

## HEALING AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN AMERICAN INDIAN BIOGRAPHIES

*Shaheena Ayub Bhatti*

National University of Modern Languages, Pakistan

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### Abstract

This paper explores a case study of traditional healing practices shown in the biographies of two medicine men – Rolling Thunder of the Cherokee-Shoshone tribe and Mad Bear Anderson of the Tuscarora tribe of the Iroquois Confederacy. Douglass Boyd has made a detailed study of the healing practices of the two medicine men and has described the in roads that the traditional religious practices have made into the entire process of healing. Therefore, this traditional practice began with a healing ritual at a conference, sponsored by the research department of the Menninger Foundation and was culminated into two biographies which gave an in-depth account of the importance the environment holds for the medicine men of the two tribes.

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**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, healing, pinyon pines, Iroquois Confedracy, Shoshone

### Introduction

“This is the Earth, healed again, growing green and blue. I want you to remember this exactly as it is, and then go and tell the people that if enough of us hold this image in their minds, we can heal the Earth and make it like it was, a long time ago.” This statement by Grandfather Rolling Thunder is one of the many statement made by Native American medicine men who have an affinity with nature. This affinity is reflected in their everyday lives as medicine men who have been entrusted with the task of healing the body, mind and the spirit of their fellow men and women. Using Glotfelty’s theory of Eco-criticism, this paper addresses the variety of issues facing American Indian beliefs and the way of life that they have adopted for themselves or that has been forced upon them by the political, social and economic situation. In doing this, the focus of this study will be on trying to determine how far traditional beliefs have impacted the environment, and at the same time, how they have managed to make a place for themselves in contemporary theories of conventional medicine.

### **Literature Review:**

Eco-criticism has been a relatively new approach; however, this paper focuses on determining how far the biographies of the American Indian medicine men conform to what Cheryl Gotfelty and others have described as being “a new critical category”. The questions addressed are in the words of Gotfelty: “How has the concept of wilderness changed over time? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture?” To answer these and other related questions, I aim to explore the case of American Indians and the environment as shown in the biographies of two medicine men - Rolling Thunder (aka John Pope) of the Cherokee, adopted by the Shoshone, and Mad Bear Anderson of the Tuscarora tribe of the Iroquois Confederacy. Although separated geographically, the lives and teachings of the two men reflect the issues faced by American Indians, living on and off the reservations. Douglas Boyd has made a detailed study of the approach of both men towards the process of healing and this paper will concentrate on two of Boyd’s biographies: **Rolling Thunder** and **Mad Bear**.

### **Paper:**

Doug Boyd has discussed and described the impact that traditional healing practices have made in the lives of American Indians. For him, and for the American Indian nations, healing is a holistic process and cannot be looked at in isolation. What started off as a healing ritual at a conference, sponsored by the research department of the Menninger Foundation, has led to an increase in Boyd’s interest in traditional American Indian religious and healing practices and their impact on the environment at the same time.

The two biographies - which form the focus of this study, give an in-depth account of the importance that the environment holds for the medicine men of the two tribes. Being works of literature, Boyd’s biographies focus not only on the professional and religious aspects, but also show that above all, the two medicine men are human beings and as such, their lives are governed by mundane matters as much as by the higher goals of environmental conservation. Therefore, while the environment is of primary importance to the existence of their tribes, such matters as treaty rights are not without importance. In making an analysis of the two biographies, this paper will also attempt to address questions regarding the efficacy of traditional medicine and various ways of healing in comparison with modern medicine.

Nature, the environment, and healing forms an invisible chain where each link performs its separate and yet interlinked function in making up the being that we call Earth. The natural environment that took eons in developing is fast being destroyed in the name of human progress, without

any thought of how these non-human resources will be replenished. Eco-centric policies are formulated and before they can be tabled, they are struck down by big money in search for further resources. Native and non-native writers, alike, writing about Native Americans have tried to bring to the notice of the public the threat that so-called ‘scientific progress’ poses on the environment. The increasing reliance on natural ways of healing are evidence of the American public’s recognition of the fact that the traditional ways of healing are not only free from what bio-medicine calls ‘side effects’, but, unlike the latter which poses no threat to the environment.

Of the various tribes that form the focus of this study, the Western Shoshone, residing in Utah and Nevada, has for generations past subsisted on the harvest of the pinyon-juniper trees. The nuts of the pinyon pines traditionally provided nourishment, in the form of easily available protein, to the Native American tribes of the Southwest. Richard O. Clemmer has discussed this issue in detail in a study which shows that during the sixties and early part of the seventies, the Nevada office of the Bureau of Land Management followed a policy which involved a systematic destruction of pinyon pine forests which thereby resulted to criticism from a vast majority of Indians living in that area.

