

...VILLE, TEXAS



### *Civilize Native American people?*

Dear Journal,

This letter concerns the racial and religious suppression of Native American prisoners confined in the Oklahoma State Penitentiary (Carnes v. Maynard).

It has always been the official will of the government to civilize the Native American people by disposing of their spiritual and cultural identity. Yet, the deprivations and displacement suffered by our brothers presently incarcerated behind the walls of the Oklahoma State Penitentiary is just as insidious and perhaps just as effective as the traumatic forced-removal of our Indian people from their land.

Today the official will of the prison administration filters down to us through a sometimes mystifying bureaucratic structure. While languishing in the chains of uncertainties and going through myriad adjustments demanded by prison autocracy. Our brothers confront a crisis of major proportions that often results in unexpected and devastating consequences. The cultural disorientation and inadequate measure of creature comfort is an attempt by the prison administration to weaken our cultural and spiritual integrity.

We ask the support of our brothers and sisters of the ~~Native American~~ public to send the fiery arrows of the almighty pen to: Warden James T. Saffle, Box 97, McAlester, Oklahoma 74502, telling him that his total disregard for the human rights of the prisoners in his charge is indefensible. Thank you for your attention and may Grandmother Earth replenish you in strength.

In the Spirit of Crazy Horse,  
Name Withheld by Request

black cloth, right in the center of it. You could watch it as often and as closely as you liked. One moment the black cloth was empty and the next, sudden as a flash, there'd be the feather on it. The eye couldn't see it move, that feather was so fast.

To drag a disease out of a man, old Chest would take his little bag and pick a feather or some of his curing stones out of it to send them into a body. They hit a fellow like a shock, disappeared in him. The feather always returned to the cloth with a little blood or mucus sticking to it. People say that the old man cured many bad cases of rheumatism this way. Chest made out well with his doctoring. He always came home with gifts—blankets, food, coffee, everything he needed. He lived in a little one-room cabin with his possessions, but he gave most of these things away, because he was a generous man. He always knew beforehand if someone was coming to seek his help. When he got this feeling he sang a little song: "I am going to get some money today." And he was always right.

Chest was an honest man. He never once misused his power. He was an old-fashioned kind of healer, a man from another age. He was never greedy. But there are some conjurers who are fakes and cheats. Maybe some of them have a little power, but they use it in a bad way. One of them could throw something sharp at you, a quill, a jagged piece of rock, then you'd get sick and only he could cure you. It would cost you. Or he could take your soul away, change a person's mind. He could part husband and wife, make him love another woman, make her go for another man. Then you'd have to pay him to get your mate back. A so-called medicine man may turn witch doctor when he feels that he is failing, slipping, when he can't cure anymore.

But in backfires. A man who misuses his power in this way may see his own children fall sick or even die. The more he gets, the more he loses. You can tell a good medicine man by his actions and his way of life. Is he lean? Does he live in a poor cabin? Does money leave

him cold? Does he have a good, loving wife and happy children? Then he is a good medicine man, no matter what methods he uses. It is also a good sign if a man doesn't pretend to be able to cure all sickness. If he tells you: "For your ailment my medicines are no good, but I will send you to somebody who has an herb for you." If he tells you this you know you have spoken to a good man.

I never tried any conjuring of that sort, never wanted to. That's not in my vision. But I once played a trick on some guys, a stunt a witch doctor could have pulled. I was volunteering for the Army, going through my physical test. We were all standing in line being told to make water in a little bottle. There were many draftees there who really wanted out; they didn't want to be taken. They all said, "Oh, what I'd give to have the diabetes or clap. Then I wouldn't have to soldier." I told them, "Boys, you are in luck. I suffer from *both*, a social disease *and* sugar. For a buck apiece, I'll make a little water in all your bottles." Boy, were they eager, waving their green dollar bills at me. Of course there was nothing wrong with me. I was as healthy as a bull. I was very busy next hour, drinking gallons of water, sprinkling a little drop of comfort here and there, getting more customers than I could accommodate. I made about forty dollars as a sprinkler. Well, that Army doctor was smiling from ear to ear. "I never saw a healthier bunch of guys in all my life. You'll all go into the infantry." I had to take some of these new-made soldiers out for a drink. They were so mad at me, without treating them to a beer they'd have killed me.

There's one thing a medicine man shouldn't try to do: doctor a woman who is *isnati*, having her monthly period. That's a strange and powerful force. A woman who is that way, if she spits at a rattlesnake, that snake will die. If you have a flower in a vase and a lady comes in who has her sickness, the petals will often curl. It is no good if a woman in this state comes to a ceremony. She has this power and it will somewhere clash with the power of the medicine man. It could harm her or him. Maybe with a special feather or a special herb she could come, but why take a chance? It's better if she stays away for four days.

A medicine man has to be of the earth, somebody who reads nature as white men read a book. He should know about food and diets, what to give a sick person to eat. Certain kinds of food make a sick person worse. The old-time Indian food is the best—raw kidney, raw liver, *wasna*, maybe the whole fetus of a cow. Reservations are like bird cages and they make us eat bird food. That's one reason we Indians are not as healthy as we used to be.

