

**An Examination of the Role of Tarot Cards in Helping to Establish Identity, Focusing on
the New Age Spirituality Culture found in Sedona, Arizona**

Social and Cultural Anthropology

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Research Question

What role do Tarot Cards play in helping to establish identity, focusing on the New Age Spirituality culture found in Sedona, Arizona?

Introduction

Tarot Cards, a tool of self-reflection, use pre-linguistic signs and symbols to convey messages that influence one's perspective of oneself and the world. Tarot Cards contribute to focus on self in New Age Spirituality, including spiritual Meccas like Sedona, Arizona. The overlapping ideals between using Tarot Cards for the benefit (or consequence) of one's identity, and the complex and dynamic phenomenon of New Age Spirituality can reveal the ways in which Tarot Cards help establish identity on a societal level, as well as for individuals.

This research intends to examine the role of Tarot Cards in helping to establish identity, focusing on the New Age Spirituality culture found in Sedona, Arizona.

Tarot Cards foster traits in individual identity like self-awareness, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence. This perpetuates the focus on self in the New Age Spiritual Movement. In places like Sedona, Arizona, where there is a higher-than-average use of Tarot Cards and attraction of New Age Spiritualists, the effects of these phenomena can be observed intertwining, showing an evident correlation between the two.

Sedona's culture and many spiritual businesses thrive because of appropriation of cultural values, 'selling' a spiritual identity to consumers which unethically consumes values from other cultures. At the same time, the societal identity formed by the New Age movement aims towards harmony, not discord, between peoples. Some argue that the connections made between Indigenous people, spiritual workers, and pilgrim-tourists of Sedona are connections of solidarity and peace, rather than of exploitation and strife.

Furthermore, the individual economic values perpetuated by the New Age Movement, such as bartering over monetization of services, and emphasis on the natural world rather than consumerism, also shape societal identity. These qualities contribute to building peaceful relationships between Indigenous people and New Age Spiritualists.

Does value-based Spirituality help to overcome or 'transcend' these cultural challenges? Or is the positive, subjective influence of Tarot Cards and broader spiritual culture on individual and group identity (through these means) just not enough?

This investigation concludes that Tarot Cards help to establish one's identity in a subjective and often beneficial way. Nonetheless, as those who partake in Tarot further participate in the New Age movement, the societal identity perpetuated by pilgrim-tourist Meccas like Sedona is intertwined with cultural appropriation. Paradoxically, the characteristics of identity formed by the New Age movement through these spiritual practices help overcome the unethical sourcing of identity in the New Age Movement. Thus, the role Tarot Cards play helps to establish a

positive identity through enforcing the focus on the Self, but not entirely without the exploitation of the Other throughout the broader New Age Spiritual Movement.

Anthropological Theory: Functionalism

The Department of Anthropology at the University of Alabama describes Functionalism, as taught by Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, to focus on the more biological, physiological, and internal needs, and how we fulfill them with our systems (like religion, kinship, and economy).

Neo-functionalism is a British school of thought concerning structural-functionalism which renewed in the 1980s. This focuses on how cultural processes, such as rituals, ideologies, and values integrate social structures. Neo-functionalism considers how problematic cultural behaviors (such as appropriation) result largely from the 'essential' role they play in benefitting the larger systems (pilgrim-tourism) in which they are embedded. Neo-functionalism focuses more on the environment, populations, and ecosystems, whereas structural-functionalism focuses on culture, making both of these perspectives applicable to Sedona's eco and cultural phenomena (Proth et al).

Collected Evidence

This investigation will use two main ethnographic sources as evidence for the effect of Tarot Cards on identity, as well as examining the culture of New Age Spiritualism in Sedona, Arizona. These specific ethnographies were chosen because they detail the effect of Tarot Cards when

used for self-reflection, and because Sedona, Arizona, is a New Age Spiritual Mecca (Ikahiv 263), where there is an extremely high concentration of Tarot Card use, as well as other New Age practices. Other research from various sources is also used as evidence for analysis.

Tarot Cards: Definition and History

Tarot Cards are a common tool for self-reflection. Each card symbolizes a unique human archetype or universal human experiences we each face in our daily lives (Sosteric 357).

Occultists and authors have linked the imagery of Tarot to many ancient mythologies without historical evidence throughout history. In 1854, Eliphas Levi wrote a book called *The Doctrine and Ritual of High Magic*, stating that Tarot Cards correlated to the Hebrew Alphabet, planets, elements, Zodiac Signs, and the tree of life.

