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Towards A New Ethnicity: Canada's Western Plains First Nations

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Abstract

Although social scientists have for a long time refrained from employing the term "ethnic" when describing First Nations cultures, recent developments in those communities have necessitated a second look at this practice. If the ethnic designation is applicable to any group of people typically related through common filiation, or blood, and whose members also usually feel a sense of attachment to a particular place, a history, and a culture (including a common language, food, and clothing), then Canada's First Peoples may also be considered ethnic. The educational implications of this reality are that the needs of Indigenous students are more nearly in line with those of other Canadian minorities than previously thought.

This paper examines five key Aboriginal values that appear to be in transition to more nearly resemble those of other Canadian ethnic groups. These include dramatic shifts from traditional practices pertaining to individualism, bravery, revered cultural skills, and traditional interpretations of wisdom, and generosity. Educators need to be aware of these transitory realities if they are to formulate relevant school curricula and methodologies.

It has long been the practice in academic circles to differentiate the cultural identity of ethnic groups from mainline cultures, the latter presumably having originated in France or in the British Isles. It may be time to dissolve this differentiation and abandon the notion that immigrants in Canada, other than British or French, somehow uniquely fit the definition of being ethnic. According to Bramadat's (2009) definition, the incorporated characteristics of ethnicity are not only descriptive of the lifestyles of British, Scotch, Welsh, and Irish descendants, they may also be applied to the cultures of Canada's First Nations. To wit: An ethnic group is any significant group of people, typically related through common filiation, or blood, whose members also usually feel a sense of attachment to a particular place, a history, and a culture (including a common language, food, and clothing).

These attributes are very much identifiable in Canada's First Nations. The 600-plus Indian bands certainly have a sense of attachment to their origins, lay claim to unique histories, and struggle to hold onto a land base. Researchers have identified six culture areas in the country—eastern Maritimes, Woodland, Plains, Plateau, West Coast, and Northern - each of which fits the dimensions of unique ethnic identity. As the discussion gets underway it is necessary to explain that various terms will be employed to describe First Nations cultures—Aboriginal, Indian, Indigenous, and Native. This is because the political correctness movement has rendered it virtually impossible to find consensus regarding terminology describing these communities. It should be noted that both the American and Canadian governments still employ the term Indian.

Until very recently, most published Aboriginal cultural and historical research has originated from the efforts of non-Native writers who have emphasized the unique cultural practices of the First Peoples but avoided calling them ethnic communities. The primary traditional values of Aboriginal nations in western Canada have been sharply differentiated from

European-imported models. This perspective ignores the common features that *all* human cultures share, namely the need for a land base, language and stock, artifacts, social organization, governance or political arrangements, spiritual or religious systems, arts and music, forms of caring for the sick or needy, rules about property, and educational arrangements (Friesen, 1983). Bitting (2001) observes that a distinct EuroCanadian bias has limited objective assessments because the model of knowledge that predominates Western society and schools is grounded historically and psychologically in Europe. In educational terms this means that Aboriginal students have not always been perceived as having the same pedagogical needs as their non-Native counterparts, and this shortcoming needs to be rectified.

Non-Native research has drawn attention to traditional Indian value systems to illustrate how very different they were from those of incoming Europeans. Surveys of Indigenous values include respect for the workings of the universe; belief in connectedness; the importance of being, not doing; the importance of family; the concept of sharing as “taking, without consequences;” respect for individuality; and government by consensus (Burger, 1968; Frideres & Gadacz, 2001; Friesen, 1999; Jenness, 1955; Knudson & Suzuki, 1992; Patterson, 1972; Ross, 1992; Steckley & Cummins, 2008; Surtees, 1969).

Briefly described, these core values have been interpreted in the following ways. Respect for nature is best depicted in the sense of rendering obeisance to the universe, which is the stronghold of the Creator, the Great Spirit. Pelletier (1974) suggests that humans have been designated stewards in the domain of Mother Earth by the Creator, and assigned the task of respecting its rhythms and resident creatures.

The concept of connectedness implies that all entities in the universe have a common origin, albeit unique functions, and they are therefore interconnected and dependent upon one another. Related to this is a logically-derived obligation on the part of human beings to place more emphasis on their assigned roles while on earth, instead of engaging in otherwise meaningless acts of doing, often for their own sake.

