

School of Media Communication and Culture
Murdoch University

**The New Age and Indigenous
Spirituality:
Searching for the sacred**

Claire Farley

30322833

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Honours in Australian Indigenous Studies, Murdoch University.

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DECLARATION

I, Claire Farley, declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

Signed:

Full name: Claire Farley

Student number: 30322833

Date: 4th June 2010

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Author: Claire Farley

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the New Age spiritual movement in its relationship with Indigenous cultures. Indigenous spiritual traditions have been appropriated to support relevant New Age theories. It critiques New Age perceptions of Indigenous cultures as misinformed and argues this misinformation is proliferated through certain New Age practices. It argues that the New Age can achieve a sustaining, earth-based spiritual practice without resorting to the appropriation of Indigenous traditions. Neo-paganism holds many of the qualities that New Agers seek in Indigenous traditions and is a potential alternative avenue of spiritual solace to the appropriation of Indigenous culture. The embodiment of New Age goals can be understood within the context of environmental ethics philosophies. Alternative festivals that operate with a spiritual ethic are explored as evidence that the New Age can and in some areas, does operate in a positive, life-affirming manner. Importantly, the thesis argues that re-interpretation of Indigenous culture by the New Age is neither welcome nor necessary.

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INTRODUCTION

In the past fifty or so years, the New Age and Neo-pagan spiritual movements have incorporated many aspects of Indigenous spiritualities into their beliefs and practices. This thesis examines cases in which this incorporation culminates in a negative experience, which does not benefit Indigenous people and their cultures today. I argue that a mutually satisfactory relationship encompassing spiritual understanding can exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

Historically, most people have ascribed to one or other formal religion¹; today, a growing number of people are moving away from formal religions and are looking for spiritual nourishment that is more appropriate to postmodern sensitivities. Popular spiritual paths include atheism, agnosticism, and religions that were not previously as accessible, especially religions from Asia and the Middle East. Two intersecting paths, which transcend many religious boundaries, are the New Age movement and neo-paganism.

The New Age borrows many spiritual ideas from ancient cultures and applies them to contemporary Occidental life. Wade Clark Roof argues:

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics. 1301.0 - Year Book Australia, 2008: Culture and Recreation: Cultural Diversity. Latest issue [online] c2008 [cited 2009 Feb 6]. Available from: AusStats. <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/bb8db737e2af84b8ca2571780015701e/636F496B2B943F12CA2573D200109DA9?opendocument>.

Religious symbols, teachings, and practices are easily “disembedded,” that is, lifted out of one cultural setting, and “re-embedded” into another. [In this process] ...depth to any tradition is often lost, the result being thin layers of cultural and religious meaning.²

This practice of “disembedding” spiritual traditions is problematic, both for the consumer of the eclectic spirituality that emerges and for the cultures from which they have been appropriated. Many within the New Age spiritual movement admire Indigenous cultures and attempt to incorporate aspects of Indigenous spiritualities into their lives despite lacking the history and connection to that spirituality which Aboriginal people themselves hold.

There are many cases where a member of the New Age has inappropriately utilised spiritual symbols from an Indigenous culture^{3,4,5}; I discuss examples throughout the thesis. Such behaviour by New Agers is not respectful to Indigenous people.

² Clark Roof W. *Spiritual marketplace: baby boomers and the remaking of American religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; 1999. p73.

³ Garvie E. *The medicine wheel: a journey of transformation and spiritual development*. Adult Education, Masters [thesis]. Antigonish (Nova Scotia): St Francis Xavier University; 2007.

The Four Winds Society, operated and founded by a Californian takes New Age seekers on trips to Peru to perform an ‘Incan medicine wheel’ ritual. The medicine wheel symbology comes from North American traditions, most documented in Cheyenne lands.

⁴ Sulak J, Vale V. Greg Stafford. *Modern pagans: an investigation of contemporary pagan practices*. San Francisco: Re/search publications, 2001. p44-46.

Stafford is the President of the Board of Directors of the Cross Cultural Shamanism Network that publishes the widely distributed magazine *Shaman’s drum*. *Shaman’s drum* advocates neo-shamanism that appropriates aspects of Native cultures including vision quests, use of ‘medicine plants’ and sweat lodges.

⁵ *Ibid.* Starhawk. p6-16. Starhawk critiques the use of the word ‘shaman’ in a neo-pagan sense. She is concerned that the utilisation of psychedelic plants by neo-shamans to summon spiritual insights is out of context and less meaningful than in traditional societies. She advocates the use of other techniques to attain ecstatic consciousness such as meditation.

Indigenous people regard these New Age followers, who are generally part of the European coloniser class in North America and Australia⁶, as disrespectful to their heritage and traditions⁷. I argue that these practices undermine the integrity of the New Age spiritual movement.

