

Drive through Tobacco

Riding in the car, away from the town, riding in the country we were surrounded by fields and fields of tobacco. Growing up in Kentucky I learned the reverence for the tobacco plant that had been handed down from generation to generation. In those days tobacco was not demonized. Tobacco was a sacred plant, cherished and deemed precious by the old folks who knew its properties and its potentialities.

I cannot recall any time in my childhood when tobacco did not have meaning and presence. Whether it came from watching Big Mama smoke her pipe, or emptying the coffee cans that were used to spit out chewing tobacco, or watching mama's mother Baba braid tobacco leaves for use to ward off bugs, or watching Aunt Margaret hand roll tobacco for cigarettes and cigars, the odor of tobacco permeated our lives and touches me always with the scent of memory. Once upon a time, tobacco ruled the economy of many small Kentucky towns. For poor illiterate black folks picking tobacco was down and dirty work, but it let one bring home ready cash, extra money. The history of black folks and the history of tobacco like braided leaves were once deeply intertwined. And even though that history, like so

many aspects of our ancestral past, is unsung, buried, the old folks remember, think of the past, and smell the fragrance of tobacco.

Tobacco planting, harvesting, picking, and curing played a major role in the drama of enslaved Africans throughout the southern states. While displaced Africans encountered many odd ways and strange appetites in the so-called “new world,” tobacco was a “familiar.” When tobacco first came to Africa, its power and pleasure quickly spread throughout the continent. At the very onset Africans conferred on the plant mystical and magical powers. Both in Africa and parts of South America, tobacco shamans used the plant ceremoniously and ritualistically. Used to heal, to bless, to protect, tobacco had divine status. In his lengthy work *Tobacco: A Cultural History of How An Exotic Plant Seduced Civilization*, cultural critic Iain Gately informs readers that: “Tobacco played a central role in the spiritual training of shamans ... A tobacco shaman used the weed in every aspect of his art.” In North America the indigenous Native Indians also considered tobacco a sacred plant and many tribal groups continue to honor the spiritual nature of tobacco both as powerful legacy and potent element of current traditions. Writing about the history of tobacco in this country, Gately emphasizes that it was “a defining habit of the diverse tribes and civilizations that occupied pre-Columbian North America” as “every one of its cultures living and vanished, used tobacco.” Indians used tobacco medicinally, to clear the skin, to cleanse the body, to purge. While tobacco was more often than not the sole purview of men in cultures around the world, on the African continent men and women used tobacco with equal relish seeking empowerment and solace from holy smoke.

Spirituality, people of color globally have viewed and continue to view tobacco as a way to be initiated into the spirit world. Many shamans, both past and present, use tobacco to trance or even go toward death then resurrect as a sign of their powers. Exploring the link between tobacco and religion, Gately informs readers that: “Ritual smoke blowing, by which a shaman might bestow a blessing or protection against enemies was intended to symbolize a transformation in which

the tobacco smoke represented a guiding spirit, and this is reminiscent of Christian ritual, whereby wine and bread are transubstantiated by a priest into the body and blood of Christ himself.” In Native American culture smoke signals are a nonlocal means of cosmic communication. In *Reinventing Medicine*, Larry Dossey explains that “the function of the smoke signal was only to get everyone’s attention so that distant, mind-to-mind communications might then take place.” According to Dossey, “the possibility that the mind might function at a distance, outside the confines of the brain and body and not just in dreams, is taken for granted in most of what we call ‘native’ cultures.” Tobacco and tobacco smoke bring the promise of transcending one’s limitations. Hence native culture’s reverence and respect for tobacco.

At the onset of the powerful memoir *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*, this wise tribal elder tells the story of how sacred visions come to him as he smokes the “pipe with a bison calf carved on one side to mean the earth that bears and feeds us, and with twelve eagle feathers hanging from the stem to mean the sky and the twelve moons, and these were tied with a grass that never breaks.” He smokes the pipe after offering “it to the powers that are one Power, and sending forth a voice to them, we shall smoke together.” He talks with the Great Spirit declaring: “Great Spirit, Great Spirit, my Grandfather, all over the earth the faces of living things are all alike. With tenderness have these come up out of the ground. Look upon these faces of children without number and with children in their arms, that they may face the winds and walk the good road to the day of quiet.” After his prayers to the Great Spirit, he welcomes tribal companions telling them, “let us smoke together so that there may be only good between us.”

