

University Press of Colorado
Utah State University Press

Chapter Title: The New Age Sweat Lodge
Chapter Author(s): William M. Clements

Book Title: Healing Logics
Book Subtitle: Culture and Medicine in Modern Health Belief Systems
Book Editor(s): Erika Brady
Published by: University Press of Colorado; Utah State University Press
Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46nwrq.10>

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the new age dilemma

THE NEW AGE SWEAT LODGE

WILLIAM M. CLEMENTS

The 10 August 1997 issue of the *Westchester Weekly*, a section of the Sunday *New York Times*, includes an article entitled “Prayer Group in Patterson Follows Rituals of Indian Purifying” (Fullam 1997). The piece recounts the use of the Lakota Indian sweat lodge ritual accompanied by a “drum ceremony” adapted from the Micmacs by a group of suburbanites who call themselves the “Red Road.” Though some of the participants state that they have been adopted by Native American families, “the closest thing to an actual American Indian in the group” is a person of Italian and Shoshone descent (the latter four generations removed) who studied with Ed McGaa, a Lakota spiritual leader who works with participants in contemporary alternative spirituality. The group, who share such common problems as “divorce, addictions, [and] grandchildren thrust on us in our later years” which the Christianity into which they were enculturated does not effectively address, sweats once a week and operates out of White Buffalo, a craft shop run by a woman of Greek-Portuguese descent. The *Times* reporter notes the effects of their participation in the sweat lodge experience: “While all members claimed to have had changes in their personal lives as a result of their American Indian spiritual practices, some also claimed more awareness in their political lives,” especially in regard to issues affecting Native Americans. The location of the Red Road sweat lodge, though, is kept secret out of fear of reprisals from Native Americans who object to non-Indians “co-opting” their ceremonies. The use of American Indian ceremonies for healing and other spiritual ends in Westchester County represents a practice whose roots go back to the beginning of contact between Europeans and their predecessors in the Western Hemisphere. But it has grown exponentially during the last decade or so, often associated with protocols of alternative spirituality which

are usually placed under the general rubric “new age.”¹ Accounts of sweat lodge use, for example, abound in literature by and about adherents of alternative spirituality. One person has written of her experience at a sweat ceremony at a Unitarian Universalist retreat and camp in western Massachusetts (Fairclough 1992); paying guests at the Open Spoke Ranch near Stillwater, Oklahoma, can enjoy the experience of sweat lodge hot tubs (Lee 1995, 254); the sweat lodge experience is among the amenities offered to guests who stay at some vegetarian-oriented bed and breakfast hostelrys (Ryan 1996); students at Worcester Polytechnic Institute can participate in the sweat lodge as part of a program called “Passages” (Gose 1996); and the “exciting week” offered by the Sunrise Retreat Center of Rimrock, Arizona, begins with a sweat lodge.² Examples could be multiplied on end, but the Westchester County example can be considered somewhat paradigmatic of the current popularity of sweat lodge ceremonialism: its association with a commercially oriented arts and crafts venture, the apparent lack of involvement of people with primary cultural roots in Native American societies, its eclectic borrowing of procedures from different Indian ethnic groups, the experience’s impact for participants on both personal and social levels, and the recognition that Indians may be uncomfortable—to the point of vaguely conceived “reprisals”—with the adoption and adaptation of traditional spiritual customs by cultural outsiders.

Or consider the testimonial of Colin Pringle regarding his first sweat lodge, which took place at a 1979 Rainbow Gathering. Led by a “Native American medicine man” named Medicine Story, the ritual involved about half a dozen participants. After they had entered the dome-shaped structure and heated rocks had been placed in a pit in the middle of the lodge, Medicine Story said a few words “to help center the energy” while the other people chanted. Pringle reports that the couple of hours spent in the lodge produced sensations “like being in an isolation tank.” While the sweat lodge is communal in contrast to the solitary isolation tank, “both experiences tend to give you the we are all one feeling that LSD is known to produce.” The lodge has its risks. The intense heat requires the same kind of consciousness alteration needed for coal-walking, Pringle avers. But the result is “a spiritual boost.” He testifies to the immediately positive effects that his first experience produced:

Like other forms of meditation, it clears your mind of all the worries, fears and other distractions of everyday life, and it works without drugs or expensive equipment like isolation tanks or bio-feedback equipment. It’s such a simple ritual, yet it’s so powerful. I think it gave me the energy to get through a mishap that happened the next day, when I accidentally consumed more LSD than I would have liked.³

What are students of alternative healing methodologies to make of the Westchester County use of the sweat lodge and of this account, which (except for its references to LSD) represents the experiences of a number of non-Indians who have participated in the sweat lodge? On one hand, glowingly positive testimonials by sweat lodge leaders as well as by satisfied participants appear in a variety of books and articles, on the internet, and in oral tradition. These accounts suggest that for people seeking alternatives to mainline religion and medicine, the sweat lodge seems to be filling some real needs. But at the same time, many traditional Native Americans and individuals who perceive themselves as their spokespersons see new age uses of the sweat lodge and other manifestations of Native American spirituality as another instance of the five-hundred-year-old appropriation of things Indian by Europeans and Euro-Americans. The purpose here is not to assume sides in what is an often passionate, sometimes acrimonious debate. Instead, I am concerned with the “logics” that inform the use of the sweat lodge outside its original cultural contexts as a method for healing in the broadest sense of that term for people who have turned to spiritual and medical alternatives to making themselves and their environment whole.

