The Cultural Appropriation of the Sweat Lodge Ceremony

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ABSTRACT

Cultural appropriation is a persistent topic with regards to cultural and Indigenous studies in Canada. This paper holds that the cultural appropriation of the Indigenous sweat lodge ritual limits Indigenous community control resulting in benefits for individuals and organizations actively appropriating the ceremony. This article highlights the negative implications of appropriating the sweat lodge tradition through a tragic 2009 incident led by self-help guru James Ray. It is argued that intercultural understanding—though limited—must be fostered to ensure the future safety of sweat lodge participants in both Canada and the United States.

KEYWORDS

Cultural Appropriation, Sweat Lodge, New Age Movement, James Ray, Indigenous Spirituality, Cross cultural awareness
Cultural Appropriation Defined

Cultural appropriation can be defined as the “use of one’s culture’s symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture—regardless of intent, ethics, function, or outcome” (R. A. Rogers 476). This definition frequently has a negative connotation, associated with the assimilation and exploitation of marginalized peoples. This broad understanding positions cultural appropriation as a process in which another groups’ culture is transformed to meet the needs of individuals or communities (Rogers 476). There are currently many examples of Indigenous cultural appropriation in Western films, media, and popular culture. Teenagers wear moccasins, pop stars do not question the use of headdresses, and popular films reinforce stereotypes of homogenous and ancient Indigenous cultures. Appropriation can also extend to cultural ceremonies such as sweat lodges used by spas and other fitness organizations. A sweat lodge is a group therapy sweating session in a covered dome structure with important spiritual significance for Indigenous communities. These instances of cultural appropriation limit Indigenous communities’ ability to control the representation and meaning of their cultural ceremonies and symbols. This paper will therefore expand upon the above definition of cultural appropriation to include loss of control by Indigenous communities and the resulting benefits for those appropriating the ceremony.

This complex and specific understanding will be applied to a discussion of the cultural appropriation of the sweat lodge ceremony, which has recently experienced a surge in popularity as an essential part of health and fitness in North America. Individuals or groups appropriating this sacred ceremony are driven by the lure of potential economic and professional benefit, which thereby creates challenges for communities attempting to protect the sweat lodge as a specific cultural ritual.
Misinterpretation of the ceremony is common as it is often removed from its original context, which limits the possibility for effective cross-cultural understanding. Indigenous communities quickly lose control of the representation and meaning of the ceremony, often finding it difficult to reassert their perspectives. These ideas will be explored using the tragic 2009 incident in which several people died as a result of a sweat lodge ceremony performed by James Ray. This example demonstrates the clear consequences for unqualified practitioners of the ceremony, while also posing challenges to Indigenous groups in both Canada and the United States. Although this case study is located within the United States, discussions of cultural appropriation are relevant for Indigenous communities on both sides of the border.

The cultural appropriation of the sweat lodge ceremony stems from a misunderstanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. Cross-cultural awareness in which groups learn and exchange perspectives is difficult to attain through cultural appropriation. Though it is held as a sacred ceremony, some Indigenous communities have encouraged the participation of certain non-Indigenous people. Problems arise however when the symbolic elements are misinterpreted, and the ceremony is conducted in a manner that is inconsistent with those that are deemed to be traditional. It is therefore of the upmost importance to foster a sense of awareness and understanding between Indigenous peoples, the public, and those who are seeking to take part in sweat lodge ceremonies. To provide context for the arguments, a brief overview of the sweat lodge ceremony and cultural appropriation of the sweat lodge tradition will be discussed, followed by an analysis of the case study of James Ray.
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The Ins And Outs Of The Sweat Lodge

Group sweating is an integral method and custom of human health therapy that has been practiced for thousands of years by various cultures around the world. In fact the earliest known medical document, *The Ayurveda*, considered sweating to be such an important aspect of health that it prescribed fourteen different methods of sweat therapy. (Aaland). In Canada and the United States, anthropologists such as Raymond Bucko, have discovered references to the sweat lodge among groups such as the Dakota and Lakota American Natives as early as 1680 (24). Many academics argue that the sweat lodge was created as a means to combat the onslaught of colonialism, and was nonexistent prior to the arrival of Europeans. (Powell 517)

