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New England's Holistic Magazine  
September/October 1998 **FREE**

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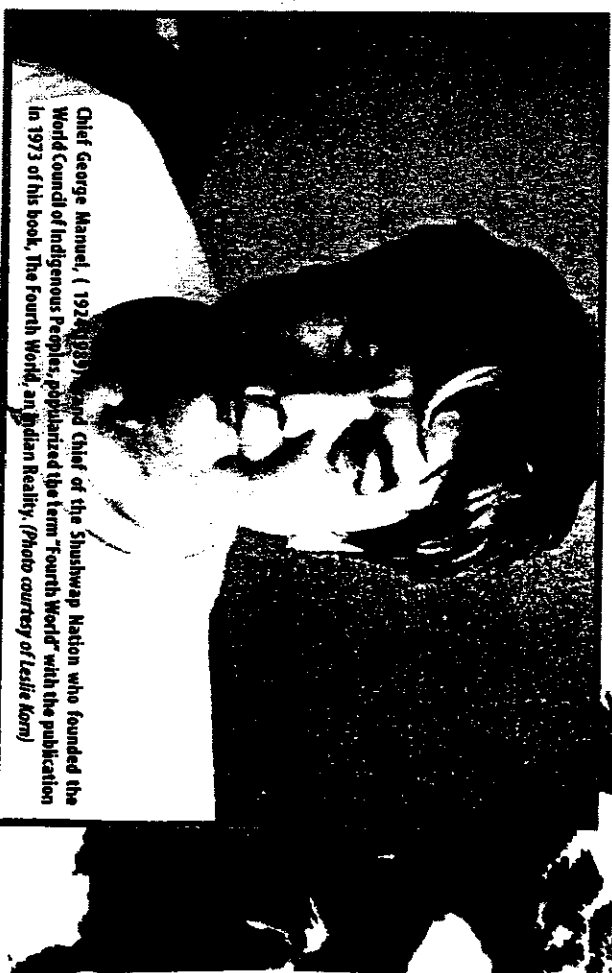
# Connecting with Our Cultures

KNOWING ONE'S OWN CULTURE OPENS THE DOOR TO RESPECTING FOURTH WORLD CULTURES

by Leslie Korn, Ph.D. M.P.H.  
Center for World Indigenous Studies

The words "native" or "indigenous" have become popular ways of talking about peoples who live in Fourth World nations. Neither of these words, however, reaches the depth of meaning or precision that the word "people" does. It is the one word that is translated or translatable into every human language. The words for "people" are so beautiful that they sing. Listen as you say Inuit (IN UU EET), Naga (NAAgaa), Lakota, Hopi, Yanomami (YAA no MOMee), Ainu (EYE new), Mong, Palau (baa LOW), Karimojong, Dogon (DOE gone), Yupik, and Taidnapum (ti ID NAA pum). By these words and thousands more spoken in more than six thousand languages we immediately recognize the richness of human diversity joined by common knowledge."

Rudolph C. Ryser in *Forward to Simply Living*



Chief George Manuel, (1926-1989) was a member of the Shushwap Nation who founded the World Council of Indigenous Peoples, popularized the term "Fourth World" with the publication in 1973 of his book, *The Fourth World, an Indian Reality*. (Photo courtesy of Leslie Korn)

There is a flowering of interest about indigenous peoples by Euro-Americans, Euro-Canadians and Europeans. Some of the activities associated with this flowering in the United States and Canada are positive. These include cross-cultural exchanges and education, attraction to traditional medicine and healing opportunities, spiritual development and group cooperation to foster environmental protection. The burgeoning interest in peoples of different cultures and the desire to participate in their cultural expressions reflects, in great part, the desire to connect meaningfully and purposefully. Growing numbers of people seek connections not only with new friends, mentors and colleagues, but to reconnect within the depths of the self – the original self connected to the cosmos and the rhythms of the natural world.

