

## **Medicine Wheel Hoax - Andrea Bear Nicholas**

Posted on April 28th, 2007 by Shewolf

<http://www.shewolfnative2.com/2007/04/medicine-wheel-hoax-andrea-bear-nicholas/>

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April 24, 2007

To Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, and Passamaquoddy Peoples of the Maritimes:

It has been repeatedly brought to my attention how completely our people have been fooled into believing that the medicine wheel is somehow part of our traditions, especially our spirituality. While I had long had concerns about its origins, what woke me to the hoax was an event that occurred several years ago at a national conference of Aboriginal women scholars. It occurred when I raised the concern and prefaced my remarks with an apology to those whose tradition it might have been. Immediately a chorus went up with virtually everyone in the room saying loudly that it was not their tradition! And these were Aboriginal women scholars from across Canada! Subsequent to that meeting, we in the Native Studies Program at St. Thomas University began researching the history of the medicine wheel, and what we have found is appalling!

Indeed, it was not even known by our people in the Maritimes until the last couple of decades. It is not anywhere in the oral traditions of Maliseet, Mi'kmaq or Passamaquoddy people collected as recently as the 70s and 80s. So how in the world could it represent the knowledge of our elders, if none of them ever heard of it until recently? The answer is that it was a totally invented tradition that was foisted on our people only as recently as the 1970s.

The following is an excerpt from a paper I have written which is due to be published soon. It is titled "The Assault on Aboriginal Oral Traditions: Past & Present". I include in this paper an analysis of the assault on our languages, as the most important of our oral traditions, specifically the fact that our languages have been deliberately targeted for destruction, not only by residential schools, but also by public schools and all schools taught only in a dominant language such as English. The paper also deals with the fact that so many of the stories of our people have been both distorted and often totally invented or fabricated by non-First Nations people. It is in connection with the destruction of our languages that I discuss the matter of invented traditions, especially the medicine wheel, as follows.

[Begin quote] "It is into this void [where so many people no longer speak their languages] that invented traditions have come with a vengeance. One such "tradition", the medicine wheel, is of particular concern for it is now widely promoted as the basis of

Maliseet or Mi'kmaq traditions. In fact, it was invented as recently as 1972 (1) by a man representing himself as Cheyenne, but who was immediately exposed as a fraud.(2) The medicine wheel is not a Maliseet or Mi'kmaq tradition, nor, it seems, was it a Cheyenne tradition. Within two decades, however, it evolved into the form it is known today, thanks to the embellishments of several others, including the discredited "plastic medicine man" known as Sun Bear, who exploited the idea for their own personal gain.(3) The irony is that this now very non-Native invention is seen as the essence of Native traditions, not only by the dominant society but also by First Nations people, even many who style themselves as "traditionalists", in spite of the fact that the enormity of the fraud has been known at least since 1983.(4) With the 1996 publication of a Native Studies textbook that features the medicine wheel,(5) the concept has been foisted upon a whole generation of Maliseet and Mi'kmaq high school students who now firmly believe that this invention is an old Mi'kmaq and Maliseet tradition. Furthermore, Native Studies teachers in New Brunswick high schools are now provided with supplementary binders and curriculum materials that are totally focused on the medicine wheel. That this philosophy has effectively and almost totally displaced the oral traditions of our people in schools, makes it impossible to conclude that it does not serve the ends of the ongoing colonial assault on the traditions of our people. That this headlong rush for an invented tradition has occurred without critical attention to its origin as a hoax is a serious indictment of academia, and particularly those institutions that have taken on the responsibility of training First Nations teachers.(6) The sad irony is that anyone who now voices objections to the medicine wheel as tradition is generally condemned for "messing" with tradition." [End of quote]

I put these comments out knowing that they will stir up much reaction and discussion, and that they will even be considered disrespectful, to say the least! I just hope that the discussion it provokes is respectful. As an indigenous academic my duty is to seek the truth, and to speak out against untruth, particularly with regard to our history. In fact, I now realize it would be disrespectful of me to hold my tongue on this matter any longer, especially when I know that young people are being taught this hoax as some sort of truth or legitimate tradition of our peoples, even in school.

I urge people to read the following footnotes to the excerpt quoted above, and the sources they cite before weighing in on this matter.

- 1.) Storm, Hyemeyohst, *Seven Arrows*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1972.
- 2.) Kehoe, Alice B., "Primal Gaia: Primitivists and Plastic Medicine Men", in James B. Clifton, ed., *The Invented Indian: Cultural Fictions and Government Policies*, New Brunswick & London: Transaction Publishers, 1990, p. 200.
- 3.) Sun Bear and Wabun, *The Medicine Wheel*, New Jersey: Prentice-Hill, 1980. Judy Bopp, *The Sacred Tree*, Lethbridge, Alberta: Four Worlds Development Project, University of Lethbridge, 1988; and Lorler, Marie-Lu, *Shamanic Healing within the Medicine Wheel*, Albuquerque: Brotherhood of Life, 1989. For a critique of this idea and other New Age phenomena Aldred, Lisa, 2000. "Plastic Shamans and Astro turf Sun

dances: New Age Commercialization of Native American Spirituality” in *The American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 24(3):329-352; and Jenkins, Philip, *Dream Catchers: How Mainstream America Discovered Native Spirituality*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

(4) Parkhill, Thomas, *Weaving Ourselves into the Land: Charles Godfrey Leland, “Indians” and the Study of Native American Religions*, Albany: State University of New York., 1997. p. 141, citing Alice Kehoe, “Primal Gaia: Primitivists and Plastic Medicine Men”, p. 200-201, who in turn cites Castro, Michael, *Interpreting the Indian*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982, p. 155; and Bruchac, Joseph, “Spinning the Medicine Wheel: The Bear Tribe in the Catskills”, in *Akwesasne Notes*, 1983, vol. 15(5):20-22.

(5) Leavitt, Robert, *Maliseet & Micmac: First Nations of the Maritimes*, Fredericton, NB: New Ireland Press, 1995. .

(6) Dorson, Richard M., *Folklore and Fakelore: Essays toward a Discipline of Folk Studies*, Cambridge & London, Harvard University Press, 1976, p. 119.

Respectfully,  
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