

# Native Americans as a source of wisdom. History and analysis of a contemporary mythology



Véronique Champion-Vincent

## **Native Americans as a source of wisdom. History and analysis of a contemporary mythology**

The article investigates the important element of alternative spiritual beliefs, often designated as New Age, connected with cultural appropriation of spirituality of the “imagined community” of idealized Native Americans. First, origins and historical background of this social imaginary is being provided, rooted in popular literature, impact of influential Buffalo Bill’s Wild West shows of the 1800s, and youth movements, Indian hobbyist and (Euro)indianist movement of the 1900s. Second, important cultural texts such as Chief Seattle (alleged) Speech, Rainbow Family legends (and its connection to Greenpeace) and Black Elk message are thoroughly investigated. Third, the current “source of wisdom” with renewed social dynamics is being analysed, along with search for a new paradigm for studies of this syncretic phenomenon.

### **Keywords:**

Native Americans, New Age, subcultural movements, ecological movements, Euroindians, contemporary mythology, cultural appropriation, imagined communities

This article aims to present, situate and analyse an important element of the alternative spiritual beliefs often designated as New Age. A rich cultural background — playing Indian (Native American) — has fostered the rise of the idea that a Native American spirituality could be a source of wisdom, thus reviving ideas of the Noble Savage that were formerly confined to intellectual highbrow circles.

## **1. ORIGINS**

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, literary fictions awaken the interest of Europeans for the American Indians. Fenimore Cooper’s *Last of the Mohicans* (1826) will have a considerable and lasting impact. These fictions grow in importance after the Gold Rush of the late 1850s. In France, Gabriel Ferry (1792–1852) and Gustave Aimard (1818–1883) specialized in the “western” genre, but several other authors of adventure novels also touched on the theme: Jules Verne, Paul d’Ivoi, Louis Boussenard. In Great Britain, Robert Louis Stevenson, Arthur Conan Doyle, John Buchan; in Italy Emilio Salgari and Luigi Motta. In Germany Karl May (1842–1912), “The German Fenimore Cooper whose tales of America he never saw, tales of Old Shatterhand and the Indian scout Winnetou, fuel the Western fires for German versions of playing Indian forever” (Green 1988: 38) who is still an important author and has influenced the development of the German Indianist movement.<sup>1</sup>

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1 For more details, see <http://mletourneux.free.fr/types-ra/western/western.htm>.



## BUFFALO BILL'S WILD WEST

Large scale shows played a major role. Especially the first one, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*, which toured Europe several times. In France, the first tour took place from 1889 until 1891. It was interrupted by Buffalo Bill's return to the U.S. when repression of the Ghost Dance movement led to the death of Sitting Bull and to the Wounded Knee Massacre in December 1890. City of Strasbourg, then part of Germany, was visited too from October 21–26, 1890, then from April 19–22, 1891, after Buffalo Bill's return to Europe. In France, three cities were visited in 1889: Paris (May 18–November 14), Lyons (November 17–28), Marseilles (December 1–16). The stay in Paris coincided with the Universal Exhibition and Buffalo Bill was invited to the inauguration of the Paris Statue of Liberty. Italy was visited in the Spring of 1890 and in Rome, the cast attended the Anniversary Ceremony of Pope Leo XIII's coronation on March 3, 1890.

In 1905–1906, the second tour concerned more than 120 cities and towns in France. It was an impressive cast: none less than sixteen ships were needed to cross the Atlantic for the 800 people and 500 horses of the cast. Once in France they boarded three special trains that took them from city to city. The fifty cars, being over one kilometer-long, were American. Disembarking of personnel and equipment generally took place between 7 and 9 a. m. The cast's men proceeded to the raising of the tents, the installation of kitchens and stables, while the Indians raised their teepees. In less than two hours all the gear was brought on the show's place: 1.200 stakes, 4.000 masts, 30.000 meters of ropes, 23.000 meters of canvases, 8.000 seats and 10.000 pieces of wood and irons of all types. On the whole, hundreds of tents topped with flags from all the world's nations.<sup>2</sup>

Buffalo Bill evocated Custer's death during the victory of the Sioux at the Little Big Horn in 1876 and, nine years after the battle, Sitting Bull, the organizer of this victory, returned from his exile in Canada and participated actively at this reconstitution during the 1885 tour in the U.S. Another example of this narrow interaction between reality and legend is the high number of *Buffalo Bill's Lives* in books and in movies far before his death.

The region of Camargue was the privileged place for shootings of these movies in France and actor Joe Hamman shot five French episodes' biopic in 1910–1911 there. Hamman was friend of Marquess Folco de Baroncelli (1869–1943) who helped with the shootings, lending some of his Indian paraphernalia. A life-long activist for Camargue, Baroncelli has made contact with the *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*: some Camargue guardians had participated to the show presented in Nimes (in October 1905) and Baroncelli had paid repeated visits to the *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* during its winter rest in Marseille that year. Baroncelli maintained a long friendship, with over twenty years of correspondence, with one of the cast, the Oglala Sioux Jacob White Eyes. Drawing parallels between the vanquished Amerindians and the then diminished Occitan people, Baroncelli played a major role in the building-up of Camargue as a region proud of its specific culture (Zaretsky 2004). The cast recruited horses, carriages and coachmen, as well as male and female extras on the spot; especially for one of the favorite

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2 <http://dreamokwa.over-blog.com/article-le-wild-west-show-53141239.html>.



acts, the reconstruction of stagecoach ambush. American Indians played a major role but the cast was very diversified and Chinese acrobats, horse riders (the cast's subtitle was *Rough Riders of the World*), cowboys from the U.S. and Mexico and exotic dancers supplemented the main Wild West theme.

