

The Renaissance of Shamanic Dance in Indian Populations of North America

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Consecutive waves of paleolithic migrants crossing the Bering land bridge from Siberia to North America between 80,000 and 7,000 B.C. brought with them the shamanic way of harnessing supernatural powers. This way prevailed until the White intrusion 400 years ago, into the living space of the aboriginal peoples of North America. Wherever European political, religious, and economic dominance was established, shamanic institutions became the focus of negative attention. The shamanic practitioner was variously depicted by governmental and ecclesiastic authorities as a charlatan and imposter or a purveyor of evil influence. Some well-known ethnological and medico-psychological experts have until very recently portrayed the shaman as a mentally deranged person whose "primitive" culture permits the acting-out of psychopathology in a prestigious role, a eurocentric and positivistic fallacy rooted in Western misinterpretations of learned behavior manifested during shamanic rituals involving altered states of consciousness. Legal measures to suppress shamanic ceremonials were taken in the United States, especially in the aftermath of the Ghost Dance.¹ This shaman-inspired movement, originating in the Prophet Dance of the Pacific Northwest (Spier 1935), sent waves of hectic sacro-nativistic ceremonial activity through many Amerindian tribes, and finally culminated in the Sioux uprising of 1890 which ended in the tragedy of Wounded Knee (cf. Mooney 1896). Spirit Dancing had already been outlawed in 1871 in Washington Territory by decree of the Superintendent of Indian Affairs. In Canada, the "Law against Potlatch and Tamanawas Dancing" (Section 3,

1. The name Ghost Dance was applied to a Native American religious movement that first appeared around 1870. The movement began among the Pawitos tribe of Nevada and was characterized by a belief in the return of the dead and the practice of ritual dancing.

Statutes of Canada, 1884) was designed to suppress the traditional exchange feast (*potlatch*; Chinook) and the guardian spirit (*tomanoas*; Cowichan) ceremonial in British Columbia. Until rescinded in 1951, this law served as general instrument to quash any aboriginal ritual activity that might have aroused the suspicion of a local Indian Agent of the Government or of an official of church or education system. A few shamans and ritualists continued to practice ceremonials clandestinely. North America experienced a renaissance of Amerindian cultures under the impact of drastic changes in the Western *Zeitgeist* during the period of global decolonization from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s. By that time the Western image of the shaman had changed from that of a "crazy witchdoctor" to that of the sage and culturally-congenial psychotherapist (cf. Jilek 1971). The few traditional shamanic practitioners then still around played a leading role in the survival of the ritual dances that are presented in this article as major group activities with shamanic aspects still practiced in North America today. Of these the Salish Spirit Dance has best preserved its shamanic character. We can resort to Hamayon's (1990) perceptive analysis of Siberian shamanism in order to identify significant analogies with the contemporary Salish Spirit Ceremonial. The traditional secret quest for tutelary spirits, formerly practiced by young Salish people in the context of the general Amerindian guardian spirit complex (cf. Benedict 1923), was a strenuous effort often made over years in order to acquire supernatural spirit helpers that would convey upon the individual personal powers, including shamanic, if appropriately sought. Secret spirit quests in the forest or on the beach are no longer possible now that "the White man is disturbing and polluting nature." The traditional individual spirit quest has therefore been incorporated in the collective initiation process of the contemporary Salish Spirit Dance. However, the spirits from whom powers are obtained in this initiation are those of Salish tradition and are equivalent to the auxiliary spirits of the Siberian shaman (cf. Hamayon 1990, pp. 431–434). Just as these, the Salish tutelary spirits are usually represented in animal form and are today often referred to as "power animal." They are also materialized in the costume and paraphernalia which the novice receives from sponsors as a sign of rebirth in the initiation ceremonial, similar to the "renewed life" of the Siberian shaman (cf. Hamayon 1990, p. 456). The initial contact with spirit powers traditionally leads to "spirit sickness," a stereotyped patho-

morphic but not pathological state very much akin to the "initiation illness" of Siberian shamans (cf. Hamayon 1990, pp. 439–441). The powers granted by Salish tutelary spirits are likewise ambivalently conceived as mostly of great benefit, but also as potentially failing or even harming their protégé, depending on how the latter keeps its covenant with them. As in the case of the Siberian shaman's "contract" with the supernatural partner, this relationship has always implied strict adherence to the prescriptions and proscriptions of the ceremonial. Today it is also understood as the constant effort of the Spirit Dancer to respect "Indian ways" throughout life.