The Rider-Waite-Smith deck was the first deck produced having detailed symbologies on all 78 cards. The cards became more understandable and easier for everyday people to interpret. In the 21st Century, Tarot Cards play an essential role in New Age Spirituality culture, helping users to form individual, spiritual, and collective identities (Horowitz).

Common Uses

Tarot Cards are most commonly used by asking a question regarding one's life, shuffling the deck, pulling one or multiple cards from the deck and placing them into a 'spread' arranged on a flat surface, and then interpreting the meaning of each card, its relation to the other cards in the spread, and relation to the question asked. Most uses of Tarot Cards fall into one of two

categories: divination (fortune telling), or self-reflection. Self-reflection offers the Tarot as an inclusive tool for all people - regardless of religious and spiritual beliefs. The lines between external spiritual communication, and internal meaning-making, are blurred in many spiritual paradigms. Signs and symbols in environments are inevitably interpreted through the lens of the self to some degree (Semetsky). Therefore, this investigation will focus on Tarot card use in self-reflection.

Questions asked can be as specific or broad as the user would like. Using question form is optional, a statement can be focused on instead. Overall, using the Tarot deck is very open-ended (Kate).

Tarot Cards: Ethnographic Sample

In Gigi Hoffman's thesis titled *Tarot Cards: An Investigation of their Benefit as a Tool for Self Reflection*, she conducts ethnographic research with the goal of discovering the way in which regular users of Tarot Cards employ the cards for self-reflection (iii).

Research Methods

Hoffman gathered data by conducting qualitative interviews (informal conversations with participants, four female co-researchers) and compared each case. She used the snowball sampling method, where the participants were chosen because of their expertise regarding the phenomenon (Gall et al., 2005). The selection criterion was that they use Tarot Cards at least once a month for self-reflective purposes, for self-examination, and for clarifying one's emotions

(Hoffman 33). Snowball sampling is non-random and used when it is rare to find someone who meets the characteristics desired. Initial participants then refer others to potentially be interviewed as well. Sometimes, there are overall biases from a large network of peers, but since Hoffman is interviewing four participants on a highly subjective topic, this ethical issue is unlikely (Dudovskiy).

The postmodernist philosophical approach is used, meaning that through conversation, narrative, language, context, and inter-relational thought, knowledge is formed (29). Qualitative interviews allow the researcher to have both an emic and etic social context of the data. If knowledge is formed between two people, then the researcher should record their thoughts during the research process, embracing the perspective of the participant. However, for the most applicable analysis of data, an etic approach is needed to remain in the role of the investigator. This is done by personally reflecting on each interview (34).

She used the heuristic research method to study the use of Tarot Cards. Douglas and Moustakas write that heuristics “is a passionate and discerning personal involvement.” Heuristic research begins with subjective reflections, involving self-analysis and dialogue, and develops into a definitive exposition (Hoffman 30). However, too much personal involvement has ethical implications. In this case, it is well-justified by the subjective nature of the topic. Socially and politically, interviewing exclusively female co-researchers, and only four people total, ignores a large demographic of Tarot users.

Healing Images

Prelinguistic symbols illustrating Tarot Cards give a platform for interpretation that does not use words. Colors, images, and objects portrayed in Tarot Cards are universally symbolic regardless of differing interpretations. Whether the color 'yellow' is interpreted as a color of youth and wealth, or whether a more personal interpretation of the color is used (reminding one of a notable person or event) the thought process of connecting physical forms to mental ideas remains the same (Semetsky).

The cultural universal of numerology is also used. Tarot Cards are based on the numerology of cycles. Each element has cards 1-10, plus royalty, with 1 (Ace) signifying beginnings, and 10 signifying endings, and each number in between represents different stages of cycles. Once again, numbers are symbols open to individual interpretation as well as common definitions, enforced by religions (333 - The Holy Trinity, etc), and personal numerologies like birth dates and lucky numbers.

Strong imagery in Tarot Cards allows the potential for deep pictorial analysis. The co-researchers noted that understanding the full definition of each card is not necessary, and interpreting the healing images on the cards allows for more individualized definitions to be drawn. The images on each card have the capacity to induce growth and change (Hoffman 60). The strong

symbolism found in Tarot also appears in everyday life, helping people to notice synchronicities and correlations between their thoughts in Tarot, in application to the real world.

Data Analysis

Through these interviews, Hoffman drew various conclusions about how the use of Tarot benefits one's life, as well as certain characteristics brought about by one's use and opinions of Tarot Cards.