Within popular culture in the United States, negative media representations of Native Americans, especially television images, have changed little. Smoking a peace pipe is consistently caricatured. Clearly, dominator culture mocked the Native belief in oneness with nature and the naturalness of peace when slaughtering Indians was deemed

justified because they were supposedly a savage and violent people. Yet surviving artifacts relating to tobacco (beautifully carved pipes) attest to the spiritual significance of smoking.

Though little is written of the role tobacco played as social currency between enslaved Africans and white slavers, demands for workers to plant and harvest the crop was so intense in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that more slaves were purchased to do the dirty work of planting and harvesting tobacco and thereby increasing an owner's wealth. Gately reminds readers that "tobacco's importance was not limited to the colonies of the south" as it soon became a principal crop for export. Indeed, he contends "the weed had given the colonies a place in the world." Tobacco — smoked, chewed, or sniffed — was a source of tremendous power to a growing capitalist culture of greed in the United States. For the slaves who would work to the bone to make this crop plentiful, whose existence was fiercely nomadic as planters moved to find fresh soil, the one sure reward of harsh dirty labor was the freedom to use a bit of tobacco that, like gold, was precious and hard come by.

Among enslaved black folks men and women often smoked their tobacco in pipes. No doubt smoking one's pipe at the end of a grueling work day, sitting quietly in a meditative pose, offered enslaved Africans a way to psychically leave their concrete harsh circumstance and literally be somewhere else. The reverence for tobacco as a sacred plant that had been a central part of the African experience was sustained by both the small numbers of African explorers who came to the "new world" before Columbus and the newly enslaved Africans. Even though their work on tobacco farms was harsh and life-threatening, enslaved black folk were still able to retain the ceremonial culture of tobacco that was a distinctive feature of life before exile.

These cultural retentions were carried on in black life after slavery ended. Among the elders in my family the tobacco plant had pride of place. Tobacco could be used to disinfect, to serve as a deterrent for bugs. Often braided leaves of tobacco would be placed in trunks of

clothing and other linens to keep dust mites and fabric-eating bugs from destroying costly cloth. Tobacco was useful and it was a source of pleasure. Even though I was not seduced by the world of smoking or chewing tobacco, I was seduced both by the beauty of tobacco growing, curing, hanging, or braided. In that world where women smoked, chewed, and dipped as much as men, nothing pleased me more than to be allowed to tenderly handle precious tobacco leaves and put them in Big Mama's pipe just so, making sure not to waste. In those days smoking was not viewed as the health hazard we know it to be today. However, it must be stated that the southern black folks who harvested, and cured tobacco plants with no harmful pesticides or additives used tobacco and usually lived long lives. For them, tobacco was deeply healing. Danger from smoking came into their lives when they begin to smoke packaged tobacco and store-bought cigarettes and cigars, when they became addicted to smoking. These old black folks worked and exercised; they would never have embraced a lifestyle where they simply indulged in the pleasures of smoking if that pleasure did not come at the end of a hard day of physical labor.

Nostalgia for my Kentucky childhood often focuses my mind on two distinct memories — the world of tobacco and the world of quilting. Both are associated in my mind with simple living and simply abundance. Both are associated with comfort of mind, body, and soul. Big Mama, daddy's grandmother, who loved us unconditionally, was short and squat. She came wearing a perfectly ironed apron, with pockets wide enough for tobacco and pipe. Burley tobacco grew all around us. The aroma of her pipe tobacco, the clouds of smoke and most importantly the contentment surrounding her body and being would have made it difficult for the grandchildren to see tobacco as threatening. It was part of her personal magic and majesty.

Perhaps had I not been a sickly child constantly faced with breathing problems, smoking tobacco would have held greater allure. However, I was seduced by the aesthetics of tobacco and by its presence in our lives and in our African and Native American origins as a sacred

plant. For many people of color who claim the old sacred ways of our elders, who work to restore meaningful traditions ravaged by white imperialism and colonization, it has been essential to hold to our ancient understandings of the mystical and magical power of tobacco. This has not been an easy task in a world where tobacco laced with poisons addicts, destroys and kills, where abusive use of tobacco leads to disease and death.