Yet, some of this growing interest in America's indigenous peoples produces activities that bring controversy and criticism. Indian tribal members, reservation Indians, "urban Indians" and tribal governments experience bigotry and exploitation by the projection of stereotypes in newspapers, the movies and on television. The commercialization of American Indian spiritual rituals and the amalgamation of traditions into generic "new age" manuals, card decks and products further demonstrate widely practiced efforts to exploit indigenous peoples. There remains a lack of accurate knowledge about the issues that affect the lives of North American indigenous peoples even as interest in them grows.

- *Why the surge of interest in Native Americans among non Indians in the United States and Canada, as well as Europe?*
- *What is the meaning of this profound interest in indigenous peoples and what impact does it have on indigenous cultures?*
- *What is the meaning of Euro-Americans searching among indigenous peoples for spiritual guidance and meaning?*
- *How can we best direct our attentions and efforts to support, rather than unwittingly exploit traditional peoples?*

In order to answer the questions we must first understand ourselves as individuals, as immigrants and collectivities with original histories that are often obscured beneath the surface stories of multigenerational migrations. Stories of the present become the histories of the past. Layered with meaning, these stories unfold as the myths that in turn link us to our ancestors and to our passages. To understand another person's culture, we are required to know our own culture(s).

Representatives of tribal peoples from Ecuador and Scandinavia.

The Sammi people follow the reindeer throughout northern Norway, Sweden, Finland and parts of Russia. (Photo courtesy of Leslie Korn)



*Dr. Leslie Korn, Ph.D., M.P.H. R.P.P., a Polarity Therapist and psychotherapist in practice for 21 years, received her degrees from Lesley College, Harvard University and the Union Institute. She is the director of Education for the Center for World Indigenous Studies and the director of the Center for Traditional Medicine, a cross cultural treatment and education center in Yelapa Mexico, an indigenous fishing village, where she has felt at home for nearly 25 years. Descended from grain farmers, Leslie is a second generation American Ashkenazi Jew, born and raised outside of Boston, who has traced her roots to 19th century Silesia and Romania and 11th century (what is now called) Kazakistan, thus explaining in part, her love for root vegetables. She is a member of the Cowitz Indian tribe by marriage.*

## Words Help Shape our Reality

Language is so central to identity that the first action of colonizing or invading peoples is to forbid the use of a people's language.

The invading language then defines the colonized. Words that have an originally neutral meaning can become pejorative. For example, we derive the word primitive, often applied to indigenous peoples (as well as certain mental states and behaviors) from the root words, prim, prime, and primal meanings. first. As language determines and reinforces realities, to dig deeply through the layers first requires clarity of definitions. Thus our first acts must be rooted in conscious language.

## What is Culture?

The word culture has two root words: "cult" meaning worship and "ure" meaning earth. Culture has deeper meaning than what urban populations often claim. Instead of merely visual arts, music, dance and literature, culture is in essence the "worship of the earth." Human cultural heritage is rooted in our connection to the earth. Just as the roots of trees draw nourishment from the water and nutrients underground, so do our human-animal bodies and spirits draw from where our peoples originally worked the soil and ate of the earth and sea. Out of our connections to the earth, come our means of celebration and honoring.

Through ritual we express our participation in the cycles of the earth and sky. The clay gods and goddesses of the earth through out the Americas, the red ochre drawings in the caves of Cro-Magnon, the rhythmic beats that pulse to the Celtic coastlines, economic and political systems, ways of using the land for life-giving food are all expressions of culture. The forms these expressions take arise out of unique

configurations—both the bounty and scarcity the earth provides. Is it any wonder that human-animals in industrialized societies, dissociated from earth's gifts, living in neighborhoods where one's neighbor is often a stranger, yearn deeply for connection with other human-animals who can guide them back to culture—worship of the earth?



Dora Alisa and Dona Marta teaching Traditional ways to two students from the United States at the Center for World Indigenous Studies Learning Retreat and Traditional Medicine Clinic in the village of Tepena, Mexico. (Photo courtesy of Leslie Korn)

Photo courtesy of B. B. Bohonick

## **What does indigenous mean? Who are indigenous peoples?**

The term indigenous came into popular usage because of an historic meeting of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples held in Port Alberni, Canada in 1977. There, Chief George Manuel of the Sushwap Nation gathered 29 delegations of peoples from the Western Hemisphere to form a world council.