Tarot Cards produce "greater self-knowledge and mental and physical well-being" (67). Also, they awaken a sense of enchantment and provide reliable comfort in difficult times. Tarot Cards were also reported as being useful for gaining new perspectives, and when feeling uncertain or stuck, the cards can offer insights that one may have been unable to conclude on their own (68).

They are used to understand the present state of a situation and determine the course of action, whether that is inner (emotions), or changing an outside situation, fostering personal growth.

Often, their interpretation of the cards is a reflection of their own emotions and mental state. If they are unclear and ungrounded about a particular situation, the answer will not appear as easily in the cards (54).

Personal interpretations of the cards can reveal and influence one's mind state. The co-researchers encourage Tarot clients to own their own decks, as ultimate self-authority comes from individual interpretation. For example, when one is in a darker mood, one may pick up on darker imagery in cards, ignoring positive messages. Individually reading the cards fosters

greater self-awareness, making one more mindful and observant of one's emotions (63). The Tarot Cards offer both confirmations of previous thoughts and new perspectives when feeling stuck or lost.

Another key quality of Tarot Cards is the intentionality behind the cards. Co-researchers discussed that sometimes, instead of drawing the cards at random, they will sift through a deck to find the cards they desire, meditate upon them, and display them until they fulfill their purpose. For example, when looking for a new job, one co-researcher chose cards symbolizing success, money, and balance. In this way, one can implement their own identity and goals onto the cards, and be more proactive about desired outcomes, rather than feeling 'controlled' by the cards (64).

Overall, Tarot users dedicate time and methodology towards introspection and self-reflection, making them more aware and mindful of their whole identities. This mindfulness through Tarot (and often other outlets in New Age Spirituality) can become a pillar of one's identity when habitual practice is formed. This individual identity encourages the authority of self, and promotes healthy ways of viewing one's thoughts, emotions, and life events. Also, it is important to note skeptics of Tarot inherently establish some aspect of their identity through being 'apart' from this group. Thus, in some way, Tarot use helps establish healthy views of identity and coping mechanisms for many individuals.

New Age Spirituality

Spiritual capital is a cultural resource to be acquired and exchanged through reciprocal relations. This reflects the postmodernist philosophy discussed in Hoffman's exploration of Tarot Cards, defining knowledge as a shared, linguistic, and dynamic tool. Conversation "reinforces collective boundaries and generates fresh interactive networks, providing a context of exchange for emerging forms of 'spiritual capital'" (Guest 190). In 'unorganized religion,' through conversations, shared experiences, and media exposure, personal and subjective aspects of both personal and group identity are a result of New Age culture (Sutcliffe and Gilhus 13).

Labels and Identity

In *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion*, Steven J. Sutcliffe and Ingvild Gilhus wrote that in 2011, they surveyed at a lecture-style event given by international angel-guru Lorna Byrne. Out of 263 people, only 4 checked the box identifying themselves as 'New Age,' and the most frequent choice was 'spiritual person' (243). New Age Spirituality itself encompasses a diverse array of belief systems, further perpetuating the inclusivity of 'New Agers' and others, finding solace in spirituality to account for cultural differences (Ikahiv 263). Many different 'denominations' of people are part of this phenomenon, creating commonality on the societal and spiritual level of identity, regardless of differences between people (Crockford 53).

Thus, in the context of this investigation, "New Age Spirituality" refers to either spiritual or religious people who hold contemporary values of New Age Spirituality (self-transformation and discovery), or people who identify as a 'spiritual person,' so as not to exclude those with similar beliefs.

Sedona, Arizona

Sedona, Arizona is a 'New Age Mecca' (Ikahiv), attracting New Age pilgrim-tourists, a unique contemporary phenomenon that is not exclusive to Sedona. The "spiritual magnetism" of Sedona was most recently popularized in the 1970s and 1980s. There are four main vortexes and several smaller ones, all described in various ways depending on the subjective experience of the individual in attendance. It is said the 'life force energy' or 'mysterious power spots' of Sedona make it a natural spiritual attractor, and, arguably, the effect on the identity of pilgrim-tourism is related to the self-transformational experiences highly associated with these vortexes (Guest 119).

Susannah Crockford's 2-year ethnographic stay in Sedona allows her to paint a vivid picture of its real-life dynamics. Those engaged with New Age Spirituality in Sedona are a numerical minority. With a total population of around 17,000 people, there is predominantly a retirement community and a tourism community, of which permanent residents conduct town-council legislation to minimize the intrusion of 'hippies,' by passing policies like prohibiting camping within city limits and turning trailer parks into time-shares. Not all residents believe in the power of the vortexes or even engage in the New Age Spirituality found there (52). It is important to evaluate the effect of the heterogeneous mixture of identities on the overall conditions of Sedona. Although the use of Tarot Cards and other spiritual services is popular, many Sedona residents' identities are affected by their personal skepticism or separation from the New Age Spirituality in their environment.