If today our look on *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* centers on American Indians, the Colt and Winchester guns exhibition had probably more importance for the contemporary audiences than that of the Amerindian "losers", and certainly largely contributed to the financing of this huge venture. The whole West saga was exalted there: female sharpshooters, pioneers and cowboys occupying more space than the vanquished ones whose forthcoming disappearance was then a certainty for all. At this point of the nineteenth century, Indian removal of the 1830s had reached its peak. The allotment and leasing of land had reduced Indian territory to a tiny foothold, and the end of the disastrous Indian wars of the 1880s had their inevitable end in depopulation of Indians and their transfer to reservations. Depopulation (with Indians at their lowest population of 200.000 or so in 1910), transfer to reservations, the official government policy of assimilation, and land allotment make real the Myth of the Vanishing American, and for one brief moment in space and time, it appeared to most Americans that, indeed, this "species" will go the way of the buffalo (Green 1988: 37).

The presentation and analysis of the abundant intellectual production and re-evaluating and analyzing the role of *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* since the end of the 1950s is beyond the scope of this article. Our brief evocation of Robert Altman's critical and deconstructive movie *Buffalo Bill and the Indians or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (1976) will note that critics remarked he had softened his source, the play *Indians* by Arthur Kopit (1968): "The film that Mr. Altman has made is even more about theater-as-life and about the making of legends (matinee idols, movie stars and Presidents) than it is about genocide" (Canby 1976).

In the reconstitution of *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show*, a major attraction of France's Euro Disney since 1992, the show is enriched by cartoon characters, so kids can relate to the theme, and ends with a Texas barbecue.

## YOUTH MOVEMENTS

Youth movements that focused on a return to nature inspired by a semi-imagined Indian way of life were extremely popular in North America and Europe as early as the early 1900s. More specifically, these youth movements were particularly concerned with ecological issues, exemplified through a desired communion with nature, and presented a strong recreational component.

One important figure is the British-born Ernest Thompson Seton (1862–1946), best known as one of the founders of the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) but also the creator of the Woodcraft Indians, a colorful youth movement developed from Seton's first camp in 1902 organized in Connecticut. There are striking parallels between the mixture of Indian rites of the New Age period of the 1960s and 1970s and the selection process used by Seton in 1902: Seton had fashioned a makeshift village, with such diverse artifacts as Northern Plains teepee lodges and Algonquin birch bark canoes, on the grounds of the estate which included a man-made lake. Dominating this modular



Indian camp was a large council ring, around which were several expertly-done rock paintings. The council fire in the center of the ring was encircled by a stone necklace representing the Great Spirit. Four arms extending equidistant from the center symbolized spirit, mind, body and service. At the end of each arm was fastened a lamp with three rays, each of which stood for the laws of woodcraft. Obviously, this fire-centered circle, fashioned after a Navajo sand painting, was symbolic of nature's cycle. But as Seton explained, it also "led men to think about the Great Mystery over all" (Anderson 1985: 45).

Seton's incorporation of Native American culture was aesthetic — that is, both playful and craft-oriented — but also significant to his educational project: "The boys were taught to talk and think Indian. They learned many facets of nature, including plant and animal identification, trail marking and stalking, as well as various Indian arts, crafts and rituals. These educational aspects were incorporated into their various games" (Anderson 1985: 46).

Seton was BSA president in 1910 but left in 1915 after disputes that were partly nationalistic in nature. The BSA maintained a strong Indian lore component, exemplified by the creation of the Order of the Arrow, a camping fraternity whose initiation ceremonies drew on Indian themes and which resorted largely to Indian names. After 1915 Seton revived the Woodcraft Indians, adding Indian ceremonials and united them into a League that was transferred in 1929 from New York to Los Angeles. He established: "[...] Seton Village in the pin-covered foothills of New Mexico near Santa Fe the following year. As the League's new headquarters, Seton Village included a four-week children's summer camp and Seton's 'College of Indian Wisdom' for adult leaders and counselors. After the death of its founder in 1946, the decentralized Woodcraft League rapidly fell into oblivion" (Anderson 1985: 48). Seton's thought was religious and syncretic, as shown in *The Gospel of the Red Man* (1936, still in print) which compares "American Indian Religion" and Christianity.

It is, perhaps, ironic that two British Woodcraft groups established in the New Forest, "The order of the Woodcraft Chivalry", created by Westlake in 1916 and "Kindred of Kibbo Kift", created by Hargrove 1920, who oriented themselves towards Anglo-Saxon and British lore rather than keep up the original orientation towards American Indian lore, have influenced the development of the Neopagan Wicca Movement (Smoley 1998).

By the 1930s, some U.S. groups that focused exclusively on American Indian lore had left the BSA. In the 1950s the movements that originated in BSA and the Woodcraft League combined forces in the development of Indian Hobbyists groups; in the U.S. these groups gradually became ethnically mixed, including Indians no longer assigned to reservations as well as Afro-Americans and Puerto Ricans.

