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# Borrowed Meanings: Case Studies of Katsina and Dreamcatcher Traditions

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# Borrowed Meanings:

## Case Studies of Katsina and Dreamcatcher Traditions

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Honors Research  
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# Acknowledgements

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I would like to dedicate this in loving memory to my grandfather, Albertus Glasker, who was a guiding force and a constant source of support in my life and, sadly, will not see the culmination of my four years at Illinois Wesleyan University. I would also like to dedicate this to my parents who have always encouraged and supported me.

## **Borrowed Meanings: Case Studies of Katsina and Dreamcatcher Traditions**

Every summer, thousands of climbers and nearly half a million other tourists flock to Devils Tower in Wyoming due to its spectacular views and challenging climbing conditions. And every summer, members of several different Native American tribes travel to the religious site known as Bear Lodge, their name for Devils Tower, to perform religious rituals such as the Sun Dance. The Cheyenne, Arapaho, Crow, Kiowa, and Lakota all recognize Devils Tower as a sacred religious site, “grant it a prominent place in their mythology and oral histories, and in the past probably used it for individual religious observances” (Brown 2003: 152). The result is a battle between the Native Americans who see and use the site for religious purposes and the non-Indians who see the site as simply nature at its best. While the main purpose of this essay is an analysis of the Hopi Katsina and the Ojibwa dreamcatcher, Devils Tower offers an interesting example that frames the key issues of this essay.

Since the 1980s, Native American tribes have been voicing their opposition to allowing climbers on Devils Tower because it violates Native religious beliefs and principles. These complaints range from the climbers show a lack of respect for the spiritual forces who reside there, to the shouts of the climbers and the noise from their hammers and drills are too loud and distracting for Americans Indians “to engage in acts of worship,” to the presence of outsiders “on such a commanding vantage point” make it impossible to assure privacy during religious rituals (Brown 2003: 152). In response, the National Park Service issued an optional climbing moratorium in June, which was intended to “allow climbers to show respect for American Indian concerns through their willingness to avoid climbing the tower in June” (Brown 2003: 154). By making the ban

voluntary, the National Park Service avoided the First Amendment Clause which prevents any law from favoring a specific religion or promoting a religion in general, as well as comply with Supreme Court decisions which have stated that the government must accommodate the free exercise of religion whenever possible. The legal status of religion is only complicated by policies meant to protect Native Americans, such as NAGPRA<sup>1</sup> and The American Indian Religious Freedom Act<sup>2</sup>. The Park Service also proposed that the site be renamed Bears Lodge to better reflect the sacredness the site holds for American Indians and because Devils Tower was offensive to those Native beliefs.

These plans by the Park Service were quickly met with opposition from both sides. Climbing outfitters were angry because they stood to lose business, members of movements such as the Friend of Devils Tower and the Sagebrush Rebellion were angry because the change of name would threaten the validity of the Euro-American history of the site, and climbers were angry because it was being implied that what they were doing was wrong, while some tribal members were angry because the plans did not go far enough ([www.devils-tower.com/freedom/index.html](http://www.devils-tower.com/freedom/index.html)). Because many different groups were seriously invested in Devils Tower, hostilities between the groups and toward the Park Service were inevitable. Chas Cartwright, the superintendent of Devils Tower National Park, was shocked by these hostilities, which included citizens opposed to the NPS policies screaming “obscenities and generally making him and his family feel unwelcome” (Brown 2003: 157). Many Native Americans are also voicing their unhappiness with the inability of the law to completely represent their religious beliefs and practices. Anthropologist Michael Brown quotes Francis Brown, an American Indian from Wyoming, as stating

The climbers say that the Constitution guarantees them the right to climb.

Well I've read the Constitution, and it doesn't say anything about rock climbing. The issue boils down to religion and beliefs. My people love God better than Christians do. Christians were paid to destroy the life of my people. I don't have much use for Christianity (2003: 161).

The Devils Tower site has also become a sacred spot for practitioners of the New Age religion. The New Age religion has for some time been appropriating beliefs and practices sacred to various Native groups and making it a part of their religion<sup>3</sup>. One of these beliefs is the sacred nature of Devils Tower. Most Native Americans are upset about the appropriation of aspects of their religion by outsiders who twist and manipulate those aspects to better suit their needs, and their use of Devils Tower has only made this worse. Many are upset that the same laws and policies that protect the practice of their own religious beliefs are protecting New Age followers and because New Age does not have the historical connection to Devils Tower that Native religions do. It is not only the appropriation of religious practices that offend Native groups, but also the appropriation of their religious sites. New Agers converge on sites like Devils Towers to perform their own religious rituals and ceremonies (New York Times 1994). Many times, this results in what has been deemed "New Age vandalism" (Brown 2003: 162). In the case of Devils Tower, this includes damage to the landscape as well as fragile archaeological sites caused by ritual activities including "burning bundles of sage or other aromatic substances, recharging crystals by burying them in the ground, or allowing candle wax to accumulate in caves during impromptu meditation sessions" (Brown 2003: 162).

The struggles over Devils Tower, while not the main focus of my essay, do

highlight appropriation, a process critical to understanding my discussion of Katsinam and dreamcatchers. In this example, mainly land and religious beliefs have been appropriated; in other cases, it is material culture, and even human remains. Devils Tower also demonstrates how laws and policies instituted by the United States government to protect Native American cultures often fall short both because they are created by outsiders and because it is impossible to please all parties involved. Even among the Native groups involved, there is varying opinion about why what is happening at Devils Tower is offensive and what should be done about it (Bonham 2002, Hammons 2000).