The Western Shoshones are the largest Indian group residing in the area that the Bureau of Land Management and the United States Forest Services decided to clear in order to provide fuel for silver smelters and also to “yield grasses [for grazing livestock]”. The effects of this destruction would not have been as hazardous if the mode used had been different. Therefore, the Ely Chain which was used in this project of destruction was made of ship’s anchor chain “with 18-inch pieces of iron rail welded into each link”.

This extremely heavy chain, of which each link weighed 90 pounds, was then hitched on to two Caterpillar tractors which dragged it across acres of pinyon forests. However, this method had a twofold effect on the ecology of the region: not only did it uproot the trees on the land; according to Katie Fite, “native wildlife species that rely on pine nuts—pinyon jay, juniper titmouse—and even mule deer that eat pine nuts” suffered from the destruction of their natural habitat and food sources.

The destruction of the natural source of the Shoshone’s food was carried out at such speed and with such completeness such that the acres of pinyon trees which had grown over a period of years were destroyed within hours. This is apart from the fact that the eradication of forest-land also meant a direct increase in the number of farm animals – since the area was being cleared for sheep grazing - thereby contributing to global warming. The long term repercussions were also felt in the increased production of lower quality animal protein in the form of beef. Not only was the quality of

the protein inferior, it also put additional burden on the already strained pockets of the Shoshone who were deprived of a much higher quality of nutrition that was not only free at all cost, but also available in abundance.

The fact that these tractors “dragging their anchor chain across the ground, ripping out life-giving trees at twenty acres an hour,” managed to destroy trees spread across an estimated 42,000 acres or 3,211,000 acres, has been recorded by Boyd in his biography of Rolling Thunder:

All of us knew that the Bureau of Land Management was destroying thousands of acres of living, growing trees to serve the mercenary interests . . . . The issue of the pinyon trees involved ignoring ecology, destroying a valuable natural food source, harming wildlife and killing millions of trees. . . . To become involved in this issue was to work on a spiritual level with spiritual matters.

Thus for Rolling Thunder, it was not merely a source of essential nutrition being destroyed.

“To him this was a health problem and a human problem.”

The change in the ecology was something that may have been ignored by the Bureau of Land Management, and the US Forest Services, but was of paramount importance to Rolling Thunder and others of his tribe, who speak not of the immediate gains or losses of a small group of people, but of those of the entire planet and of eons. His view was that:

“The land is becoming contaminated and the resources are disappearing or becoming unusable . . . .”

However, his views gained support when confronted with the fact that the pinyon forest chaining, like the destruction of rain forests e.g. did not only lay waste to the land but affected non-human animal and bird life, thus effectively sealing the fate of the environment of the area.

These are the ideas that Rolling Thunder worked with in order not only to preserve the life-giving food of the Shoshone, but by doing so to protect and conserve the various forms of wildlife essential to human beings. The natural habitat of the small animals and birds, being destroyed, enforced a migration and in some cases obliteration of these creatures. Richard O. Clemmer has also given examples of areas in which sheep ranching was increased. Although there was an inevitable increase in the supply of meat protein, these areas ultimately fell prey to loggers, which combined with overgrazing, gave way to soil erosion destroying the ecological environment totally and absolutely, and defeating the feeble and half-hearted attempts at re-forestation.

Rolling Thunder’s way of working, however, was not to work on any one issue—like that of the pinyon forests—in isolation. For him, the physical reflected the spiritual, and the physical solution therefore would reflect the spiritual solution. The two were inter-twined and thus “the issue of the

pinyon trees involved ignoring ecology, destroying valuable natural food source, harming wildlife and killing millions of trees,” which for Rolling Thunder was synonymous with the spiritual destruction of the inhabitants of the land. Doug Boyd seeing Rolling Thunder gathering herbs and plants, with due care for the numbers growing in any one place, and placing an offering of coins below a plant, is impressed by the seriousness with which Rolling Thunder treats the plants and herbs, and he remarks:

“Money, possessions, and the acts of giving and receiving are all powerful agents, and agents can be either good or bad. Here, the coins had been a form of love.”

For Rolling Thunder and Mad Bear, spiritual elevation could only be achieved by working on the physical level and for them and others like them; it is only through work that the spirit can be elevated. Representing his adopted tribe – Shoshone- as much as the one he was born in- Cherokee - , Rolling Thunder emphasized the Earth’s ‘health problems’. Working on the premise that the return to traditional ways would necessarily entail a return to nature, Rolling Thunder focused on this inter-relatedness and encouraged the reversal of the vicious circle of pollution, exploitation of nature and the loss of spiritual powers. The ill-health of the Earth, according to him, was directly the result of this pollution and this in turn was demoralizing and destructive for the social, cultural and moral fiber of the society. The healing ceremonies conducted by him and recorded by Doug Boyd, for the Menninger Foundation, were proof of the inter-dependence of the physical and the spiritual.