Ceremonial sweating may be the most widely known ritual healing practice in native North America. The earliest contact documents report the use of sweat baths for hygienic and therapeutic purposes, sometimes for specific ailments but often as a general cure-all. Not confined to any ethnic group or culture area, sweating occurred among native communities in virtually every part of the continent (Vogel 1970, 254–57). Methods of administering sweat baths varied, of course, as did the degree to which the practice had spiritual significance. The approach to sweating that has exerted the most influence in contemporary alternative spirituality is that of the Lakota of the northern Plains, probably because of the influence of Joseph Epes Brown’s book *The Sacred Pipe* (1953; Bucko 1998, 51–53), which presents a detailed description of the Lakota sweat lodge ritual, or *inipi*, recorded from the Oglala Lakota spiritual leader Nicholas Black Elk. The reputation that Black Elk developed as a result of John G. Neihardt’s poetic presentation of his life history in *Black Elk Speaks*, which has enjoyed considerable popularity since the 1960s especially in the new age movement, undoubtedly contributed to the foregrounding of Lakota ceremonialism in alternative spirituality. Moreover, the high visibility of two Lakota spiritual practitioners, Wallace Black Elk (a spiritual, though not genealogical descendant of Nicholas Black Elk) and Ed McGaa (Eagle Man), has contributed to the prominence of the Lakota version of the sweat lodge. The popular reception of Richard Erdoes’s treatment of the life history of John Fire Lane Deer is another relevant factor. Undoubtedly,

the Lakota prominence in popular culture images of the generic “Indian” must be taken into account as well.

Considerable variation characterizes even Lakota sweating; in fact, the more punctilious a sweat lodge leader is about the exactness of procedures, the more likely he or she has derived knowledge of those procedures from new age publications rather than traditional Lakota sources. In general terms, though, the ceremony does follow a standardized pattern. The venue for the ceremony is a dome-shaped structure, whose frame usually consists of pliable saplings secured into the earth and bent together. A single door may be directionally oriented toward either east or west. The sweat lodge (sometimes simply referred to as a “sweat,” also a term for the ceremony itself) is covered with hides, blankets, tarpaulins, or plastic. The object is to capture and retain as much heat and to exclude as much light as possible. The sweat lodge may be a relatively permanent structure; leaders, both traditional Lakota and new age, may have lodges erected in their backyards. Often, though, participants will be expected to assist in constructing a lodge for a particular sweat, the result being a structure that is disassembled as soon as the ceremony concludes.

The ceremonial leader or an assistant heats rocks on a fire built outside the lodge (hence the alternate term “stone-people lodge”). Some ceremonialists insist that a certain number of rocks be heated, while others make no specific recommendations. Igneous rocks of some sort (“lava rocks”) are thought to be best for ceremonial purposes. Meanwhile, participants enter the lodge by crawling through the door perhaps after an introductory ritual involving an offering of tobacco smoke. Traditionally, sweat lodge ceremonies seem to have been segregated by gender, in which cases the participants entered the lodge naked. In the mixed sweats that occur among participants in contemporary alternative spirituality, men and women are likely to wear bathing suits or other light garb.

Participants position themselves around a central indentation in the earth into which the fire tender introduces some of the heated rocks. Water poured over the rocks produces steam which begins to heat the darkened enclosure. As the temperature builds, the leader may intone a prayer to Wakan tanka, Tunkashila, Mother Earth, or another animatistic deity. Each participant will have his or her turn at prayer, which both traditionally and in new age contexts often begins with the Lakota phrase *Mitákuye oyás’* (all my relatives). Prayers may be for personal needs, though the community (defined as ranging from the immediate reference group to the cosmos in general) usually receives some attention. After a period of time, the door of the lodge will be opened and participants given the chance to drink some water. The process may be repeated for several rounds (or “endurances”), four being a frequent

number. Often sage is sprinkled over the heated stones, and a pipe filled with tobacco is passed among the participants.⁴

Europeans apparently adopted Native American practices of sweating for medicinal purposes very soon after contact. Several early accounts by missionaries and explorers report the authors' participation in or observation of the ceremony. An example appears in the work of Moravian missionary John Heckewelder, whose 1819 account of the Lenni Lenape (Delawares) continues to receive high marks for its ethnographic value. In a chapter entitled "Remedies," Heckewelder notes, "The sweat oven is the first thing that an Indian has recourse to when he feels the least indisposed; it is the place to which the wearied traveller, hunter, or warrior looks for relief from the fatigues he has endured, the cold he has caught, or the restoration of his lost appetite" (1819, 225). The missionary provides a fairly good description of procedures in the "oven" and more to the present purpose offers the following account of its use by a Euro-American:

