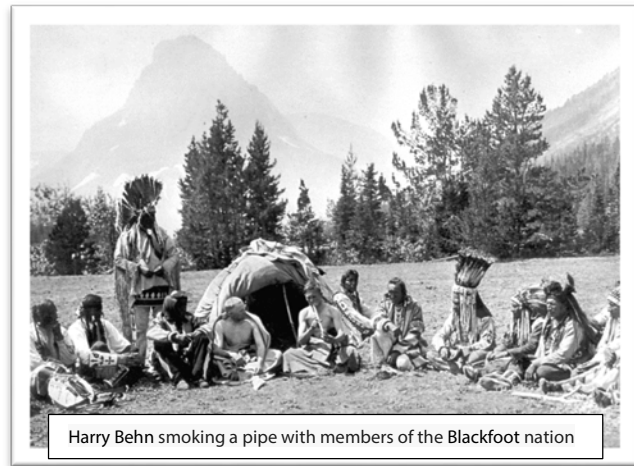


Ceremonial smoking pipes were used by many First Nations peoples in North America, but not by all. Smoking the pipe, for many First Nations, is rich in symbolism: offering tobacco to the almighty, demonstrating solidarity and power within a tribe or band, signifying honour and the sacredness of life, as well as marking a commitment, an agreement or a treaty.

The role of tobacco and the ceremonial pipe in marking the end of conflict is quite well known. Even colonial traders got involved because peace between the Nations was good for their business. Hugh Dempsey, a Canadian historian and honorary chief of the Kainai Blackfoot, cites the case of the trader in charge of Fort Edmonton in 1862. The trader writes about how he brokered a peace agreement between the Cree and the Blackfoot.



*“The Peace was finally satisfied today in the mess room, the Chiefs of each of the Tribes were present; delivered a paper to each chief confirming the Peace made, signed with the names of all the Chiefs present. Tobacco exchanged & sent to Slave [Blackfoot] Indian camps and Cree camps. All parties saluted each other with a kiss, shook hands and the Crees went off quietly at once. Long may it last.”*

Of course, agreements, even when sealed with tobacco, do not necessarily last. The traders later commented, “the Blackfeet and Crees are again at war” and complained that it was bad for business at Fort Edmonton because the Blackfoot would not come to the fort for fear of attack by the Cree.

In more traditional settings a peacemaker would be sent into or near the enemy camp. The peacemaker would bring tobacco, a pipe and other symbolic items. There were many different traditions, but, in one case, when the offer of peace was presented,

*“The pipe was passed from the chief to the person who was chosen to smoke and then the person would indicate his satisfaction before taking a puff. The pipe was then returned to the chief and then passed on to the next one who was chosen to smoke. By smoking the gift tobacco, they showed they would make peace.”*

Tobacco could play a role in both peace and war. Some nations or tribes had different pipes for different meanings such as a peace pipe and a war pipe that displayed differently. More often, it seems, the meaning was determined by the context. Dempsey writes,

*“For example, at the outbreak of the Riel Rebellion in 1885, an influential Siksika chief named Big Plume went to the lodge of his chief, Crowfoot, and presented him with a small bundle containing tobacco, sweetgrass, and bullets. If Crowfoot had smoked the tobacco, it would have indicated his willingness to fight. Instead, he sent the tobacco bundle to Red Crow, head chief of the Bloods, seeking his opinion. Red Crow refused to smoke and sent the tobacco back, showing that he had no intention of joining the fight.”*

Being a peacemaker could be very dangerous. Once, Maskepetoon, the great peacemaker of the Cree, led a small party to a hill near the Siksika camp where he sat with a Bible, pipe and tobacco.

*“When he was observed, Big Swan, the Siksika chief, rode to the hill with a party of warriors and greeted him. He told the Crees to lay their guns aside and accompany him to the camp. However, as soon as they laid down their weapons, Big Swan gave the order to attack and killed them all.”*