Sweat Lodge traditions differ across North America, with the main differences being the resources available and the cultural teachings associated with the ceremony that may differ over time. For example, Indigenous groups in the United States, such as the Lakota or the Hupa, build their structures mainly out of rocks, while most Canadian indigenous groups use tree branches and rawhide (Bucko 21). Though the elements of the tradition may be unique between groups, the holistic purpose of rejuvenating the mind, body, spirit and soul remains consistent regardless of the Indigenous group practicing the ceremony. As with most Indigenous traditions, every aspect of the sweat lodge contains an underlying spiritual element, reaching far beyond the physical world (Speilmann 158).

The sweat lodge ceremony is therefore highly complex, as demonstrated by the intricate symbolism within any given lodge. For example, a typical Anishinaabe sweat lodge structure in Ontario symbolizes the womb of Mother Earth while the path to the fire pit represents the umbilical cord (Bucko 156). Rocks, known as the Grandfathers, are heated in the fire for several hours before the beginning of the ceremony.
The Grandfathers are perceived to be living beings and nature’s oldest objects. As they arise from underground, the Grandfathers are viewed as a gateway to the spiritual world, imparting wisdom and sacred knowledge to those who bask in their steam (Pelech 76). To Indigenous communities, the most important aspect of the lodge is not the physical act of sweating, but rather the cultural continuity of the ceremony. To examine the implications for Indigenous communities in Canada and the United States, this paper will now provide a short overview of cultural appropriation.

Understanding Cultural Appropriation

Cultural appropriation can be understood as taking an expression, tradition, or way of knowing, and presenting it improperly, which unjustly provides benefits to the group who ‘borrowed’ the information. Appropriation has existed since the initial contact of settler and Indigenous cultures, where researchers had wrongfully taken knowledge of medicine at the expense of Indigenous groups (Bucko 24). This legacy has continued into the present, now in a different form through the incorporation of the sweat lodge into the North American economy. The 1980’s ‘New Age’ spirituality movement has created a surge of popularity for Indigenous cultural knowledge, and traditions such as the sweat lodge. This consumer trend commercializes Indigenous spirituality as an economic sector of profit (Aldred 331), which is consumed by non-Indigenous people at the expense of Indigenous communities.

The ‘New Age’ movement is the response by a significant number of White suburban and urban middle-aged baby-boomers who feel uprooted from cultural traditions, community belonging, and spiritual meaning (Aldred 329).
Driven by consumer capitalism, ‘New Agers’ pursue spiritual meaning through the acts of purchase.

Examples of this can be found within the publishing industry with regards to ‘Native American’ medicine books. Authors such as Lynn Andrews and Mary Summer Rain have produced New York and Los Angeles Times best selling books through the appropriation of Indigenous spirituality (Aldred 331). These non-Indigenous women also lead expensive workshops, claiming to teach their consumers “how to practice Indigenous spirituality” (Aldred 331). Moreover, products such as “sweat kits” can be purchased over the phone (1-800-36-SWEAT), which will give a consumer the “total experience” through their own personal tent product (Aldred 334). These instances of cultural appropriation lead to an examination of reasoning behind such actions.

**Appropriating The Sweat Lodge For Personal Benefit**

A study conducted by Oklahoma State University investigated the effects of group dynamics during sweat therapy. The research discovered that participants reported more therapeutic factors, including stronger group cohesion, as a result of group sweating. The study further concluded that sweat lodge use promotes healthier skin, aids in eliminating toxins, enhances immunity, and provides deeper sleep, pain relief and muscle relaxation (Colmont, Eason and Winterowd 330). The study notes that sweating has been helpful in treating insomnia, arthritis and even cancer treatment. Though sweating has its physical health benefits, the group setting has tremendously positive effects on the mind of participants. These factors make the sweat lodge appealing as a means of successfully accumulating profit by capitalizing on the New Age Movement associated with a focus on connecting with the environment (Aldred 332).
Professional advancement is an important motivator for the appropriation of the sweat lodge ceremony. The professional opportunities to develop a reputation as an important trainer or health guru can result in economic benefit (Aldred 331). As indicated by this example, appropriation of the ceremony has many clear benefits for individuals wanting to gain profit and professional advancement opportunities as a result of the New Age Movement.