The challenge of working out one’s spiritual assignment and eventual destiny is focused on primary relationships, particularly involving one’s family, band, and nation. The benefits of individual gifts such as wisdom, healing, food gathering, or engagement in the arts are intended to accrue to the people of one’s identity. They are not intended to encourage or become the source of individual pride since they are considered “community property.” The prized form of sharing, therefore, is being able to provide for others in the form of acquired resources that may be freely accessed by others. In that sense, a classic form of sharing is entrenched in the act of a family or band member helping themselves to the resources of a connected individual without asking to do so. In this sense respect for the individual is maximized in that the individual with available resources is honored in being able to provide for others, and the needy individual is respected by not having to request assistance. The same principle of common property applies to ceremonial paraphernalia; that is, an individual carrying a pipe is considered a *pipe carrier*, and an individual in possession of a medicine bundle is a *bundle keeper*. Member nations of several Plains Indian tribes have a tradition that if someone requests that a medicine bundle or teepee design be transferred to himself so that its power become his, that request cannot be refused (Harrod, 1992).

Finally, the traditional habit of talking things through to consensus assures that everyone’s opinion is validated in deliberations, and everyone is on board with communal decisions.

These values have been challenged and significantly modified since the time of European contact, but as is the case with other cultures, change is to be expected. It could be argued that the most far-reaching transformations have occurred in the last several decades, and have most notably included the replacement of working in harmony with the rhythms of nature with a capitalistic bent. The latter is deeply founded in the strong Protestant ethic encapsulated in the biblical mandate, "The sluggard's craving will be the death of him, because his hands refuse to work" (Proverbs 21:25 NIV).

A Working Model

Malcolm McFee, a professor of anthropology at the University of Oregon, formulated a useful model by which to compare changing Blackfoot values (McFee, 1972). The results of the study are relevant to the western Canadian First Nations, particularly the three Alberta member First Nations of the Blackfoot Confederacy—Kainai, Peigan, and Siksika - but also to nearby Cree, Tsuu T'ina, and Stoney First Nations. McFee identified five transforming Blackfoot values: individualism, bravery, skills, wisdom, and generosity, and indicated how each has been affected by contemporary cultural shifts.

- (i) Individualism was a very highly valued characteristic in traditional Blackfoot culture in the form of individual achievement in tribally valued activities. Individuals so recognized gained social acceptance and increased prestige, and were assigned higher status. Respect for individualism was particularly manifest in the way children were brought up. Their rights were respected to the same degree as those of adults. Non-Native observers would have labeled the Blackfoot philosophy of raising children as child-centered or permissive. In contemporary times, Blackfoot parents have often experienced frustration from witnessing societal institutional disregard of children's wishes by forcing them to conform to institutional expectations—like those existent in schools—without negotiating them. According to traditional Blackfoot beliefs, this approach robs "little adults" from becoming the people the Creator intended them to be.
- (ii) Bravery, once manifest in war, hunting, and horse raiding remains a valued characteristic, but is now aligned with such activities as supporting the American war effort, engaging in sports and rodeos, participating in occasional fights, and taking up certain kinds of employment such as ranch hand or firefighter. In its contemporary form, exhibited bravery has little to do with economic or social achievement. Hard work in certain sectors does count.
- (iii) Certain cultural artistic skills that were traditionally valued remain on the roster of importance today. These include dancing, singing, arts, crafts, and oratorical skills, all considered expressions of cultural identity. Crafts such as beading, basket-making, and leather work are also making a comeback among Native women.
- (iv) Wisdom was traditionally viewed as the domain of elders—including medicinal, consultative, storytelling, and ceremonial elders. Elders had to be consulted for the conduction of certain rituals and ceremonies. One could go to an elder to discuss personal matters or to seek advice. Some elders were trained in the use of plants for medicinal purposes; young people were usually apprenticed to these men and women

to carry on the trade. Although the importance of eldership deteriorated after European contact, in recent decades the status of elder has been renewed in importance. As time has gone on, the Montana Blackfeet have also come to appreciate modern knowledge emanating from college and university education. They realize that this form of knowledge is valuable and necessary in dealing with non-Natives and state and federal governments. According to McFee (1972) postsecondary forms of education will not assure employment on the Blackfeet reservation, however; jobs are basically procured on the basis of family nepotism or having the right political affiliation (Flanagan, 2000). This corresponds with my experience working in four different Native communities over the past forty years.

- (v) Generosity, the final key Blackfeet value, today takes both public and private forms.

