Sacred and Ceremonial Use of Tobacco

Traditional tobacco has been used for centuries by many Native American and Alaska Native communities as an essential element for spiritual, ceremonial and cultural purposes. Traditional tobacco is natural and comprises of tobacco and/or other plant mixtures grown or harvested with strict guidelines with different tribes having their own unique ways and is fundamentally different from commercial tobacco. Traditional tobacco is sacred and should only be used with awareness and respect.

Commercial tobacco is different from traditional tobacco in the way it is grown, harvested, prepared and used, however because of the Native American cultural connection to tobacco, commercial tobacco manufacturers have targeted Native Americans and Alaska Natives, misappropriating the culture for marketing and other commercial purposes, thus influencing tobacco disparities among racial and ethnic minority groups including Native Americans.

Electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS), or e-cigarettes are also a form of commercial tobacco that have been sold as being less harmful and cooler for young people. Tobacco companies are actively marketing and promoting vaping to Native American youth. The extent of long-term health effects by e-cigarettes is still being studied, however the Center for Disease Control (CDC) has stated that e-cigarettes are not safe for youth, young adults, pregnant women, or adults who do not currently use tobacco products.

### Differences Between Traditional Tobacco and Commercial Tobacco

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Tobacco</th>
<th>Commercial Tobacco</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional tobacco is Sacred and used for ceremonies, medicine, gifts and other cultural and spiritual purposes</td>
<td>Not sacred, sold for profit and used for pleasure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used with respect</td>
<td>Not used with respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used appropriately with awareness, in moderation in community and social context</td>
<td>Used individually as a personal choice for recreation and or pleasure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural/Ikče (wild, in a state of nature, with no additives &amp; absence of negative health consequences)</td>
<td>Not natural, processed, has additives such as nicotine and thousands of other chemicals that cause cancer, heart disease, and other health problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not usually inhaled</td>
<td>Inhaled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not addictive</td>
<td>Designed to be addictive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Some Uses of Traditional Tobacco

- Prayer, healings and blessings
- Medicine
- Smudging
- Gifts for welcoming guests
- Gifts for requesting prayer or sharing of wisdom
- Creation stories
- Pest deterrent

### Some Medicinal Uses of Traditional Tobacco

- Asthma
- Childbirth pain
- Toothaches
- Earaches
- Insect bites
- Coughs
- Open wounds
- Snakebites
- Headaches
- GI disorders
- Rheumatism
- Convulsions

Contact for More Information:
Cindy Sagoe, B Pharm, MPH
Program Coordinator, National American Indian and Alaska Native Prevention Technology Transfer Center
College of Public Health, University of Iowa
145 North Riverside Drive, Iowa City, IA 52252

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Sacred Ceremonial Pipes

Another important use of sacred tobacco is with the sacred ceremonial pipe used by several Native American cultures for spiritual ceremonies. The sacred pipe is sometimes mistakenly referred to as the peace pipe because of the role of smoking the ceremonial pipe to seal a peace treaty, however this is only one of the uses of a sacred pipe by the tribes who use it. Other uses include personal prayer, collective rituals, and healing ceremonies.

Different tribes have their own name for the sacred pipe in their Indigenous language. For example, The Lakota sacred pipe is called a chanupa, also spelled chanunpa or c’anupa (in Lakota: čhaŋnúŋpa), the Meskwaki scared pipe is called Ob-wa-kani (Opwaagun), and the Chippewa (Ojibwe) scared pipe is called Pawaagan/Opwaagan.

Pipe Carriers and their traditional health practices are a key part of Native American cultures, because they are healers who represent a link to the creator. Sacred Pipe Carriers are individuals who have been acknowledged by one or more individuals from the community as healers with spiritual gifts. The community recognizes these individuals by offering them a pipe. Accepting the pipe and its inherent responsibilities as role models, teachers and leaders in the community makes them a pipe carrier.

The sacred pipe is of spiritual significance and should always be treated with respect, care and used only in a sacred manner. It is also important to understand and respect the role of pipe carriers in Native American cultures and knowledge systems.

Sources


Written by:

Cindy Sagoe, B Pharm, MPH