The system of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy that took the tobacco plant and made it into a product to be marketed solely for excess profit is continually critiqued perhaps more so than any other plant drug because it is legal. And because the tobacco industry, through seductive marketing and advertising, invites consumers to choose death. Ironically, capitalist marketing seduces consumers using the same subliminal suggestions which convey to the public that tobacco has mystical and magical power that were used more overtly in ancient time to seduce native people everywhere in the world. However, this contemporary marketing completely severs tobacco from its roots as a healing and sacred plant. Just as the colonization of Native and African peoples required that they be stripped of their language, identity, and dehumanized, the tobacco plant underwent a similar process. In *Food of the Gods*, Terence McKenna describes the way the world of tobacco changed with the coming of the white man, the colonizer: "Tobacco was the first and most immediate payoff of the discovery of the New World. On November 2, 1492, less than a month after his first arrival in the New World, Columbus landed on the north coast of Cuba ... Scouts returned with a account of men and women who partially inserted burning rolls of leaves into their nostrils. These burning rolls were called tobaccos and consisted of dry herbs wrapped up in a large dry leaf. They were lit at one end, and the people sucked at the other and 'drank the smoke,' or inhaled something that was utterly unknown in Europe."

Tobacco as a capitalist industry has been subjected to all the machinations of imperialist corruption and greed. Without a doubt,

tobacco is the most widely consumed plant drug on earth. Removed from all its medicinal legacy tobacco has come to be demonized solely as a product that kills. And wrongly used, addictively used, it will indeed take users on a path that will lead to disease and ultimately death. If current smoking trends continue globally, in this century alone, one billion people will die from tobacco-related diseases. According to the World Health Organization, India and China now account for 40 percent of the world's smoking population. In the United States there has been tremendous consciousness raising about the dangers of tobacco and the corruption of the tobacco industry, but there has been little or no effort to separate the tobacco plant and its positive attributes from all that is negative. In the recent Al Gore documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, a film about global warming, he shared the heartrending story of his sister's death from lung cancer. She smoked at an early age. The film showed his grieving father, a long-time tobacco grower, facing the hard truth about the role tobacco played in causing the death of his daughter. And viewers hear commentary about his father's decision to stop tobacco farming. There is no effort in the film to depict an alternative view of tobacco, one that would separate the plant from the tobacco industry and its calculated use of poisonous additives or from addictive smoking.

The Native people in our culture who continue to regard the tobacco plant reverently have no public voice. And the tyranny of fundamentalist Christianity usually obscures the presence of sacred traditions that are not Bible-based. None of the anti-tobacco pundits offer the possibility that were young folk, who are especially vulnerable to advertising and marketing that targets their desires, be taught alternative ways to think and dream about tobacco, ways that would teach respect for this wondrous yet potentially dangerous plants, they would not become addicted. The public could be taught to relate tobacco use to sacred traditions. If this were the new culture of tobacco, the public would have the opportunity to choose what their relationship to smoke and smoking might be rather than to be led mindlessly

into the culture of death created by mainstream poisoned tobacco. When imperialist tobacco producers received public sanction to go to underdeveloped countries to grow and harvest their crop, without the health regulations regarding insecticides and poisonous addicting additives that “might” be imposed in the United States, it signaled the end of major tobacco growing in this country.

Tobacco — the crop that had once called the world’s attention to the United States’ market has little meaning in cultural iconography today. My home state of Kentucky once produced huge quantities of burley tobacco, bringing huge revenue into its coffers, money that primarily made the rich richer, but that day has long passed. Tobacco is no longer vital to the economy of Kentucky. The miles and miles of farmland where tobacco grew, seemingly on and on into eternity, that were visible during my childhood are no longer. Once upon a time, one could walk into any small town Kentucky store and find tobacco hanging in all its glory, beautifully braided leaves to be shared as gesture of plenty and regard, nowadays tobacco has no place. Certainly this beautiful plant cannot line the walls of superstores or drive-through tobacco marts.