In the year 1784, a gentleman whom I had been acquainted with at Detroit, and who had been for a long time in an infirm state of health, came from thence to the village of the Christian Indians on the Huron river, in order to have the benefit of the sweat oven. It being the middle of winter, when there was a deep snow on the ground, and the weather was excessively cold, I advised him to postpone his sweating to a warmer season; but he persisting in his resolution, I advised him by no means to remain in the oven longer than fifteen or at most twenty minutes. But when he once was in it, feeling himself comfortable, he remained a full hour, at the end of which he fainted, and was brought by two strong Indians to my house, in very great pain and not able to walk. He remained with me until the next day, when we took him down in his sleigh to his family at Detroit. His situation was truly deplorable; his physicians at that place gave up all hopes of his recovery, and he frequently expressed his regret that he had not followed my advice. Suddenly, however, a change took place for the better, and he not only recovered his perfect health, but became a stout corpulent man, so that he would often say, that his going into the sweat oven was the best thing he had ever done in his life for the benefit of his health. (1819, 226–27)

Heckewelder encountered the man fifteen years later, when he claimed to have suffered no illness at all in the interim. He died "at an advanced age," some thirty years after his sweating experience (1819, 227). Similar accounts can be gleaned from such sources as Heckewelder: occasional instances of Europeans or Euro-Americans who enjoy relief from some ailment as a result of ceremonial sweating. These seem, though, to be isolated cases and exemplify individuals

who were willing to take advantage of any available curative procedures. To my knowledge, in early accounts one does not encounter attempts to spread the use of the sweat lodge beyond the immediate community.

That is just what began to happen in the 1970s with the emergence of new age consciousness. Some alternative religious communities during the 1960s may have adopted the sweat lodge into their ceremonial agendas, but one does not hear of widespread new age use until the next decade when examples such as those reported at the beginning of this essay become more and more commonplace. The period also marks the emerging visibility of Native American (often Lakota) promoters of their indigenous spirituality (or modified versions thereof) to non-Indian populations.

Commentators on new age spirituality have noted the eclecticism and volatility of the “movement.” During the quarter-century or so that has passed since alternative spirituality emerged into the mainline, various points of stress have become foregrounded and then receded to a less visible position as new emphases replace them. While the 1970s were marked by an emphasis on Eastern religions, especially those from India, and on the methodology of channeling spiritual entities from the past, more recently environmental concerns have come to the fore and spiritual agendas adapted from native America and the Celtic cultures of northern Europe have received increased attention (Lewis 1992, 10). This does not mean that these emphases have not always been a part of contemporary alternative spirituality, just that fluctuations in prominence have occurred. For example, *The Teachings of Don Juan* (Castaneda 1968) has been an influence on alternative spirituality virtually since its publication, but Native Americana did not become one of the *prominent* new age themes until about a decade later. While sweat lodge ceremonialism adopted from Lakota and other American Indian groups may have been conducted in new age contexts thirty years ago, now they have become rather standard features of new age spiritual experiences. The emergence of figures such as Vincent La Duke, Ed McGaa, Jamie Sams, and Wallace Black Elk as ostensible guides for non-Indians into Native American spirituality had brought the sweat lodge (and other adapted Native American ceremonies) into prominence by the 1980s. La Duke, a Chippewa who used the name “Sun Bear” in his role as spiritual leader, focused much of his attention on orienting followers (members of what he called the “Bear Tribe”) with the cosmic forces of earth using the medicine wheel. In the Bear Tribe, the sweat lodge offers individuals an opportunity to undergo ritual purification before the medicine wheel ceremonies.⁵ McGaa (a Lakota who is also called “Eagle Man”) works with a “Rainbow Tribe,” whose membership extends to non-Indians. His earth-oriented spirituality adapts the seven rites which Nicholas

Black Elk had described to Brown in *The Sacred Pipe* so that the focus will be upon environmental consciousness and so that their accessibility will extend to non-Indians. Less coherent in polity than the others, Wallace Black Elk nevertheless sees the sweat lodge as part of what “Earth People” should be doing in order to reestablish their harmony with the earth.

The work of these ceremonial leaders has engendered some vociferous responses, and the new age sweat lodge because of its prominence has received special attention from critics, most of whom are either Indians or persons sympathetic to traditional Indian cultures. Though the reaction of some Native Americans to the use of the sweat lodge by non-Indians in the new age movement has been indifferent or even sometimes favorable, a vocal group of spokespersons has been adamantly opposed to what they consider appropriation of Indian spirituality by non-Indians—hence, the perceived need to conceal the location of their sweats by the Red Road group in Westchester County, New York. Many have extended their criticism especially to other Indians such as Wallace Black Elk and Ed McGaa who have been responsible for introducing new agers to the sweat lodge and other manifestations of Native American spirituality.