Characteristic features of shamanic initiation and practice are also present in the revived Sun Dance of plains and prairie tribes. The emphasis of the contemporary Sun Dance ceremonial is on the acquisition of supernatural powers through an arduous quest that is part of the ritual, for one's own well-being and for that of one's community. Today seen by many young Amerindians in North America as an ideal articulation of Amerindian culture, it retains aspects of shamanic séances in the socially sanctioned collective emotional abreaction of the participants under intense sensory stimulation by rhythmic drumming, chanting and whistling.

Salish Spirit Dance

In the Coast Salish area of the Pacific Northwest, the sociocultural complex of aboriginal North American guardian Spirit traditions combined the Plateau Indians' individual adolescent vision quest to obtain a life-long supernatural helper, with the secret-society initiation of the Kwakiutl who acquired their guardian spirits as marks of aristocratic rank in a dramatically staged group performance. In traditional Coast Salish culture, initiation into Spirit Dancing was conceived of as a necessary test and collective confirmation of individually acquired spirit powers. "Spirit sickness" was a seasonally limited, goal-directed state, identifiable on the basis of stereotyped symptoms, which inevitably lead to Spirit Dance initiation. The nature of spirit sickness and the connotation of initiation has changed since the ceremonial experienced a revival in the 1960s (cf. Jilek 1974). The purpose of initiation is no longer solely to provide entrance into a ceremonial via the ritualized cure of an initiatory illness-like state, but to treat pathological symptoms and behavior seen as resulting from the negative effects

of the White man's intrusion into Amerindian society. Salish Indian ritualists today consider native persons suffering from chronic depressive symptomatology, from antisocial behavior and alcohol or drug abuse, as candidates for dance initiation. Contemporary initiation is understood as a curing process based on the therapeutic myth of the death and rebirth of the neophyte who is made to regress to a state of infantile dependency in order to obtain individual spirit power and grow with it into a healthier existence, having found a new Amerindian identity validated in a namesgiving ceremony. The candidate's old self, alienated from Amerindian culture, is seen as faulty and diseased, and is symbolically "clubbed to death" by the ritualist in the first act of the initiation drama. For at least four days, the candidate is confined to the ceremonial house, submitting to a strict regime of immobilization, fasting and dehydration. Guarded and attended by so-called "baby sitters," he/she lies as a "helpless baby" in a dark screened-off area, sweating under heavy blankets and listening to rhythmic chanting and drumming. Depatterning of the established personality is then achieved by subjecting the initiate, under appropriate suggestion, to psychic and physiological stress; exposing him/her to a regime of sensory deprivation alternating with sensory stimulation. Rhythmic drumming in a frequency range which is known to produce auditory driving in the electroencephalogram under experimental conditions, appears to be a major factor in the induction of altered states of consciousness during initiation. It facilitates the initiate's entering into a trance state with dream-vision of the tutelary spirit, through which the individual spirit power, its song and dance are acquired at the end of the seclusion period. Thus the traditional individual quest for spirit power, including shamanic power, has been absorbed into contemporary initiation, a collective enterprise. Having "found the spirit song," the initiate, now attired in the traditional Salish garb, feels blissfully carried away by the newly acquired power. Dancing through the ceremonial house for the first time, the new dancer is spurred on by dozens of drums and deerhoof rattles and the singing and clapping of the crowd. In the service of personality resynthesis, hardening physical training and intensive indoctrination are combined to "strengthen the new dancer in body and mind."