Consequences Of Appropriation For Indigenous Communities

The multiple benefits of cultural appropriation have transformed the sweat lodge into a form of commercialization consumed by non-Indigenous people at the expense of Indigenous communities. Indigenous communities express concern as often non-Indigenous people claim authority for the definition and meaning of the Indigenous tradition means, therefore distorting understandings (Rogers 487). This community concern ultimately reflects the challenges associated with attaining cross-cultural understanding when they lose control over the meaning of the ceremony. These frequently non-Indigenous ‘authority’ figures claim to be knowledgeable about the meaning and symbolism of the practice, which as the case study of James Arthur Ray outlined later in this paper demonstrates, is often false.

Another concern deals with the issue of cultural preservation. Cultural practices are best understood in their native contexts and advocates for Indigenous communities believe that preservation of their cultures should be a priority (York 368). The appropriation of the sweat lodge has thus caused communities to lose control of the tradition.
The free market principles of the New Age movement exploit the sweat lodge tradition because it encourages a homogenization of cultural standards (York 368), resulting in the removal of the tradition from the communities who hold it as a sacred ritual.

Not only does appropriation move the sweat lodge tradition away from its roots, it contributes to a further misunderstanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. This is problematic because the traditional lodge leaders, through the spiritual connection, contain the significance of ceremony within the teachings. The case of James Ray and his misappropriation of the sweat lodge will now be explored in more detail, enhancing the discussion of cultural appropriation.

*James Ray’s Deadly Sweat Lodge*

In what the Lakota Nation has termed a “misappropriation of faith,” popular self-help guru James Ray performed a sweat lodge ceremony in 2009 that resulted in the tragic death of three people (Goulias). This case of cultural appropriation has left many Indigenous communities bewildered. As a means of professional advancement and economic benefit, Ray charged nearly $10,000 for participants to take part in a week long ‘renewal camp,’ the final stage being the Native American sweat lodge. A small dome structure was crafted and covered with tarps, which were described as impermeable and non-breathable. Nearly 50 people were crammed into the small structure, eventually resulting in the deaths of three individuals and leaving many more ill (Dougherty).

The sweat lodge session took place the day after participants had spent twenty-four hours fasting in the Arizona desert without food or water. Shortly into the ceremony, several people experienced severe discomfort and many began to vomit and faint. There is no evidence that any help was given to them (Dougherty).
Throughout the ceremony, Ray maintained that nobody was allowed to leave until the round had ended. Ray was notified that a woman had passed out and he replied by saying that they would worry about it after the round was over. In 2011, Ray was criminally charged and found guilty on three accounts of negligent homicide resulting in a two year prison sentence (Ortega). The Oglala Lakota’s also filed a lawsuit against the state of Arizona, Ray, and the Angel Valley Retreat Centre, the site where the sweat lodge took place. The litigation alleged that the appropriation of the sweat lodge was an example of fraud and theft of intellectual property (Rehfeld). This lawsuit was later dismissed; however, civil litigation brought forward by the families of the victims was settled for a total of three million dollars (Press).

The Cultural Appropriation Of James Ray’s Lodge

Aside from the inhumane treatment and criminal activity, Ray’s sweat lodge is a form of cultural appropriation demonstrating a deep misunderstanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. Ray misappropriated and misrepresented the sweat lodge within the context of the New Age spirituality, as nothing about Ray’s lodge speaks traditional. This is offensive for all Indigenous communities who use the sweat lodge tradition. The sweat lodge was never intended to be profitable, as from an Indigenous viewpoint economic benefit diminishes the sanctity of the tradition and distances it from its true roots and purpose.