The principal charges involve the “selling” of Indian ceremonies—that is, the fact that some practitioners, Indian and non-Indian, charge fees for conducting the sweat lodge (Shaw 1995, 86). The website for the Earth Circle Association’s sweat lodge (www.sfin.com/org/earthcircle/sweatlodge.html) suggests that participants make “a donation comparable to a doctors [*sic*] visit” to defray ceremonial expenses and “to the support of the ceremonial leader.” Frequently, though, according to critics, those leaders have little in the way of traditional credentials or claims to expertise. While Euro-Americans who lead sweats almost invariably claim to have received instruction and authorization from a tribal teacher, many traditionalists hold that assuming a leadership role requires that one have previously participated in other Lakota ceremonies such as the Sun Dance or at least have the ability to speak Lakota (Bucko 1998, 64, 102). Those who fail these tests lack the “confirmation of the [traditional Indian] community” for their role as spiritual leader (Hobson 1979, 106). They are, in the frequently cited words of Ward Churchill, one of the leading critics of the new age movement’s use of things Indian, “plastic medicine men” (1996, 355–65) whose principal motivation is financial.

But criticisms extend to issues more fundamental than commercialism and credentialing. For one thing, critics argue that the sweat lodge has meaning only within a larger religious context—that of Lakota or other specifically tribal spirituality (St. Pierre and Long Soldier 1995, 35, 207). There is indeed a tendency to “mix and match” elements of various Native American religious

systems as if they together comprised a coherent whole (Bell 1997), a process exemplified by the use of Lakota and Micmac ceremonialism by the Westchester County Red Road group. For another instance, the “Seven Day Native American Spiritual Journey” offered by the Sunrise Retreat Center of Arizona offers not only the sweat lodge (using the Lakota term *inipi* to refer to the experience), but also the “Cherokee and Navajo Prayer Way.”⁶ Extracting the sweat lodge from its traditional context, argue critics, renders it meaningless and perhaps even dangerous. New agers who enter the sweat lodge without perceiving it as part of a larger ceremonial continuum trivialize the experience, and that has ramifications for the very real role that the sweat lodge is playing in the revival of traditional spirituality. Sweats have come to figure into situations of crisis which contemporary Native Americans face. They play a role in treatments for dependency, for example, and prisons with significant Native American populations have sometimes provided sweat lodges as part of their rehabilitation programs (Farnsworth 1996; Johnson 1997). New agers “playing Indian” by entering the sweat lodge undercut the power of the sweat lodge experience for Native Americans who are trying to come to terms with their own cultural identity, a nebulous view of which may contribute to drug abuse and criminal behavior. For Lakota and some other Indians, the sweat lodge has a role in cultural identity similar to that of the sauna among Finnish Americans (Lockwood 1977). Consequently, its use by people from other ethnicities seems inappropriate. According to Cynthia R. Kasee,

While the “franchising” of Indian religions would deal a death blow to cultures practiced collectively by Native people, the loss of group identity conveyed by these faiths would devastate those who also rely on them as the Red Road to recovery. If Indian religions can be bought by any dilettante with a credit card, they lose their ability to require commitment, reform, and diminution of ego. In other words, the practicing Indian Traditionalist is the antithesis of the Ramada Inn Sweatlodge Yuppie. (1995, 86)

According to this view, the new age sweat lodge is but another instance of Euro-American theft from Native Americans, part of a continuing pattern that began with land and continues through spirituality. Religious historian Martin E. Marty has characterized the behavior of what he calls “Boulder types” (from the Colorado city that is a locus for much new age activity) who “believe that they can and should jump out of their cultural skin and can simply take over the elements of the ‘other.’ They will do thus at whatever cost to the integrity of the borrowed-from, or stolen-from” (1994, 564). A suggestion frequently made by critics of the new age use of Native American spirituality

is that Euro-Americans in search of spiritual fulfillment should instead explore the mystical tradition of Western Christianity (Shaw 1995, 89).

Critics also note the physical distress—on a few occasions to the point of fatality—that has sometimes affected non-Indians who are unprepared for the intense heat and potentially claustrophobic atmosphere of a sweat (D’Antonio 1992, 55). The spiritual powers which the sweat invokes may also be too much for the uninitiated to handle.

Finally, new age use of the sweat lodge is perceived by Native American critics as being too oriented to individual interest in self-actualization. When such ceremonialism occurs within the context of contemporary alternative spirituality, participants tend to downplay the community orientation that figures into traditional enactments. Christopher Jocks has noted, “Typically, practices that seem to involve ‘mystical’ individual experiences are promoted, while other elements considered equally or more important by Native participants are ignored: elements such as kinship obligations, hard work, suffering, and the sometimes crazy realities of everyday reservation life” (1996, 418). The tendency has been to use Indianness as represented in borrowed ceremonies as a way of finding “personal solutions to the question of living the good life” (Deloria 1998, 174).

My failure to evaluate and then either to endorse or refute these criticisms does not necessarily mean that I agree or disagree with them.⁷ My purpose here is to note their existence before exploring the context of the use of the Lakota sweat lodge in contemporary alternative spirituality. That context lies in a healing logic that involves historical precedent both in terms of the role of sweating in Western medicine and the contact relationships between Native Americans and Europeans and in the general new age search for personal fulfillment and for a sense of holistic community.

