



Smoking the Pipe: Peace or War?

Historical nugget

Summary and excerpts from Hugh A. Dempsey. (2006). Blackfoot Peace Treaties. Alberta History 54(4) 22-26.

Ceremonial smoking pipes were used by many First Nations peoples in North America, but not by all. Smoking the pipe, for many First Nations, is rich in symbolism: offering tobacco to the almighty, demonstrating solidarity and power within a tribe or band, signifying honour and the sacredness of life, as well as marking a commitment, an agreement or a treaty.

The role of tobacco and the ceremonial pipe in marking the end of conflict is quite well known. Even colonial traders got involved because peace between the Nations was good for their business. Hugh Dempsey, a Canadian historian and honorary chief of the Kainai Blackfoot, cites the case of the trader in charge of Fort Edmonton in 1862. The trader writes about how he brokered a peace agreement between the Cree and the Blackfoot.

“The Peace was finally satisfied today in the mess room, the Chiefs of each of the Tribes were present; to each chief confirming the Peace made, signed with the names of all the Chiefs present. Tobacco excepted. Slave [Blackfoot] Indian camps and Cree camps. All parties saluted each other with a kiss, shook hands and Crees went off quietly at once. P9I2 30.87 0 Td ()Tj EMC /P <</MCID 7 >>BDC 0.001 Tc -0.001 Tw -3

Tobacco could play a role in both peace and war. Some nations or tribes had different pipes for different meanings such as a peace pipe and a war pipe that displayed differently. More often, it seems, the meaning was determined by the context. Dempsey writes,

“For example, at the outbreak of the Riel Rebellion in 1885, an influential Siksika chief named Big Plume the lodge of his chief, Crowfoot, and presented him with a small bundle containing tobacco, sweetgrass, Crowfoot had smoked the tobacco and indicated his willingness to fight. Instead, he sent the tobacco bundle to Red Crow, head chief of the Bloods, seeking his opinion. Red Crow refused to smoke and sent the tobacco showing that he had no intention of joining the fight.”

Being a peacemaker could be very dangerous. Once, Maskepetoon, the great peacemaker of the Cree, led a small party to a hill near the Siksika camp where he sat with a Bible, pipe and tobacco.

“When he was observed, Big Swan, the Siksika chief, rode up to the hill with and greeted him. He



Instructional strategies

1. Have students read the excerpts from Hugh Dempsey's article, "Blackfoot Peace Treaties" (see [handout](#)). Then facilitate a class discussion or have them work in groups. You might use questions like the



Competencies

- Assess the complex ways in which drugs impact the health and wellbeing of individuals, families, communities and societies
- Explore and appreciate diversity related to the reasons people use drugs, the impact of drug use and the social attitudes toward various drugs
- Recognize binary constructs (e.g., good vs bad) and assess their limitation in addressing complex social issues like drug use
- Develop social and communication skills in addressing discourse and behaviour related to drugs

For a complete look at the drug literacy competencies, as defined by the Centre for Addictions Research of BC, see: www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/assets/docs/iminds/hs-pp-