## INDIAN HOBBYISTS AND INDIANISTS IN EUROPE

Indian Hobbyist movements often developed considerable knowledge of the material culture of the American Indian groups they chose as models and adopted collective behavior of festive identification. They practiced ostensive action, living in their chosen past society: "The interest of a committed hobbyist generally begins at an early

age, manifesting itself in activities such as costume making and powwows. The powwows form an important activity of a typical hobbyist group and involve dressing up and dancing and singing, frequently in public” (Taylor 1988: 562).

In Europe, Indianist — the expression “Indian Hobbyist” being gradually dropped as judged too light for this specific leisure activity that “usually involves a very deep commitment” (Taylor 1988: 562) — groups existed in all countries. In the two pages he devotes to “The Continent” (the first three pages discussing British groups) Taylor enumerates: Belgium; Czechoslovakia; Finland; France; Germany; Holland (sic); Hungary; Italy; Poland; Soviet Union; Sweden; Switzerland. Indianists were especially popular in Central and Eastern Europe, and Taylor quotes the Leningrad Indian Club: “In the Soviet Union, the largest and best organized group is in Leningrad, which acts through the Inter-Union House of Creative Activities. Called the Leningrad Indian Club, it was formed in the late 1970s; it influenced other groups, organizing annual powwows generally held near Leningrad. The total number of participants at such powwows is generally about 60, and in 1984 there were 20 teepees pitched” (Taylor 1988: 569).

Germany was the most active country, where groups already existed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. An Indianer Museum renamed Karl May Museum existed near Dresden. Karl May did not collect “[...] American Indian material, and the majority of specimens in the Radebeul Museum were assembled, partly by exchange and loans from German museum collections, by Patty Frank (1876–1959), who was active in Buffalo Bill’s show around 1900” (Taylor 1988: 567). Discouraged by the Nazi regime, the Indianist activities were tolerated by the DDR: “In 1985, there were 21 hobbyist groups” in the DDR (Taylor 1988: 567). In West Germany, the first Indian council was held in 1951, and the 1981 meeting in Nilda (40 kilometres from Frankfurt) was attended by 3,000 people and there were also 200 teepees (Taylor 1988: 568). These groups celebrated the whole of the American West Saga with cowboys, North West Mounted Police, and soldiers from both sides of the Civil War.

The Czech Tramping movement is still active in 2017. It emerged in the 1920s as an independent outgrowth of the more organized Scouts and Woodcraft activities that already existed in 1913. It survived German occupation and the harsh early years of the Communist Era and was better tolerated in the 1970s, when specific Indian Hobbyist movements were also on the rise. The emphasis on outdoor life, including a positive attitude toward nature and a modest lifestyle, have taken root in Czech and Slovak societies (Jehlicka 2008; Pohunek 2011).

In France, Olivier Maligne wrote a Ph.D. dissertation and a book on the subject (Maligne 2004; 2006), naming the groups “Indianophiles”. He remarks that Indian Hobbyist clubs have existed in France since the 1930s. These clubs brought together three different milieus: scholars and collectors; artists, writers and showmen; and youth movements. In 1966, the theme park Red Skin Valley (Vallée des Peaux Rouges) in the Paris region was created by actor Robert Mottura. The site was well known in the 1970s and still exists today, coupled with a tree-climbing adventure park. Since the 1960s, movements centered on crafts and pageants have persisted in France, in parallel with the development of new movements such as Rainbow Gatherings and New Age workshops. In 2010, Sylvie Jacquemin’s prize-winning documentary *Indians like Us* told the story of a group from Picardy who had crossed the Atlantic to meet





American Indians.<sup>3</sup> In 2012, Giulia Grossman's documentary *Native American* was filmed at Fort Rainbow, a Western village set in a pine forest located 24 kilometres from Bordeaux, during the General Meeting of the French Federation of Friends of Old America.<sup>4</sup> The film brings into focus a Crow Indian from Montana employed by Euro Disney where he performs Indian Hoop tricks and dances and appears in the guise of various characters. Cowboys and outlaws are also present at Fort Rainbow.<sup>5</sup>

More than recreational organizations, the Hobbyist, later Indianist, clubs considered themselves as an alternative to an "artificial civilization", through the members' identification with Native Americans and the revival of a "natural" society. Both Maligne in France, and Taylor, commenting on activities in Hungary, stress this major component: "The social order is not opposed to the natural order [...] and this whole is internally coherent due to the harmonious interaction following the image of the Great Circle that incorporated all things without breaks or hierarchies. [...] The separation of man and nature is at best an illusion, at worst a moral offence even a cosmic disaster" (Maligne 2004: 107). "Those that participated felt that they shared an inborn, natural quest for the hardships, freedom, and glory of the idealized warrior life of the North American Plains Indian" (Taylor 1988: 569)

It is to be noted that a recent exhibit in Bakony in Hungary (July 2015 — Nov 2016) tells the story of the Indian enactment in the place since 1961.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. DEVELOPMENT

Learned and literary conceptions about Native Americans evolved already in the 1930s and changed radically since the 1950s. This will be documented by the presentation of two legends, and of the successive receptions of the Sioux Black Elk's spiritual message, which have strengthened the generalization of idealized representations of Native Americans.