Distinguishing, as I do, the harmful effects of smoking, of addictive use, from the tobacco plant, I mourn the loss of those tobacco fields for all that they stood for in our childhood. First and foremost, they represented the bounty of nature, the richness which the earth offers to us. And so as the elders taught, we are given the beauty of smoke, the aroma or tobacco, to enhance life. When I talk with my siblings, those who worked harvesting and stripping tobacco when we were young, they remember the dust, the ache in their bones from bending, the cold air on the loosening floor. But they recall as well the culture of tobacco that freely gave us images of beauty, rows of tobacco leaves hanging in a barn, green fields and our young child voices wanting to hear the plant growing everywhere identified — tobacco. Finding words to express the aesthetics of the tobacco plant, the beauty and bounty of tobacco leaves hanging in barns is no simple matter in

today's world where tobacco is mainly viewed with disrespect and disregard, if recognized and remembered at all. In my book of love poems, *When Angels Speak of Love*, tobacco is muse. In my imagining I dream of "braided tobacco leaves twisted hung time on the loosening floor, time stripping, time drying, time turning, sheets of brown, time turning away, and all the time love, the smell of smoke between us." Whether through simple nostalgia or meaningful cultural memory, the tobacco plant is worthy to be cherished.

Globally, from its origins to the present day, tobacco and tobacco use have been linked to freedom. Like the white Kentucky abolitionist politician Henry Clay, who neither, as Gately put it, "slavered nor spat," I, who will never smoke, dip, or chew, understand intimately the lure of tobacco. A powerful advocate of universal human rights Clay visited Cuba and was so welcomed that in 1850 a cigar brand was named after him as a gesture of respect. When James Weldon Johnson's novel *The Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man* was published in 1912, he included a fictive portrait of cigar making. His main character remembers that: "At first the heavy odour of tobacco sickened me, but when I became accustomed to it, I liked the smell . . ." In the early nineteenth century black men found they could make ready cash working in tobacco more so than in other trades where they were cruelly discriminated against. Johnson's protagonist associates tobacco with freedom, commenting: "Cigar-making was a rather independent trade; the men went to work when they pleased and knocked off when they felt like doing so." Southern black males working in tobacco fields and tobacco plants were able to make a better income than they could make doing other forms of service labor. Even though dominator culture made tobacco use in the Western world a patriarchal male privilege, using tobacco has been for females of all ages a way to assert independence. How life-enhancing it would be if tobacco were only used by females in coming-of-age rituals. Sadly, as equal consumers of tobacco, females court death and disease. Because nicotine is so highly addictive, it is only the fortunate who can use tobacco nonaddictively.

Clearly, all over the world, people on planet earth use tobacco. It is the most democratic of all plant drugs. It is the drug that it is legal to use and easy to purchase. McKenna argues that a more stringent tax on tobacco would limit use. In the final pages of *Food of the Gods*, he reminds readers that folks will always seek ecstasy (to stand outside) through the use of mood-altering drugs. And he reminds us that this longing is indeed a yearning that is religious in nature. He contends: "Help from nature means recognizing that the satisfaction of the religious impulse comes not from ritual, and still less from dogma, but rather, from a fundamental kind of experience — the experience of symbiosis with hallucinogenic plants, and through them, symbiosis with the whole of planetary life ... Without the escape hatch into the transcendental and transpersonal realm that is provided by plant-based hallucinogens, the human future would be bleak indeed." McKenna suggests that survival lies not in forbidding tobacco but in creating a context for meaningful use of plant drugs, uses that could aid in restoring a non-dominating relationship to nature. Sharing this insight he explains: "The shamanic plants and the worlds that they reveal are the worlds from which we imagine that we came long ago, worlds of light and power and beauty ... We can claim this prodigal legacy only as quickly as we can remake our language and ourselves. Remaking out language means rejecting the image of ourselves inherited from dominator culture ... Nature is not our enemy, to be raped and conquered. Nature is ourselves, to be cherished and explored." His words echo the teachings about our right relationship to nature that I received from Kentucky elders.

In my life in Kentucky today, I know no tobacco farmers. Journeying down country roads I come upon lone tobacco barns loaded with treasure and I feel again the sense of wonder and awe that this union of human and plant produces. It is for me a moment of interbeing whose beauty blesses me. And I do not want to forget. I want to hold forever in my hand braided tobacco, planted by my elders, braided by the beloved hands of Baba mama's mother. I want to cherish the tobacco plant — let its sacred appeal be the legacy that calls to me.