Appropriation, an extremely important concept in Native American studies, is the taking of something and making it one's own. It often has a negative connotation attached to it and is often a complicated process with varying results. Appropriation is seen as problematic because of its connection with colonialism, especially when looking at Native American cultures (Root 1996, King & Springwood 2001, Deloria 1998, Ziff & Rao 1997). The appropriation of Native American culture has been taking place since the 1860s when the United States government started its "assimilation or annihilation" policy. Even though the policy was to destroy Native culture and bring the Natives into American culture, salvage ethnographers were sent out to capture and preserve these "dying" cultures. Some of these early collection techniques included looting ancestral sites and burials, taking unauthorized photographs and recordings, and the intrusive documentation of sacred, and in some cases secret, rituals, dances, and ceremonies<sup>4</sup>.

For the purposes of this essay, any discussion of appropriation necessarily implicates the process of commodification, or the transformation of property into

something that can be sold or assume value in terms of some market. In the case of Native American culture, many of the appropriated items have become symbols of American Indian identity, and because of this, they have become a commodity to those who have appropriated those items (King & Springwood 2001). There is money to be made by both Natives and non-Natives in the sale of cultural items, whether or not those items are in fact authentic, because they are symbols that represent the foreign, and often times romanticized, other.

It is often difficult to talk about appropriation and commodification without also thinking about authenticity. Authenticity, a culturally provisional, constructed concept, is central to the process of commodification. In fact, that which is bought and sold when Native American signs, symbols, and objects are commodified is “authenticity.” In other words, the selling point of Native American cultural items is their claimed authenticity. In the following analysis of the Katsinam, I will illustrate that many of the Katsinam sold to tourists are advertised as “authentic” Hopi Katsinam, but are in fact made by people of other cultures. The Ojibwa dreamcatcher carries a different authenticity, but is still attractive to non-Natives because of its Native “authenticity.”

In the balance of this essay, I focus on the history of two particular traditions of material culture, the Hopi Katsina and the Ojibwa dreamcatcher. These two items are similar in that they both have emerged as symbols of Native American identity; they have transcended the context of the tribes who “invented” them to assume great significance within pan-Indian culture. However, the appropriation and commodification of these items has been negotiated in different ways by the Hopi and Ojibwa people. Katsinam have been appropriated by Euro-American culture as well as by other Native cultures,



specifically the Navajo, and have been turned into a commodity by outsiders as well as by Hopi themselves. The Hopi have varying opinions on how this should be dealt with and who should and should not be allowed to create and sell Katsina dolls. On the other hand, dreamcatchers have also been appropriated by both non-Indians and other Native groups and have been turned into a commodity by all groups. However, there is a general consensus among the Ojibwa that it is all right for others to use and sell the dreamcatcher as long as it is done correctly and with respect.

The juxtaposition of these two examples illustrates just how complicated and provisional the notions of appropriation, commodification, and authenticity are. Similarly, these case studies help us to better understand how it is impossible to come to a consensus on what should be done or how laws and policies should be written. Many of these laws and policies, even though a step forward, end up creating problems. The main reason for these problems is that these laws concerning Native culture are written by European Americans. The legislation and policy concerning intellectual and cultural property rights “reveals a tangled mass of distinctions between the two, which are complicated by definitions and interpretations that have been created mainly by Euro-Americans with little input from the very people whose property is being considered...the definition of the problem and the solutions are constructs of Western culture” (Spencer 2001: 171 and 176)<sup>5</sup>. The cultures of the outsiders creating these laws and policies have been a far greater influence than the cultures of the people most affected by those laws and policies (Dougherty 1998, Brown 2003).

### **Hopi Katsinam**

Within the material and symbolic world of the Hopi, traditionally, Katsina has

referred to three things: “the hundreds of spirit beings associated with rain, clouds, and the dead - ancestors of Hopis, the participants in the Katsina ceremonies who appear at eleven Hopi villages from December to July, and the wooden carvings that were and are given to young girls at ceremonies” (Pearlstone 2001: 43). However, only outsiders use the word Katsina to refer to the dolls, which are called *tihu* by Hopis, and only the dolls carved by Hopis can be called *tihu*. *Tithu*<sup>6</sup> are not merely dolls or carvings to Hopi; instead they personify the Katsina spirits and were originally created by the Katsinam as their physical embodiments. However, because *tithu* are not as sacred as the dancers who represent the Katsina spirits, they are not, therefore, believed to be secret or need to be hidden.

In Hopi society, there exists a compartmentalization of knowledge. Certain people are allowed to know only certain things and that knowledge is kept secret from outsiders, including other Hopi. For the Hopi, knowledge is “consistently and purposely segmented, compartmentalized, and shared on a ‘need-to-know basis’ ...and carries with it the burden of responsibility to keep it private,” unlike Euro-Americans who value shared knowledge (Spencer 2001: 171). The idea of restricted knowledge is deeply imbedded in Hopi culture and “community values discourage curiosity about the details of rituals in which one is not a direct participant” (Brown 2003: 14). Knowledge held by a certain, specialized group is guarded from outsiders who have not been initiated into that group. This is true for knowledge concerning Katsinam. In fact, Katsina dancers are not allowed to be seen by outsiders and only the initiated are allowed to see dancers without their Katsina masks. Traditionally, the carving of *tithu* was taught to male children, only after they had been initiated in the Katsina tradition, by their godfather in

the privacy of their kiva. The carving of *tithu* was never to take place outside among the general public. So, whereas the *tithu* themselves are not secret, the making of them is.