### CHIEF SEATTLE (ALLEGED) SPEECH

This famous speech celebrates with talent the love of nature and has become a founding text, a gospel of the ecological movement since the 1970s. Supposed to have been said by Chief Seattle in 1854 (the U.S. city of Seattle is named after him), the text was not noted in 1854 but published in 1887 by Dr. Henry Smith, who had arrived in the territory only in 1853; then it stressed America's "Manifest Destiny" — its civilizing mission — and predicted the forthcoming disappearance of the American Indian: "There was a time when our people covered the whole land as the waves of a wind-ruffled sea covers its shell-paved floor, but that time has long since passed away."<sup>7</sup>

3 [www.indianslikeus.com/index.php/en/](http://www.indianslikeus.com/index.php/en/) and [www.facebook.com/indianslikeus](https://www.facebook.com/indianslikeus).

4 [www.ffava.com](http://www.ffava.com).

5 [www.dailymotion.com/video/x28a7xh\\_native-american\\_shortfilms](https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x28a7xh_native-american_shortfilms).

6 [www.museum.hu/exhibition/16034/The\\_Story\\_of\\_the\\_Indian\\_Enactment\\_in\\_the\\_Bakony](http://www.museum.hu/exhibition/16034/The_Story_of_the_Indian_Enactment_in_the_Bakony).

7 <http://www-formal.stanford.edu/jmc/progress/fake.html>.



Archivists have strongly questioned the authenticity of Smith's publication, but the 1887 speech stayed in circulation, an important relay being its republication as a booklet (Rich 1932). In 1969, a new translation was published by poet William Arrowsmith who interpreted it in 1970 on the first Earth Day April 22, 1970. A script-writer Ted Perry watched the performance and later asked Arrowsmith's authorization to use the text for the script of the ecological film *Home* produced by the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission. Ted Perry was paid for his script, but his name was voluntarily omitted by savvy producers on the film's release and the Speech thus attributed to Chief Seattle.

In opposition to the dualist Western tradition, the Speech revised in 1972 presents the Universe as a sacred unit: "How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them? This we know — the Earth does not belong to man — man belongs to the Earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the Earth — befalls the sons of the Earth. Man did not weave the web of life — he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself."<sup>8</sup>

It also denounces "the white man's excessive exploitation", leading to the destruction of Nature and, beyond, to the disappearance of humans: "We know that the white man does not understand our ways. One portion of land is the same to him as the next, for he is a stranger who comes in the night and takes from the land whatever he needs. The Earth is not his brother, but his enemy and when he has conquered it, he moves on. He leaves his father's graves behind, and he does not care. He kidnaps the Earth from his children, and he does not care. His father's grave, and his children's birthright are forgotten. He treats his mother, the Earth, and his brother, the same, as things to be bought, plundered, sold like sheep or bright beads. His appetite will devour the Earth and leave behind only a desert."<sup>9</sup>

A moving passage was quickly spotted for its anachronisms as neither buffaloes disappeared and lived very far from Seattle's dwellings, nor did trains existed in 1854: "I am a savage and do not understand any other way. I have seen a thousand rotting buffaloes on the prairie, left by the white man who shot them from a passing train. I am a savage and do not understand how the smoking iron horse can be made more important than the buffalo that we kill only to stay alive."<sup>10</sup> Some enthusiasts solved the problem by post-dating the Speech to 1894.

In 1987 Rudolf Kaiser told the full story of the revised Speech's elaboration, and this chapter of a social anthropology book (Kaiser 1987) was later relayed in the *New York Times* (Egan 1992). These revelations have not stopped the Speech's expansion, especially in production aimed at children, as Susan Jeffers's *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* 2002 book exemplifies. It was one of the main pieces of the influential anthology of Indian texts *Touch the Earth* (McLuhan 1971). However, the qualification of "hoax" appears spurious as, though the film's producers' omission of Perry's contribution

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8 [www.snopes.com/quotes/seattle.asp](http://www.snopes.com/quotes/seattle.asp).

9 [www.snopes.com/quotes/seattle.asp](http://www.snopes.com/quotes/seattle.asp).

10 [www.snopes.com/quotes/seattle.asp](http://www.snopes.com/quotes/seattle.asp).



DID intend to mislead, the Speech's admiring audiences do not really care about the authorship of this fifth ecological Gospel: "Large parts of the environmental movement are more concerned with feelings than with facts. The fake Chief Seattle Speech appeals to them independently of whether he really said that. If he didn't say it, he ought to have said it — rotting buffaloes and all."<sup>11</sup>

## RAINBOW FAMILY

The Rainbow Warriors legend has played a major role in the development of the Rainbow Family and still functions as a unifying origin myth in this utopian and anarchist movement aiming at a spiritual transformation of "Babylon"; the existing, and evil, universe.

