

REVIEWS

People of the Rainbow: A Nomadic Utopia

MICHAEL I. NIMAN

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The Rainbow Gatherings represent an expression of two primary goals or ideals that are characteristic of many utopian societies. The first is the desire of diverse yet like-minded people to celebrate their unity. The second is the demonstration to the larger world of the positive values held by the Rainbow Family individual responsibility for self, society and nature through caring, sharing and nurturing. Although these goals and ideals are not unique to the Rainbow Family, what is most valuable about their expression in the Gatherings is that they have fostered a set of practical systems and processes that has enabled the Rainbow tradition to survive more than twenty-five years, and to spread around the world. It is this continuity and growth that earns for the Family the distinction of being a successful utopian society. Explaining how this success has come to be is the value of Michael Niman's book, *People of the Rainbow: A Nomadic Utopia*.

Niman provides the best collection of information about the Rainbow Family currently available. He points out all of the basics of Family structure, history and beliefs, including the point that anyone can consider themselves a Rainbow Family member simply through their participation. One of the most helpful aspects of the book is Niman's effort to explain the

nature of the Family's organization. Throughout the book the author refers for comparison to other utopian societies, including the Hutterites and Twin Oaks, and in particular The Farm. He also notes, however, that the Rainbow Family is in a different class than the historical and contemporary intentional communities to which he compares them. He notes that the family is more similar to nomadic traditions such as gypsies, and notes a curious correlation with Alcoholics Anonymous, focusing on their similarity in the dynamic of the periodic dissolution and reforming of a mutual-aid society. Michael Niman suggests that the anarchist theorist Hakim Bey has a concept. Which can help to explain the family. The form of intentional community which the Rainbow Family represents is best described by Bey's theory of the temporary autonomous zone (TAZ), where the community forms for a time, then dissolves into the larger society (called "Babylon" by Rainbows), only to temporarily reform at another place and time.

Niman points out that because of its continual reforming and dissolving, the Rainbow Family can have a significant impact upon the larger society, as members express their communitarian values through other aspects of their lives. The trends toward alternative medicine, whole foods, non-violent conflict resolution and mediation, homeschooling and charter schools, community supported agriculture, and various social movements toward forms of intentional community, such as cohousing, ecovillages and communal community, and many other social innovations, are all supported by Rainbow members.

Additional materials about the Rainbow Family can be found in the appendices. These include samples of Rainbow orientation materials and statements, a list of all of the PAST Annual Gathering locations, sample entries from the Rainbow Guide (a directory of participants, including self-descriptions, occupations, and interests), a glossary of Rainbow terms, extensive notes and references and an index. Twenty-four photographs from various Gatherings around the country are also included, giving a wonderful view of many aspects of Rainbow Gatherings. Niman mentions one source for information on the locations of gatherings, which are the pages on the worldwide web. Although Michael Niman does present a sense of what attendance at a gathering is like through the day-in-the-life literary convention, he fails to give a good chronological account of the progression of events through a typical North American annual Rainbow family gathering.

Although Niman's writing fails to engender as complete an understanding of or feeling for the Gatherings as would be possible, it does serve to present many essential and quite fascinating details about the Rainbow Gatherings and the Family. In the second chapter, Niman describes the roots of the Rainbow tradition, explained as being among

activists in the counter-cultural, ecological, spiritual and peace movements, along with Vietnam War veterans. The latter contributed the designs for much of the Gathering's infrastructure, such as medical units, field kitchens and latrines. Other chapters cover Rainbow Council consensus government, culture and communications. Niman's presentation of the importance of "Heart Songs" to Rainbow culture is essential to the understanding of the Family. Rainbow Council's are more than decision-making bodies, as they provide forums for the "personal passions and poetics of individual participants" (p. 40) as well as a healing space and therapeutic benefits for members of the tribe, a feature common to traditional societies, but lost by Western civilization. When people "speak from the heart" about their concerns, fears and joys, a sense of empathic caring is engendered among all, and commitment to the group is nurtured. As Niman writes, "People talk as if Council decisions are divinely inspired; in any case, some magic is necessary for hundreds of people to be of one mind." (p. 44).

A particularly important chapter called "Violence and Peace" includes a discussion of the "Shanti Scena" (the system of family self-policing) and of the "A Camp" (comprised of anarchist alcoholics who serve both as a shield from and a transition zone between the disruptive influences of the world and the non-violent, spiritually reverent celebrations within). The chapter called "Fakelore," covering Rainbow spirituality, makes the point that Family members consider Gatherings spiritual affairs held in the "cathedral of nature," with many religions represented Eastern, Western and Native American.

Due to its basic nature, the Family may never be more than a social network dedicated to the hosting of "Gatherings of the Tribes," or gatherings of various communities which, along with individuals, comprise the "Rainbow Nation." Some collective houses and farms involving Rainbow Family members have been formed, and there is always talk of forming "Peace Villages," and recently of finding a "Rainbow Homeland." But the fact that these would necessarily involve the accumulation of assets, membership restrictions and legal representatives would result in someone claiming that these communities are not true to the Rainbow ideal, and therefore should not use the name "Rainbow." Therefore, the Rainbow Family is likely to remain a network of separate individuals and communities, inspiring members and others to live Rainbow ideals, but not providing the organizational structure for permanent settlements.

The strength of Niman's book is in his presentation of a comprehensive account of the past and present of the Rainbow Family, and organization now spreading around the world, and likely to be in existence now spreading around the world, and likely to be in existence long into the future.

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