

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

The Paths of Kateri's Kin. By Christopher Vecsey.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4v462596>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 23(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Bonvillain, Nancy

Publication Date

1999

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

turally defined discourse conventions which relegate information flow to strangers.

Perhaps what is most impactful is the nature of the book, that is, its goal to salvage and document the Haida songs. For this reason I have written a double-edged review. *Northern Haida Songs* is well written, detailed, and scholarly. Such research provides a bountiful collection of work, but the audience of such research somehow remains outside the people from whom the collections came. In a sense, much of the work is inaccessible or at best difficult for any linguistically and musically untrained person to understand. Thus, the majority of the Haidas themselves couldn't enjoy or appreciate the discussion and analyses of the songs, though the fluent elders could certainly comment on the translations and ethnographical content of the book. The result is that the book targets an audience that does not include the subjects of the research.

Finally, this collection also reveals that the people who had such knowledge and skill are few in number. The somber nature of this work is reflected, in that those who helped document the songs for this volume are now dead (p. 4), as is the case for the person to whom the volume is dedicated. It is significant, therefore, that this collection exists, since it may be only through such documentation that the Haida songs will endure past the generation of people who now know, are skilled in singing, and are trying to revive the culture beyond their own existence.

Frederick White

University of California, Los Angeles

The Paths of Kateri's Kin. By Christopher Vecsey. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997. 392 pages. \$40.00 cloth.

In *The Paths of Kateri's Kin*, a well-written, thorough, and insightful account, Christopher Vecsey examines the history and contemporary expression of Catholicism among Native Americans who were the recipients, and descendants of recipients, of French missionary activity beginning in the early seventeenth century. The book spans the time of the first missions and continues into the present, combining an analytic view of history with the immediacy of contemporary scenes. A recurring theme is the devotion that many Native American Catholics today give to the seventeenth century Mohawk convert Kateri Tekakwitha, whose "life and death became central icons" of Jesuits in North America and of many contemporary American Indian Catholics (p. 99).

Born in 1656 in a Mohawk community in northern New York state, Kateri was baptized in 1676, moved to the Jesuit mission community of Kahnawake near Montreal, and died in 1680 after four years of intense devotional activity that included extreme acts of self-mortification such as walking barefoot in the snow and ice of winter, eating sand and glass, and thrashing herself with branches. Kateri was also known in the community for her charitable acts of aiding the elderly and ill. Shortly after her death, devotions to Kateri became popular among the converts at Kahnawake and later spread elsewhere among

American Indian Catholics in the northeast.

In 1884, the Society of Jesus began its formal campaign for Kateri's canonization. She was declared "venerable" in 1943 and was beatified in 1980. Her followers look forward to the day when she will be declared a saint. Presently, Tekakwitha conferences are held yearly in New York to commemorate her life and to discuss the present role of American Indian Catholics in their communities. But despite the devotion to Kateri among many Native American Catholics, she remains a controversial figure because some Mohawks reject her as a traitor to her Iroquoian heritage and claim that her life and death have been manipulated by the Church for its own goals.

Vecsey discusses the role of the Jesuits not only in the religious conversion of Native people but also in the expansion of French economic and political hegemony in North America, forming, solidifying, and justifying trade and military alliances between France and indigenous nations. He shows how although the Jesuits had a personal commitment to the Church and to their God, they were also committed to furthering the political interests of the French state and the economic interests of French commercial enterprises.

The complex role of the Jesuits in disrupting and transforming indigenous communities and cultures is also well explored by Vecsey. He demonstrates how the Jesuits, sometimes knowingly and sometimes unwittingly, created dissension within Native communities and kin groups. They sometimes sought to extract converts from their own settlements and relocate them to missions under the priests' strict control, while at other times they used converts to gain wider acceptance in Native villages, particularly when they were able to convert leading chiefs or members of prestigious families, such as the conversion of the Mi'kmaq leader Membertou in 1610.

Vecsey shows how the Jesuits employed numerous strategies in order to appeal to potential converts. They learned the native languages and attempted to translate Catholic concepts into native words so that their religious arguments would be understood. As Vecsey shows, this particular endeavor was not always successful because the native languages lacked words that encompassed meanings of French terms, especially lacking a word for "sin." The priests often made explicit the connection between conversion and economic benefits that Christian Indians would receive at French trading posts. And they promised converts protection from their enemies, both other Native nations and European competitors such as the British and Dutch. Vecsey also suggests that some people were drawn to conversion because of the use of ritual objects such as crucifixes, rosaries, and medals that could be equated with traditional beliefs about the embodiment of spirit power in sacred objects. The music, songs, and chanting of Catholic ritual appealed as well to the Indians' creative impulses.

Vecsey outlines the far-reaching effects of Jesuit teachings that transformed aboriginal values and social norms. The priests deliberately tried to impose Christian values, particularly concerning marriage, sexuality, and personal shame or sin. They insisted on their converts remaining in monogamous, life-long marriages and imposed restrictions on the natural expression of sexuality, especially by women. Many women indeed did object to curtailments of their autonomy. Although most people neither understood nor

accepted the notions of original sin and innate depravity that were taught, some converts came to “feel themselves as sinners” (p. 17). In this context, Kateri Tekakawitha’s life and death become relevant again. She was among a group of women who engaged in extreme forms of devotion. Although Vecsey doesn’t explain why it was that women were particularly drawn to such rigorous demonstrations of faith, perhaps it was because they so keenly felt the transformation of traditional values that overturned women’s equality and reacted with extreme forms of self-discipline and self-punishment.

