

THE INDIGENOUS ANARCHIST PRESENTS

# ETIQUETTE

## *in Native Spaces*



A practical guide on how  
to act with respect in  
Indigenous communities

# NOTE:

*There are more than 500 tribes in the United States alone, each with distinct cultures and values. The tips herein are generalities from my lived experience in tribal spaces. If a culturally-involved Native person tells you “that might be how they do things but we do them different” then please respect that. I do not speak for all Indigenous people.*

# ETIQUETTE

## GUIDELINE 1: INTRODUCTIONS

In Indigenous community it is often expected you introduce yourself to everyone new around you when you enter a space (whatever is reasonable).

All ages included. Be prepared to say aloud your name and your tribal or ethnic background. People might ask about your family, why you are there, or your role in your community as well. Do this even if not asked to. This shows respect and understanding of our ways.

# ETIQUETTE

## GUIDELINE 2: HANDSHAKES

When meeting Native people it is common to shake their hand. Know that in Indigenous community a \*soft\* handshake is considered appropriate as opposed to the firm handshake of colonial America. It symbolizes friendliness. And since you will be greeting the elderly and children also its relevant to state they really don't need a gripping handshake anyway. If you do meet a Native who goes in firm feel free to respond likewise, otherwise go in soft.



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## GUIDELINE 3: LAND RIGHTS

When you enter a Native space it is important to know whose tribal land you are on. Be able to pronounce the tribal name (to the best of your ability) and when folks introduce themselves mentally note who is from the same tribe and who is not. It makes a difference. As easy as this is, it is critically important. When people enter our space without a clue they give off a colonizer tourism vibe and it might just make us wary of your intentions.

# ETIQUETTE

## GUIDELINE 4: BETWEEN

In Indigenous community it is considered rude to walk between two people who are talking. The polite thing to do is go around even if it puts you at an inconvenience. If you must pass through - a quiet but clear "sorry, excuse me" is warranted. And, generally speaking, if you see folks in Native space walking around a direct path to something... instead of through it...do the same yourself.

# ETIQUETTE

## GUIDELINE 5: PRIVACY

In Native community stories are isoften private. Unless you have permission to re-tell those stories then you shouldn't do it. This is true even if the story is told in public. It's the same for many cultural rituals & songs, you need permission to replicate them. Why? To make sure you know enough to speak or perform it correctly. This is how we pass down history, culture, medicine...it is important to get it right.

# ETIQUETTE

## GUIDELINE 6: POINTING

Using a single finger to point at objects, people, or animals is considered very rude in many tribes. What do we do instead? Point with a full hand, chin, head, or lips. So...if you are talking to Natives and they point their lips at you, don't mistake it for flirting!

# ETIQUETTE

## GUIDELINE 7: WHISTLING

Most Natives don't whistle at night and we expect you to do the same while in our company. This is a part of the spiritual & cultural beliefs of many many tribes (globally actually!). If you want to joke and tease around with it be prepared to get left behind, because we ain't playing. P.S. I am not going to get into "why", because this is one of those stories you should hear by being in real-life proximity with Native people. Or that is what I was taught anyway.

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## GUIDELINE 7B: TABOO

It is extremely rude in Indigenous community to: a) talk about taboo topics in space told not to; and b) to think you've learned the answer to something taboo by googling it. So, for example, if I say we are NOT going to talk about why whistling at night is taboo, that you have to learn it from a Native IRL, and then you come into my space and give everyone a why...that is disrespect. And if you think you know because of Google... no you don't.

# ETIQUETTE

## GUIDELINE 8: REGALIA

Two of the most common types of cultural clothing seen by Non-Natives are Regalia and Ribbon Skirts/Shirts. These are worn commonly at Pow-Wows but now also often at Protests and other Public Events. We also have more private, and tribally specific, Ceremonial clothing. In no case are these to be called costumes. In no case is uninvited touching okay.



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## GUIDELINE 8: REGALIA (RUH-GEHL-YA)



RIBBON SHIRT



RIBBON SKIRT



REGALIA



# ETIQUETTE

## **GUIDELINE 9: HUMBLENESS**

Humbleness is valued in Native Society.

For example: our most treasured leaders, medicine people and elders don't often go around introducing themselves as such. You might never know until someone else tells you. When we accomplish big things for our people we don't often brag about it. Of course social media has created some nuance here but ..for the most part.. try avoid bragging and name dropping and self congratulations. You will be held in higher esteem.

# ETIQUETTE

## GUIDELINE 10: PHOTOS

Photography at Native events and gatherings isn't always welcome. Even events that allow photography might restrict it at specific times. This is true even if you see other cameras there. (they probably have special instructions).

It is advisable that you always ask before taking pictures at an event (seek out an organizer or M.C.) so you don't accidentally cause offense. While this sometimes has a spiritual component this has more to do with invasion of privacy,

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## GUIDELINE 10: PHOTOS

Some examples of why we have need for privacy:

- For a long time our cultural practices were outlawed and they were only kept alive by doing them in secret, the government still monitors some practices today.
- Non-Natives often steal our Ceremonies and components of our culture and then replicate them improperly for profit.
- Some Ceremonies and cultural events are closed to outsiders.
- It's important that we aren't distracted or interrupted by lookie-loos.