The appropriation of the Katsina image by non-Hopi comes in all forms.



**Figure 1. Large sign that appears outside of a lighting store in Albuquerque.**

Katsinam can be seen on billboards advertising car dealerships, t-shirts and shot glasses sold at tourist shops, paintings, jewelry, postcards, and just about anything else you can think of. They have become one of the most widely recognized Native American images and are part commodity, part symbol of the Hopi and the Southwest. According to Zena Pearlstone, Euro-Americans are drawn to Katsinam for these reasons; “they provide an exotic, complex subject packaged increasingly in a familiar emotive, narrative style. Katsinam are other, but they are also human like, and Westerners can think of them as akin to

saints or dolls” (122). Outsiders are drawn to Katsinam because they are symbols of the other without being completely foreign.

For the purposes of this paper, I will be focusing on the appropriation of the Katsina dolls, which I will refer to as *tithu* when speaking of traditional Hopi-made carved dolls. As I stated, *tithu* were traditionally carved exclusively by men and only in kivas. In the past, *tithu* were made of cottonwood root and colored with natural pigment. Women were not allowed to carve or to even touch the shavings because it would interfere with their ability to produce perfect offspring. However, very few who produce *tithu* still adhere to these traditions, and many contemporary women have taken up carving as a way to make a living.

Four types of Katsina dolls exist in the Hopi community: old-style, traditional, one-piece, and sculptures. The first three types are usually viewed as traditional *tithu*, while sculptures, which are also referred to as “action figures,” are not. Old-style dolls are carved in a simple fashion, appear somewhat stiff, resemble the Katsinam but are not lifelike, and are painted in simple earth tones. The flat cradle dolls given to children as their first *tithu* would fit into this



**Figure 2. Putskatithu, the flat dolls also known as cradle dolls, given to children as their first *tithu*.**

category. The traditional dolls are more refined than the old-style but are still not lifelike, are more brightly painted, and are not carved from a single piece of wood. One-piece dolls are carved from one piece of wood and because of this require talents only possessed by master carvers. Finally, highly colorful sculptures or action figures are carved into wood with other Hopi designs and scenes to present a story, and are not used in Hopi Katsina ceremonies (Secakuku 2001: 164). These action figures, often characterized by exaggerated movement, can be ultra realistic or stylized, representing dramatic poses that dancers do not do (Pearlstone 2001: 54).

R. Laurence Moore said “if you do not commodify your religion yourself, someone else will do it for you” (Pearlstone 2001: 38). In the case of the Katsina doll, I argue the Hopi have commodified their religion themselves, but others are also doing it for them. *Tithu* were most likely the first Native American religious item to be commodified. When John Wesley Powell encountered the Hopi during his exploration of the Colorado River system, between 1869 and 1871, he “was impressed with [Hopi]

material manifestations, among them *tithu*” (Kuwanwisiwma 2001: 16). Powell reportedly offered several families a quarter for each *tithu* and, as he had promised, he returned to purchase more. Since Powell’s 19<sup>th</sup> century purchase, the sale of Katsina dolls has emerged as a major source of income for the Hopi people.

The creation of *tithu* for economic purposes creates many problems within the Hopi community. In fact, “many artists live with anxiety about breaking from tradition and they question whether they are artists simply churning out commodities or Hopis continuing their Native American identity” (Pearlstone 2001: 59). Most recognize that the production of some commercial Katsinam does violate the religious viewpoints of other Hopis, like the members of the Katsina society and the Katsina clan. These people “probably feel infringed upon because they are the people who are vested with certain ceremonial obligations, with maintaining the integrity of all that pertains to Katsinam” (Kuwanwisiwma 2001: 17). The people of these groups, however, do not know how to deal with the situation due to the fact that people’s livelihoods are at stake.

Also, successful artists may be forced to “operate in a world where values are directly opposite to traditional Pueblo values” (Pearlstone 2001: 61). While the Euro-American world celebrates competitiveness, individualism, uniqueness, and elevating those that fit that description to higher statuses, the Hopi admire communality, humbleness, and subtlety. These popular artists are also becoming spokesmen for their communities before they have earned that right in Pueblo terms, which can be very disruptive to their life in the Hopi community. Finally, “innovations move the artist further away from his community and are threatening to traditionalists” (Pearlstone 2001: 61). The success of an artist can lead to envy from others, but also to distrust, ostracism,

and even accusations of witchcraft. With every artistic innovation, the Hopi artist moves a little further out of their community by alienating and offending more people.

Hopi artists represent this sacred and secret object in different ways. Many set boundaries or censor themselves; some will not make Katsinam from metal, some still



**Figure 3. Tihu made by Neil David, Sr. for commercial reasons.**

chant and pray over the figures, some will not burn shavings, some will not work with bronze because fire would have to be used, and some will omit details to make the dolls seem less Hopi and less sacred. Neil David, Sr., a Hopi artist who paints and carves, believes that all carvings are *tithu* as long as they are accurate, and does not have a problem with Katsina

representations in tourist art. However, David states that “there are some Katsinam that I will not represent in carvings and paintings [because] it makes a difference what Katsinam are represented” (Pearlstone 2001: 35). Ramson Lomatewama,

another Hopi artist who carves, believes it is perfectly all right for Hopi to represent Katsinam in any medium for sale. These examples show different viewpoints; from some believing that tradition should be strictly followed and the representation should be accurate, such as those who will not use metal or allow fire to touch the figure and those that still pray over the figure, to others believing only those that are not traditional should be sold as a way of safeguarding the sanctity of Katsinam, like those who omit traditional details, such as symbols on masks.