In order for Indigenous people to feel comfortable in granting non-Indigenous people access to a deeper comprehension of the lands we live in, there must be a balanced exchange. Indigenous people in the Americas, Australia and elsewhere continue to struggle for survival. Land rights are continuing to be restricted in some nations^{8,9}, and are yet to be recognised in others¹⁰. Lack of access and rights to homelands is central

⁶ Nasel DD. 6.13: Demographic characteristics of New Age followers. In: Spiritual orientation in regard to spiritual intelligence: a consideration of traditional Christianity and new age/individualistic spirituality. PhD [dissertation]. Adelaide: University of South Australia; 2004.

The New Age movement is primarily based in the USA in the middle class elite of all age groups; contains many followers who have rejected Christian religion; and is predominantly made up of women.

⁷ Our Red Earth Organization. New age frauds plastic shaman. Plastic shaman [homepage on the internet]. 2001 [cited 2009 May 22]. Available from: <http://www.geocities.com/ourredearth/plastic.html>.

⁸ Fay D, James D. Chapter one: Restoring what was ours. In: The rights and wrongs of land restitution: restoring what was ours. Taylor and Francis e-Library; 2008. p1-24. The Mexican government began a policy of ending land restitution in the 1990s in favour of allotting Indigenous people private properties.

⁹ Poirier R, Ostergren D. Evicting people from nature: Indigenous land rights and national parks in Australia, Russia, and the United States. Natural Resources Journal [serial online]. 2002 [cited 2010 May 4];42(1):350. Available from: Law Journal Library. www.aallnet.org/products/pub_journal.asp.

...[n]ative access to the resources of national parks throughout the world remains essentially prohibited. National parks in the United States, Australia, and Russia fundamentally adhere to the Yellowstone model of securing a land and protecting its "pristine" quality by not allowing traditional land uses and permitting access for visitors under carefully controlled conditions.

¹⁰ Yarraga M. Land rights. Indigenous Australia. FrogandToad Travel [homepage on the internet]. No date [2010 May 4]. Available from: <http://www.indigenoustralia.info/land/land-rights.html>.

"Tasmania is the only State in Australia not to have enacted some form of Aboriginal land rights legislation."

to Indigenous peoples being able to practice their traditional religions as they are inextricably tied to the land in which they were formed¹¹. These issues need to be addressed; personal spiritual growth can be combined with practical political action to create the change we want to see in the world.

As the fields, which I cover in this thesis, are many and the room to discuss them is limited, I draw on many authors rather than a few key writers. Some of the writers I acknowledge as having had a significant influence on my work include Vine Deloria, Jr for Indigenous critiques of the New Age; Monica Sjöö, Starhawk, Jenny Blain and Robert Wallis on neo-paganism; Karen Warren and Carol Adams on ecofeminist theory; and Graham St John for critique of alternative festival culture.

I begin this thesis by providing an overview of the New Age with a discussion of its aim to save the planet through individual self-enlightenment. I discuss the New Age's connections with astrological movements in the development of spiritual evolution theory and provide examples of some key texts that have progressed this theory.

In the second chapter, I argue that some members of the New Age reinforce myths about Indigenous people through misappropriation of Aboriginal spirituality. I discuss how this attempt to embody Native spiritual traditions is related to the disconnection that

¹¹ Warren K. Chapter 8: With justice for all. In: Ecofeminist philosophy: a western perspective on what it is and why it matters. Lanham (Maryland): Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc; 2000.

many people in Occidental society feel between self and nature. I argue that this motivation drives non-Indigenous people who are misinformed about Aboriginal spirituality to proliferate incorrect stereotypes. I discuss how some such people in the New Age movement have misused the term 'shaman', which both adds to stereotypes and is misleading for those who are customers of mercenary spiritual leaders. I argue that Native people who profit from the sale of their spiritual traditions abuse and disrespect their cultures by doing so.

My third chapter focuses on neo-paganism as potentially providing a sustaining earth-based spirituality as a viable alternative to the inauthentic borrowing from other cultures that occurs in some aspects of the New Age. I discuss aims and motivations of neo-paganism and explore how it has come to be in its present forms. I explain how contemporary neo-pagan communities are actively engaging in nourishing, relevant forms of spiritual practice.

In the fourth and final chapter, I argue that environmental ethics are an example of how the New Age operates in the world. Environmental ethics can provide a forum for examining our spiritual and physical relationships with the rest of nature, informing how we address the current ecological and spiritual crises. I describe several New Age counter-culture festivals that attempt to embody environmental ethics principles. I argue that these events initiate dialogue between Native and non-Native people on spirituality and social issues. I conclude that it is possible for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people

to share a spiritual dialogue, albeit one that respects the diverse collective cultural and individual histories we have each experienced; and that it is necessary to do so in order to work together to circumvent ecological crisis.