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## GUIDELINE 11: ELDERS

In Native community we respect our Elders. They are served food first and are not asked to wait in lines behind young people. We listen when they speak and do not shout at them. They are seen as a blessing to a home, not a burden. When an Elder gives advice its to be taken seriously & as an honor that they took the time to tell it to you specifically. Even annoying Elders whose advice is always off are treated with respect.

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## GUIDELINE 11: ELDERS

So, when in Native spaces we ask you to do the same. Please treat our Elders with respect, they have had to survive so much to make it into old age. And if you are ever at a Native event, like a potluck or pow-wow dinner, unless you are an honored guest or Elder yourself, make your way to the appropriate spot towards the back of the line. Or! Offer to help serve Elders at their tables.

# ETIQUETTE

## GUIDELINE 12: DIVERSITY

Native people come in all skin tones and hair textures...and always have. We have always been diverse. Colonialism has amplified that diversity, sometimes by choice and sometimes not. Blood quantum, or treating Natives like horses who need a Pedigree to prove their "Indianness", is a project of erasure. So, when you meet Native people - Never assume someone isn't "Native enough" by their skin tone. AND DO NOT EVER ask Natives "how much are you?"

Note that our respect for diversity applies to gender identity as well. Many tribes have more than 2 Traditional genders.



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## GUIDELINE 13: YOUR LANE

If you are not Native don't respond to questions asked to Native people about their culture. It's not a question for you. You are not an expert. Stay in your lane. You do not have to colonize everything.

# ETIQUETTE

## GUIDELINE 14: COMPLIMENTS

In many Native communities (worldwide!) it is considered rude to overcompliment someone. In fact, in some tribes if you overcompliment a person's... earrings for example... they are obligated then to give them to you. Even if at great cost to themselves.

Another example: in some tribes too many compliments is said to bring the attention of evil, real or spiritual, to your family. So, if you say their baby is cute too many times ...

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## GUIDELINE 14: COMPLIMENTS

they might tell you "oh no, he is not that cute, look at this lump on his head and this redness on his cheeks". This ties deeply with Lesson 9 -to be humble. Consider how this value distributes equity. Nobody is better than anyone and anyone who has too much will end up having to give that away. A single plain compliment is enough if you should want to give one. And a gift of labor or goods is even better. Ex: bring baby a gift or embody 'you helped me and instead of feed you compliments i help you'.

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## GUIDELINE 15: MINORS

I shared previously that Elders are held in high esteem in Indigenous community.

What you may not know yet is...so are children. We do not isolate children from our community. They go to meetings, Ceremonies, events and potlucks. And they are allowed to be children in those spaces without it being a sign of disrespect. In Native space it is important to honor the presence of children. Greet them and treat them with respect. They are precious.

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## GUIDELINE 16: HAIR

Easy one. We ask our hair not to be touched without permission. This applies to all of us, children as well, and we take it quite seriously. That can mean our hair growing out our head or, for

Traditionalists, it can even apply to random strands of hair on a jacket or in a hairbrush. And if a Native ever asks you to braid them up ...best to ask if they are single before you agree or you might just be signing up for a fight.

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## GUIDELINE 17: DNA

Belonging to Natives as an ethnicity requires a blood connection to Indigenous people through your Ancestors. In this regard, there is self identification and official tribal enrollment, both accepted in Native community. Noting that official enrollment has stricter standards of proof of descendancy than self-identification. For no tribe, however, does DNA testing count as proof of descendancy. It's correlative data, not causal.

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## GUIDELINE 17: DNA

What this means is that you are unlikely to be taken seriously if you tell tribal people you believe you are Native because a DNA test said so. In fact, we might find it both rude and tone deaf. If you want to reclaim tribal roots...do the work...find out who in your family was Native and what tribe they belonged to. And remember to self-identify we don't require a pedigree, we just have no room for colonial nonsense.



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## GUIDELINE 18: HELP OUT

Offer Help. In Native community everybody with ability serves a purpose. The work we do together serves as time to pass on culture, time for social bonding, and is done as a sign of respect for one another so no one person has to carry the load of labor. If you invited to a Potluck, Ceremony, or Gathering in Native space and you have the ability to do so....offer to help.

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## GUIDELINE 18: HELP OUT

Common help needs for newcomers are set-up, clean-up, wood chopping/carrying, and kitchen assistant (cooking and food prep). When you offer help you are showing respect to the hosts of the event and to the entire community. And you will be given respect in return.

Just don't think this works like it does in colonial community where offers of help will be quickly turned down. You very likely will be put to work. And if you are not...I suggest...offering again later.

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## GUIDELINE 19: GIFTING

Gift-giving is a love language. In pre-colonial tribal society those who gifted the most were held in highest esteem. Particularly when done with humbleness. These folks were abundant but shared that abundance with their community. In turn they received great social respects. Today we still do a lot of gift-giving in NDN country and we even have Ceremonies and cultural events that center this principle.

