



Commentary

Decolonization of Tobacco in Indigenous Communities of Turtle Island (North America)

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Indigenous peoples represent a diversity of cultures, perspectives, languages, experiences, and protocols that bring tremendous vibrancy across Turtle Island, commonly known as North America. We acknowledge the diversity of practices among these peoples, especially in their relationship with tobacco. The colonization of Turtle Island, which escalated after Christopher Columbus accidentally came unto the lands of the Arawakan people of the Caribbean, not only altered—and continues to alter—the culture, language, and traditions of the original inhabitants of this land, but it also has modified how tobacco is discussed.¹ Colonization is the action(s) or process(es) of settling and establishing control over the respective Indigenous peoples of the land, in this case across Turtle Island. Colonization also determines whose values and knowledges are privileged. This commentary discusses the impact of colonization on tobacco, the introduction of commercial tobacco, the relationship between tobacco and Indigenous populations, as well as the harmful influence this exchange has on Indigenous health and well-being. Decolonizing tobacco seeks to actively reverse and remedy the colonization of tobacco, through direct action, listening, and privileging Indigenous voices and peoples. This is consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

There are many different species of tobacco plants indigenous to Turtle Island, including *Nicotiana rustica* and *Nicotiana tabacum*. Before colonization, many Indigenous peoples used tobacco as a sacred medicinal plant in ceremonial and cultural practices, often to

promote wellness for individuals and communities. Most Indigenous peoples across the world have unique practices, protocols, and relationships with a variety of plants. Some Indigenous peoples do not use tobacco, but different types of plants, such as red willow (the Lakota's *Caḡsasa* and the Anishinaabe's *Asemaa*). Even though red willow is not a *Nicotiana* species plant, these tribes refer to these plants as “ceremonial tobacco,” “sacred tobacco,” “traditional tobacco,” or “natural tobacco.”

“Tobacco” is said to have been a term in Taíno, a language of the Arawakan people, but was claimed by the Spanish in 1550. This claiming of language was one of the first forms of colonization, setting a dangerous precedent.^{2,3} Years later, European settlers continued this pattern of colonization by industrializing and modifying tobacco—developing the tobacco plant as a plantation crop. Subsequent mass production and distribution of adulterated tobacco, in the form of cigarettes, have resulted in commercial tobacco products being available in large quantities and low-cost, readily accessible forms. Materials added to commercial cigarettes by the tobacco industry may have masked smells, increased nicotine content, exacerbated addictiveness, and lowered production costs, but more importantly, these modifications and alterations threaten the sacred nature of the plant for many Indigenous peoples.⁴ The tobacco industry continues to adulterate and manipulate tobacco, more recently through the production of electronic cigarettes, which vaporize extracted nicotine together with other fluids, flavors, and

other additives, further distancing these commercial tobacco products from the tobacco plant's origins.⁵

The global promotion of commercial tobacco, and the subsequent addition of Indigenous peoples to commercialized nicotine products, is a modern form of colonization and subjugation at national and international levels.⁵ Indigenous knowledge values, behaviors, and protocols have been suppressed (oftentimes appropriated for financial gain) through colonization processes implemented by governments, churches, and other institutions.^{6–8} For example, the US federal government passed the Code of Indian Offenses in 1883, prohibiting Indigenous peoples from the right to perform cultural and traditional ceremonial practices, such as the ghost and sun dances. Both of these ceremonial practices involved the use of ceremonial tobacco.^{9,10} In Canada, ceremonial tobacco use and ceremonial practices were more broadly illegal under the Indian Act of 1885 and its associated amendments.⁸ However, commercial tobacco use was not illegal, contributing to the promotion of commercial tobacco use among First Nations (status and non-status) and Métis peoples.^{8,11} As a direct consequence of these policies, commercial tobacco products were introduced into ceremonial practices as a harmful and unsustainable replacement to sacred tobacco.^{1,8,11} The restrictions of cultural and ceremonial practices, including use of ceremonial tobacco, were finally lifted in the United States in 1978 and in 1951 in Canada.^{8,9}

Among some Indigenous peoples, the modification, transformation, and commercialization of the *Nicotiana* tobacco plant belittle, disrespect, and complicate the understanding of these plants that are endemic to Turtle Island.^{12,13} The widespread availability of commercial tobacco products, the historical restrictions on ceremonial tobacco products, the tobacco industry's exploitation of tribal sovereignty through tax-exempt tribal cigarette sales and heavy promotion at tribal enterprises, and the industry's targeted marketing of commercial tobacco products to Indigenous peoples have enabled frequent use and dependence among Indigenous communities, with concomitant and serious effects on the user's health, and those exposed to second- and third-hand smoke. These forms of colonization tactics have complicated public health efforts aimed at reducing harms of commercial tobacco in Indigenous communities. Commercial tobacco and its derivatives represent a threat to physical health, spiritual health, and well-being for Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island.⁵ Today, Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island report the highest prevalence of cigarette smoking, with above 50% in many communities, and lowest quit rates of all groups.^{14–16} Consequently, high rates of cigarette smoking have led to higher rates of smoking-related disease morbidity and mortality in these communities.¹⁷