Today, the individual rebirth of the initiate is placed in the context of a collective Amerindian renaissance. In the Spirit Dance initiation, the young native person not only acquires individual Spirit

Power by his rebirth as a "true Indian"; he overcomes sickness and faulty behavior seen as contracted by exposure to an alien culture. The Amerindian name of a "great ancestor" comes to life again in the namesgiving ceremony, and, in front of witnesses and audience, is solemnly bestowed on the initiate as insignia of a regained Amerindian identity. The revived spirit ceremonial provides the initiated dancers, and to some extent also their relatives who assist and witness, with an annual winter treatment program which in scope and duration is unparalleled in Euro-Canadian society (cf. Jilek 1982). Each year from November to April participants are immersed in a complex therapeutic enterprise. The learning experience of initiation enables the dancers to reenter an altered state of consciousness without initiatory preparation; and in this state they relive the coming of the spirit which then breaks forth in a tremendous affective and motor release in front of an interested and helpful audience. Throughout the ceremonial season, these affective discharges take place at every Spirit Dance gathering. The tension-releasing effect of "singing out one's song" is akin to that of crying. By expressing emotions in a recognized and ritualized form to a sympathetic audience, the dancer learns to accept and to control them. Dramatic acting out is a most conspicuous feature of the Spirit Dancer's performance. Each Spirit Dancer reenacts his first spirit possession, with every dance again becoming possessed, i.e. reentering a trancelike state in order to feel and display the personal spirit power originally acquired in the altered state of consciousness induced by initiation procedures. The dancer's Spirit finds its dramatized expression in dance steps, tempo, movements, miens and gestures: in the sneaking pace, then the flying leaps of the ferociously yelling "warrior" or in the swaying trot of the plump, sadly weeping "bear mother" bemoaning her lost cubs; in the "lizard father" who sheds tears over his devoured offspring, or in the mighty "whale" who grabs smaller fish. Here the choreographic drama of the Spirit Dance becomes therapeutic psychodrama, by virtue of its combination with a cathartic abreaction in an appropriate group setting. The annual Spirit Dance ceremonial provides the participant with support, protection, acceptance and stimulation. Group solidarity is stressed in speeches held during ceremonial gatherings. Perhaps the most relevant group therapeutic aspect of the ceremonial is that participants are turned from egocentric preoccupations to collective concerns and the pursuit of collective goals.

The essentially shamanic nature of the Salish Spirit Dance ceremonial is revealed in structural analysis (Jilek & Jilek-Aall 1982). Salish Spirit Dance initiation, with its leitmotif of death and rebirth, implies the novice's travel to the Land of the Dead. The journey starts when the novice is "clubbed to death." He/she does not return fully to the land of the living before having found the spirit song. Like the shamans in the now obsolete Salish Spirit canoe ceremony, the initiate is highly vulnerable, and while on the trip has to be protected by "baby-sitters" and by "uniform" and staff. With the staff the initiate "poles upstream, toward life" in the manner of the spirit canoe voyagers. The initiate has to fast and must resist the temptation of accepting food with which he/she is "teased," for the myths tell that he who accepts food in the Land of the Dead will remain there forever. The mature Spirit dancers relive this archetypal journey at every Spirit Dance ceremonial when dancing in trance around the hall of the Ceremonial House, which always extends in East-West direction, "looking to the Land of the Dead." Although blind-folded, they find their way past obstacles just like the shaman on his voyage to the other world. The Spirit Dancer has to beware of stumbling since it augurs ill, as did the shaman's misstep or fall during the ancient spirit canoe ceremony.

Sun Dance

The Sun Dance originated with the plains Algonquians around 1700, diffused throughout the plains tribes, and in the early 1800s became the most magnificent aboriginal ceremonial of this culture area, involving complex group rites associated with mythological themes revolving around war and the bison hunt. Sun Dances drew a large number of participants: dancers, singers, drummers, and spectators. Men danced for three to four days and nights, undergoing fasting, thirst, mutilation, and torture in their quest for power and success in the hunt and in warfare. As Amerindian resistance to "Manifest Destiny"² was finally overcome by the military might of the dominant society in the United States and there were no more bison to hunt, the traditional Sun Dance lost its function. By 1881 the Sioux Sun Dance was officially banned by the authorities on Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota. A last, des-

2. Manifest Destiny was the belief that the American nation should extend from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific. It was first propounded in 1845 and is the title of a book written by John Fiske (1845).