Let me tell you about some of the herbs and plants we use in our work. These herbs have their own ways like all living things. We have one, *aunyeyapi*, a kind of sand berry, if you approach it from the wind side it tastes bitter, but if you come from the other direction you'll find it sweet. That's how strange some of these herbs are. I know of some roots which bring on a high wind if you use them right. Sage drives out evil spirits; sweet grass attracts the good ones.

For a stomach ache we use *taku-sasala*—the smartweed. It's good for cramps and the runs. Red oak also binds you up. Horse mint and verbena tea are good for stomach and abdominal pains. The blossoms of the prairie clover are good for swollen throats, and its roots purge you but good. *Waganu pejuta* is a melon medicine. Boil the melon and take half a teaspoon. It's an emetic, a hot flush; it cleans out your gall and kidneys. It opens you up. The four-o'clock weed—*huokihe hanskaska*—will open you up if you can't make water.

*Wina wizi cikala* is a kind of licorice. It's bitter when you chew it, but it is good against the flu. *Can makatola* is purple lily plant. A powder made of it is good for lumps and swellings. *Cante yazapi icuwe* makes a fine tea for all kinds of heart trouble. *Sinkpe tawote*—that's muskrat food, sweetflag, one of our busiest medicines. It has bitter roots that are very good against a fever. When you grind them up and mix them with gunpowder they are a help against cramps in arms and legs. *Tate canuga*—a kind of snakeroot—is for treating a poor appetite. But with no jobs and no money on the reservations, that's one herb we don't need right now.

*Taopi pejuta* is our great wound medicine. You have to

go into the Badlands, search among those prehistoric monster bones, to find this herd. It is especially good for wounds caused by bullets. *Pejuta wahesa* is good for the same thing. This is the hairy red root. The root looks black, but if you peel the dark outer skin off, it is red underneath. One makes a powder from it for people who are shot through the chest and lungs. There's a story of a girl who was shot right through her body, but when she was given this medicine she was cured. The white doctors had given her up. "It's hopeless," they said. *Winawizi hutanka*—I don't know the white man's name for this—is good for stopping hemorrhages. It grows in wet places along creeks.

The purple cornflower chewed up is good for snakebite. The butterfly plant is good if you want to vomit. Red cedar is used for bad lungs. The great Chief Red Cloud also used it to stop a very deadly cholera epidemic among his people over a hundred years ago. *Pispiza tawote*, the prairie-dog medicine, helps those people who have difficulty in breathing.

We have many herbs that have to do with child-bearing, with baby care and with sex. *Hupe stola*—that's the soapweed, a kind of yucca. It is truly a big medicine. Mixed with a certain cactus, *unkcela blaska*, it helps a mother in labor when the baby doesn't want to move down. Used in a different manner, it becomes *hoksi yuhapi sni*—a medicine which aborts. When there is a very good reason for a woman not to have a baby one gives her this and there won't be a birth. One uses this carefully after thinking about it for a long time.

This medicine is *lila wakan*—very sacred, working two ways. It is also good for catching wild horses. Let these animals smell its smoke and they slow up, quiet down enough for you to catch them. This herb also kills lice, if you should have this problem, and makes your hair grow at the same time.

*Itopta sapa tapejuta*—or snow-on-the-mountain—is a milkweed. You pick it in prairie-dog towns. You make a tea of it for mothers who don't have enough milk for their babies. Its crushed leaves are good against swellings.

Green milkweed is used for stopping a baby's diarrhea. *Can hlogan wastemna*—a ragweed—helps a woman during a bad child-bearing. It will also make a man fall asleep so that you can steal his horses, but it's no good for stealing cars.

As for sex medicines, the little female wild sage helps a woman during her menstrual cramps. A certain kind of skunk cabbage, if you make a liquid of its boiled roots, is a birth-control medicine. It has to be taken with some care. Too much of it and you can't have any children. But some tribes use it. If a man is weak and can't get it up, a certain snakeroot could be a big help. One plant, if just one tiny seed of it is given an old man, can keep him going the whole night through. I won't describe or name it, otherwise the whole place would be overrun by white men from the big cities looking for these seeds. They'd go crazy with this herb, and I'd catch hell for telling about it.

Finally there are some herbs that are not used on men but just to cure horses and cattle. Those ecology people should know about *hante*—a certain cedar. It's a natural, harmless bug spray. It will drive the potato bugs away if you crush and boil this plant and use the liquid. Other herbs are just for food, such as prairie apples, wild turnips, which we call *tinpsila* and use like bread. The dried-out bush is your tumbleweed. We even have herbs that are used neither for curing nor for food, such as *pejunige tanka*. In the old days, before we had matches, when you lit this herb it would keep smoldering for months. It used to be hung up before the tipi. If you needed a fire you just blew on it until it glowed, then you hung it up again to smolder some more. Some things you use aren't herbs at all. Badger fat is not a plant but what its name says it is. It's a good medicine against baldness. And I told you about giving somebody a turtle heart to eat to make him brave and strong. I could add some more plants and medicines to this list, but I think we have more than enough here.