Researchers and policymakers have increasingly called for the use of asset- or strength-based intervention approaches to promote well-being for Indigenous peoples.^{18,19} Globally, the language used in public health to discuss commercial tobacco prevention and control is overwhelmingly deficit-based. Public health experts and institutions have referred to the widespread availability of commercial tobacco and concomitant disease as the “tobacco epidemic.”¹⁹ Regulatory efforts internationally aim to reduce the access and availability of commercial tobacco products by increasing costs (eg, taxes), while restricting sales to specific persons (eg, underage sales) and in designated places (eg, pharmacies). Another strategy being implemented is the exclusion of tobacco use in some places (eg, schools, workplaces, public facilities), which de-normalizes tobacco use, limits use opportunities, and reduces secondhand smoke exposures. Some health experts have called for a “tobacco endgame,” or the eradication of all tobacco products. While these efforts to reduce harmful tobacco products are beneficial, working toward the “tobacco endgame” without

acknowledging the differences between commercial and ceremonial tobacco serves as further colonial erasure. Unqualified and deficit-based references to commercial tobacco threaten the relationship between many Indigenous peoples and ceremonial tobacco. There is a vital need for the distinction between the two distinct forms of tobacco, particularly in the public health sphere.

As a form of reclamation and cultural revitalization, Indigenous communities in urban, rural, and remote settings are actively promoting the recognition, growth, and use of ceremonial tobacco as well as addressing commercial tobacco misuse.²⁰ Communities are now reclaiming traditional practices that were suppressed through colonization and forced assimilation into settler society. To honor and respect the traditional role of the tobacco plant in Indigenous cultures, while addressing the health impacts of commercial tobacco products, Indigenous communities, researchers, and advocates have carefully differentiated between “commercial tobacco” and “ceremonial tobacco” (also called “sacred” or “traditional” tobacco).^{12,21–23} Some European-American tobacco researchers and institutions follow this practice, striving to foster a culturally safe environment in alignment with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).²⁴ Specifically, under Article 24, UNDRIP states:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to their traditional medicines and to maintain their health practices, including the conservation of their vital medicinal plants, animals, and minerals. Indigenous individuals also have the right to access, without any discrimination, to all social and health services.
2. Indigenous individuals have an equal right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. States shall take the necessary steps with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of this right.²⁴

There is significant potential in successfully decolonizing Indigenous peoples' relationships with tobacco while improving health and well-being, by addressing this completely preventable cause of morbidity and mortality. Furthermore, bringing attention to this issue is expected to lead to significant benefits within Indigenous communities, and better informing policies and programs aimed at eliminating the harm of commercial tobacco.²⁵ While these efforts are a positive step in the decolonization process, they must work carefully in such a way that does not continue to disenfranchise Indigenous peoples or restrict the use and understanding of ceremonial tobacco.

As Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous accomplices and allies, we reflect on these acts of colonization, and their impacts, on Indigenous communities' health and well-being. We offer recommendations on how commercial tobacco research scientists, funders, and professional organizations may help to foster a culturally safe environment for Indigenous communities by delineating the difference between commercial tobacco and ceremonial tobacco. Precise language and terminology are vital to understanding the relationship and history between tobacco and its impact in Indigenous communities.

We recommend:

1. Policies recognizing, protecting, and revitalizing ceremonial tobacco to sustain its cultural importance, and the distinction between “commercial tobacco” and “ceremonial tobacco”;
2. Normalize the use of “commercial tobacco” by integrating this term into regulatory science, programs, and policies, and developing the means to differentiate ceremonial tobacco from prohibitive and punitive regulations;
3. Use of the term “commercial tobacco” in reference to health and public health risks, in particular when associated with harm, eradication, disease, and dysfunction;

4. Promoting an understanding of and respecting ceremonial tobacco in meetings, programs conferences, and ongoing activities, including health conferences;
5. Meaningful engagement with Indigenous leaders and communities in the development, implementation, and evaluation of commercial tobacco control programs that are socially and culturally safe and that are also appropriate and consistent with the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) and the UNDRIP.
6. Recognizing the need to fund research and public health promotion programs to revitalize ceremonial tobacco, and evaluating the impact these programs have on reducing commercial tobacco use;

Colonization is not a historical artifact or mere moment in history; it continues to harm contemporaneously.^{6,7} Indigenous peoples remain steadfastly resistant and resilient in the face of colonization and its many forms, but the impure and dangerous form of tobacco brought to Indigenous communities by colonizers distances Indigenous peoples from their ceremonial or traditional tobacco.

Supplementary Material

A Contributorship Form detailing each author's specific involvement with this content, as well as any supplementary data, are available online at <https://academic.oup.com/ntr>.

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Declarations of Interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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