Indeed, the new age use of the Lakota sweat lodge constitutes an instance in a recurrent phenomenon in the contact history of Indians and Europeans, the incorporation of cultural material from the former into the belief and behavioral systems of the latter—what is dismissively referred to as “playing Indian” for purposes of revelry and rebellion, of assertion of a distinctly *Euro-American* identity and artistic inspiration, of ecological sensitivity and spiritual renewal (Deloria 1998). One impetus for that incorporation came from the economics of survival: the Indians had already adopted successful lifestyle strategies to the environments into which Europeans were intruding. Incorporating at least some native hunting, gathering, and horticultural techniques made practical sense. On the medical front, the inclusion of Indian pharmacopeia into European-based healing systems also made sense, as the plants and other natural substances from which palliatives might

be derived were often unfamiliar to new arrivals. This inclusion contributed to the use of Native American imagery in the promotion of patent medicines during the nineteenth century. The “Indian medicine show,” in fact, endured as late as into the 1970s. The technique was to advertise a product, largely consisting of alcohol, by connecting it by name with a Native American origin and by association with the show’s performers, who donned Indian costume and sang and danced in what were perceived as Indian rhythms (Green 1988, 40).

The contemporary image of the Indian as healer in new age contexts has ample historical precedent, but the persistent presence of Indian influences in Euro-American life, long after adjustments to European lifeways had made them adaptive to the “New World,” suggests something that transcends the prosaically practical. Much has been written about the attraction of the “primitive” to people jaded by the artificialities of Western civilization (for example, Torgovnick 1990). The discovery of Indians in the Americas by Columbus and his successors revealed real people to whom the idealized concept of the primitive could be attached. Though an anti-image which equated savagery with bestiality was often concurrent, one prevailing image of the American natives characterized them as representing what all of mankind had once been: natural philosophers, living in harmony and at ease with their environment. This concept of the “noble savage,” which may have first been connected with American Indians by Montaigne, had a particular appeal for the Enlightenment and romantic philosophies which contributed to the formative moments in the American republican experience. In broad outline, the ethical aspects of the noble savage concept for overcivilized humanity held that a person who had become enervated by the unnecessary complexities of the institutions of European-derived society could experience physical, intellectual, and spiritual regeneration by learning from the Indian (Slotkin 1973). Based on generations of living close to a specific tract of earth, the Indian as noble savage intuitively sensed the higher truths of existence. While one should avoid the excesses of unbridled license that could emerge in the savage state (especially among people for whom that state was something adopted after already being corrupted by civilized artificiality), a person could become healthily harmonious with the cosmos by learning from an Indian. A common figure in American literature and popular culture is the Indian “sidekick” who provides a Euro-American protagonist with the spiritual (and often other) support needed to become fully human. Chingachgook plays this role in classic American literature for Natty Bumppo, for example, as does Tonto for the Lone Ranger in more recent expressive culture. Particularly relevant to new age spirituality is a reading of Castaneda’s *The Teachings of Don Juan* that places it within this tradition: the Yaqui shaman as guide for the spiritual maturation of the young Western

anthropologist (Clements 1985). That new agers, disgruntled with the mainline Judeo-Christian heritage and already opened to alternatives by their contacts with Eastern religious influences, would find native Americana attractive seems inevitable. Not only do Indian cultures offer a primitivistic answer to the over-civilization that may be responsible for new age anomie, but they do so from an American perspective. One need not turn to the exotic East—for spirituality coming from those who have spoken for the “spirit of the continent,” in D. H. Lawrence’s words (quoted in Deloria 1998, 3), has roots in *this* portion of Mother Earth. Those who are dissatisfied with what the mainstream offers can turn to a source of autochthonous spirituality and cite many precursors in Euro-American–Native American contact history for doing so.

That new agers are concerned about establishing a spiritual identity with American roots is evident in the claims made by some Euro-American participants in contemporary alternative spirituality that they had, in fact, been Native Americans in previous lives (Bucko 1998, 230–31; Smith 1991). They consequently justify their use of spiritual and healing procedures such as the sweat lodge by asserting that they are reclaiming what was once their proper cultural inheritance. Of course, other Indian ceremonials besides the sweat lodge can and are being reinterpreted by new agers, but none to the extent of the Lakota sweat lodge. This spiritually based healing ritual has several advantages: unlike a Navajo sing, it is relatively easy to conduct and it requires little in the way of specialized ritual paraphernalia; unlike the vision quest, it can be extracted from its distinctive spiritual context and introduced into a variety of new age and even mainstream Judeo-Christian environments (as well as into secular contexts); unlike the Sun Dance, it does not call for intense and painful sacrificial commitment; and it does have some forerunners as a healing procedure in Western medicine.