Rolling Thunder’s collection and use of herbs and plants to cure the physically and mentally/spiritually ill is another aspect that bears careful thought. At no time did he advocate the collection of plants or roots without due consideration to the numbers growing and this formed one of the basic rules of his healing practices. Once convinced that he had gathered a sufficient number of members of one ‘family,’ as he called it, he moved on to another patch carefully considering the scale of depletion and making sure that he did not take more plants, or portions of plants than were actually required. The difference between ‘need’ and ‘want’ is one that he has tried to teach, with the firm belief that his consideration would be re-paid by the effectiveness of the plants gathered. The one time that he took Doug Boyd on a herb-gathering expedition, the latter saw Rolling Thunder making offerings to the plants and communicating with them, even as he would with humans and animals. ‘He smiled and spoke in a whisper so that I had to think for a minute before I heard the words: “This one is the Chief.”’ His earlier warning to Doug Boyd not to hurt any snakes, otherwise when it is considered as a dangerous species is only one of the many examples that Doug Boyd finds in his travels with Rolling Thunder and Mad Bear, which reflect the respect and

eneration with which they treated all things in the Earth. Doug Boyd over a period of time that he associated with Rolling Thunder, reached the conclusion that: “It is involvement that is the key to understanding: without involvement, I could research Indian philosophy and phenomena to my death and achieve nothing but increasing bewilderment.” Unlike Euro-Americans researchers, who believed that power lay in repetitive chanting and casting aside worldly thoughts, Boyd believes that this was not the answer to the problems faced by humanity. He stated that the lesson that he learned from the time spent with Rolling Thunder and Mad Bear Andersen, is that:

The powders, the feathers, the gestures and the incantations were not the most important factors. I knew that these things were the agents, or perhaps the physical vehicles of agents. Like mantras, acupuncture, meditation, hypnosis, psychotherapy, even herbs and massage, are not understandable within the limitations of the body sciences.

One belief that Rolling Thunder had was that of seeing the earth as a living being, that had health issues and like all ailing beings which are sorely in need of treatment. This treatment had to be in the form of appreciation and gratitude. He invariably compared the earth to a human being as he states that:

The earth is a living organism, the body of a higher individual who has a will and wants to be well, who is at times less healthy or healthier either physically or mentally. People should treat their own bodies with respect. It’s the same thing with the earth. Too many people don’t realize that when they harm the earth, they harm themselves.

For Rolling Thunder and Mad Bear, the health and well-being of humans is directly dependent on the health and well-being of the earth they inhabit. Both believe that the planet they inhabit is languishing for want of attention and appreciation. Over usage, without any regard being paid to the Earth Mother, has rendered it barren in many places, this barrenness having an adverse effect on its inhabitants, thus is giving rise to much dissatisfaction and ill-will among human beings.

Mad Bear and Rolling Thunder cast the earth in the role of the maternal provider and this fact is emphasized by Mad Bear at the beginning of Doug Boyd’s biography of Mad Bear when the latter claims:

The first thing you could do is just remember every day to thank your mother. That simple thing - giving thanks to Mother Earth - every time you eat, every time you walk on the grass . . . . The first step is to stop - stop ripping off the Earth.

However, taken into the background of available knowledge, this statement becomes even more appropriate. The thankless grabbing of vegetal covering from the face of the earth has and is contributing to numerous problems. The health of the planet, in other words, is affecting the health of

the human beings. The depletion of the ozone layer, over countries like Canada and New Zealand, is a small evidence of the interconnectedness of the human with the non-human inhabitants of the earth.

As far as the Shoshones is concerned, the destruction of the pinyon pines created a dependence on refined food - especially commodity food - which in turn has led to a rapid decline in the general physical health of the Shoshone. According to a study conducted by the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Indian Research and Education Center (AIREC), in collaboration with the Department of Agriculture and Economic Research Services:

Complications from inadequate diets and poor eating habits are likely to persist for life and therefore carry the associated burden of persistent chronic illness and opportunity loss costs.

