Reservation Café: The Origins of American Indian Instant Coffee

Gerald Vizenor

SHAMAN TRUTH LIES, tribal trickster and mixedblood master of socioacupuncture, interrupted an academic assessorization conference to proclaim a modest reservation economic development scheme that would corner and control international coffee markets.

The college deans at the conference were neither surprised nor displeased with the unusual proclamation. Tricksters were well known in high education circles for exploiting familiar forums of instruction, revealing unnatural visions and banal dreams.

The shaman trickster earned his nickname from a television interview: “Truth lies in tribal dreams,” he said, emphasizing the word lies, and then he concluded that “white histories are nothing more than word piles,” emphasizing the last word. Reminded of these ironies, he allows that it is “better to be known as Truth Lies than as Word Piles.”

Truth Lies told the assessorization conferees that “great spirits offered coffee to the tribes, and now we have the first proud word and the best beans, enough to take back the world markets from the word pilers.” The deans sat in neat rows, stout fingers bound over their stomachs, like woodchucks waiting at the roadside for the racial traffic to clear before making a move.

The trickster had been invited to the conference to express a short
tribal benediction, not a diatribe on coffee fascism. The invitation
was a throw back to frontier mission romances and racial
overcompensations, but the urban shaman was not a native speaker
of a tribal language so he told a few short stories, seven in all, about
the mythic world in the tribal mind where the white man is tricked
from his illusions of power and dominance and then taught to walk
backwards in dreams, backwards right out of the country.

Truth Lies unfurled a small birch bark scroll. He gestured with his
lips, in the tribal manner, toward the scroll, while he circled his
right fist, which held seven dark red coffee beans, around the
microphone, an uncommon benediction. The trickster consulted the
scroll from time to time as he told stories to the deans about the
tribal origin of coffee, and as he talked he pinched the seven red
beans into a fine instant powder over a cup of hot water.

First pinch:

In the beginning there was the word and the first word was
coffee, or makde mashkiki waaboo, a black medicine drink, in the
anishinaabe oral tradition. It was a time when naanabozhoo, one of the
first humans on the earth, a super trickster who dreamed in different
forms and languages, spoke the same tongue as the plants and
animals.

Well, several weeks after the famous flood, the first trickster
noticed that when his earthdiver friends, the otter and muskrat and
beaver, ate some red berries from an evergreen shrub, they danced
and sang with such ecstasies that naanabozhoo invented loneliness to
protect himself from the shared pleasures of others. He asked the
animals to explain but there was no language then for their
pleasures. The trickster, an empiricist of sorts, ate some of the red
berries, and as he ate he interviewed the evergreen shrub about the
meaning of pleasure. The shrub shrugged his inquiries at first, but
then, when naanabozhoo began to snap his fingers, roll his head and
eyes, and wriggle his enormous toes in the shrubbery, the shrub
revealed that she was named coffee, or makde mashkiki waaboo, the
first word in the creation of the world.

Second pinch:

Great spirits created the species coffea anishinaabica, the frost
tolerant low altitude pinch ground coffee which, until now at this
telling, has been a tribal secret. Coffea anishinaabica thrives along the
shores of Algoma, the Sea of the Algonquin, or Lake Superior.
Later, much later, two other important species were created, coffea
arabica and coffea robusta, in other parts of the world, but these species,
as you know, are pinchless and sensitive to frost.

There are two simple methods to prepare coffea anishinaabica beans.
The first and the most traditional method is to do nothing. You
heard it right, nothing. The shrubs flower in the spring and then red
berries appear in summer. Late in winter under a whole moon the
berries are harvested by shaking the shrubs. Sometimes the shrubs
shake back and tell stories like this one. The berries are stored in
birch bark containers with a fresh cedar bough. Some traditionalists
tell that one should pick and pinch no more than one bean at a time.
Storage, according to the static fundamentalists who talk backwards
far enough to lock the past into the present, welcomes evil admirers.

The second method is sacred, a ceremonial preparation shared by
some women of the tribe. Vision berries, as the beans are named one
at a time, are picked with ritual care from sacred shrubs grown at
Michillimackinac, or Turtle Island. Tumbled for several nights in red
cedar water, the beans are separated and bound in birch bark balls
and suspended in cedar trees over the winter. In the spring, the beans
are pinched into a ceremonial brew, and the hallucinogenic
alkaloids released from this ritual process cause one to feel the
summer in the spring, from tribal coffee no less.

Third pinch:

You must wonder how could such a fantastic coffee bean, pinched
into a rich nuance without roasting, be held a secret for such a long
time? Well, the answer is simple: No one believes in tribal stories.
We have hundreds of herbal cures for various diseases but who has
listened? What the tribes have told the white man has passed
through their ears with little attention; some are impressed with
mythic form but not with content. Few people believe what we have
been telling about the earth: Rivers are dead, fish are poisoned, and
the air is evil with pollution, evil enough to drive the cockroaches to
the mountains for a rest.

Twice, however, we almost lost the secret to enterprising white
men. Bishop Frederic Baraga, a small man with compulsive
historical missions, tried makade mashkiki waaoo on several occasions.
Stories are told about how he drank a cedar blend of coffee
anishinaabica in place of sacramental wine during services.