Members of the Lakota Nation advocate that the tragedy was a direct result of the absence of Indigenous community members with lodge experience throughout the ceremony. The sweat lodge ceremony carries with it a risk of danger, so it is important to have them conducted by properly trained individuals.
There are generally two people in charge, the first being the lodge leader who is responsible for the participants, prayers, and teachings. The second is the fire keeper, who transports the grandfathers, maintains the fire, and responds to the requests of the lodge leader. Ray claimed to have extensive experience with sweat lodges, but this does not mean he was qualified to perform the ceremony (Rehfeld). Each Indigenous community practicing the tradition has a vigorous training process for those who wish to become qualified lodge leaders or fire keepers (Garrett, Torres-Rivera and Brubaker 321). Though Ray may have had extensive experience with the sweat lodge ceremony, there is no evidence suggesting that an Indigenous group had properly trained him. This may well be the most offensive part of this cultural appropriation. This is because the most significant feature of a traditional lodge ceremony is the teachings of the lodge leader who communicates with the spirits. Ray’s lodge was absent of teachings in connection of spiritual knowledge or guidance within the lodge. Instead it was a test for the participants, who were forced to endure extreme heat, while being dehydrated, and without proper guidance from their leader.

In an effort to reproduce the sweat lodge tradition, many key safety measures were overlooked. The construction of the structure was not made in a traditional manner, as the lodge was not breathable. Traditionally in preparation for a sweat lodge ceremony, the place where the lodge is built is sacred. The methods in which the lodge is constructed pay specific attention to the natural law of reciprocity (Garrett, Torres-Rivera and Brubaker 321). Gifts are given for everything that is respectfully taken from nature to maintain the balance of the relationship. A traditional lodge is covered with breathable materials, including animal skins or blankets, to ensure the safety of participants (Garret, Torres-Rivera and Brubaker 320). Ray’s lodge was not crafted in such a manner and was covered with countless non-breathable tarps (Rehfeld). The construction of Ray’s lodge in this manner created danger from the outset.
Ray’s conduct during the lodge session was a marked departure from a traditional lodge as well, as during an Indigenous ceremony participants can exit the lodge at anytime. During the ceremony, there are four rounds that together typically last for three hours. One may leave the lodge if the heat is too extreme, but can only re-enter when another round starts (Garret, Torres-Rivera and Brubaker 321). This has always been accepted within an Indigenous lodge ceremony, as bearing the heat is less important than the teachings of the lodge leader, and the social cohesion of the group. Personal safety should always be at the forefront of the sweat lodge ritual, which is why a qualified professional should make the structure.

A traditional lodge always places the group dynamic at the forefront of the ceremony. Even though one may not be related to those within the lodge, the group is considered family. Ray’s lodge misconstrued this element of the tradition, as even in times of dire need, participants were forced to “push through” their distress on their own.

This case study clearly indicates the negative effects of cultural appropriation of the sweat lodge ceremony. This appropriation is advanced through a misunderstanding of traditional elements such as the profitability of the ceremony, breathability of the structure, the family aspect, the teachings within, and the safety of participants.

Summary

This paper has demonstrated the consequences of cultural appropriation, which are especially significant when dealing with a potentially dangerous tradition such as the sweat lodge. Many of the primary cultural elements are overlooked to the detriment of Indigenous communities interested in attaining cross-cultural understanding.

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The cultural appropriation of the sweat lodge has created numerous challenges for communities that recognize it as a specific cultural ritual concerning the relationships between non-Indigenous and Indigenous groups. The commercialization of this tradition moves it away from its true roots, and from the hands of the Indigenous communities in both Canada and the United States who recognize it as a sacred ritual. The case study of James Ray is an example of the misunderstandings of the sweat lodge that ultimately ended in tragedy. Ray’s ceremony was not complacent with the traditional methods of an Indigenous sweat lodge, and as a result three people lost their lives. Intercultural understandings must therefore be created in order to ensure that this does not happen in the future. The recent surge of the sweat lodge tradition caused by the ‘New Age’ movement only makes the need for intercultural understanding more pressing. This paper can serve as a means to spread knowledge and awareness among Indigenous communities seeking to preserve the tradition, and others seeking to appropriate or participate in the sweat lodge.

**Bibliography**