Though mainstream medicine now regards sweating primarily in terms of its role in regulating body temperature, this physiological process has a long history as a purificatory and healing procedure in the Western tradition. Humoralism, for instance, which advocated a holistic approach to preventing and responding to disease, made use of sweating as one way of regulating the balance between such physiological states as moist and dry, hot and cold. Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth-century religious whose writings on a medicine grounded in humoralism have been enjoying a revival of interest in the 1990s, recommended steam baths for corpulent individuals, “since the humors that are superfluous in them are controlled and lessened” (Flanagan 1996, 117–18; see Malpezzi, this volume). She also advised those suffering from arthritis and lameness as well as from various psychological imbalances to take baths in which the steam had been sweetened with extracts from chestnuts or oats

(Strehlow and Hertzka 1988, 110–11). But while it may have fallen from favor as a purifying mechanism in mainstream Euro-American medicine, folk medicine continues to endorse the beneficial effects of sweating. In addition to the general folk idea that sweating is good for a person and that one who sweats profusely in response to exertion or intense heat is demonstrating a normal, healthy reaction (Hand, Casetta, and Thiederman 1981, 258)—an idea supported by contemporary exercise physiologists (for example, Bailey 1994, 218–19)—sweating receives specific recommendation as a way of breaking a fever. Plant-based folk medicine suggests a variety of teas (such as corn pone or willow bark) as a way of inducing sweating for that purpose (Hand 1961, 188, 191). Tying red onions to the feet and rubbing the body with warm vinegar will also produce a fever-breaking sweat (Hand 1961, 189). Other ailments for which folk medical practitioners have endorsed sweating include cramps and neuralgia (Hand 1961, 163, 239).

Regardless of the role that sweating has played in the therapeutic heritage of the West and of the history of borrowing from American Indians by Europeans and Euro-Americans, the new age movement would not have been attracted to the sweat lodge if it did not serve the ends of alternative spirituality. The roots of the new age lie principally in Western adaptations of Eastern religions, particularly Buddhism and Hinduism. As other sources of spirituality that are compatible with the ways in which new agers have used those religious traditions have become known, they have become part of the movement. One important focus of new age spirituality has been on the transformative nature of religious experience. For the individual, this means growth, continual learning, and a movement toward holistic perfectionism (Lewis 1992). Testimonials about the sweat lodge experience indicate that it has a role in accomplishing these goals. To begin with, some participants stress that the sweat may be part of a regimen of physical healing: “Any illness that needs to be sweated out is so done in the sweat lodge” (Lee 1995, 54). Adolph Hungry Wolf, who was popularizing Native American traditions several years before the dawn of the new age, noted about “sweat bathing”: “The expulsion of dirt and germs through profuse sweating literally causes the removal of evil from the body” (1973, 24). The role of sweating in physical healing coincides with the Western notions that the process cleanses the body of toxic substances. Lewis Mehl-Madrona, a physician of Cherokee heritage with an M.D. from Stanford University, includes the sweat lodge in what he calls a “healing intensive” for the chronically ill. Patients usually participate in a seven-day program that combines Native American medicinal practices from various ethnic traditions with Morita therapy from Japan. Mehl-Madrona uses the sweat lodge for purification on the third or fourth night of the program (1997,

254–60). Sweats conducted under the auspices of the Woptura Medicine Society “will prevent common illnesses and begin to heal even chronic illnesses such as all forms of cancer, lupus, Parkinson’s disease and even AIDS. The ceremony will purify the organs of the body, the blood, the heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, pancreas, gall bladder and all others.”⁸

But new age testimonials about the sweat lodge experience suggest that it contributes to personal growth and healing in ways other than just the physical. Ceremonial sweating can be a *rite de passage* during which one is personally transformed while sharing the fraternal and sororal ritual ambience that Victor Turner has called *communitas* (1969). A common analogy is drawn between sweating and the Christian rites of baptism and being born again (which, of course, in some Christian groups occur concurrently; Lee 1995, 55–56).⁹ Beth Moscov, a new age practitioner who has adapted American Indian ceremonials primarily for Euro-American women participants, has stressed this feature of the sweat lodge experience in a poem she wrote in 1993 “after a women-only sweatlodge ceremony on the spring equinox”:

I was born again today.
I went in on my hands and knees,
bowing reverence to the many things.
I came out on my hands and knees,
This time as a newly born infant seeing the world for the first time.¹⁰

Common imagery about the lodge itself stresses its womb-like nature: the circular shape, the narrow passage through which one enters and exits, the darkness, and the moistness. It is perceived as “the moist womb of Mother Earth” (McGaa 1992, 83). And, of course, it is more than just the physical sensations, which may require considerable fortitude and endurance from participants, that contribute to the passage aspects of the experience. The prayers, which often involve frank revelations of their sense of self, afford participants a kind of group therapy (Garrett and Osborne 1995). As Wallace Black Elk has described the experience of healing and rebirth in the sweat lodge,

This little guy [the spiritual force encountered in the sweat] goes inside and investigates everything. He sees everything. So the enemy does damage to the brain or heart or liver or kidney or whatever. He goes there. He sees, like X-ray. He sees it, and he goes there and repairs whatever is damaged. He recreates all the molecules, genes, organics, fibers, or whatever the enemy damages. He recreates and reforms it. That is why he has his name. That is why we call him Creator. So he reconstructs the human mind and physical body. He recreates the human spirit, so that the spirit could wear its robe [physical body] and walk with a clear mind. (Black Elk and Lyon 1990, 41)

Moreover (and in support of this new age emphasis), imagery of rebirth permeates traditional Lakota accounts of sweat lodge participation, and Raymond A. Bucko has published several narratives of “conversion” by Lakota participants which foreground the rite de passage aspects of sweating (1998, 171–96).

