

## The Last of the Great Horsemen Are Still Around and They Still Use Mushrooms

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**Abstract:** The Indigenous Peoples of the North American plains have some wonderful uses of mushrooms, they preserve great traditional ecological knowledge and some fungi are very sacred to some clans and families. This article talks about the resistance of their culture, a couple of these sacred mushrooms and how they can be used.

**Key words:** Indigenous Peoples of North America plains, ethnomycology, puffballs, sacred, *Haploporus odorus*, traditional ecological knowledge.



Jake Page was a great historian of indigenous cultures, he wrote a book about the 20,000-year history of the indigenous people of North America, called “In the Hands of the Great Spirit”. Through this work, he was able to create an amazing framework of the history of how the continent was first inhabited- he estimates about 50.000 to 20.0000 years ago- and how humans lived here throughout the years. In chapter twelve, he talks about the peoples that inhabited the plains of North America and the atrocities that happened to them during the late bloody years of American colonization, including massacres and a smallpox pandemic that wiped out most of the population. The title of the chapter is “The Last of the Great Horsemen”, where he also depicts a drawing of a "Sioux horse fetish" that seems to be long lost, except by the pages of the book.

I think Page would have been happy to know that the last of the great horsemen and women are still around. Living and resisting in the harsh plains of the center of North America, the descendants of Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull and other famous warriors are still there.

We, indigenous people, are not gone.

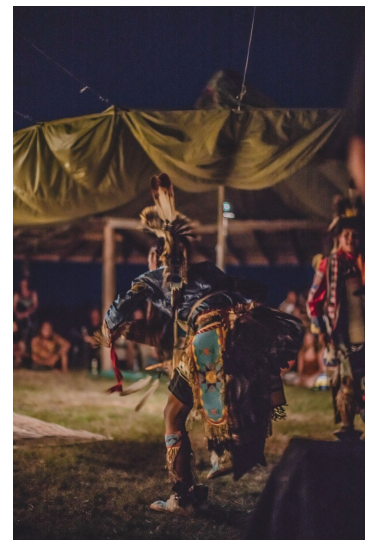
The "fetish" is actually a very sacred staff that is real and still exists, it doesn't look exactly like the picture in Page's book, it is similar, but much more beautiful, with a more intricate work. This is not something to be talked about lightly. The staff is something sacred, that has traveled through generations. She is taken care of by the Oglala Lakota now, and just like her people, she has survived through many atrocities.

In spite of all that has happened, and the loss of sacred lands, as they were put into reservations, not only the Lakota, but other plains' peoples, still resist and survive. Their Traditional Ecological Knowledge is so rich, so connected to the ecosystem and to the animal that shaped North America, the buffalo. Some of these peoples include the Oglala Lakota, Rosebud, Dakota, Cheyenne, Crow, Sioux, Pawnee, Blackfoot Confederacy or Siksikaitap, and many others.



Many Lakota ceremonies are still preserved, clans and families still hold their own practices, passed through many generations. Their culture is so strong that a lot of their healing ceremonies, like the Sun Dance, are said to have been adopted by other peoples, and influences healers all around the world. They are the ones that talk about the concept of "seven generations" and "walking the red road" (Marshall, 2001). They use many plants and mushrooms medicinally and some mushrooms are very sacred to them.

In the South Dakota plains, Slim Buttes area, some Lakota families still use puffball mushrooms, *Hokší čhekpá* in their language, for culinary, sacred and healing purposes (Black Elk; Flying By, 1998). For a long time these fungi have been present in the culture of many of the peoples that inhabit Turtle Island (this is how some indigenous people



call North America), some clans, families and medicine men and women really adopting it as part of their medicine bundle, sacred moments and daily lives (Peschel, 1998; Anderson; Lake, 2013).

Due to its high resilience and adaptability, these species of fungi like very much to be in the plains, where seasons are extreme. Maybe they like summer's heavy thunders, and rock and rolling with the high winds that sweep through the land. Maybe they like healing the wounds of the Lakota dancers at the Sun Dance, who are, for four days dancing for life on earth, praying, fasting, making sacrifices, and whose wounds are sacred, just like the ceremony (Glover, 2004).

Some Puffballs are edible when young, but as they age, their spore mass becomes an amazing powder for healing wounds and that is why they are so praised by so many people, as well as for having anesthetic qualities (Wood, 1983; Kivrak; Kivrak; Harmandar, 2016). I wonder why not every household has one of these nowadays? It is just the best thing to stop the bleeding, many are the indigenous stories of how someone was saved because of that (Peschel, 1998). As Linda Black Elk (1998) tells, even at the moment of birth, the Lakota use puffballs, *Calvatia cyathiformis*, to heal the newborn's navel. Interestingly, we have reports of the Maya people of the Yucatán having done the same use with earthstars, *Geastrum saccatum*, a relative of the puffballs (Guzmán, 1994a; 1994b).