### *The movement*

During fieldwork on the prediction of a major spiritual change on Dec 21, 2012 and its rooting in South-West France *département* of Aude, Bugarach and Rennes-le-Château, I met an enthusiastic participant of Rainbow gatherings, musician René Osilla<sup>12</sup> who had discovered "The Rainbow Family" during a gathering at Rennes-le-Château in December 1987. Born from hippie currents and counterculture of the 1960s, the utopist and anarchist "Rainbow Family" has organized large-scale gatherings in the US since 1972, and in Europe since 1983 (Ticino) but also in the whole world. The gatherings generally take place in forests and last a lunar month. Drawing on the experience of Vietnam veterans who joined the first meetings, the gatherings — preceded by a "seed camp" and followed by systematic cleanup — take pride in their environmental care. The two published anthropological studies of the Rainbow Family, based on fieldwork in the U.S. from 1984 by Michael Niman (Niman 1997) and from 1998 till 2002 by Adam Berger (Berger 2006) indicate that many of the Family's problems come from its refusal to filter the arrivals. Many differences seem to exist between the U.S. Rainbow Family, marked by the input of the veterans, and its extensions in other countries. Thus Niman and Berger recognize the systematic utilization of mind-altering substances and explain the setting-up of "border A" camps to admit alcohol users in the U.S. The Rainbow gatherings of Canada and Europe are generally abstinent, as was emphasized by Thierry Sallantin, alternative libertarian militant and regular participant to Rainbow during a presentation made by the author and sociologist Gérald Bronner's workshop (Paris, January 22, 2016). Centered on nonviolence and cooperation, the Rainbow Family has one central aim. It is "an intentional society devoted to achieving world peace through spiritual healing" (Berger 2006). Inspired by its reinterpretation of Native American cultures, the Rainbow promotes their supposed values. American Indian traditions are thus the object of a selective *bricolage* and said to belong to an immemorial tradition of harmonious communion with Nature.

Rainbow gatherings are the occasion of many discoveries and ecstasies. An enthusiastic account by a participant to a Rainbow gathering in Italy, 2002, tells prob-

<sup>11</sup> <http://www-formal.stanford.edu/jmc/progress/fake.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Pseudonym. Interviewed Jan 16, 2012 in Fa, near Esperaza Aude.



ably as much as learned studies: “Everything was there for a perfect gathering and the chosen spot allowed a true rainbow way of life. Imagine! Far away from Babylon, at an altitude of 1.400 metres, several clearings encircled by a huge forest. Pictures from a dream world: butterfly women, thousands of soap bubbles rising towards the shining sun or the full moon, unreal tipi camps, fog layers... Birds made of wood and leaves, sadhus, shamans, sufis, Adams and Eves before wine leaves were invented... Ah! What about the 3 huge food circles where all gather in the celebration hymn and join through the primordial sound of OM waking up with the ritual of clapping one another’s palms... Joy of sharing with the Whole under all its aspects: with Mother Earth, with the rain of an instant, the Sun, the cold of an evening and all creations of Gaïa, her inhabitants and with the deepest core of ourselves! Joy of finding the way back home to life’s very essence... A Rainbow gathering as we know them, in a word! In harmony with Rainbow gatherings: joy, colors, wisdom, being together, party, music, dance, fire, expansion, meeting again, intelligent talking.”<sup>13</sup>

These gatherings appear close to Neopagan and “transformational” 21<sup>st</sup> century festivals such as Burning Man.

#### *The Rainbow Warriors Legend*

The prophecy, central to Rainbow’s worldview, is told in almost identical terms by Niman and Berger: “It is said that when the earth is weeping and the animals are dying that a tribe of people who care will come. They will be called the Warriors of the Rainbow” (Niman 1997: 135). “When the earth is ravaged and the animals are dying, a new tribe of people shall come unto the earth from many colors, classes, creeds, and who by their actions and deeds shall make the earth green again. They will be known as the warriors of the Rainbow” (Berger 2006: 124).<sup>14</sup>

This legend’s origin is not to be found in Native American cultures, but it is fake-lore, drawn from *Warriors of the Rainbow*, sub-titled: *Strange and Prophetic Dreams of the Indian Peoples* (Willoya, Brown 1962): “A typical piece of sixties esoterica”, compiled by a natural history writer (Brown) and an Alaskan Indian who had gathered material visiting North West tribes (Willoya) it “added to the growing image of the wise ‘ecological Indian’ a construct that blended romanticized primitivism with moralistic environmentalism. [...] Whether Willoya and Brown’s rendering of these legends was faithful to their original spirit is perhaps open to question.” (Zelko 2013). Berger analyzes with finesse — but legend scholars already know what he demonstrates — the role played by this prophecy in the cohesion of the Rainbow movement: “The degree to which it is believed to be a literally accurate foretelling of what is to happen to humanity, however, varies. Most people consider the apparent intersection between the Hopi myth and the Rainbow Family to be a sort of coincidence. [...] These stories are quite important to the movement, but this importance comes from factors other than unquestioning belief in them. Perhaps the most obvious effect of such Hipstorial [*Hipstorial* = Historical in Rainbow lingo] mythology is that it serves to bind this rather disparate bunch of people together. Even the improbability of these

13 <http://frenchrainbow.free.fr/comptesrendus/italie2002/italieenglish.html>.

14 [www.welcomehome.org](http://www.welcomehome.org).



Hipistorical myths works towards fostering a perception of separation from the outside world and, by implication, an alternative identity. Such myths are therefore display something of a practical function, helping to define the Rainbow group” (Berger 2006: 140–141).

An interesting point — which will not be developed to respect limitations of space — is strong ties of the Rainbow mythology to End-Times scenarios.

### *Rainbow Warriors and Greenpeace*

Greenpeace in its early days was strongly influenced by the Rainbow Warrior legend. In 1971, a party of Greenpeace members were invited to participate in a tribal initiation ceremony: “The message was clear: Greenpeace was fated to be the messenger between the destructive White Man and the ecological Indians; it was, in short, the first tribe of Rainbow Warriors” (Zelko 2013).