Other vs. Self: Ethnographic Sample

With New Age Spirituality, past knowledge is used as the syllabus for contemporary values.

From the history of Tarot Cards to Astrology, built as a scientific tool in the second millennium BC in Mesopotamia (Crockford 53), and Christianity's reliance on the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, influencing 'New Agers' who are liberal Christians or Neo-Pagans, the variety of knowledge of New Age Spiritualists (Ikahiv 263) draw upon resources of many different cultures throughout history.

For these reasons, the concepts of cultural appropriation and consumption are ever more important to discuss, as the values from other cultures are the backbone of the identity that comes with New Age Spirituality.

The physicality of the location of Sedona unifies specific themes within identity, and Mayan knowledge has influenced the cultural and economic success of Sedona greatly. The spiritual vortexes of Sedona are long-held sacred places, valued by Indigenous people for vastly many generations. The spiritual commodities and self-transformational experiences 'promised' in Sedona are a product of New Age Spirituality's capitalistic and appropriative relationship to these values.

The paradoxical question is whether the cultural appropriation and consumption that inarguably take place in New Age Spirituality culture perhaps also has positive benefits in the construction

and meaning of identity for believers. Up-close and intimate participation in New Age Spirituality can reveal the pervasive effects of colonialism, and its effects on realms such as spiritual identity, economic relations, and place-hood – in both Sedona and the lives of New Age Spiritualists more generally.

Research Methods

Curtis Coats, Ph.D., offers a unique perspective on the construction of identity through ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ in a chapter of *Media, Spiritualities, and Social Change* titled *Spiritual Tourism-Promised and Problems: The Case of Sedona, Arizona*. He argues that although cultural appropriation through traveling often objectifies people and culture, fosters ‘spectacle and gazing,’ and forces Others to sell their spaces, practices, and beliefs, there is still a recognizable effect of identity through the meaningful encounters and relationships of solidarity formed through ‘sacred appropriation’ (118).

Coats uses a ‘mixed-method qualitative analysis’ to study the case of Sedona, Arizona. This involves “participant observation, in-depth interviews, and text analysis. (He) interviewed more than 30 pilgrim-tourists and practitioners, attended two spiritual conferences (Four Directions Wisdom Gathering and Prophet’s Conference Sedona), participated in four guided vortex tours, and observed pilgrim-tourists at the four major vortexes. (He) also coded and analyzed 63 spiritual brochures, 14 websites, and one issue each of *Sedona Journal of Emergence!* (June 2006), *Awareness* (June 2007), and *Four Corners Magazine* (May 2007); and one book, *The Secret* (Byrne 2006)” (118-119).

Data Analysis

Sedona's spiritual tourism includes a decentralized market bazaar, holding the theme of focus on self and interior parts of identity also found in dominant, late modern, Western culture (Guest 181). Marketing materials perpetuate the appeal of self-discovery and inner transformation, both on a broader cultural level and within micro-level interactions on spiritual tours. People offering goods and services use dialogue of personal choice, empowerment, and intention, through ritualized practice, such as self-guided tours and connecting one's energies to the energies of the vortexes. This mediates the relationship between 'Other,' and 'Self,' showing the two are connected through the scripts of individualism offered by particular media products (like Tarot Cards) and pilgrim-tourist attractions. This relationship both increases the spiritual magnetism of Sedona and reinforces the emphasis on self in broader public discourse (120).

VisitSedona.com says 'Our Native brothers and sisters are sharing their tribal wisdom, showing us how to live in harmony with the Earth and all our relations.'

The Native mythology Sedona incorporates into its marketing materials cultivates a unique relationship between Other and self. Tourists can "watch Native dance, listen to Native Song, participate in Native ceremonies, and walk on sacred, Native ground" (124). This creates the desire to '*be* Indian,' in self and community, in Sedona.

But, what are the true implications of this sense of belonging between self and Others? The moral space in Sedona helps people to 'express a desire to live in harmony not discourse,' find

more meaning than money and work, and connect to family and community. There is also a genuine desire to connect with and understand the 'Native Way,' opening doorways for relationships of solidarity and meaning with local Natives (125).

