

Testimony Regarding Native American Possession of Ceremonial Tobacco

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The way that we as Abenaki people walk in the world is sacred and an important aspect of our spiritual practice revolves around the use of tobacco. Tobacco is one of four sacred medicines/scents, in addition to sweetgrass, sage, and cedar. Each medicine has a different purpose that purifies and offers gratitude within life's journey. Tobacco is used in several capacities and ceremonially is used typically as an offering. I will provide a few examples of how I utilize tobacco. I always carry *T. rustica* leaves with me in my car to be used as offerings. Tobacco is grown within our gardens. Oftentimes if I see an animal that has passed in a particularly brutal way on the side of the road or has just been hit, I provide an offering to ease its journey to the next world whether by pulling over and providing the offering or if on the interstate where that is not possible, I say my blessing and offer it with the help of the wind. I live in relationship with many communities, one of which is our non-human relatives. Also, when an elder has gifted me a story or teachings, I honor that gift with an offering of tobacco in a small bundle. When opening the drum for use, I say a prayer with tobacco. These are a few examples of how I utilize tobacco in my everyday life that do not include smoking.

Prior to European contact, there were many varieties of tobacco and as a sacred plant it was utilized within our ceremonies. Colonization, as it does with everything, commandeered tobacco, commodified it, and disrespected cultural norms of the people of this place to the point where people of dominant society have zero understanding of its original and spiritual use. Every manner of toxin under the sun was added to it causing sickness and now, once again, Indigenous people must ask for use of their own cultural items from the government, which has no right to dictate our belief systems. Our young folks need to be able to utilize this item so that they can participate in our ceremonial cycles in a respectful manner and not fear retribution by state authority.

In order to teach our youth how to properly utilize this sacred item, please provide us with a legal avenue as promised so that our youth are not targeted for owning ceremonial items. Additive free and typically leaves grown within our gardens are used. Our teachings will not include vaping, e-cigarettes, or cigarettes. The history of tobacco is a microcosm of colonization as a whole. Dominant society coopted the sacred, erased its Indigenous roots in Western memory, and now controls access to a piece of our ceremonies. Please correct this oversight in the law.