Thus the memorial book of the Canadian Robert Hunter, one of the founders and an early leaders of Greenpeace, was titled *Warriors of the Rainbow* (Hunter 1979). And Greenpeace’s first ship, infamously sunk by the French secret services in New Zealand in 1985 (one dead, the arrest and condemnation of the couple having operated on orders, resignation of Charles Hernu, Secretary of Defense who paid for a decision that had been approved by President Mitterrand) was called the Rainbow Warrior, as successive Greenpeace ships will be called.

### BLACK ELK

The Oglala/Lakota Sioux Black Elk’s [or Wapiti] (1863–1950) philosophical and religious message, “based on a magnificent vision that he believed empowered him to cure and to lead” (Keyhoe 1990: 197) have turned him into one of the most influential authors in the build-up of the cultural fiction surrounding the superior religious authenticity of the American Indian. The message appeared in a growing climate of search for remedies to the ills of civilization “Thousands [...] believe that American Indians retain a primordial wisdom that could heal our troubled world” (Keyhoe 1990: 194).

The message first appeared in 1932 in collaboration with Nebraska’s poet laureate, John Neihardt. In a second stage Black Elk, who died August 1950, dictated an additional message to Joseph Epes Brown, who had studied with the main creator of the concept of a Goddess Cult, Swede Åke Hultkrantz (Gill 1990). This led to the publication of *The Sacred Pipe* (Black Elk, Brown 1953) where ideas of syncretism and of primal religious ideas were added by Brown. The French translation, published in the same year, referred to Black Elk’s Indian name. It had been revised by Swiss esoterist Frithjof Schuon who prefaced the book and made many references to the primal religion represented by Hehaka Sapa (Hehaka Sapa 1953, still in print). In a strongly synthetic later text *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian* Brown explained: “American Indian religions represent pre-eminent examples of primal religious traditions that have been present in the Americas for some thirty to sixty thousand years. Fundamental elements common to the primal nature of those traditions survive in the present among Indian cultures of America” (Brown 1982: 1).

Black Elk's message was republished in *The Sixth Grandfather*, the original 1932 transcriptions of his dictation to Neihardt being revised and re-translated by academic Raymond J DeMallie (1985) who unlike the preceding compilers knew Black Elk's language. Black Elk's temporary conversion to Catholicism was by then recognized. Later, in 2008 and 2014, enriched versions of *Black Elk Speaks*, will be published. It has become an American classic.

We will only address the spiritualist and religious aspect of the evolution of the approach of Native Americans. Of course, simultaneous cultural and political changes took place. We will mention Dee Brown's *Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee* from 1970 which overturned the opinion in favor of the Indians and the 1973 confrontations in Washington D.C. and on the Pine Ridge reservation, that marked the development of the AIM American Indian Movement. Since then, several acts have considerably changed the condition of the Native Americans: 1975, Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act; US Code — 25 — Ch.14/II; 1978, AIRFA American Indian Religious Freedom Act, amended 1996; 1990, NAGPRA Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (Berthier-Foglar 2002 :45). A process of restitution of tribal territories has started and although problems of Native Americans are far from solved, their numbers are steadily growing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### 3. SOURCE OF WISDOM

In 2017, it has been over thirty years since, in parallel with the Europeans playing Indian of the Indianist clubs, Native Americans — sometimes “self-proclaimed” and even “white” and in conflict with U.S. tribal authorities — come to Europe to disseminate a knowledge transformed by the New Age conceptions of a Past Golden Age, incarnated in the Celts, and of the Noble Savage (Bowman 1995).

In Spain, social anthropologist Anna Fedele, studying groups of women who use their menstrual blood to create offerings, indicates the influence of a female shaman from Mexico in the creation of this ritual, supposed to revive former Indian customs: “Estrella explained that she had been offering her menstrual blood since 2000, following the invitation of an elder Mexican shaman woman who visited Barcelona once a year to hold workshops for women and sweat lodges open to both men and women. During her workshops, she invited women not to throw their blood in the trash because it would be like throwing away their personal power. Being the expression of the woman's power, the menstrual blood should be offered to Mother Earth, as she claimed Mexican indigenous women had done” (Fedele 2014).

Anthropologist Daniel Vazeilles — specialist on the Sioux of which she has studied “the daily life, the identity renewal and the dynamism of the shamans” (Vazeilles 2008, subsection 1) — has followed these neoshamans during their tours in France. They assert to be close “to the spiritual knowledge of the ancient Celts and of their druids” (Idem, subsection 4). This asserted closeness, surprising at first, can be explained by the great value which New Age circles, especially British, have attached to the Celts, seeing — or rather dreaming up — in these diverse groups the incarnation of an ancient age where everything was simpler, in harmony with nature, and





better (Bowman 1993). These borrowings do not concern only Celts. Many other New Age ideas, inherited from esoterist currents, are adopted by these Sioux Vazeilles has studied: “Several explain, for example, that Northern American Indians come from Atlantis and those of the South from Mu. [...] Traditional shamanist ideology is lost in these assertions that, in fact, belong to the contemporary mystical and esoterist movement” (Vazeilles 2008, subsection 31).