The reaction within the Hopi community to the commodification of *tithu* varies greatly. This is due to the diversity of Hopi society; there are twelve villages, thirty-four



living clans, about forty extinct clans whose interests still have to be represented, and about fifteen religious societies. One can imagine how impossible it would be to have a unified opinion over something as complex as the sale of *tithu* in a community as varied as this one. Some in the Hopi community argue that only Pueblo carvers should be allowed to produce and sell *tithu*, while others believe anyone can sell them as long as they are carved correctly according to tradition. Some claim all other Katsina dolls are fakes produced by sheer greed, while still others insist only those that are not of a traditional format should be sold since the traditionally carved *tithu* are violating Hopi ideas on the protection of sacred knowledge. Ramson Lomatewama believes that only those initiated in the Hopi culture should create Katsinam images. Lomatewama states, “to engage in traditional arts a person should go through the process of initiation...because one has then earned the privilege to do certain things, one has the license to carve” (Pearlstone 2001: 131). He feels this way because “people need to understand why they are going through a process” (Pearlstone 2001: 131). There is also a conflict between not wanting to regulate or infringe upon a person’s private rights and protecting the rights of the culture as a whole.

Other Pueblos differ significantly regarding “the behavior of Katsina participants, the secrecy of Katsina ceremonies, and the use of Katsina imagery” (Pearlstone 2001: 84). In fact, it is very rare to see commercial Katsinam carvings from other Pueblos because they have affectively cut off access by outsiders to their Katsina imagery and artists hold to the restrictions set by their Pueblo due to the dire consequences enforced. These other Pueblos have voiced their objections to the Hopi. However, some artists from other Pueblos who carve Katsina dolls get around restrictions by using Hopi Katsinam instead

of Katsinam from their own community.

While the Hopi community does not express a general consensus concerning the sale of *tithu* by members of their own community, they do seem to agree that the commodification of the Katsina by the Navajo is wrong. As Pearlstone states “most offensive to the majority of Hopis are non-Pueblo made objects that mimic their carvings...and the Navajo are the worst offenders in this category” (2001: 95). In the minds of many Hopi, What the Navajo are making and selling are simply cheap imitations, and the representations are seldom accurate or respectful. As Hopi artist Neil David, Sr. states “Navajo shouldn’t be carving Katsina-like figures at all. I have yet to see one that is accurate” (Pearlstone 2001: 35). The Hopi “see in these carvings an affront to their religion, the usurpation of private supernaturals and betrayals of confidential information, [as well as] inaccurate representations and sloppy workmanship” (Pearlstone 2001: 98). The Navajo are not only creating Katsina dolls for sale, but are also claiming that Katsinam are part of their cultural history, even though they are not a Pueblo tribe. Clyde Qotswisiuma of the Hopi Cultural Preservation Office has expressed his anger at the Navajo appropriation of Hopi culture, more than just their Katsinam, saying, “the Navajos are taking Hopi qualities...we Hopis don’t talk first in public gatherings anymore. Now we are afraid that if we say something, the Navajos will say that it’s theirs too” (Brown 2003: 19).



**Figure 4. Navajo produced Katsina figure.**

The Navajo have a 50-year history of making Katsina-like figurines and are believed to be the first group to appropriate Hopi imagery. A large number of the Katsina



dolls sold to tourists today are made by Navajo. In fact, unless one is at a Hopi Pueblo or in an art gallery, he or she is most likely seeing Navajo imitations instead of authentic *tithu*. These Katsina-like figurines are advertised and sold as authentic, Hopi made Katsinam; the buyers are not told the true origins of the piece they are purchasing. In many cases, the salespeople themselves do not know the difference between the *tithu* and other Katsina figures made by Hopi and the figures made by Navajo. Besides being abundantly available, the Navajo pieces also sell well because they are usually priced much lower than Hopi made Katsinam; they also cost less to make because many Navajo mass-produce the figures in factories.

The Navajo, however, see things much differently when it comes to Katsinam. To begin with, the Navajo “have long been known for their eclecticism in absorbing the art forms and techniques of other cultures,” so the appropriation of the traditions of other cultures is part of their culture (Pearlstone 2001: 99). The Navajo also believe that the Pueblo Katsinam are now part of the common Southwest Indian heritage and therefore open to all for economic purposes. Finally, many simply see the manufacture of Katsinam as a livelihood. They are not trying to offend anyone; they are just trying to make a living. What this shows is that cultural meanings are not in anyway fixed; they are instead constantly changing and evolving and moving. The boundaries between cultures are complex and porous, with the exchange and incorporation of culture constantly occurring (Aldred 1993, King & Springwood 2001).