The *communitas* element of the sweat lodge is perhaps most clearly evident in the adoption of the Lakota phrase meaning “all my relatives.” Theoretically, the distinctions that categorize people in ordinary existence disappear in a sense of community that includes not only the other human participants, but the nonhuman natural and spiritual realms. Defenders of new age uses of ceremonial sweating and other manifestations of Native American spirituality stress the universal inclusiveness of the phrase: that “relatives” is meant to incorporate not only traditional Lakota religionists but anyone with the proper attitude of humility and sense of community. In fact, one of McGaa’s disciples has suggested that the Lakota phrase means “we are related to all things” (1992, 85). Other ways in which *communitas* becomes apparent in the sweat lodge include the fact that one crawls in an act of personal debasement on hands and knees into the structure, the seating of participants in a nonhierarchical circle around the heated stones, and the leveling nakedness or scanty clothing worn while in the lodge. The darkness contributes to the loss of ordinary identity and the sense of kinship with the other participants. As one is being purged of the toxins that have generated physical illness, one is also emptied of the trappings of structured self. A person emerges from the lodge physically cleansed and receptive to new influences, those from the spiritual powers that the experience has invoked.

The sweat lodge fulfills the new age program for the individual. The person who participates supposedly leaves the lodge as more nearly perfected in body and spirit. The individual fulfillment afforded by the sweat lodge becomes particularly apparent from a couple of sets of divinatory cards that new age practitioners have developed. Jamie Sams has created a set of tarot-like cards called Sacred Path Cards (1990). The second in the series of forty-one is the sweat lodge. If one draws this card, Sams writes in a book explicating the cards, the person “may be asking for a cleansing,” subconsciously taking note of the need for purification of the body, mind, or spirit (1991, 11). A similar card set focuses exclusively on the sweat lodge. An internet advertisement for the Lakota Sweat Lodge Cards, designed by Chief Archie Fire Lame Deer and Helene Sarkis (1994), informs the surfer, “Sitting in the sweat lodge, an improvised womb of Mother Earth, you may experiencean [*sic*] expanded vision of your being and purpose as well as an intimate sense of walking in balance between the conscious world and the world of spirit.” The cards use “the timeless medium of

divinatory symbols” to direct the user’s consciousness toward “the source of personal power, insight, release, and self-awakening.”¹¹

While critics have suggested that using the sweat solely for personal fulfillment violates traditional values for the ceremony, the appeal of the sweat lodge to new agers does transcend the personal. Especially for those who have come to the sweat through the influence of Native American leaders such as Wallace Black Elk and Ed McGaa, the sweat lodge is part of a program that has cosmic ramifications. As “a medicine man from the Chippewa tribe of the North Plains” told journalist Michael D’Antonio, “We have a philosophy that says everything has a spirit: trees, rocks, animals. Our way of life has let us develop along the theological lines that give us a responsible role in the world, not ownership. . . . You go in [the sweat lodge], you listen, and we help you participate. . . . When it’s over we are spiritually and physically purified. A cleansing takes place, and if it helps people develop a consciousness for the sacred nature of the Earth, that’s good too” (D’Antonio 1992, 48). “Earth spirituality” (or “Earth people philosophy” or “Mother Earth spirituality”) holds that “the land on which we live shapes our experience of the sacred and that, in fact, certain religious movements, ceremonies, and artifacts are present in the land itself” (Buhner 1997, 217). The sweat lodge, which “allows a special closeness to Mother Earth” (McGaa 1990, 7), is one of these autochthonous ceremonies. Participants in sweats emulate “red brother and sister caretakers” of the Americas, individuals who developed methods over millennia for achieving oneness with *Wakan tanka* that are hemisphere-specific (McGaa 1990, 45). McGaa refers to the seven ceremonies, including the sweat lodge, which he has adapted from the rituals described by Nicholas Black Elk to Brown, as “Mother Earth ceremonies” that arise from the “realization that Mother Earth is a truly holy being” (1990, 204). The sweat is particularly effective for attaining oneness with this being because in what McGaa has called a “spiritual sauna,” participants are reborn through “the commingling of [their] own lifeblood (sweat) with the lifeblood of the planet” (1990, 7). In a statement published a couple of years later, McGaa reiterated the way in which the sweat lodge is especially important for adherents of Mother Earth spirituality: “Mother Earth is present. You are sitting upon her. Father Sky is present. The sun’s heat is within the glowing stones and brings forth your lifeblood, your sweat, to mix with the lifeblood of the world, the water within the bucket beside the lodge leader” (1992, 83). Theoretically, the interior “harmony and balance” that individuals experience in a sweat “will automatically translate outward to encompass the other worlds in which [they] live simultaneously” (McGaa 1992, 84).