perate effort to stem the White tide by turning to the supernatural means of the Ghost Dance religion ended in the bloody suppression of the Sioux outbreak of 1890. In these years, the shamans of the Wind River Shoshone of Wyoming shifted the focus of the Sun Dance away from warfare and the hunt to the curing of illness and social misery as their Sun Dance chief had been instructed by a dream vision. This clearly demonstrates the adaptive function of altered states of consciousness in shamanism. The failure of the Ghost Dance, which had aimed at a total change in the supra-individual system, led the ritualist leaders of the Shoshone to change the Sun Dance ceremonial into a therapeutic instrument which dealt with health and other community problems that, directly or indirectly, were the results of the White intrusion. In response to the deprivations of the early reservation period, the Sun Dance developed into a small scale movement aimed at promoting a total change in individuals. It experienced a revitalization in the late 1950s and by the mid-1960s was flourishing as the major religious movement of Amerindian tribes in Wyoming, Idaho, Utah, and Colorado, claiming more adherents than the Native American Church of peyotism,³ and attracting many of its members. The contemporary Sun Dance (cf. Jorgensen 1972) is usually conducted throughout three days and three nights. Besides the dancers, it involves teams of singer-drummers, and many spectators who comfort and encourage the dancers. The shamanic Sun Dance chiefs not only plan and direct the ceremonies, but also guide the initiation process of new dancers. Among the Ute, shamans validate the candidate's calling by interpreting his dreams and counselling him accordingly. Throughout winter and spring, Sun Dance adepts and singing teams are busy with preparations. Many other members of the sponsoring community are also involved with preparations for the many guest participants from other reservations who will be feted and given gifts at the end of the ceremonies. Sun Dance initiates among the Shoshone and Ute are instructed by their chief to dance at least twice in each of 12 ceremonies, to acquire supernatural power slowly over the years, to learn to control each dose of power before seeking more, and to exercise great caution in the use of supernatural power. Dancers must abstain from alcohol and are warned against premarital and

3. Peyotism (peyote being a plant with hallucinogenic properties) is a religious practice originating in Mexico and widespread among the Indians of North America.

extramarital intercourse as their power implies unusual fertility. Other commandments oblige the Sun Dance participants to act in the interest of their people, to be generous, kind, and respectful to their elders. During the ceremonies, shamans and leaders exhort dancers and audience to maintain traditional "Indian ways." Railing against the materialism of the dominant White society, they belittle its assets in comparison with the supernatural "Indian power."

The Sioux Sun Dance was also revived in the early 1960s (Nurge 1966). Several hundred participants and large crowds of spectators again gather at Pine Ridge reservation, South Dakota, every year in August. Some dancers take a sacred vow to dance with pierced skin in consecutive annual ceremonies. After purification in the sweat lodge and passing of the peace pipe, the dancers enter the arena in a procession led by a man carrying a buffalo skull, and by the Sun Dance chief, the shaman-director who traditionally determines the course of the ritual procedures. Accompanied by rhythmic chanting and drumming, the dancers, blowing their eagle bone whistles, dance four times in each cardinal direction, alternately charging toward and retreating from the centre pole. The dancers who have taken the vow are tied to the centre pole by a thong which the chief inserts through bloodless incisions in the skin of the chest. Holding on to a protective staff with a banner, they may dance for one and a half hours before "breaking the flesh."

The focus of the Sun Dance religion is on the acquisition of supernatural power (Jorgensen 1972). Power (transcribed *puwa* in Ute, *poha* in Shoshone) is sought for one's own health and for the community, to comfort the suffering and the bereaved, or to counteract evil influence. On the basis of comparative analysis, we can define this as shamanic power and state that the Sun Dance has the characteristic features of shamanic initiation: calling and instruction by dream visions; guidance and teaching by a shaman; ordeal experience with fasting, thirst, pain, and privation; and finally, questing for and receiving a personal vision in the final dance. In entering an altered state of consciousness the vision-seeking dancer is helped by intensive rhythmic drumming in high frequencies (3.3 to 3.7 beats per second). A stimulus frequency in this range acting on the human brain, as seen in the electroencephalogram, is conducive to the production of altered states of consciousness via auditory driving in conjunction with other physiological features present in both Sun Dance and Salish Spirit Dance (Jilek 1989). At the Sun Dance, the dancer questing for a vision is encouraged by the other dancers who blow their whistles while women in the