Non-Natives have also appropriated and commodified the Katsinam image, but this appropriation and commodification is not as offensive to the Hopi as that of the Navajo. Non-native appropriation is not as offensive because many of these artists have

distanced themselves from Hopi traditions in an attempt not to offend the Hopi. There are many ways in which these artists distance themselves from Hopi traditions, including stating that they are depicting the Katsina dancers not the spirits, using materials other than traditional cottonwood root, and stating that they are not trying to replicate or imitate Hopi tradition. Chris Pardell, a Euro-American artist who creates Katsinam sculptures using bronze, pewter, and gold, says “sensitive to the beliefs of the Hopi, I hold that only they can make true katsinas, and in any event, certainly not in metal. I wanted to create figures depicting, not the katsinas



**Figure 5. Katsina figures created by Christopher Pardell using bronze and pewter.**

themselves, but Native Americans dancing the katsinas as they do in ceremonials” (Pearlstone 2001: 92). John Fansworth, a Euro-American painter, states, “I am not trying to replicate or imitate the spiritual beings of the Hopi. Like the many non-Indians who have written about them, I am merely reporting on them and on their visual beauty, which has so moved me” (Pearlstone 2001: 145).

Many of the artists, not just Fansworth, say that they are drawn to “Katsina imagery by what they see as the beauty of the Katsinam or because of the spirituality of the supernaturals” (Pearlstone 2001: 92). Non-native artists also do not claim any right, ownership, or history to the religious figure of the Katsinam like the Navajo. Katsina items are now produced in locations all over the world and sold through catalogues and as tourist souvenirs. Many of these foreign-made Katsina figures are being mass-produced in factory settings in countries such as Italy and the Philippines. As Pearlstone states “it



**Figure 6. Mass-produced Katsina figures.**

is a sign of profound change that sacred, and in some Pueblos secret, beings can now be marketed, bypassing the Southwest completely” (2001: 40).

While many Hopi fight the sale of non-Hopi crafted Katsinam, there is little that they can do. They cannot trademark the Katsina image so that outsiders cannot make Katsina dolls or use the Katsina image because it is already

a part of the public domain. Not only is the image already in the public domain because of outsiders writing about and documenting the Katsina, but also because the Hopi themselves are responsible for introducing *tithu* into the commercial market. It is extremely difficult to stop the sale of this sacred item when they themselves are profiting from it.

This does not mean that the Hopi are not fighting the commodification of the Katsina (For examples of Native resistance to commodification, see King & Springwood 2001, Josephy, Nagel, & Johnson 1999, and Brown 2003). In 1992 Marvel Comics published an issue of one of their comics that demeaned Katsinam. By the time the Hopi tribe had contacted the publishers, there was not much that could be done because the rights to the comic had been sold to their distributorship nationwide. A recall was issued, but the comic had already been available for two or three weeks, meaning that many issues had already been sold. The Hopi then protested publicly, but this only made the issue a collector’s item and tripled the price<sup>7</sup>.

While the foregoing discussion of the Katsina reveals the conflicts and complexities that can and most often does surround appropriation and commodification

of American Indian culture, in what follows, I turn to the Ojibwa dreamcatcher, an object that has decidedly less controversy surrounding it. In my discussion of the Katsina, I illustrated how members of the same tribe can have completely different opinions concerning authenticity and who should and should not be allowed to create and sell material culture, as well as how one tribe may object to the appropriation of an object by another tribe. I will show that this is not always the case by discussing the Ojibwa dreamcatcher.

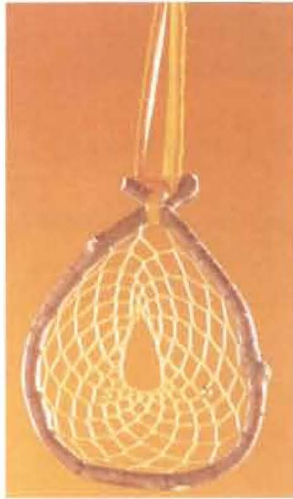
### **Dreamcatchers**

The Ojibwa dreamcatcher is much more than a child's plaything or a decorative object. Born in legend, it is a constant reminder of universal flux, our mortality, and the delicate harmony of the natural environment. The dreamcatcher is but a see-through curtain between the material and supernatural realms, and all good spirits are intelligent enough to float through this light veil and bless us by animating our dreams.

-Judy Black (1999: 71)

To understand the Ojibwa dreamcatcher, one must first understand how important dreams are to the Ojibwa. As the epigraph suggests, dreams are so important that “the Ojibwa order their existence according to their belief in the sometimes parallel, but more often intersecting, realms of physical reality and dream imagination” (Black 1999: 48). The Ojibwa believe that the human self is divided into four different states: body, aura, ego-soul, and shadow-soul or free-soul. It is the shadow-soul that comes alive in dreams. Dreams are important because they are considered “visions of the spirit world and the means for acquiring spiritual power, and it is the message in a dream that determines

everything from a child's name to the life-course a young adult will follow" (Black 1999:



**Figure 7. Traditional child's dreamcatcher.**

48). Dreams open a person's mind to the "the inter-dependence of the natural and supernatural worlds and the dependence between the body and the spirit" (Black 1999: 105). These dream experiences are not derived from the self, as is believed in Euro-American thought, but are instead derived from outside sources. Because dreams are so important to Ojibwa life, good dreams are considered a true blessing and bad dreams are dangerous.