The United Nations adopted the term "indigenous" when it established the Working Group on Indigenous Populations in 1982. Since the historic meeting of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples much has happened to ingrain further the word "indigenous" in the common lexicon. The United Nations held 10 years of meetings to develop the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the formal declaration on the Decade of Indigenous Peoples (1992-2002). There is even a music group that calls itself "Indigenous." However, concern that the term indigenous has become overly broad and used imprecisely prompts growing disquiet among indigenous people. The term has increasingly been associated with marginalization and with minority status. Consequently, leaders in the field have turned to a new term of reference - Fourth World nations.

## **What is the Fourth World?**

Among many peoples of the Americas, from the Hopi to their sisters and brothers the Maya, there are similar stories that employ the sacred circle and the four directions. For the grandfather tribe known as the Hopi, the story takes them through their origins as human beings emerging through the first three worlds and finally arriving in the world of renewal, the Fourth World. The Snohomish, Anishnabe and the Nuxalk tell similar stories. When the Mayan Daykeepers announced on January 1, 1994 that they would reclaim Mayan lands in the Mexican State of Chiapas, their announcement was more than a political demand. It was a statement based on the ancient calendrical cycles of the cosmos, land and spirit. In North America, there are over a thousand tribes or nations and there are more than 6000 nations of indigenous peoples worldwide on every continent and in every skin color. For these peoples, the age of renewal is widely recognized to be arriving.

## **Stereotypes: Dangerous assumptions**

Indigenous peoples in the western hemisphere experience the bigotry of others that comes from lack of education and persistent media stereotypes. The "New Age" Indian movement is likewise fraught with simplistic and materialistic ideas that objectify real people. Several friends have shared with me some of the bigoted questions they have been asked.

- *How much Indian blood do you have?*
- *What part Indian are you?*
- *You don't look Indian!*
- *What is your animal totem?*
- *What is the meaning of a butterfly that stopped on my shoulder?*
- *It's terrible that the United States (Canada) have decimated Indians and that they (you) are disappearing.*
- *Isn't it terrible the rate of alcoholism and drug abuse among Indians?*
- *What is your Indian name?*

When one thinks about these types of questions and observations, one comes to recognize how depersonalized they can make a person feel. Unintentional bigotry is no less a form of violence than intentional bigotry. Bigotry results from ignorance. Everyone must work to replace ignorance with knowledge that promotes understanding.

## **New Age Indian Movement**

Cultural dislocation affects everyone. Rosalee Tizya, a Gitskan activist and researcher working in the area of community trauma has been chronicling the negative effects of what she has called "the New Age Indian movement." The focus of her research refers to Indians inside and outside of their tribes who, in response to demands by Indians and non-Indians alike, take on roles as spiritual leaders and medicine people for which they are not authorized.

"Individuals who have not been chosen from within their communities as medicine people with authority are granted authority by non-Indians. This devalues important tribal institutions and creates circumstances that beguile young Indians and non-Indians."

When asked about how tribes and others can act to prevent and address these growing effects she suggests: "The alternative is for tribes to inform people outside their tribe as well as non-Indians so that they are not misled. Non-Indians must first inquire about the roots and origins of the traditions being taught and investigate the role of commercialization in sharing these practices."

## Identifying your indigenous roots

If we can trace back our origins far enough, we can all find our original hands and our original peoples. We all have "indigenous" roots at some point in our story though many individuals have become disconnected from their culture. The degree to which we identify and connect with those original roots mirrors our ability to embrace other cultures, without objectification, glorification or romanticization. The tendency to look to others as the keepers of sacred knowledge and spirit action reflects the social association that keeps many caught in the techno-industrialization ethos. This paradigm exalts progress, pavement and productivity – the cerebral over the spiritual and the corporeal.

