

Response to Colonized Ideas of “Race Shifting”

There have been some concerns regarding claims that certain Abenaki individuals, families and communities in Vermont, New Hampshire and neighboring areas are fraudulent. The issue of ethnic legitimacy was settled over a decade ago. In 2009, the State of Vermont created statutorily regulated, scholarly and political vetting processes to determine the authenticity of its Indigenous communities. In 2011 and 2012, the State of Vermont Legislature passed laws recognizing the Missisquoi, Nulhegan, Koasek, and Elnu peoples as legitimate Native American Tribes.

Nevertheless, for reasons unknown, certain individuals have recently questioned the validity of the whole American Abenaki people. These tiresome, repetitive assaults focus on genealogy and culture. In this short response, we introduce a few of the factual, ethical, and human rights violations embedded in these claims.

“Race Shifting”

In 1995, Vermont Governor Howard Dean (D) began a quarter century of political, economic, and social assault on American Abenaki ethnic legitimacy. It recently evolved into a two-pronged social media assault on the four state-recognized Abenaki Tribes. One grotesque offspring of this legacy is kept alive by Darryl Leroux, a Nova Scotia social justice scholar who has apparently completed some sort of online genealogy study of Vermont and New Hampshire Indigenous people. His “Tweets” and Facebook posts about this tiny, biased sample illogically suggest that American Abenaki Communities are riddled with white supremacists co-opting Abenaki genetic identity. The supposed purpose of this racist charade is to steal government largesse destined for legitimate Native American people. Leroux’s fantastical claims have achieved a measure of support amongst the local social justice community including school librarians and four Departments at the University of Vermont (1).

The results of this bogus research display ignorance of the historical, cultural, genealogical, political, and geographic complexity of the American Abenaki Indigenous experience. Leroux’s work demonstrates inappropriate academic behavior, such as demeaning his academic colleagues as uninformed or unprincipled “anthros … one of the driving forces behind white folks “playing Indian.” His divisive rhetoric violates Twitter’s “Hateful Conduct Policy” and Facebook’s Community Standards III:12 “Hate Speech.” Its methods defile human subjects research core values such as those listed in “The Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association,” “American Folklore Society Human Subjects and Ethnographic Research Code of Ethics,” and the

“American Association of Geographers Ethics Guidelines.” Leroux’s narrow, genealogy-based critique of American Abenaki identity is a human rights violation under Article 33, sections 1 and 2 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, which states that Indigenous communities, not foreigners like Leroux, set their criteria for citizenship. Leroux’s behavior has ignited the flames of intertribal distrust and white supremacy.

The “Cultural Appropriation” Assault

A second heinous legacy of the Howard Dean Administration’s Native American policy is an ethnocidal campaign designed to portray American Abenaki bioculture as entirely “made up” or pilfered from neighboring tribes. This ethnic cleansing flows from a bizarre assortment of basement bloggers, social justice activists, misguided Native activists, conspiracy theorists and university professors. It displays not only a sad lack of understanding of the American Abenaki experience, but an alarming ignorance of the ethical and legal restraints against attempting ethnic erasure of whole communities.

Modern American Abenaki culture is ethnically distinctive and composed of many ancestral regional traditions. These range from the modest, little-known “keeping fish eyes warm under the tongue while ice fishing” culture trait; to growing twelve unique regional varieties of corn, beans, and squash; to the socially and spiritually complex Forgiveness Day and Harvest rituals. American Abenakis have received freely given traditional knowledge from friends in neighboring communities. For example, in the 1980’s only the basics of the Abenaki Round Dance remained in the Koas and Missisquoi communities, but in the 1990’s, Odanak Abenakis helped their American neighbors add new dance moves to “fill in the gaps,” making the beautiful, joyous dance we all do today. In addition, indigenous colleagues from Indian Township and Sipayik (Maine) and Kahnawake (Quebec) have traveled to the Champlain Valley over the years to gladly teach American Abenakis the political, cultural, and spiritual nuances of the Wabanaki Confederacy and Seven Nations of Canada. However, American Abenakis also routinely travel to New York, Quebec, Maine, and New Brunswick indigenous Communities to share their knowledge. An interesting circular “cultural polarity” occurred years ago, when “Fancy” ash-splint basket weaving was taught to American Abenakis by Odanak (Quebec) basketmakers — who then turned around and taught Wôlinak (Quebec) Abenaki citizens! Like most North American Indigenous peoples, the American Abenakis have a robust ethnic tradition, much of which is regional and ancestral, but much of which is shared with their neighbors.

The conspirators’ vast ignorance has led to intellectual, ethical, and legal abuses. Scholarly and ethical violations include the unnecessary and improper use of cultural

appropriated materials from known American Abenaki families to prove that Odanak Abenakis occupied Vermont in the 19th and 20th centuries. American Abenakis know that Odanak people came to Vermont to sell baskets, guide fisherman and perform dances and song; and many elders remember dancing and sharing meals with our Canadian neighbors. Much more troubling; this atrocious assault on American Abenaki biocultural legitimacy is violation of Articles 8.2, 11.1, 13.1, and 31.1 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. These articles repeatedly declare, in different ways and contexts, that Indigenous communities have the inalienable right to develop, revive, maintain, and promote their culture in whatever way they see fit. In addition, the U.N. Declaration articles insist that state, provincial and national governments take actions necessary to protect that right.

The American Abenakis, the traditional First Peoples of Vermont and New Hampshire, neither recognize nor accept this colonial – supremacist nonsense, and rightfully ignore its clueless perpetrators and its desperate narrative.