With self as the ultimate authority, a sense of entitlement is created for the connection and community that come with interactions with the Native land and spiritual customs. This objectifies the Native space as a 'heroic sage,' and the identity of Other becomes fixed and passive in Self's demand of the ancient 'self-serving' wisdom offered in Sedona. This is cultural appropriation, normalized to its culprits through the understanding of 'spirituality as the marker of difference' (125). The focus on self perpetuates this phenomenon, as people are 'set free' from the social forms of industrial society (class, stratification, family, gender, etc) and create their own stratifications based on their ambitions and interests, which in this case, would be spirituality. The pacifying of the Other inhibits cultural sensitivity and awareness. Thus, Sedona's potential for solidarity and social change is inhibited by the paradox of the identity of self (126).

Economics and identity

Some scholars argue that New Age spirituality is a form of 'self-spirituality,' an expression of the capitalistic trend to convert everything into a marketplace. However, New Age approaches to landscape and nature differ noticeably from the commodification usually identified in consumer capitalism. The unique relationship with self brings forth qualities of New Age thinking that contest the popular understanding of the relationship between self and natural world (Ikahiv

263). This investigation will briefly detail the ways in which the identity formed by New Age Spirituality fosters a *lack* of consumerist impact, making economic consumption a less accurate reflection of New Age identity.

The identities of business owners in Sedona influence the New Age movement. Money is seen to have negative energy, whereas barter has a higher energetic vibration (Crockford 58). Feelings against consumerism and advertising are ingrained into New Age conscience, thus creating a drift away, and a resentment for the traditional economic interactions which often encompass cultural resources (69).

Connection to the natural world draws pilgrim-tourists to Sedona. Highly sought energetic vortexes attract New Agers whose identities often emphasize living in harmony with nature. Focus on living in 'harmony' (Coats 125) and personal transformation is done through connection to the Earth, rather than the institutions and profit-mechanisms often relied on otherwise (Recio 5).

Socio-economic status is not important to the identity created by the New Age movement, no matter how many 'spiritual products' are owned, the power lies in the individual, not in pilgrim-tourist expenditures or excessive ownership of products like Tarot Cards. Thus, although media products are consumed, New Age Spirituality emphasizes ignoring and nearly 'shunning' economic implications on identity (Recio).

Critical Evaluation

Tim Ingold, in the book *Anthropology, Why It Matters*, explains that the wisdom provided by the Anthropological perspective allows us to truly learn from one another. The complex formation of identity, especially regarding 'hard to define' concepts such as spirituality, is difficult to study with uniformity. We rely on 'knowledge production' to understand the world (7). Ingold argues that rather, Anthropology is the pursuit of the *wisdom* needed to address societal issues which shape our contemporary world. Knowledge closes in on solutions, and wisdom opens us up to the process of life, in its variety and unpredictability (9). To derive applicable wisdom from hard-to-study subjects, Anthropologists often require a more subjective relationship with what is being studied.

Participant observation is not about 'knowledge production,' but about "joining (others) in the common task of finding ways to live" (14). Ethnography is a commitment to learning by doing and allowing ourselves to be *educated* by others. As ethnographers Hoffman and Coats' research shows, often using mixed-method analysis allows for heuristic approaches to learning. Using personal journals to document one's relationship with knowledge attributes to the postmodernism of the New Age movement; knowledge is created and shared through dialogue with one another, making the formation of identity a cultural resource (spiritual capital). Immersing oneself in the culture of a specific case like Sedona, as Coats did, allows a well-developed perspective of a broader cultural phenomenon to be captured, allowing us to accurately observe relational identities. These ways of learning are paramount in observing the formation of identity in spiritual contexts.

Conclusion

Through the discussion and analysis of evidence, this investigation concludes Tarot Cards help establish identity in individual and subjective ways. Mindfulness, self-awareness, problem-solving, and focus on self-care are a result of using Tarot Cards for self-reflection. This parallels the broader cultural phenomenon of New Age Spirituality, with an increased focus on the self, clearly exhibited by the culture of Sedona, Arizona. The appropriation of Mayan culture which allows businesses in Sedona to thrive is somewhat combated by New Agers' desires to form relationships of solidarity with Indigenous people, but nevertheless, Sedona's potential for positive social relationships is inhibited by the 'entitlement' to Mayan knowledge perpetuated by the societal identity in Sedona. The characteristics of New Age Spiritualists invoke behaviors that reduce economic influence, like bartering and connection to the natural world. These characteristics reflect aspects of identity establishment in New Age Spirituality, as well as the nuanced benefits and consequences of the New Age movements and practices on individual and societal identity.

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Figures



(Joelle)