover some of what we've lost these past couple

of centuries rather than continuing to give up  
the pittance of ourselves we have left.

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