

Veganism Is Not Anti-Indigenous

Samah Seger

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Indigenous people represent around 5 percent of the world's population. Even fewer continue to live according to traditional ways, which can include killing animals for survival. Despite just how rare this is, arguments against veganism often evoke Indigenous peoples to prop them up.

How often have you heard — “would you tell an Indigenous person to go vegan?” In fact, the argument that veganism is incompatible with Indigenous culture is unfounded. Advocates for humans, animals and our ecosystems are natural allies in the fight against oppressive colonial structures.

As an Indigenous person, I understand the drive to protect our customs from further erasure. Because I'm also an immigrant, I know this sentiment exists among people living outside of their home lands who use food to maintain a feeling of home. But modern meat production and other systems of animal agriculture are rooted in pastoralism, which is central to the western Judeo-Christian tradition, with its pastors and godly shepherds. Colonizers were able to spread animal agriculture around the world with the help of Christianity, a tool used against Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous Hunter Stereotype

The argument that veganism is anti-Indigenous makes the mistake of equating indigeneity with hunting. Portrayals of Indigenous people that focus on violent, primitive or devious aspects of our cultures reinforce colonial narratives of Indigenous people as savages, when in fact we have long been masterful thinkers, gardeners, foragers, story-tellers, builders, healers, navigators, astronomers, artists, sailors and so much more. The shallow snapshot of Indigenous people as hunters paints us as frozen in time, ignoring our lived reality. Today, most of us get our food from supermarkets, eating food that bears very little resemblance to our traditional diet. The fact that we eat differently — plant-based or not — doesn't make us any less Indigenous.

Dairy as a Tool of Colonization

Before Europeans introduced dairy farming, the majority of the world did not consume the milk of other species. High numbers of non-Europeans have never adapted to the adult consumption of lactose and even experience disproportionate rates of disease linked to dairy consumption. Many Indigenous cultures too did not raise cattle for milk. Yet animal milk has long been used as a tool of colonization. In the article, *Animal Colonialism: The Case of Milk*, author Mathilde Cohen writes that because animal milk was wrongly thought to be a way of boosting population growth, governments pushed dairy farming to fulfill the “desire for a larger indigenous [and black] labor force and army.” Long term breastfeeding — a traditional form of contraception — was demonized, and animal milk was aggressively encouraged.

Despite widespread knowledge of its harmful effects on mothers and babies, ‘breastfeeding colonialism’ continues today, with formula companies using “pervasive, misleading and aggressive,” marketing tactics. According to The United Nations, these tactics are used on vulnerable parents around the world, creating a “substantial barrier to breastfeeding.”

The practice continues into childhood. In Aotearoa (New Zealand) today, government guidelines tell us to consume 2.5 servings of dairy a day, and offer it in schools with no alternative, even though around 64 percent of the Indigenous Māori people are lactose intolerant.

The White Gaze of Veganism

The earliest record of nonviolence towards animals comes from around 3000 years ago in ancient India. Nonviolence, or ahimsa, became central to Hinduism, Buddhism and especially Jainism, which asks its adherents not to enslave or hurt other animals. These philosophies inspired countless people and paved the way for movements of nonviolent resistance.

Since then, decolonial and anti-racist activists, environmentalists, disability advocates, anti-capitalists, feminists, anarchists, philosophers and others have discussed the oppression of animals through numerous and important lenses. For example, civil rights activist Dick Gregory once said in an interview that “the same thing that we do to animals, the system is doing to us,” believing that “eventually it will come to a vegetarian world or no world at all.”

More recently, during a talk at the University of California, Berkeley, political activist Angela Davis called on humanity to “develop compassionate relations with other creatures with whom we share this planet,” placing veganism as “part of a revolutionary perspective.” Despite the many powerful and diverse activists fighting against some of the world’s most exploitative industries, veganism is often reduced in media and academia to a mere fad for privileged white people. In reality, Black Americans are noted as the fastest growing vegan demographic in the U.S., and there is notable growth of veganism among Māori too.

These stereotypes about Indigenous cultures ignore and erase the many nations that have long relied on cheap and abundant plant staples such as lentils, corn, potatoes, beans and chickpeas, as well as the many poor vegans in affluent nations.

Indigenous Values

In contrast to the modern anthropocentric worldview, which sees humans as separate and superior to other animals, most Indigenous traditions recognize that humans are part of nature. We knew that animals were our relatives long before Charles Darwin said so.

For example, the Mandaean God (Hayyi or “the living”) is the life force of the natural world and all its inhabitants, a perspective which sees the sacredness of all living things. Our teachings say all killing and bloodletting is sinful – and though we are (perhaps paradoxically) given permission to eat male sheep, prey birds and scaled fish, “the attitude towards slaughter is always apologetic.” Some say that we, or at least our priests, used to be vegetarian.

Though some Indigenous cultures are tokenized against veganism, their stories tell us they cared deeply about their animal siblings. In her talk *Indigenous Veganism: Feminist Natives do eat tofu*, Margaret Robinson discusses the Mi’kmaq view that all life is related, encapsulated by the concept of “M’sit No’maq,” which means “all my relations.” Because of that view, she explains, “The modern commercial fishery, often touted as offering economic security for Aboriginal communities, is even further removed from our Mi’kmaq values than modern day vegan practices are.” These perspectives offer pathways to a veganism which is compatible with the values of our ancestors, and may even help us live up to them. As Robinson says, “Veganism offers us a sense of belonging to a moral community, whose principles and practices reflect the values of our ancestors, even if they might be at odds with their traditional practice.”

Veganism as a Decolonial Tool

Veganism is often accused of being anti-Indigenous, but in reality it is a response to the anti-Indigenous systems of today. Veganism offers an opportunity to disrupt colonial logic by challenging the most basic building blocks of colonialism, which reduce all life forms to mere objects for capitalist exploitation.

Our people had to adapt in order to survive – and we now must do it again.

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