

The myth of the 'peaceful' warrior

Zig Zag

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A warrior is a person who prepares for and engages in warfare or fighting, not for personal gain but in the interests of his or her community. A warrior defends their people, territory, and way of life. These attributes distinguish a warrior from those who fight for personal motivations, such as money or power. Ideals such as sacrifice, courage, loyalty, and honour are often associated with the warrior.

I believe most Natives would agree with this description of the warrior, and would acknowledge that not only were warriors a vital part of our cultures, but that they also served an important military function in defence of land and people. Some of our greatest heroes as Native peoples are warriors who engaged in armed anti-colonial resistance, such as Pontiac, Tecumseh, Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Geronimo, Cochise, etc.

In the last decade or so, I have seen a distortion of our warrior culture by some Natives that seek to portray warriors as—above all—peaceful and non-violent protagonists. This tendency has increased in the last few years with the infiltration of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs, with their fetish for nonviolent activities) into Indigenous communities, as well as the Idle No More mobilization of last year, which introduced pacifist ideology on a mass scale to Native grassroots movements in Canada.

About that Sitting Bull meme

You may have seen the meme: a photo of Sitting Bull staring into a camera, with a quote about what a warrior is. I've seen it shared numerous times by Natives and others on Facebook, often on Idle No More sites.

The quote states:

“Warriors are not what you think of as warriors. The warrior is not someone who fights, because no one has the right to take another life. The warrior, for us, is one who sacrifices himself for the good of others. His task is to take care of the elderly, the defenseless, those who can not provide for themselves, and above all, the children, the future of humanity.”

It appears to be a popular quote, judging by how frequently it is shared. There is truth in it, concerning most Native people's views on what a warrior was (and is). But there's two problems with the meme.

First, there is no source for the quote. There are many other quotes by Sitting Bull, virtually all compiled by journalists, military or government officials, who were present at the time Sitting Bull's words were translated (in the late 1800s). Yet, nowhere in any of the books or websites where his quotes are printed can one find this particular statement with a source attached.

Ian Chadwick, who runs a blog, also looked into this meme quote. His conclusion?

“I have yet to find *any* source that shows when or where Sitting Bull actually said it. So until then, it remains classified as a bad meme and likely by someone else.”

(“Does this really sound like Sitting Bull?,” posted on March 18, 2012 by Ian Chadwick's blog)

<http://ianchadwick.com/blog/does-this-really-sound-like-sitting-bull/>

Chadwick suspects the quote may actually be from one of several New Age mystics, such as Carlos Castaneda, Dan Millman, or Paul Coelho. All these authors use the imagery associated with warriors in their spiritual philosophies. These, in turn, are often used by Native pacifists as a means of portraying themselves as “spiritual warriors” while reinforcing their pacifist ideology.

One can imagine the delight that Native pacifists and reformists must feel when they see this meme. One of the most well known warriors, who led his people in fierce anti-colonial resistance, saying that, at the end of the day, the warrior is actually a non-violent actor.

The title of Chadwick’s editorial makes you think: Does this really sound like Sitting Bull? I don’t think so. Here are two quotes attributed to Sitting Bull, and which are sourced:

“I have killed, robbed, and injured too many white men to believe in a good peace. They are medicine, and I would eventually die a lingering death. I had rather die on the field of battle.”

Recorded by Charles Larpenteur at Fort Union in 1867. Published in *The Lance and the Shield*, by Robert M. Utley, New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1993. p. 73.

“I hardly sustain myself beneath the weight of white men’s blood that I have shed. The whites provoked the war; their injustices, their indignities to our families, the cruel, unheard of and wholly unprovoked massacre at Fort Lyon ... shook all the veins which bind and support me. I rose, tomahawk in hand, and I have done all the hurt to the whites that I could.”

Recorded by the Jesuit priest Pierre-Jean De Smet after a council with Sitting Bull on June 19, 1868. Published in *The Lance and the Shield*, by Robert M. Utley, New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1993. p. 79-80.

There can be little doubt that these words accurately express the conditions under which Sitting Bull lived. Like Crazy Horse and many others, he had to kill enemies in order for his people to survive a genocidal warfare being waged against them. Nowadays, we’re living under different conditions in which the settler society is far more divided and fragmented and the logic of attacking any and all whites no longer makes sense. But this was certainly the dominant reality for the Lakotas during the 1870s.

The second main problem with this quote is the obvious contradiction. Even if it were true that Sitting Bull made this statement, we can see in the quotes from Sitting Bull that *are* sourced that he engaged in a high level of combat that included the killing of enemies.

Pacifists love this quote because it literally disarms militant warriors. If Sitting Bull, a great warrior and leader of the Lakota, states that a real warrior doesn’t fight, well then who are we to say otherwise?

I think most Natives would agree with almost all the points in the alleged statement by Sitting Bull about what a warrior is. Ideas such as sacrifice, protecting the defenceless, helping those that cannot help themselves, etc. But at the end of the day we must acknowledge that a warrior is also one who prepares for and engages in warfare. That’s part of the sacrifice and how one may need to protect the defenceless.