audience beat willow wands in time and men yell war whoops. Non-dancing participants concentrate on the dancers and meditate about the power the dancers seek to win. The dancers feel supported by this well-meaning group spirit. Dancing vigorously with quickening tempo for one hour or more, the dancer finally receives his vision, is seized by a jolt of power, uplifted from his feet, and thrown to the ground where his "stone cold," power-filled body lies motionless during his soul's archetypal shamanic journey to the other world. Fellow dancers carry him to his stall, cover him, and position his head toward the centre pole. The pole in the centre of the "Thirst House," or Sun Dance corral, resembles a bare tree (example of a classical *arbor vitae*) and is a source of power as well as the medium through which supernatural power is channelled. This power is symbolically equated with water but is derived from the sun's rays in daytime and from the light of the moon and the sacred fire at night. A "nest of water" in the form of a bundle of willows is placed on the pole and a bison head or stuffed eagle is attached below. Both are endowed with power and are also channels through which power flows. An altar made of soil at the base of the pole represents the life-giving earth. In syncretistic manner, the Sun Dance pole may today be called "Jesus" or "crucifix." Specific shamanizing curative rites are part of the Sun Dance ceremonial. Ailing persons may be brought into the corral and up to the centre pole where the Sun Dance chief or a senior dancer diagnoses and treats them individually while singers and spectators concentrate on each patient with chanting and meditation to help him or her receive the healing power. At the end of the annual Sun Dance, a final blessing by respected shamans validates the power the dancers have obtained during the ceremonial. The ritual functions are then concluded as the dancers partake of the sacred water which has been blessed by the Water Chief.

The psycho-social function of the contemporary Sun Dance ceremonial can be defined in general terms as providing a means of achieving spiritual and emotional well-being, responsibility, and self-esteem when native people may find such feelings difficult to achieve in North American society.

Contemporary North American Indian Cult Dances as Therapeutic Movements

The significant individual and group therapeutic aspects of the revived Amerindian cult dance ceremonials have been described

above. They may be summarized as boosting ego-strength and group cohesion, thereby helping participants overcome anomic depression (*dépression anomique*), first described in 1972 by the author as a deleterious condition often found among younger North American Indian people and characterized by feelings of existential frustration, discouragement, defeat, lowered self-esteem and sometimes moral disorientation, in the context of cultural confusion, relative deprivation, and anomie. Anomic depression is manifested in psychic, psychophysiologic and behavioral symptom formation, often associated with alcohol and drug abuse (cf. Jilek 1972, 1974, 1982).

Contemporary North American Indian Cult Dances as Ideological Movements

The public revival of the Amerindian cult dance ceremonials presents an opportunity for the young to identify with their "proud ancestors" and thus to escape the anomie and ideological indifference of the parent generation. However, pre-contact Amerindian religion had long ago been suppressed as a result of the combined onslaught of Western ecclesiastical, educational and judicial authorities. Their attacks focussed on shamanic institutions and on the cult dance ceremonials against which legal sanctions were applied in the past. Many young North American Indian people grow up with a vague memory of fragments of aboriginal oral tradition, handed down to them during childhood days by their grandparents. The dim and rudimentary recollection of ancient lore mainly engenders in them a deep-rooted feeling of belonging to an old culture entirely different from that of majority society. This feeling resists the assimilative influence of Western school and job; even of mixed marriage. It shapes individual reactions to traumatic experiences in "White" society, and today increasingly guides the young Amerindian towards efforts which aim at the preservation and promotion of a distinctly Amerindian cultural identity. In the revived ceremonials, Amerindian cultural propaganda has now a definite place as native leaders and ritualists strive to revitalize their heritage and to uphold to the young the ideal of "Indianness," today a pan-Amerindian rallying cry akin to the pan-African "négritude" of Césaire and Senghor. In their espousal of "Indianness," prominent ritualists increasingly confront the audience with an idealized image of aboriginal culture in

contrasting juxtaposition with obvious or alleged defects of "White" society. This culture propaganda presents Amerindian and "White" cultural values in terms of binary oppositions: spiritual vs. materialistic, peaceful vs. aggressive; trusting vs. deceitful; promoting health vs. engendering disease; respectful to, and in harmony with, nature vs. wasteful, destroying and polluting nature's blessings.