## From where were your roots pulled during the great waves of migration?

The U.S and Canada are immigrant states, populated by peoples who have migrated during the last five centuries from their own traditional lands. Immigrated populations attempted to

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forge a melting pot of people living on lands belonging to scores of other peoples who inhabited North America since time immemorial. North American immigrant populations and their descendants systematically severed ties with their families and societies in the Old Country. In doing so, they literally became disconnected from their histories, from their people and their cultures. Disconnection became a powerful influence on the behavior of migrants and their descendants and helped create a sense of rootlessness and individuality. Yet as we near the millennium an "assimilation backlash" has found a creative outlet in multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is the subject of many debates in the United States – debate over use of languages, books, customs, and rituals in the schools and other public arenas. A tributary of multiculturalism is that people who feel without a culture – a connection to the land and its rituals – are looking to the original peoples of this land for connection and rituals of worship. It is no surprise that the progressive environmental movement, headed by predominantly middle class Euro-Americans, intersects Euro-American middle class yearnings for indigenous knowledge. Conversely, anti-environmentalists and white supremacy groups are responsible for some of the most rabid anti-Indian sentiments.

If we believe that we can come to know and appreciate other peoples by first thoroughly understanding who we are, then how do we go about this? Below are listed some activities to do alone, with family and with a group of friends. Uncovering the layers is a lifelong process. This process should be joyous, creative, and shared with others from differing cultures.

Openness to difference in other people is not sufficient to reduce barriers. One is obliged to find a personal connection with one's culture to fully appreciate and respect the culture of other people. Taking the step to rediscover or find for the first time one's cultural roots can be an exciting and energizing activity. The rewards are personal and the benefits to human societies can be a source of new wealth.

## Conscious Travel in the Fourth World

When planning to travel to Fourth World nations ask yourself why you are going and what your expectations are. Examine these expectations. Identify your fears before you leave. Are you looking for something exotic? Will your travels offer something to the people you meet or the region you visit? Are you trying to change the world or do you think people need your help – or your dollars? Examine your attitudes about "development." Do you believe toilets, roads, jobs and resource development is the answer to indigenous peoples' problems? What are your attitudes about "progress?" Do you believe the industrialized world and its medicines can and should do problem-solving among Fourth World peoples?

It is likely that you will travel to a country that has a state structure within which Fourth World peoples live. Before you leave research who these peoples are and the history of the region.

- Be open to communication about what people have to offer.
- Investigate traditional forms of medicine (especially if you need help)
- Be open to trying new foods.
- Ask before taking a photograph. If appropriate, offer to send a copy of the photograph as a measure of thanks.
- Learn some of the language before you go or once there, practice some words
- Prepare to hear the noises of nature and to adjust to new rhythms of sleep and wakefulness.
- Indigenous peoples also live in industrialized settings – don't assume anything.
- Prepare to observe food connected to its source including slaughter of animals vs. foods in a wrapper. Prepare to see animal waste and insects.
- Avoid jokes about the water supply or bacteria e.g. "Montezuma's Revenge." This perpetuates stereotypes including one that suggests the water supply is safer in complex societies!
- Time and nature are not to be controlled.
- Observe yourself at least as much as you observe others; keep a journal.
- Inspect assumptions born from previous exposure to and insulation from diverse cultures or National Geographic or Discovery channel images.



Consider beginning the process as outlined in number one and then gather together a group of friends who are willing to make a commitment to meet as a group periodically. Interview elders in your family before they pass on. You will learn much about yourselves as well as others and deepen your connections within and without.

1. Take a piece of paper and draw three columns. On the left side write everything that you know about your original lands, peoples and migration process. For example, where do you come from (not where did your family immigrate from)? Why? What were the journeys like? Were families separated? What does your family name mean? Were your names changed during migration; if so why? What are the family stories or secrets that have been told?

In the second column write everything that you don't know. In the third column write down what you would like to know.

2. Where is home? Where do you feel most at home on this earth? What kind of settings draw your attention, your interest? What kind of climate makes you feel most comfortable? Where do you tend to go for vacations? What kinds of earth rituals have you been exploring from other cultures? Can you identify the connecting threads to your own?