In order to defend a territory and people, our warrior ancestors had to fight and sometimes kill enemies attempting to invade our lands or raid villages, etc. During the early stages of colonization, our ancestors also had to fight and sometimes kill settlers and soldiers attempting to invade and occupy our ancestral territories.

Nowadays, however, thanks in part to New Age mysticism as well as pacifist beliefs, some Natives are trying to tell us that our warriors were actually peaceful and serene beings who

went around helping people by chopping fire wood. There is, of course, nothing wrong with this and I have seen many warriors carry out this function, along with hauling water, constructing shelters, digging outhouses, etc. Let's not distort our own history or culture, however, in the interests of promoting some idealistic and pacified version of a warrior.

Warrior Culture

The caricature of the "peaceful" warrior is probably mostly derived from Indigenous warrior culture on the plains (such as the Lakota, Cheyenne, etc.), including the practise of "counting coup," in which warriors who touched an enemy with an open hand, or a coup stick, received a special honour (perhaps a feather notched or painted in a certain pattern).

While Indigenous warfare on the plains may have emphasized such acts of bravery, we should not delude ourselves into thinking that this was the extent of their military actions. Killing an enemy also brought honour to the warrior, and even though Native warfare differed considerably from European forms of genocidal warfare (with far lower casualties for example) it was still a life and death struggle. Warriors did not develop substantial skills in producing and using weapons just so they could slap an enemy on the head.

Nor can we say that the plains Indigenous style of warfare, with its emphasis on personal bravery or its practise of counting coup, was common among all Indigenous peoples.

On the Northwest Coast, among the Kwakwaka'wakw for example, warfare was not conducted to openly display one's bravery. Instead, stealth, secrecy, and surprise attacks, including ambushes and raids, were far more common (a way of war that also became common in the Eastern Woodlands and Atlantic Coast once Native warriors began to acquire firearms, beginning in the late 1600s).

Among the Kwakwaka'wakw, there were no honours for simply touching an enemy. It was a common practise of the warriors to cut off the heads of their slain enemies as a means of preventing them from carrying out revenge attacks from the spirit world. Warriors carried various weapons that were designed for killing, the most common being a heavy war club. Small obsidian knives were carried to cut the head off slain enemies, along with other body parts. Sometimes these body parts were displayed in front of the house of the warrior that had killed the enemy.

Many aspects of Kwakwaka'wakw culture promoted "warriorism" and were in fact based on warfare. The highest ranking secret society of the Kwakwaka'wakw winter ceremonies was the *Hamatsa*, which was also the highest ranking warrior society. The *Hamatsa* was at one time possessed by a spirit that ate humans (*Baxwbakwalanuksiwe*), and during this initiation the *Hamatsa* craved human flesh (and for this reason is often called the cannibal dancer). Only by singing songs could the community pacify the *Hamatsa* so that he could rejoin human society.

The Kwakwaka'wakw also have a warrior dance known as *Hawinalal*. During this dance, historically, the warrior would be pierced through the back and legs and suspended from a roof beam by cedar rope. In his hands was small knife which he used to cut himself. Like the *Hamatsa*, it was songs that pacified the warrior.

The origins of this warrior dance come from *Wi'naXwinagim*, whose name means "Always-wanting-to-war." This great warrior would be so possessed by the war spirit, *Winalagalis*, that even when he returned to his village from war he would go around trying to stab and kill people.

The villagers bound him with cedar rope and hauled him up to the roof beams of a house, where they sang songs to pacify him so that he could rejoin society.

The war spirit of the Kwakwaka'wakw was *Winalagalis*, whose name translates as "Making-war-all-around-the-world." The dances brought by *Winalagalis*, including the *Hawinalal*, are the second most important series of dances after those from *Baxwbakwalanuksiwe*. The Kwakwaka'wakw term for warrior, *Babak'wa*, translates as either "hunter of men" or "merciless men," implying a far more sinister role than simply helping the elderly and chopping

These short examples should show that our warrior ancestors were not just peaceful, non-violent actors. They couldn't be. The reality of tribal warfare, and later anti-colonial warfare, demanded that there be a force capable of militarily defending territory and people. As can be seen in the Kwakwaka'wakw example, in some regions warrior culture was an important foundation of the overall culture and served to reinforce a warrior spirit among the people.

Today, of course, we are not faced with ongoing military attacks resulting in fatalities. And no one is advocating that we now reclaim the tradition of severing the heads of slain enemies since we are not engaged in continuous warfare. But the last 40 year period shows that we are still subject to violent police and military repression at times (i.e., Oka 1990, Ts'Peten and Ipperwash 1995, Burnt Church 2000, Six Nations 2006, or more recently the Mi'kmaq anti-fracking struggle), along with settler mobs (i.e., Chateaugay during the 1990 Oka Crisis, and Caledonia during the 2006 Six Nations land reclamation). During such times, there needs to be a force capable of militantly defending our people and communities. By promoting the concept that warriors were peaceful nonviolent angels, we only disarm and disable warriors from carrying out their roles during such confrontations.

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