Speechmaking at dance ceremonials follows the example of recognized Amerindian spokesmen with the appeal for an emerging pan-Amerindian nationalism based on the assertion of an inherent superiority of Amerindian over "White" culture. In this way an opposition mythology takes over the functions of traditional mythology in the ceremonials and may eventually replace original mythological traditions. As the established churches are losing their hold on the Amerindian people, the credibility of officially sanctioned Judaeo-Christian mythology has suffered considerably. Alternate Amerindian versions of the creation story circulate that are now presented as revelation of very ancient, genuine Amerindian tradition from times "long before the White man came." It is in these syncretic formulations that Amerindian opposition mythology most clearly manifests its mythopoetic powers.

Here is the credo of a well-known Canadian Indian writer: "Even Indian folklore notes that long ago Indians sent the Great Spirit across the oceans to take their religion to the god-less white man and that the white man killed him. Other Indian legends, handed down from father to son for generations around the camp-fire, differ in detail but generally tell of the creation of the world and all the animals and living things on it, and of man. They relate the story of the virgin birth of a spiritual leader, the story of the great flood and they tell of the triumph of the spirit of good over the spirit of evil in a great battle. Long before the white man came to the new world, Indians held ceremonies of thanksgiving and of spring's coming. There were sacrifices and offerings and prayers to win favor or appease the spirits. There was the shared suffering with the Great Spirit that came with the self-torture of the sun-dance and other religious ceremonies" (Cardinal 1969, p. 80).

The Western plateau and Pacific coast of North America was in the mid-19th century the arena of an important religious movement, the Prophet Dance (cf. Spier 1935; Suttles 1957), in which a millenarian expectation led the Indians to believe that a total renovation of the world would come about through their imitation of

ancestral ritual dancing. Closely related was Smohalla's Religion (cf. MacMurray 1887; Money 1896), spreading to the southern Salishan tribes with a strongly anti-Western doctrine that preached behavior directly opposed to the prevailing Protestant ethos of the White intruders. Smohalla extolled the virtues of ecstasy and dreaming over the White man's philosophy of rationalism and work.

These movements, characterized by a chiliastic pan-Amerindian nativism, provide early examples of resistance to the oppressor, in the theoretical framework of a pan-Amerindian opposition mythology proclaiming the moral superiority of the Amerindian and the White man's doom, in an apocalyptic vision. The revived Amerindian cult dance ceremonials of today have important aspects of revivalistic-nativistic movements (Linton 1943), namely a "conscious, organized attempt on the part of a society's members to revive selected aspects of its culture," in a "situation of inequality between the societies in contact"; and of revitalization movements (Wallace 1956), namely a "deliberate, organized conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture," in type both nativistic ("elimination of alien persons, customs, values") and revivalistic ("institution of customs, values, and even aspects of nature which are thought to have been in the maze-way of previous generations but are not now present"). The necessary ideological basis is provided by the emerging pan-Amerindian opposition mythology. Its content deals with the Amerindian-White conflict by asserting Amerindian superiority in all essentials. Its form is that of a dialectic system of binary oppositions. In recognizing this, one is reminded of Lévi-Strauss' comments on the role of binary opposition in the mythology of the Americas: "For all probability all systems of myth lend themselves to binary operations, since they are an inherent part of the mechanism that nature has created in order to allow for the functioning of language and thought" (Lévi-Strauss 1971, p. 500). The binary code, which is biologically rooted in principles of central nervous system functioning, renders the new pan-Amerindian opposition mythology an effective carrier of important socio-cultural messages, as has been, through countless centuries, the traditional mythology of the Americas. Today, the message of fundamental importance is that of Amerindian superiority in spite of humiliation, and of Amerindian renaissance in spite of defeat. Thus, opposition mythology, as a dialective pan-Amerindian ideology which

today supersedes tribal and regional folklore, becomes an effective weapon in the North American Indian's struggle for political, social and cultural assertion. What factors account for the phenomenon of Amerindian cultural revival all over North America, of which the revivals of the cult dance ceremonials are paradigmatic? The historian may look for underlying causes explaining the synchronicity of the revivals. They all occurred between the mid-1950s and the late 1960s, which was the era of global decolonization and geopolitical retreat by Western powers. These historical processes were reflected in profound changes in the prevailing Zeitgeist. The once glorious Western self-image was deflated, the once dominant eurocentric world view abandoned. Western superiority claims were relinquished in favor of an upgrading of the Western image of non-Western cultures, in this case the image of Amerindian cultures. It was in such a changing climate that the phenomenon of "Amerindian Renaissance" came about in North America.

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