It is really beautiful to see the relationship that the Piegan people (part of the Blackfoot nations) had with the puffballs, it is part of their sacred stories and was used as medicine and tinder, as LaPier (2015) tells on an amazing dissertation called *The Piegan View of the Natural World, 1880-1920*, the prairie puffball represents the North star on earth, and they are called by the same name: *Kakató'si*. The North star in their stories is The Star Child, “an important supernatural being, half human and half Sky-person, a distant relative who helped them tell time and move across the landscape”, which is exactly how ancient peoples used the constellations.





The Star Child was painted on the base of their tipis, represented by round shapes, “as a daily reminder of the kinship relationship between the Sky world and the Below world”.

How long has this mushroom been present in indigenous cultures, helping to heal the wounds of babies, buffalo hunters, warriors, children, mothers? Apparently it has been through a long time. According to evidence found in Monte Verde, Chile, for at least 15,000 years indigenous peoples have inhabited South America (Dillehay; Collins, 1988), which shows that the first migration of humans to the continent was much earlier than we had thought.

Many are the ethnomycologists who have encountered the use of puffballs by indigenous peoples all around the world (Shrestha; Kropp, 2009). Compton, Mathewes and Guzmán (1995) describe puffballs remains in a Lillooet archaeological site that dates back to circa 1860.

Although, it happened that sometimes some researches, like Burk (1983), could have confused



the Puffballs with another fungus that was also very used, *Haploporus odorus*, or diamond willow fungus, which is a conk polypore that grows on willow trees and is also a sacred mushroom to the plains’ people and also highly praised for its medicinal qualities (Blanchette, 1997; Rogers, 2020).

Blanchette (1997) tells us that *Haploporus* was many times made into a ball shape, used as beads, as ornaments. This fungus is a hard conk and can be shaped into other shapes as well, even with added details. Because of its sweet odor smell of anise and also its protective qualities, *Haploporus* was even sewn into sacred shaman robes, and put into

medicinal necklaces, often used around the horse’s neck, to protect it against diseases and pests. The Cree healer, Russel Willier, uses this fungus the same way as sage and tobacco are used for smudging, for protection and to connect with the spirits, in moments of prayer (Young; Ingram; Swartz. 1989; Blanchette, 1997).

Who knows a puffball, knows it doesn't smell like flowers and, if dried, it tends to disintegrate very fast, maybe you could try to make necklaces with them, but



those eventually would dry up and be pretty easy to break. But, as resourceful as indigenous people can be, maybe at difficult times of skin diseases, it is possible to make a puffball temporary necklace that will release its spores while being used. But, as you can see, the beautiful *Haploporus* should be the one that would be of preference for that kind of use. Unfortunately, this mushroom is considered near threatened on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List, so it is in need of rest and restoration, just like the indigenous peoples and forests of the world.

The plains' indigenous cultures have survived massacre and dominance of others who had no respect for the burial grounds and the sacred ecosystems that were in place. Nowadays, with most of the bison massacred by the colonizers, the harshness of the land where the people are, meaning extreme weather and poor soil, makes your skin thicker, you have to resist many challenges. High death rates, lack of resources, are all part of these people's lives (Glover, 2004). Some might wonder how these people are still there. But they are, it is their land, and, as you can see, the puffballs and the *Haploporus* never stopped helping them. And, still, like in the old days, they resist, they survive, in the plains, some trying to preserve, to "re-storiate" (Kimmerer, 2015), others lost, colonized, some trying to heal from all these traumas, and so forth. Humanity.

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Dedicated to Bear and all my Lakota relations.  
Mitakuye Oyasin.

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Photographs:

**Figure 1. Background Oglala Lakota horses.** Source: Indigenous Wisdom and Permaculture Skills Convergence, 2019. Photograph by Sydney Woodward and Come to Life.

**Figure 2. Horsewoman at Lakota Territory.** Source: Indigenous Wisdom and Permaculture Skills Convergence, 2019. Photograph by Sydney Woodward and Come to Life.

**Figure 3. Buffalo roaming the plains.** Source: Indigenous Wisdom and Permaculture Skills Convergence, 2019. Photograph by Sydney Woodward and Come to Life.

**Figure 4. Sacred tipi being set up.** Source: Indigenous Wisdom and Permaculture Skills Convergence, 2019. Photograph by Sydney Woodward and Come to Life.

**Figure 5. Lakota dancers.** Source: Indigenous Wisdom and Permaculture Skills Convergence, 2019. Photograph by Sydney Woodward and Come to Life.

**Figure 6. *Calvatia cyathiformis*.** Source: mushroomexpert.com. Photograph by Michael Kuo.

**Figure 7. Blackfoot Tipis.** Source: Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Photograph by Arthur Rafton-Canning (1864-1952).

**Figure 8. *Haploporus odorus*.** Photo courtesy of Robert Blanchette, University of Minnesota.

**Figure 9. Indigenous person with horse that has *Haploporus*.** Photo P56 courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Alberta, this is an enlargement from the original photo by Robert Blanchette, University of Minnesota as used in *Mycologia* 89(2), 233-240.



**Figure 10. Author with Bear, the best Lakota dog ever.** Source: Indigenous Wisdom and Permaculture Skills Convergence.

Photograph by Sydney Woodward and Come to Life.