The results of the study showed that from the 1960s onwards, availability of commodity foods like canned meats, soups, and juices; pasta; cereal; rice; cheese; peanut butter; corn syrup; flour; dry, evaporated milk; and vegetable oil - increased obesity rates among the American Indian tribes to double those of non-Indian/White Americans. The occurrence of type 2 diabetes is also “the highest in the world.” This survey also emphasized the fact that Indians living on reservations or near reservations were more likely to be economically distressed, making them less able to fulfill nutritional requirements than those living in big cities. In such cases, commodity food seemed to be by far, the best choice for the majority of low-income American Indian families, whose actual aim was to get the maximum number of calories per dollar, thereby led them to buy processed foods with long shelf-lives rather than fresh foods. Reliance on man-made - or processed foods - has also taken human beings, generally, and the American Indians, particularly, away from the spiritual. The American Indians who according to Rolling Thunder and Mad Bear, are all born with a special connection with the Earth Mother, are therefore also blessed with the powers of healing, but by forsaking the earth - and turning to advancements in technology -, the link with the world of the spirit has been broken. “Nowadays, with all the diggin’ and cuttin’ and choppin’ up of the Earth, it seems like the lines get cut i.e. broken connections to the spirit world. Just when we need it, too. We better get that back!” This statement of Mad Bear indicates the deterioration, degradation and gradual downfall of the Indians, who had always been taught to:

. . . trust the land. . . . The land gives food and shelter and medicine and cleansing, and you know these things belong to you. The land belongs to life, life belongs to the land and the land belongs to itself.

Mad Bear and Rolling Thunder, like all other traditional medicine people, are of the opinion that whatever is taken from the land must be

acknowledged and appreciated, even if it is by the simple manner of thanking the earth. Doug Boyd's declaration that:

To the American Indian . . . the tree is the symbol of life.

It is a reference to the ancient belief that the tree of life is sacred and any one can take refuge beneath its branches. This belief has been equated with the concept of Sanctuary in the Christian Church. Mad Bear also underscores the importance of the tree when he refers to the tree painted on the faces of Indian warriors and which was mistaken by the whites as 'war paint.' Perhaps, the most pertinent statement that Boyd records for Mad Bear is the idea of convincing the young and old alike to practice the policy of 'live and let live' and the belief in the one paramount rule, basic to the continuing survival of humankind—basic even, perhaps, to the continuation of a living planet. Do not be competitive. Do not compete for survival. Compete, combat, and die. Cooperate, cultivate, and live.

This spirit of co-operation is what medicine men have striven hard to inculcate in the minds of their people. Once this idea is firmly ingrained in their minds, there is no trouble in being grateful for what has been provided. Thus an important lesson that Mad Bear and Rolling Thunder teach is that the various plants, roots and herbs are only to be taken from places where they are in abundance and even then, only after proper respect has been shown to them. The view that the plant world is sentient or that the "little People" are to be acknowledged as equal share-holders in this vast planet, is a view that has become lost in this far too rapidly advancing—technologically—world. According to them:

The earth is sick now because the earth is being mistreated . . . . A lot of things are on this land that don't belong here . . . . now we may not know, but a lot of the things that are going to happen in the future will really be the earth's attempt to throw off this sickness. This is really going to be like fever or vomiting, what you might call physiological adjustment.

Spoken in the last decade of the twentieth century, these words of Mad Bear Anderson have proved to be prophetic. The recent upheavals in the world of nature have been taken in this context to show the ailments of the planet. Whether it be an earthquake in Pakistan or Haiti, a tsunami in Indonesia, or hurricanes and tornadoes in other parts of the world; however, the evidence is very clear that the Earth is vomiting out parts of what it has ingested. The massive upheaval caused by these changes is but a small portion of the illnesses that need to be cured and the cure is within the Earth itself. Mad Bear's statement that:

If you don't think you're ripping off the Earth, or abusing the land, maybe you're not paying attention to how you live. That's the first step. Then every time you take a bite to eat, or even breath of air, you give thanks, and it goes on to some level—it becomes a habit. And every time you take



anything from the Earth\_\_food, air, clothing, anything,\_\_you give something in return. Thus, this needs to be heeded if we are to continue on this earth.

### **Conclusion:**

In writing the biographies of the two medicine men, Doug Boyd has pointed out the various ailments that have deprived the Earth of its essential cover—in the form of de-forestation, plundering the land of its resources, or tearing apart of the ozone layer—showing us that the only way out is to return to the Earth that which has been taken from it. Re-forestation is a very slow process, compared to de-forestation but it is one aspect for this remedy. Acknowledgement of the Earth’s natural resources, be they in the form of minerals, herbs or flowers for decorative purposes, is essential and while one way of acknowledgement is to replenish the planet of what it has been denuded, another is the definite positive use of these resources by ensuring the development of harmony amongst nations and peoples. Disintegration and division will only cause destruction. In the words of Rolling Thunder: “We say there is a right time and place for everything, . . . .and we live in harmony with that.” It is harmony that is of utmost importance and which will ultimately heal the Earth, and in healing the Earth, we will heal all mankind. These are lessons which might seem new to many particularly in the current scenario, but it is essential that for harmony to accrue:

“This learning must come . . . . before people can begin to work successfully in groups than as disconnected individuals, and before they can begin to deal with snowballing social problems\_\_ like ecological ones that challenge the potential of individuals, societies, nations and the planet to function as a single society.”

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