Bishop Baraga, in one respect at least, became a tribal person: His
superiors did not believe his stories about pinch coffee from the
woodland lakeshores in the new world. Notes on his experiences
with the sacred miskwaawaak, cedar blend, disappeared from his
memorabilia.

Then, a few years ago, three white shoguns who had cornered the
wild rice market, heard about coffee anishinaabica and attempted to
shave all the shrubs for personal profit. Well, the shrubs shook back
and spoke in the voices of their white mothers. The three exploiters
were lost in a snow storm, misdirected by the talking shrubs, never
returned.

Fourth pinch:

Little does the white man know that once we shared the secret of
coffee anishinaabica with the whole world. It was during the war, the
great war, a time when coffee production of the most common species,
aranica and robusta, was cut short and instant coffee appeared for use in
the field. Well, we supplied the instant coffee from pinch beans, one
more tribal contribution to the white man during his endless wars.
Tribal children shook the shrubs during the war and pinched the beans
for distribution as instant coffee to the soldiers on the front.

Fifth pinch:

You smile, surprised, a mask of derision, no doubt. Well, listen to
this: The code talkers during the war spoke in tribal languages over
the radios to confuse the enemies at home and overseas. While

winning the word wars, these tribal code talkers maintained an
elaborate pinch coffee exchange in military units throughout the
world. Now you know why that coffee tasted so good on the front
lines.

Sixth pinch:

Following the war, we saved our pinch beans and then with new
economic schemes in the sixties we traveled with the elders to the
International Coffee Conference. But the conference from coffee
producing countries would have nothing to do with our claim to a
percentage of the market, even after our efforts during the war. So,
with a sense of evertribal humor, we war danced, a dance we created
for the moment, at the entrance to the United Nations. While we
danced we offered free pinches of coffee to the public, a sort of tribal
war dance coffee break. The hippies were impressed, so impressed by
the effects of the sacred brew that they promised a brisk sale of our
pinch beans to weird friends in communes on the coast.

Seventh pinch:

There is a notion that coffee fosters radical political discussions.
Well, the world should consider the tribes as one enormous
reservation café, more ominous with pinch beans than the Oxford
Club in England or the Café Foy in France. The pinch bean coffee
anishinaabica is the beginning of an international revolution.

Since we were shunned at the conference and denied a place in the
international coffee market, we have harvested and stored billions
of birch bark bundles of coffee anishinaabica on the reservation. More
berries are waiting to be shook, and soon, in a few months time, we
plan to saturate the world markets with pinch beans, a
paraeconomic disruption of coffee supplies.

How, you ask, can we establish these markets? Well, it all started
with the hippies, believe it or not, who shared some tribal economic
values and introduced new methods of distribution. In the late
sixties, like the code talkers during the war, the hippies spoke a
peculiar patois and started selling our beans to romantic liberals all
over the world. Europeans became our best customers for secret pinch coffee. Karl May Red Roast, for example, is cut and sold to tourists for more than a thousand times the original value on the frozen shrub.

There you have it, pinch seven *coffea anishinaabica* beans once a day into hot water, drink while looking at a tree, and your delusions of progress and domination through power will dissolve and you will feel a new sense of acceptance with the world.

Shaman Truth Lies pinched his last bean and then he announced a ceremonial coffee break, time enough to sip his cedar brew and dance backwards through the auditorium holding out his cap.

The deans at the conference on academic assessoralization were so pleased with the entertaining benediction that they voted to name the trickster an honorary dean of a college of his choice.

The trickster returned the gesture, he named all the deans honorary tricksters, members of an urban reservation of their choice.

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**The Warriors**

Anna L. Walters

In our youth, we saw hobos come and go, sliding by our faded white house like wary cats who did not want us too close. Sister and I waved at the strange procession of passing men and women hobos. Just between ourselves, Sister and I talked of that hobo parade. We guessed at and imagined the places and towns we thought the hobos might have come from or had been. Mostly they were White or Black people. But there were Indian hobos too. It never occurred to Sister and me that this would be Uncle Ralph's end.

Sister and I were little and Uncle Ralph came to visit us. He lifted us over his head and shook us around him like gourd rattles. He was Momma's younger brother and he could have disciplined us if he so desired. That was part of our custom. But he never did. Instead, he taught us Pawnee words. "Pari" is Pawnee and *pita* is man," he said. Between the words, he tapped out drumbeats with his fingers on the table top, ghost dance and round dance songs that he suddenly remembered and sang. His melodic voice lifted over us and hung around the corners of the house for days. His stories of life and death were fierce and gentle. Warriors dangled in delicate balance.

He told us his version of the story of *Pahukatawa*, a Skidi Pawnee warrior. He was killed by the Sioux but the animals, feeling compassion for him, brought *Pahukatawa* to life again. "The Evening Star and the Morning Star bore children and some people say that these offspring are who we are," he often said. At times he pointed to those stars and greeted them by their Pawnee names. He liked to pray. He prayed for Sister and me and for everyone and every tiny