Dreamcatchers were traditionally crafted for children by their mother or grandmother and were meant to protect them from evil, such as illness and bad spirits, "as a spider's web catches and holds everything that comes in contact with it" (Black 1999: 50). They protected the child so that he or she would grow into a competent, productive adult. Dreamcatchers serve as an invitation for good dreams and fortification against nightmares and evil spirits. The hole that is traditionally left in the center of the dreamcatcher allows good dreams to find their way to the dreamer, whereas the web catches all of the bad dreams that are dangerous. The bad dreams that are caught by the web are "consumed by the fiery light [of dawn] and disappear from the face of the earth" (Black 1999: 54).

A variety of myths attempt to explain the origins of the dreamcatcher. The most popular legend involves the grandmother and the spider. In the legend, a spider would spin its web, day after day, near the bed of the grandmother, N'okomiss, as the grandmother looked on in appreciation. One day, N'okomiss's grandson spotted the



spider and lunged towards it, lifting his moccasin to squash it. However, N'okomiss stopped her grandson before he could do so and the grandson asked her why she was protecting the spider. N'okomiss did not respond, but only smiled. When the grandson left, the spider spoke to N'okomiss stating that it was grateful to her for saving its life and wished to return the gesture of protection and life-giving. The spider began to weave a web and told N'okomiss to watch carefully how the web was woven because every web that N'okomiss would weave thereafter would be able to capture bad dreams and let good dreams through. The knowledge of this web was the spider's gift to N'okomiss. In this legend, the grandmother understands the co-dependence between human and animal spirits and that only good can come from the animals around her.

Although several myths concerning the origins of the dreamcatchers exist, they all have a few ideas in common. In every one of the legends, an emphasis is placed on the "importance of dreaming and the close relationship between spiritual life and protection of dream spirits during wakefulness" (Black 1999: 66). These legends show the importance of dreaming to the Ojibwa and the fact that much can be learned from one's dreams. Each myth also "highlights the core beliefs of the Ojibwa about the world of the supernatural...that the natural and supernatural realms are continuous rather than disjointed" (Black 1999: 66).

Traditional dreamcatchers are made from willow and sinew and are not meant to last. The willow used eventually dries out and the tension from the sinew collapses the dreamcatcher. This is intentional and represents the temporariness of youth. Traditional children's dreamcatchers also include a feather - an owl feather for girls and an eagle feather for boys<sup>8</sup> - in the center. This feather represents breath of air, which is essential

for life. These dreamcatchers are usually hung on the child's cradleboard and the child is meant to be entertained by the feather as well as be given a lesson on the importance of good air. Other natural items, such as stones, feathers, and parts of animals, were, and still are, used in the dreamcatchers. These items "each have their own significance and reflect the individual gifts, gender properties, and special capacities for whom it was made" (Black 1999: 70).



**Figure 8.**  
**Dreamcatcher**  
**hung from a**  
**cradleboard.**

Three main design elements are common to all dreamcatchers. All dreamcatchers are circular, which is a reflection of the Sacred Hoop or the Great Circle of Life. Dreamcatchers also feature an unbroken strand of web, which is symbolic of eternity and the life cycle that is continuously replenished and never ending. Finally, they are made only of natural fibers and materials. These fibers and materials are meant to represent the four elements: earth, which is represented by the wooden hoop and (optional) mineral beads; air, represented by the feather; fire, represented by the bad dreams that are consumed by first light; and water, which is used to make materials pliable and manageable. It should be mentioned that, because it is now illegal to use feathers of endangered birds such as eagles, symbolic gems are used in the place of eagle feathers.

Today, dreamcatchers are made for and used by people of all ages and have been adopted by many other tribal cultures, becoming a symbol of pan-Indian identity (Barker & Bullers 1996, Fisk 1977). Dreamcatchers have come to represent psychic healing and a shield against evil, and can cross cultural boundaries. In January of 1997, Susan Cockle, a Scottish-born child psychologist working in Edmonton, Alberta, arranged for

dreamcatchers to be sent to the traumatized survivors of the massacre at Dunblane Primary School in Dunblane, Scotland. On March 13, 1996, a gunman opened fire in a classroom and killed sixteen children. The surviving children who had witnessed the event suffered from nightmares for a long time afterward. Dreamcatchers were made by a number of groups across Alberta and British Columbia and were donated to be included in the Dunblane Healing Gift Project packages, which were comprised of several therapeutic items, and sent to these children. Many letters were sent to Cockle thanking her for the packages and stating how the dreamcatchers had worked in curing the children of their bad dreams. One little girl wrote “she had not had any nightmares since the night she hung the dreamcatcher in her bedroom window” (Black 1999: 119-120).



**Figure 9. Modern dreamcatcher that uses traditional elements.**

When one hangs a dreamcatcher above his or her bed, he or she is “also making a silent prayer to survive, prosper, and be initiated into a realm of wonders, wisdom, and magic that lies outside our reach, somewhere in the great beyond” (Black 1999: 97). Dreamcatchers have become a source of income for many Native Americans, not just Ojibwa, and people not of Native American descent. A person can go into any bookstore or library and find instructional books on how to make dreamcatchers, or go into any hobby shop and find dreamcatcher kits; they can be found hanging in art museums and being sold at craft fairs or at Native American centers, pow wows, or museums.