I would like to talk about one more thing. I have been to New York, Chicago and some other big places, stayed in your house many times, met a lot of people and kept

my eyes open. So I know a little about what you call psychology. I have heard about group therapy and encounter meetings and found out that some white people have a way of acting out their troubles as in play. Well, I must tell you that we Indians knew about these things a long time before you did. For longer than anybody can remember, many Sioux ceremonies always ended with a kind of Indian "group therapy"—with everybody taking his turn in a circle, talking about his problems, about what's wrong with him. And a *heyoka*, a thunder-dreamer and clown, always has to act out his dreams in public, no matter how embarrassing that may be. At least it doesn't cost him thirty-five bucks an hour.

I also think that it is a very wise sort of Indian psychology that a medicine man doesn't dress up fancy with feathers and war bonnet when he performs a ceremony. You have seen me praying, performing a wedding, or running a ceremony in an old sweat-shirt and patched pants. There's a purpose in this, a certain humbleness in the presence of the spirits, but not of men. It means a medicine man should be stripped down to the bare essentials when he does these things. It's not the package and the wrapping which counts but what is inside, underneath the clothes and the skin.

As I get older I do less and less curing and ceremonies and more and more thinking. I pass from one stage to another, trying to get a little higher up, praying for enough gas to make it up there.

I haven't told you all I know about the herbs and about the ways of our holy men. You understand that there are certain things one should not talk about, things that must remain hidden. If all was told, supposing there lived a person who could tell all, there would be no mysteries left, and that would be very bad. Man cannot live without mystery. He has a great need of it.

in the room are pots and plates with bread and soup, corn and berry *wasna*, the pudding called *wojapi* and a special kind of mint tea we drink on this occasion. All this food will be distributed after the ceremony is over.

All is now ready for the *yuwipi*, for the skull practice, as they used to say in the old days. Before the tying up the room is purified with sweetgrass. We call it *wacanga* and it is braided like a woman's pigtail. We burn it at one end, walking around with it, waving it so that the scent spreads through the room blessing it with its fragrance. It smells so good; it swirls around us and makes us all relatives. With it we purify all the things we use in the ceremony. It drives out evil influences. It counteracts the effect of a woman having her monthly time. When she has her period she is not supposed to take part in a ceremony because being *isnati* is having a great nature power which could spoil the medicine and undo the curing. If a woman is *isnati* one can't doctor her. Women know this and stay away from a ceremony when they have their time, but in case there should be one who doesn't know, well, the smoke from the sweetgrass will neutralize this power. For some ceremonies one uses cedar smoke, which gives a man the power to dream, but for *yuwipi* we prefer the sweetgrass.

We also use *wahpe-wastemna*, Indian perfume. The Great Spirit told me to use these things. We pass a bag around to put on ourselves, rub our bodies, our clothing with it to smell like nature. Now the spirit comes through the house. Everybody puts a sprig of sage behind his ear or in the hair. Now the spirit can work well.

The medicine man stands before the altar. He is ready to be tied up. We use rawhide for this, the same as our bowstrings. We start with his fingers, put his arms behind his back, tie each finger to the other. The finger tying represents the *wakinyan*, the thunderbirds, the lightning. This finger is also symbolized by the bowstring. The spirit strikes as with a bow, quickly.

Then we wrap the *yuwipi* man up like a mummy. In the old days we used a buffalo hide for this, but now we make do with a large star blanket, a quilt with many

Photographs by Richard Erdoes



Mako Siča—the Badlands, strewn with the bones of the fabled monster Uncegila: a place to hide yourself, the last refuge of the ghost dancers.

**WOMEN ON THEIR MOON:**

Following the tradition of our Elders, a tent has been set up as a Moon Lodge behind the house for women who are menstruating. In memory of those who give us life, our moon is our time of celebration. Blood is sacred and speaks of womanliness. It is our purification time; a time to reflect and look within ourselves and feed our inner strength. We ask that you respect our traditions.

The Moon Lodge is built specifically for women on their moon. During this time, women do not participate in the ceremonies, the sweats, and do not handle food. This is because the kind of power that is evoked when a woman is on her moon is totally female, and must remain separate from the power of ceremony. We hope that no one is offended by the ways of the blanket. Remember that this is a time of personal celebration and cleansing, a respite from the chores of everyday life, and a time to be with other women-to share and understand the female power. If you have any questions, women are available to discuss the matter further. Please ask security.

**PLEASE REMEMBER THAT THIS IS THE FIRST SUNDANCE TO BE HELD ON THE EAST COAST IN OVER 250 YEARS. RESPECT MOTHER AND HER CHILDREN.**

Thank you.

A-HCY!

-The Tayac Family