3. Health and Foods of the Earth and Sea: Write a list of the foods that make you feel healthy and the foods that make you feel sick or cause you discomfort or allergic reactions. Do other family members have similar experiences? Identify what makes you feel nourished or ill when you eat certain foods. Research where these foods originated. How long have they been domesticated. What are the foods that your ancestors ate? What are the proportions? Once a month, join with friends and family members. Each person should take a turn researching and choosing a recipe to prepare traditional foods from their culture(s). In traditional societies, some peoples eat their meals with ritual. What are the rituals of your peoples? Invite your group to participate. (Hint: Remember, while potatoes are commonly associated with Ireland, they are indigenous to Peru. They were brought to Ireland in the 1500s. Dig deeper into the earth and sea to discover what was born of the Celts and before them the Fairies.)

4. Travel to the land of your origins—feel and taste the earth, view the sky and the trees. Swim in the waters, eat the foods, delve deep into your dreams and connect to your ancestors. Until you have traveled to your land of origins, you may be missing where you belong. This is especially important for people who are bicultural. Many think at times that they stand between worlds but not firmly rooted in either. Speak or write to your ancestors

# ACTIVITIES

## ORGANIZATIONS

- Center For World Indigenous Studies: 1001 Cooper Pt Rd SW, m Ste 140-214, Olympia WA 98502. 781-643-1918. email: <cwisilka@wco.com>  
An independent American non-profit research and education organization, CWIS conducts professional and personal development seminar and certificate programs and accredited MA programs in Traditional Medicine, Fourth World Studies, Ethnobotany, the Environment and Women's Health. Runs the Fourth World Documentation project on the WEB, a node of the World Wide Web library at [www.halcyon.com/FWDP/](http://www.halcyon.com/FWDP/)
- Indigenous Women's Network  
P.O. Box 174  
Lake Elmo Minnesota 55042  
605-393-1053

Advocacy and education supporting indigenous women in the Americas focusing on language, the environment and protection of religious and cultural practices.

## BOOKS

- Simply Living (Due Spring 1999) Shirley Jones, Ed.;  
New World Library, Novato, CA.  
A guide to the wisdom of indigenous peoples worldwide
- Guns, Germs, and Steel (1997) Jared Diamond  
Pulitzer prize winning nonfiction about human evolution, plant and animal domestication and migrations of peoples.
- Anti-Indian Movement on the Tribal Frontier (1994) Rudolph Ryser.  
Daykeeper Press 1001 Cooper Pt Rd SW, Ste 140-214, Olympia WA 98502.  
Research monograph about the interrelationships among the anti-Indian movement in the Northwest U.S., the anti environmental movement and the far right wing.
- Mother Tongue: English and how it got that way (1991) Bill Bryson, Avon Books, N.Y.  
A compendium of lore about the development and influences on the English language.

## MAGAZINES/JOURNALS

- Indigenous Knowledge and Development Monitor, Centre for International Research and Advisory Networks (CIRAN/Nluffic) ([www.inuffics.nl/ciran/ik-pages/](http://www.inuffics.nl/ciran/ik-pages/)), P.O. Box 29777, 2502 LT The Hague, The Netherlands.
- Transitions Abroad: Alternative Travel Magazine, P.O. Box 1300, Amherst MA 01004, 413-256-3414 <[tradabroad@aol.com](mailto:tradabroad@aol.com)>
- Native Peoples: The Arts and Lifeways (subscription), PO Box 36820, Phoenix AZ 85067. 888-262-8483

## WEB SITES

- Center for World Indigenous Studies ([www.halcyon.com/FWDP/](http://www.halcyon.com/FWDP/)). Award winning web-site established in 1992 with documents, a library system and links to Fourth World nations worldwide.
- Transitions Abroad. [www.transabroad.com](http://www.transabroad.com)  
A guide for educational travel programs worldwide.
- Native Peoples Network [www.nativepeoples.com](http://www.nativepeoples.com)  
Offers study guides for elementary through high school students.