In France, Indian neo-shamans look for megalithic monuments, considered as Celtic, for their benevolent energy: “These supposed Amerindian rituals can be adapted to local knowledge when the workshops happen around a dolmen. [...] This has been the case for the tours made for several successive years by Archie Fire Lane Deer or yet of Indian shamans in Broceliande forest” (Idem subsection 27). Syncretism — already active in the ceremonies created by Seton for the Woodcraft Indians — is paramount. Neo-shaman rituals can be: “A hodge-podge of generic Plains ritual combined with holistic healing and human potential movement language” (Green 1988: 45). Just as the Celts are reduced to an essence: “The New Agers [...] believe they have achieved a complete picture of the Celts and their world, through inspiration, interpretation of cultural tradition and esoterically transmitted knowledge” (Bowman 1993: 147). Differences between contemporary Celts and definitional problems as to who counts as Celtic tend to be overlooked. There are now many people who might be classified as ‘Cardiac Celts’: they feel in their heart that they are Celts. You can choose to be Celtic if it feels right for you, for spiritual nationality is a matter of elective affinity (Bowman 1995: 144).

Native Americans are said to share a unique — albeit ersatz — spirituality: “Similarly, Native Americans, despite over 200 distinct tribal entities, despite ample historical evidence to the contrary, have come to be thought of by some as ‘all the same really’” (Idem: 146). After African sorcerers and Indian gurus, a market of religious American Indian experience is born. This market is lived individually by the seekers, hopping from tradition to tradition and/or from shaman to ascended master.

Sales of Australian didgeridoos and Native American medicine shields and dream catchers increase, not just as ethnic *chic* but as spiritual tools. The toolbox approach to spirituality promoted by some strands of New Age and Neopaganism encourages shopping around in the global market, both literally and metaphorically, using the currency of cultural evolutionary ideas. Aspiring Noble Savages are consumers, and consumerism is generally a matter of individual choice, so what might formerly have been features of a particular group or tribe have to come in individual portions (Idem: 145).

Search for the Golden Age, criticism of a too complex society by the evocation of the Noble Savage, have been yesterday literary or intellectual movements. Today the concern is the creation of a new identity, built-up from a past or a beyond redefined according to personal desires: “Our future depends from a return to the past. Instead of simply admiring them from afar, people want to become Noble Savages” (Idem: 144).

#### 4. FROM HARSH CRITICISM TO A NEW PARADIGM

##### CRITICISM... AND FIELDWORK

Evident frauds and crooks do exist — as in all human activities. Thus Ed McGaa, creator of a “Rainbow tribe” who has toured in France, is denounced by a specialist of the Rainbow Family. “Author Ed McGaa, a self-proclaimed ‘Oglala Sioux ceremonial leader’, in 1987 created a ‘tribe’ for the New Age ‘Indians’. In one swift but profitable move, ripping off both Native American and Rainbow Family culture, McGaa dubbed his followers the ‘Rainbow Tribe’” (Niman 1997: 138). However, for Philip Jenkins, historian of contemporary American religion and author of a study subtitled *How mainstream America discovered Native spirituality*, Ed McGaa is just one of a galaxy of authors “popularizing Native religions” in the 1980s (Jenkins 2004: 181).

It is by Native Americans themselves that the projects of playing Indian, or of an appropriation of Indian spirituality, have raised strong opposition. Thus Rayna Green — Native American, Smithsonian scholar and one of the creators of the Museum of the American Indian — suspects the “Indian players” of harboring genocidal ideas: “Indians are, in effect, loved to death through playing Indian” (Green 1988: 50). One of the earliest and best-known protest pieces against New Age appropriations is the *Declaration of War Against Exploiters of Lakota Spirituality*, adopted on June 10, 1993 at the Lakota Summit V, an international gathering of U.S. and Canadian Lakota, Dakota and Nakota Nations. Resolution 5 exemplifies the tone of this widely circulated and lengthy text: “We assert a posture of zero-tolerance for any ‘white man’s shaman’ who rises from within our own communities to ‘authorize’ the expropriation of our ceremonial ways by non-Indians; all such ‘plastic medicine men’ are enemies of the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota people.”<sup>15</sup>

It is easy to discover other examples of criticism. Thus, on Dec 20, 2009, an entry in *The Blog of Don Juanito* aptly criticized a certain acquisitive New Age attitude that sees other cultures merely as convenient sources of energy: “From behind his computer, the transcultural cybersurfer no longer needs real contact with Native American traditions in order to exploit their resources. [...] He only takes hold of abstractions, dead and devoid of actors, cultural goods to be consumed, sell or throwaway after use”.<sup>16</sup> Terry Macy and Daniel Hart’s *White Shamans & Plastic Medicine Men* (1996) translated this type of protest into pictures. It is to be noted that its projection on YouTube has been commented negatively: “To be offended by cultural appropriations, is to be an example of cultural indoctrination, small minded, self-important imbecile”.<sup>17</sup>

The collective work *The Invented Indian* (Clifton 1990) is a despising and fiery criticism of a vision of North American Indians which the editor James Clifton designates in his foreword as a “cultural fiction”. It is the very concept of a superior culture because it is closer to nature that the book attacks as a resurgence of “cultural primitivism, the discontent of the civilized with civilization” (Keyhoe 1990: 195) which devel-

15 <http://puffin.creighton.edu/lakota/war.html> (The source quotes the text *in extenso*).

16 <http://magick-instinct.blogspot.fr/2009/12/sexualite.html>.