In his discussion of contemporary responses to Catholicism, Vecsey analyzes the different adjustments that people have made to their Indian heritage and to their Catholic beliefs. In each section of the book, after detailing the history of the church in the Northeast, the central Great Lakes region, the Southeast, and the Pacific Northwest, Vecsey includes scenes of modern Catholic communities and quotes positive and negative reactions of individuals that elucidate general patterns of belief and resistance. One of the most moving is Joan Paul, a Passamaquoddy Catholic who, although having a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ,” objects to the “fear, shame, guilt [that] all came along with it.” She resents the “feeling of worthlessness she and her people have acquired by being Catholics” (p. 158). Many comments express anger over the clergy’s attempts to exert power in Native communities. Especially traumatic were the experiences of children in church-run boarding schools where they were forbidden to speak their native languages or engage in any forms of traditional religious expression and were often victims of psychological and physical abuse. And complaints about ethnocentrism and racism among the clergy were voiced as well. Blindness to the facts of history was demonstrated by Pope John Paul II to American Indian Catholics during a visit to Native communities in Canada in 1987: “the pope said that ‘the Indians owe much to the missionaries, particularly for the preservation of their culture’ . . . They [the missionaries] taught you to love and appreciate the spiritual and cultural treasures of your way of life” (pp. 310–311).

For some believers, such as many Houmas whom Vecsey interviewed in Louisiana, Catholicism has become a part of Native identity and has helped the people maintain their distinctiveness. Vecsey asserts that “the two parts of their identity—Catholic and Houma,—are not only *not* in conflict but are cojoined into a single identity. Catholicism provides the Houmas with means of affirming themselves as Houmas” (p. 189). Vecsey demonstrates that for many American Indian Catholics, however, their two identities are not so easily reconciled. Some have begun to incorporate aspects of Native spiritual expression into Catholic ritual. These practices (the use of eagle feathers, offerings, participation in the sweat lodge, and the quest of visionary experience) have often been newly learned through contact with other people in powwows and tribal celebrations. But many people have turned away from the church because of its association with forced change in previous centuries and have rediscovered traditional modes of spiritual expression.

Throughout the book, Vecsey dissects the dilemma of Native American Catholicism, pointing out the more sinister aspects of the Jesuits’ roles in Native communities that caused dissension, forced cultural transformations,

and unwittingly brought disease and despair while offering eternal salvation. Vecsey's comment in the context of writing about the Coast Salish applies equally well to all of Native America: "Catholicism constituted part of the trauma as well as providing succor in their travails" (p. 320). Vecsey accomplishes the difficult task of presenting a history that both respects the beliefs of American Indian Catholics and confronts the context in which those beliefs were first accepted.

Nancy Bonvillain

Places of Memory: Whiteman's Schools and Native American Communities. By Alan Peshkin. New Jersey: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates. 150 pages. \$39.95 cloth; \$22.50 paper.

Success. What is it? How is it articulated and quantified? How is success defined within the context of American Indian education? Conversely, what defines educational underachievement and in what multiple contexts may it be manifest? This contrast between success and failure lies at the heart of Alan Peshkin's insightful exposé of Pueblo education. Moving comfortably within the strictures of educational anthropology, Peshkin seeks to examine the sweeping composite of Pueblo education through multiple lens of reflection: culture, assimilation, utility, and expectation. Yet at the core of this analysis is the fundamental belief that educational underachievement (which is a more appropriate term than failure) is more than just poor test scores. It is a deeper sense of cultural detachment and a more pronounced schism between expectation and outcomes that serve to undermine the academic excellence of Pueblo youth. For Peshkin argues, correctly, that Pueblo education—and to a greater degree American Indian education writ large—suffers from a cultural malady that asks, if not demands, a physical and ideological adherence to an educational prescription incongruous to many American Indian communities. The result is an educational malaise born of cultural difference and mired in often incompatible expectations.

Peshkin begins his exposé by exploring a series of confounding and often contradictory educational expectations. The first is the duality of curriculum. Pueblo students ascribe to the "conventional" curriculum—history, government, English, math, and science—that is geared for college entrance. All standard fare. Yet this curricular conventionality, if you will, is juxtaposed with a set of Pueblo cultural tenets that often dictate how this curriculum is to be presented. For example, certain pieces of literature are "screened" for their references to Pueblo taboos. Science is presented in a way that is congruous with Pueblo life-ways. The result is not a watering down of the curriculum by any means, but rather a dualistic approach to curricular presentation that, though enlightening, walks a precarious balance between Native and non-Native expectations.

But is this curricular incongruity to blame for Pueblo educational underachievement? To the students who were asked to expound upon their academic prowess or interest (or lack thereof) many exhibited an educational