With the appropriation and commodification of the dreamcatcher by others, the design and materials used to make dreamcatchers is constantly changing and



modernizing. Artists make dreamcatchers to a person's specifications to reflect the person's own personal symbols and incorporate what is important to the individual. For the most part, the Ojibwa are not offended by and are all right with the use of the dreamcatchers by other cultures. However, some "contemporary trends may be considered unfaithful to original purpose and sacred design" and many are not happy about this (Black 1999: 111). For example, making dreamcatchers that exceed a certain size do not conform to Ojibwa tradition and is offensive. Some people also use unnatural materials and objects, which also does not conform to tradition. It is also not correct to hang a dreamcatcher in any other place than above one's bed or in a window that opens upon the sleeping person. Therefore, it is wrong and offensive to hang dreamcatchers in other locations, such as on rearview mirrors and on key chains. Even with the appropriation, commodification, and increase in popularity, "dreamcatchers are still considered to be gifts from the spirit world, and their creators take great pride in the intricate beauty of these artifacts and relish the spiritual aspects of their labors" (Black 1999: 115).

## **Conclusion**

With these two examples, the Katsina and the dreamcatcher, we see how native opinions and reactions to appropriation and commodification can vary greatly. For example, the Hopi seem to be doing everything in their power to stop the manufacture and sale of Katsinam made by outsiders, and there is a wide range of opinions within the culture about whether or not it is all right to sell *tithu* and, if so, what type of *tithu* can be sold. Even though most Hopi agree that outsiders do not have any right to create and sell

Katsinam, “when...groups choose to commercialize their identity for economic gain, courts are less likely to accept the argument that unauthorized use of that identity undermines their dignity” (Brown 2003: 38). With the Ojibwa, we see a society open to sharing their material culture with others, of both Native and non-Native background, as long as the dreamcatchers are properly made and used.

I believe that this difference stems from the way in which knowledge is viewed by these two cultures. The Hopi are an extremely secretive society that believes knowledge is sacred and should only be shared with those that have a right to it, those that have been initiated into the correct parts of their society. The appropriation and commodification of Katsinam goes directly against that belief. Here we have not only outsiders – outsiders who have not been initiated into the correct societies – viewing these sacred objects, but also creating and selling them.

The Ojibwa, on the other hand, appear to be open with their culture. They freely share their culture if it is felt that their culture will be given the correct amount of respect and that their culture will in any way help. In the case of the dreamcatcher, the Ojibwa realize that all people, not just the Ojibwa, can benefit from the spiritual qualities of the dreamcatcher; everyone can benefit from keeping the bad dreams out and inviting the good dreams in.

Ideas of authenticity also play into the complexity of appropriation, commodification, and ownership rights. The actions of a Boy Scout troop in the 1950s highlight these issues well. A Boy Scout group in Colorado calling themselves the Koshare Indians have adopted the practice of several different American Indian groups. Their name is a Pueblo Indian word meaning “fun-maker,” and they divide their troop

into “clans,” with the Kiowa and Sioux emphasizing dancing, while the Navajo emphasize drumming, singing, chanting and costume maintenance. They perform traditional dances in what they call a “kiva,” and they perform in traditional costumes. This group claims to be “authentic - as opposed to the movie or television - Indian,” but also interpretive (Mechling 1980: 27). In the 1950s, the Koshare made and used masks that are part of the Zuni culture. The Zuni heard about this, came to watch the Koshare, and amazingly decided that the masks were in fact *authentic*. The result was “the Koshare agreed to give the [masks] to the Zuni, who built a new kiva for them and treated the Koshare-made [masks]...with sacred reverence.” (Mechling 1980: 27).

In the case of the Katsinam, most Hopi, and other pueblo peoples, believe that only the Katsinam created by Hopi and other pueblo peoples in traditional ways are authentic. Views on whether or not authentic Katsinam should be made to be sold vary, with some believing only authentic Katsinam should be sold and others believing that only non-traditional, less authentic Katsinam should be sold. Authenticity is viewed much differently by the Ojibwa. They believe that any dreamcatcher made that follows a few traditional rules, such as using natural materials, is an authentic dreamcatcher, regardless of who made it. In the above example, the Zuni viewed the masks made by the Koshare Boy Scout troop as being so authentic that they built a kiva for the masks. In this case, “our commonsense understanding of ‘authentic’ fails us when White boys can make Native American costumes, Native American ceremonies, and Native American gods ‘too real’” (Mechling 1980: 27). These very different examples only prove the varying ideas on what authenticity is. They also suggest that different groups construct the authenticity of an object from contrasting viewpoints, with different agendas and

different results. As Jay Mechling states, “Signs are interpreted within sign systems, and cultures are elaborate webs of significance that provide the context for the interpretation of the meaning of a given sign or symbol” (1980:28). The meanings of authenticity are constantly shifting and being reinterpreted, as culture is shared, exchanged, and appropriated.

What these conflicts show us is that what is right for one cultural group is not right for the next and that each group must be considered individually. For example, making it illegal for anyone outside of a specific cultural group to create and sell a cultural object would work for the Katsina, but not the dreamcatcher. The Ojibwa do not claim sole ownership to the dreamcatcher nor do they object to the creation and use of dreamcatchers by others. Even though current laws are a major step forward in Native rights, much still needs to be done. Lawmakers need to realize that Euro-American ideas of ownership and rights do not apply to every cultural group. However, while laws concerning restitution are not the ultimate answer, “restitution helps lay the groundwork for new and better ways of living together” (Brown 2003: 234).