17 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=19JAMhAzXms>.



ops into “the use of the term ‘nature’ to express the standard of human values, the identification of the good with that which is ‘natural’” (Lovejoy, Boas 1935). Keyhoe concludes her very critical analysis of cultural primitivism with the prediction of its victory in our society: “Cultural primitivism, constructed as the opposition to civilization with its discontents has been part of Western culture for close to 3.000 years. [...] Borrowing from and serving one another, poets and plastic medicine men earn a living from the hoary tradition of ascribing virtue to nature. The tradition will not die. Its invented Indians are eternally reincarnated Scythians from the primal Gaia of the Western imagination” (Keyhoe 1990: 207).

And indeed, 25 years later, we see the triumph of the cultural fiction, endorsed and enhanced by the First People themselves.

However, even if these New Age conceptions defining themselves as Indian are far from an authentic image of the spiritual life of past or present Native communities, their practioners and believers are real enough to designate them as a “real” religion. Adaptations and plagiarisms characterize all new religions, who claim to trace their beliefs to some antiquity or community (Jenkins 2004: 248–250).

Some anthropologists adopt an empathic attitude in their study of the imitative phenomenon of the Indianist clubs. The historical study of Nancy Reagin on the German Indian Hobbyists (Reagin 2016) is relevant here. The name of Petra Kalshoven, author of *Crafting Indian*, a book based on observations in Europe (Kalshoven 2012), needs also to be quoted. Kalshoven clearly situates Indianist clubs within the growth of *living history*, the collective practice of historical reenactments (Middle Ages, Napoleonic troops, etc.): “Indianism is also very much a product of its time and place in that an increasing number of Europeans are involved in similar imitative play predicated on replica-making in different forms of historical re-enactment” (Kalshoven 2010: 74). Indianist groups sometimes explicitly place themselves in that field. Thus: “We are a ‘living history’ group, representing the life of a Sioux Lakota family during the 1850s–1860s”.<sup>18</sup> Reenactments are also very popular in Russia, but more tuned to medieval times, often the occasion for staged fights (Radtchenko 2006).

## INVENTED TRADITIONS AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

While not doubting the mythical quality of cultural primitivism, the denouncing approach of authors such as Clifton or Keyhoe should be considered as too limited to permit an analysis of the phenomena that have been presented.

The approach of such cultural and social movements — that remain extremely limited — has been overturned by the concepts of *invented traditions* (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and of *imagined communities* (Anderson 1983). *Invented traditions* are essentially ritual and symbolic practices trying to establish links to historical past, generally fictitious. In our societies of perpetual changes, they make use of history as a source legitimizing action and ensuring the group’s cohesion; they try to present and structure some parts of social life as immutable and invariant and play a major role in the elaboration of modern nations. Benedict Anderson’s revo-

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18 www.indianisme.be.



lutionary definition of the nation as founded on an *imagined community*: “it is an imagined political community — and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson 1983: 7) took the same direction. Around these concepts, a new approach of innovations leaning on imaginary constructions has been built-up into a new paradigm. Setting aside their problematic relationship to reality to study how these innovations are lived, stress is laid on the analysis of the innovations, their causes, motives and consequences rather than on indignation towards their inaccuracies. And innovations are considered not as the creation of a sick mind but as a central tenet of social evolution.

However, this acceptance is far from complete, especially in the “serious” sectors of the social sciences. While today societies from *beyond* are studied seriously even in their most *bizarre* aspects, the denigrating qualifiers of *savage* and/or *infantile* are frequently applied — including by reasonable intellectual elites — to the alternative beliefs and practices in our own societies that are generally judged as hatcheries for dangerous and harmful sects or refuges for misfits. Questioning the sneers currently met when were evocated the beliefs and practices of alternative spiritualists, and especially the beliefs in civilizing extra-terrestrials he had studied, Wiktor Stoczkowski (1999, 2001) has vigorously pleaded for a serious approach of these “laughable beliefs”, accounting for their cultural roots and not only considering them as “a simple phenomenon of breakdown or a lack of control of the dominant culture’s canons” (Stoczkowski 2001: 98).

We have chosen to center on one of the many elements of New Age spiritualities which are: “Based upon the individual manipulation of religious as well as non-religious symbolic systems, and this manipulation is undertaken in order to fill these symbols with new religious meaning” (Hanegraaff 1997: 304). As the symbolic systems of Western societies are mostly non-religious, this mutation can be considered as representing a radically new phenomenon. In our secularized and diversified societies, religion becomes the domain of spiritualities, often individually built: “Secularization [...] does mean that religion as such is radically changing its face. The essence of this process, I suggest, lies in the fact that religion is becoming less and less the domain of religions, and more and more the domain of spiritualities” (Hanegraaff 1997: 302).

New Age spiritualities constitute a unique synthesis and an important phenomenon. They shouldn’t be considered as *bizarre*, ridiculed, or approached with hostility as is often the case in French society.

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**Véronique Campion-Vincent** is French anthropologist and folklorist, researcher at the CNRS and the Maison des sciences de l'homme, specialized in the sociological approach to rumours and urban legends. She is the author of *Organ Theft Legends* (2005), *La société parano; théorie du complot, menaces et incertitudes* (2007), *100% rumeurs ! codes caches, objets pieges, aliments contaminés... La verite sur 50 legendes urbaines extravagantes* (2014, with Jean Bruno Renard), and many other books and scholarly publications.