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## GUIDELINE 19: GIFTING

So, when interacting in Native spaces, you can show extra care by: Bringing food with you to people's houses. Staying late at events and helping clean up. Offering gifts to educators and elders who teach you lessons or give you advice. Know also that if you take too much without offering back folks might tease you about it until things change. And never never refuse a gift being offered to you. It is a sign of great disrespect.

FOOTNOTE: I AM USING COMMON  
VERNACULAR, I DO NOT SUPPORT THE 'FIVE  
LOVE LANGUAGE' BOOKS IN ANY WAY

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## **GUIDELINE 20: CELEBRATIONS**

We notice who celebrates on the ashes of our dead. We notice your attachment to Thanksgiving and the celebrations you hold over the mass slaughter of our people. And it makes you unsafe. If you occupy stolen land the kindest, most polite, thing you can do is not gather in celebration and feast on days that glorify acts of brutality against our people. Try enjoying Solstice instead, your Ancestors did.

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## GUIDELINE 21: GOSSIP

The function of gossip in Indigenous community is care. Some gossip serves as a form of accountability. The idea being if you don't want shamed for your poor actions, you shouldn't be doing them. This helps keep folks safe from abusers. But more commonly gossip serves to aid the community. So, if Aunt Mary tells you that person x is homeless, your responsibility is not to judge or shame them but to quietly offer person x some food or housing help.

Be careful though if you are the one gossiping, Native community is small and you just might be talking to a family member of the target of your gossip.

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## **GUIDELINE 22: EYE CONTACT**

In many Traditional Native societies eye contact had a different role than it does today. For some folks it was a sign of aggression. For others it was reserved for more intimate settings with family, close friends or in relationships. Today most Natives have adapted to the colonial standard of expected eye contact.. but most is not everyone. Know that forced eye contact can be seen as rude so just do your best to follow the lead of whomever you are talking to. Note also that lack of eye contact for Native people does not equate to rude or dishonest behavior.



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## **GUIDELINE 22: RESPECT LIFE**

In Native communities it is a general expectation that all life be treated with respect. This is a global Indigenous value. In Native spaces it is proper etiquette to treat everything with life as if it is of value. For example: Be kind to animals, take bugs outside instead of squishing them, be very careful not to litter or vandalize natural spaces. This expectation is amplified in Ceremonial and Sacred spaces.

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## GUIDELINE 22: SACRED ITEMS

Respect is a core value in Indigenous community. We respect Elders, children, people with differences, animals, and the natural world. We even respect specific places like particular mountain ranges or places we go to dance. AND! We respect items that are hand made, where energy and love are put into the making, especially Ceremonial items. So, if something looks powerful or neat to you then please ask before touching. It is very normal in Native community to ask before touching and to show special care for particular inanimate objects.

**This is still true if something, like a feather, drops on the ground. Please do not pick it up, just tell someone.**

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## GUIDELINE 22: FOOD GIFTING

As is true in many cultural communities it is considered rude in Native society to refuse food when it is offered to you. In today's world where there is so much diversity in diet this can be difficult to navigate. In most cases you can simply explain yourself and nobody will take offense. But! if you are in a situation you think might be more sensitive know it is not abnormal to go for a little walk if something you find unappetizing is being passed around.

A tip for those with restrictive diets: bring something you can eat as a gift, so when you have to refuse food the door for food-sharing isn't closed and they know what they can make you next time (if they want).

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## GUIDELINE 22: WAITING

In Indigenous community punctuality is not as important as in colonial culture. It is normal to expect meetings to start several minutes late and for folks to show up even after then. It is not generally taken as a sign of disrespect. So, if someone makes you wait... don't take it personally. And if you use respectful discretion in being tardy yourself, you can expect the same.

This is often referred to as "running on Indian Time"

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## GUIDELINE 22: SOBRIETY

You should expect any Native event you attend to be a Sober event (unless told otherwise). We do not generally allow alcohol or drugs at our events, doubly so for Ceremonies. We do not just expect folks to not use substances during the event but also to not show up inebriated.

In strict circles this also includes use of recreational tobacco or marijuana but in most modern settings folks can step aside to a "smoking place" when appropriate. We will kick people out of events for breaking this rule.

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## GUIDELINE 22: COPYCAT

In Native spaces we incorporate a lot of cultural Tradition with modern life. If you are ever in a position where you go to an event or meeting and suddenly folks are doing something Traditional you don't understand... do not be worried..

Just copycat what everyone else around you is doing to the best of your ability...without flare or exaggeration.

This is the most respectful thing to do.

However, note that participating in a ritual, tradition or Ceremony once does not give you the right to teach it to others or claim it as your own.

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Native spaces are generally very welcoming spaces. We treat people with respect as part of our value system. But...we do expect the same in return. My general hope is this guide will aid folks in doing just that. My larger hope, however, is that people will (humbly and respectfully) spend more time in spaces where Indigenous people are in charge, on our own homelands. I want folks to see just how beautiful Indigenous sovereignty is and how much we deserve that returned to us in the largest capacity possible.

This guide may be replicated for  
educational purposes.

**PLEASE CONSIDER SUPPORTING THE AUTHOR:**

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