Wallace Black Elk’s “Earth people philosophy” essentially emphasizes the same point of view: that while sweating heals the individual, it also heals the

cosmos. He notes, "The center is the Earth, and on this Earth we build the stone-people-lodge." The experience of the lodge involves all four of the basic constituents that comprise the cosmos: fire, rock, water, and "green"—in other words, the sage, cedar, and sweetgrass that are sprinkled onto the heated rocks (Black Elk and Lyon 1990, 59–60).

Not all sweat lodge leaders stress the community-oriented aspects of the experience, nor do all participants who recount their experience emphasize this aspect of it. But part of the healing logic of the sweat lodge (and at least part of its appeal in new age contexts which might have foregrounded other, non-Indian sweating protocols such as the sauna) lies in its connection with what proponents of contemporary alternative spirituality perceive as ecological awareness.

The logic of the new age sweat lodge, despite its being the target of considerable criticism, stems from at least two historical settings: the role of sweating in Western medicine, particularly that which has posed an alternative to the mainstream, and the fascination with matters Indian that has been a constant feature of Euro-American culture. Meanwhile, proponents of the lodge testify to its role in physical healing—a role that finds enhancement from its evocation of ceremonial patterns such as rite de passage and *communitas*. Moreover, the sweat lodge has a role in modern manifestations of the nature religion that Catherine L. Albanese has found pervasive in American spiritual life "from the Algonkian Indians to the New Age" (1990). The merging of these forces in one experience creates a powerful healing procedure that works for its adherents on several diachronic and synchronic levels. The Red Road in Westchester County with their tenuous claims to Native American ethnicity and the offense that they give to many American Indians nevertheless are operating from a coherent logic, a set of assumptions and precedents that makes them actors in a continuing subplot in the narrative of the American experience, a subplot that has at times influenced the main currents of the society's life as it seems to be doing more and more among new agers and others at millennium's end and beginning who have turned to the pre-European indigenes of the Western Hemisphere for a way to enhance their own experience in that land.

NOTES

1. The term "new age" is, of course, problematic. Many participants in what outsiders call "the new age movement" reject the term altogether. And it certainly has been used to cover such a vast array of beliefs and practices as almost

to have lost utility. “Alternative spirituality” as a term has the advantage of not being as offensive to those involved, but it also lacks precision. Generally, what I mean are contemporary (in other words, 1990s) beliefs and practices that lie outside the traditions of “great religions,” that represent an often eclectic attempt at blending traditions, that are oriented toward personal transformation and fulfillment, and that have some millenarian overtones often couched in ecological diction.

2. On the internet at www.photon.net/sunrise/seven.html, which I accessed 14 May 1998.
3. Pringle’s account, “Centering the Energy in a Sweat Lodge,” appears on the internet at www.halycon.com/colimp/sweat.htm, which I accessed on 15 April 1998.
4. The most comprehensive treatment of the procedures of the Lakota sweat lodge is Bucko’s (1998). My account draws also upon a variety of descriptions by participants in and observers of the use of ceremonial sweating in contemporary alternative spirituality.
5. La Duke published a number of books until his death in 1992. A generally positive account by an outsider to his movement was done by Catherine Albanese (1990, 155–63).
6. On the internet at www.photon.net/sunrise/seven.html (accessed 14 May 1998).
7. For a response to most of these charges, see Buhner (1997, 79–188). Stephen Harrod Buhner, who led a new age religious gathering in Boulder, Colorado, called the Church of Gaia has been one of the most outspoken defenders of non-Indian use of Indian ceremonials. He has had able opponents in the debate in Ward Churchill, for example, and in the editorial staff of the weekly newspaper *Indian Country Today* (formerly the *Lakota Times*). The issues raised by critics and defenders of non-Indian use of Native American ceremonialism find parallels in a variety of cross-cultural borrowings of what are perceived as “traditions”: for example, the blues revival of the 1990s, in which white performers have figured prominently and white audiences have dominated (Lornell 1998). A classic example from Indian–Euro-American relations is the dispute over the ethnicity of artists who can sell their products at the Portal of the Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe, New Mexico (Evans-Pritchard 1987). These cases—and many like them—reflect the disparity that may arise from differing views of what constitutes “tradition,” a construct more symbolic than substantive, as Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin have suggested (1984).
8. On the internet at www.redroad.com/cc/inipi.html (accessed 20 May 1998).
9. Bucko (1998, 33) gives Charles Alexander Eastman, a Santee Dakota who received a medical degree and wrote a number of books on American Indian subjects during the early twentieth century, credit for first equating the sweat lodge and baptism.

10. Moscov's poem, entitled "Sweat Lodge," appears on the internet at www.west.net/%7Ekesslari/sweat.html (accessed 20 May 1998).
11. On the internet at www.antelicsinsights.com/lakota.html (accessed 3 July 1998).

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