However, where does all of this leave the anthropologist, or anyone else who works with Native American material culture? Whenever there is a discussion of appropriation of Native American culture, there must also be a discussion of cultural studies. In 2001, a university archivist was faced with an interesting ethical dilemma when the tribe represented by interview tapes and letters given to the archives by an anthropologist requested that the collection be closed to the public because it contained religious information. However, the university rightfully owned the property, held copyrights to their contents, and the donor had asked that the materials be available to

researchers, and by accepting the gift, the university had agreed to honor those wishes. The tribe then requested that they review any requests to view the documents and decide who would and would not be allowed to view them. But, this request could “potentially violate the ethical guidelines of the archivists professional guild, which stipulates that all patrons be treated equally,” as well as break numerous laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of religion, gender, or ethnicity (Brown 2003: 230). The fact that the archivist had a responsibility to serve members of the community, a community in which tribe members are a part of, further complicated this dilemma. The matter has yet to be resolved, but the archivist is working to find ways to respond to the tribe’s concerns while still honoring the donor’s wishes. The materials, meanwhile, have been kept sealed and will remain sealed until an answer can be found (Brown 2003: 229-30).

This is just one example of the complex problems that can be faced by those working with cultural materials. The opinions within this world vary as much as the opinions within the Native American community; “within the anthropological profession there are radically different opinions about repatriation, the role and responsibilities of archaeologists, and the definition of ethics,” and “many anthropologists, museum curators, landowners, and hobbyists - some of whom are ironically American Indians - are hesitant to return objects, citing scientific and academic freedom” (Mihsuah 2000: 1 & 8). It is almost impossible to regulate the study of Native American’s and their cultural materials because of this. There are some who believe that Native Americans are unable to chronicle their own histories and that this task lies with those who study culture, therefore any and all Native American property can and should be allowed to be studied by outsiders. On the other end of the spectrum, there are Native Americans who believe

that only Native American scholars should be allowed to study Native American culture, that non-Indians have no right to Native culture in any context. This continuum of opinions is connected to the issues posed by the Katsina and the dreamcatcher in that the views of scholars heavily influence the laws and policies made to protect Native culture and its commodification.

Ultimately, it is impossible to stop the appropriation and commodification of Native American culture because the definition of authenticity, as well as the definition of right and wrong behavior, varies so greatly within all communities involved in the matter. With this juxtaposition of Katsina and dreamcatcher, we see that each tribe must be treated differently and that it is impossible to set laws and policies regulating the appropriation and sale of Native culture that will please everyone. In the end, it is only through respect and cooperation that any agreement can be reached.

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<sup>1</sup> NAGPRA, created in 1990, consists of four main components: establishes legal protection for Native American burials; makes it illegal to deal in Native American remains and designated cultural items, such as sacred objects, in the market place; requires museums and federal agencies to summarize their cultural property holdings, inventory human remains, and provide open access to Native Americans; and requires museums and federal agencies to actively seek consultants with tribes and repatriate human remains and relevant cultural materials. Several other United States and international laws to protect Native rights exist, including the National Historic Preservation Act, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, and the National Museum of the American Indian Act, all of which are part of intellectual and cultural property rights.

<sup>2</sup> The American Indian Religious Freedom Act was enacted in 1978 to “protect and preserve for American Indians their inherent right of freedom to believe, express, and exercise the traditional religions of the American Indian, Eskimo, Aleut, and Native Hawaiians, including but not limited to access to sites, use and possession of sacred objects, and the freedom to worship through ceremonials and traditional rites” (<http://www.cr.nps.gov/hps/laws/religious.htm>).

<sup>3</sup> New Agers have been putting traditional Native American knowledge and beliefs into practice since the 1980s. Some of the most commonly used Native American religious items are medicine wheels and sweat lodges. In many sacred sites on public lands, American Indians have to compete with New Agers for use of these sacred Native areas. Since the beginning, New Agers have commodified Native beliefs. For example, New Age leaders make money by offering classes and workshops and publishing books in which “traditional” Native American religious practices are taught. In fact, “indigenous peoples now perceive themselves as more threatened by outsiders who claim to love their religion than by missionaries dedicated to its overthrow” (Brown 2003: 23).

<sup>4</sup> Numerous examples of each of these exist and most tribes have experienced each of these in one way or another. There is a long history in the United States within cultural studies of the taking of Native

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American remains to be studied to show Native inferiority through phrenology and craniology. A good example of the taking of Native bodies for research and display would be Ales Hrdlicke, the founder of the Smithsonian's division of physical anthropology, digging up the remains of 800 Konaigs, a Native group from Alaska (Mihsuah 8). During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, H.R. Voth lived with and documented Hopi traditions, including many sacred ceremonies. The Hopi peoples claim that Voth would force himself into secret ceremonies, including those held in kivas, the most sacred of places, and when the Hopi would try to get him to leave, he would turn violent (Brown 13).

<sup>5</sup> There are several ways in which these laws and policies cause problems. First of all, these laws deal with ownership, and most Native tribes do not believe property, whether it is land, resources, or objects, can be owned. Also, the idea of knowledge differs between these two cultures, with Euro-Americans valuing shared knowledge while many Native groups value need-to-know, compartmentalized knowledge.

<sup>6</sup> The plural form of *tihu*.

<sup>7</sup> "The Katsina's Sing of Doom," *NFL Superpro*, no. 6, March 1992. Marvel Comics.

<sup>8</sup> An owl feather represents wisdom and an eagle feather represents courage.

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