

# The fight over Native culture at the U of Michigan

## Secret society degrades Native culture



Members of Michigamua publicly painted themselves red, wore Native American headdress, smoked pipes and gave themselves names like "full moon," to make fun of Native American culture.

BY RICHARD MCKERGOW

ANN ARBOR, Mich. (CUP) — Among the company of family, mentors, friends and supporters, Joe Reilly hunches over a drum, pounds it and sings in victory with three fellow members of the Native American community.

Behind him, other members of the University of Michigan's Students of Color Coalition, who are overwhelmed by the crowd's pride and gratitude, embrace each other while tears soak their faces.

On March 13, at 3:30 p.m., members of the Students of Color Coalition, of which Reilly is a founding member, ended their grueling 36-day occupation of club space belonging to the University of Michigan's secret society Michigamua.

They spent the previous 20 hours barricaded on the seventh floor of the Michigan Union's (U of M) student centre, without sleep, while weighing options and working towards such a conclusion.

The goal of the coalition's occupation was to end Michigamua's admittedly mocking traditions of Native culture.

Driving 10 hours through a blizzard to join the coalition members at the conclusion of the sit-in were University of Toronto (U of T) activists Elan Ohayon, Chris Ramsaroop, Oriel Varga and former U of T student Selwin Pieters.

Before the 1970s, members of Michigamua publicly painted themselves red, wore Native

American headdress, smoked pipes and gave themselves names like Full Moon, to make fun of Native American culture.

The society has not been allowed to do this in public since that time, and its members insist they do not continue to mock Native Americans behind closed doors.

They say they have abided by a 1989 agreement with the university's student services promising to remove any element of Native culture from their organization.

But according to Reilly, on February 6, 2000, the coalition decided Michigamua had failed to live up to that promise.

After a meeting with the Michigamua society, coalition members were told their suspicions of continued mockery of Native American culture were false, and that the club possessed no signs of aboriginal culture.

The coalition decided to find out for themselves and occupied the "tower," a term which indicates the fifth to seventh floors of the student union building. The tower houses three secret societies, Michigamua being one of them.

A boardroom and storage closet full of Native artifacts, mock native characters and Michigamua records and yearbooks were discovered by the coalition.

Over the next month, they catalogued the items, and categorized the property of the Michigamua, determining what the Native community would repatriate.

Native artifacts included spiritual items such as pipes and drums, and other items like arrowheads, artwork and a carry case for an infant.

These are items the Michigamua have collected since their inception in 1902.

The coalition presented the university with three demands. They called for the university to sever all affiliation with the secret societies, eliminate the space given to those societies and give all Native American artifacts back to their original community.

"It is the students' intent that the personal items of the Michigamua are returned and the others will be repatriated," said Bob Meggimson, a Native American associate professor of mathematics who has volunteered his time to help with the negotiations between the university, the coalition and Michigamua.

Meggimson said the materials are now under the provost's control.

Throughout February, the coalition negotiated with the university and Michigamua, and all three finally agreed that the artifacts would indeed be repatriated. The coalition began to move out the objects.

But on March 12 — the day before the protest ended — the coalition was interrupted by campus security who had been called by members of Michigamua.

"The Michigamua felt that the [coalition] was trying to move rapidly, but by Monday morning [March 13] they had it all worked out," said Julie Peterson, spokesper-

son for the university.

But a stand off between members of the coalition and Michigamua ensued at the base of the tower. Tensions heightened as one member of the coalition demanded repeatedly to know what was the mock name of one member of Michigamua.

The society member would not answer and could only look away.

During this point, U of T students Ramsaroop and Ohayon stood with the coalition to provide their support if it was needed. Ohayon suggested that Michigamua help the coalition remove the artifacts.

"We are here as international observers, and we will act on the [coalition's] best interests," said Ramsaroop. "It's not a matter of the U of M anymore."

On February 25, Lee C. Bollinger, the university president, announced the establishment of a panel to assess whether the secret societies would be able to keep using university space.

The panel will consist of three university administrators, according to university spokesperson Peterson.

"The university will then make a decision about the assignment and use of the Michigan Union tower and any other exclusively assigned space that may exist," added president Bollinger.

However, this was not enough for the coalition, who demanded the panel have a broader scope than just looking at student space. They wanted to look at the broader issues of racial equity.

"The panel is a total subversion of the real issues," said coalition member Reilly.

But the university president would only expand the panel under certain conditions.



"The university told the [coalition] that if they wanted to have the scope of the panel expanded they really needed to come down," said Peterson.

She added that Bollinger would not take their recommendations into account if they did not leave the tower.

So the coalition exited the tower six-and-a-half hours after the Monday, March 13, 9:00 a.m. deadline issued by Bollinger. At that point, the university president agreed to expand the panel's field of investigation.

The university cites the first amendment and freedom of speech when discussing how it has and will treat Michigamua.

"Under our principles it is clear that student organizations must not be recognized or de-recognized, or suffer any other penalty, because the ideas they espouse or beliefs they adhere to are offensive, or even dangerous, to our community," said Bollinger on February 17.

Paul Seguire, another spokesperson for the university, adds that the society has a lot of history with the university as well.

"The members of Michigamua were instrumental in building the Michigan Union," he said. "They raised the funds for the building and as a result they got the space."

Nick Delgado, spokesperson for the Michigamua, added that the society is being sensitive to the criticism.

"They [coalition] highlight critical issues and we are doing everything to address these issues with the Native American community," he said.

Although they do not deny that the artifacts found are indeed reminiscent of Native American culture, Michigamua members claim they had no idea the items found in the closet existed.

"I did not know the artifacts were there," said Delgado. "We agree that those artifacts need to be removed from the tower."

Delgado said there is nothing left for them to do.

"We have apologized for the historical appropriation of Native culture," he said.

Seema Pai, in her fourth-year at the College of Literature, Science, and Arts (LSA), says being a mem-

ber of the Michigamua is difficult.

"There's a level of prestige. They only chose 25 members across the board," she said, adding that she was approached to join the Michigamua for her involvement in student government at the LSA.

She said the organization tries to find ways to improve the campus, but she had a difficult time giving specific examples.

"The concept is very hard to articulate because the effects are intangible," she said.

Coalition member Reilly, in his final year at U of M's school of natural resources and the environment, said Native Americans compose less than one percent of the student body, and number 250-300 at the University.

The continued use of drums on the part of Michigamua was particularly offensive to Reilly.

"Drums to Native American people are a heartbeat and the living spirit, so we take it very personally when organizations or groups of people use them for their own purposes," he said.

At a press conference, Reilly suggested members of Michigamua might be bothered by conscience.

"It's a hard road once you start looking in the mirror," he said. "I think Michigamua has a pretty hard time looking in the mirror and they see those headdresses, and their bodies painted red, and they wonder, 'What am I doing? What the hell am I doing?'"

U of T activists felt that they witnessed an historical victory.

"It was effective, it was an important victory that they accomplished," said Ohayon.

"There was a victory after years of trying to negotiate, it showed that activism clarified the situation," he said, adding that such victories are remembered and appreciated years later.

Ramsaroop felt that their presence at the sit-in formed an international bond.

"We showed that each has the other's back, and we know that we are going to get their support in the future," he said.

Ramsaroop was especially moved by the crowd's reaction to the coalition when they finally emerged from the tower.

"That was amazing, it was one of the most touching and inspiring moments," he said.

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