Traditionally the notion of sharing resources was adhered to in the following terms: individuals with means were expected to feel honored if they were able to share their resources with their kin. Those without means were not required to ask for assistance; it was expected that they could access the resources of their kin simply by availing themselves of them. The highest honor in such a situation accrued to individuals with means (Erdoes, 1972). These individuals were expected to feel blessed in being able to help the needy, and the community respected them for it. More recently, this arrangement has proven somewhat dysfunctional. For example, in one case a young man with no means of support moved in with a family and contributed little or nothing to family coffers. The woman of the house believed that she could not ask him to move out because she would lose the respect of the community. Her solution was to ask a local non-Native individual to accost the uninvited guest and ask him to either help out the family or move out. Her plea to the non-Native individual was this: “Only don’t tell that I said for you to do it” (McFee, 1972, p. 100). It would be an insult of significant magnitude to be told that one was stingy, selfish, or unkind.

Another individual, clearly upset at the way the traditional practice of sharing was being interpreted by council members, remarked; “At election time they’re always willing to lend you a dollar, but after they’re in they won’t give you a nickel” (McFee, 1972, p. 101). Evidently, the traditional Blackfeet approach to sharing has been amended.

Applying the Model

When the territory of Nunavut was formed in 1999, members of the Inuit community were excited about the prospect of operating their own affairs. As one spokesperson put it, “We were so proud when we were told that we would have our own Inuit land, with Inuit rights, and our own way of life would come back” (Gregoire, 2009, p. 40). The Inuit were not prepared for what transpired. They were soon to discover that they would not be able to go back to their traditional way of life. The skills of tracking polar bears, harpooning seals, building igloos, and sewing skin boots were replaced by trendy clothes, indoor swimming pools, an urban graffiti project that incorporated traditional images, and the phenomenon of significant oil and gas exploration.

A recently released consultant’s report suggests that Nunavut has neither the human capacity nor the expertise to handle the necessary changes (Gregoire, 2009). Some Nunavut leaders believe that the process of devolution is a reality in Inuit territory, and a key to unlocking Nunavut’s economic self-sufficiency. The territory contains an estimated ten percent

of Canada's oil reserves and 20 percent of its natural gas. In addition, the copper, diamonds, gold, and nickel that can be mined in Nunavut could yield additional income. In 2007, the government of Canada earned an estimated 33 million dollars from royalties and taxes in Nunavut (Gregoire, 2009). These developments indicate that the Inuit will face an uphill battle in pursuing the restoration of their traditional lifestyle. This experience is easily paralleled in Plains First Nations communities.

Although several decades have passed since McFee analyzed change in the Blackfeet community, the five characteristics of his model can easily be applied to developments among the First Nations of Western Canada.

Individualism

Individuals who are a part of the nine-to-five workforce often complain that individualism has virtually no place in today's society. After finding a bearable occupation, all that is left to experience after thirty-five years of labor is retirement with a minimally subsistent pension, short, inexpensive vacations comprising visits to the children, and finally, the hope of spending one's last years in a reasonably comfortable senior citizens' complex. Dismal as this description may sound, it very much resembles the lifestyle of many retired Canadians. This unadventurous lifestyle is far removed from that traditionally practiced by Canada's First Nations. Precontact tribal cultures greatly respected both age and individuality, whether it was evident in the medicinal skills or knowledge of an elder, the warrior skills of an admired scout, or a creative urge demonstrated by a young child. Unique abilities and talents were admired and encouraged.

When the Europeans arrived, they foisted their institutional forms on local Aboriginal residents, with the objective of "making the Indian over." For many generations it appeared as though they were successful, but recent attempts to revive revered Indigenous customs and practices have been quite successful.

One example of a return to the past is evident in the arena of raising children. Significant changes are taking place in the way that child rescue and social work generally have been conducted. Walmsley (2005) emphasizes that the new approach is a family-focused orientation recognizing that a child's needs are best met within the context of a family, and social intervention must be directed to enable families to care adequately for their children. When a child is at risk of neglect or abuse, social intervention can involve a range of family centered, home-based protective services that will parallel or even enhance locally respected practices. Thus the practice of respecting traditional Native individualism may be revived.

Bravery

The Indian cultural renaissance of the 1960s not only intensified the practice of traditional rituals and ceremonies, it also served to bring together the concerns of both American and Canadian First Nations (Lincoln, 1985). Better means of transportation, coupled with improved technologies and new avenues of funding, have enabled greater intertribal sharing of cultural practices that have involve talents similar to those valued today by the Blackfeet—dancing, singing, drumming, arts, crafts, and oratorical skills. Engagement in the employment sector, however, conjures up a more complex scenario. Some tribal leaders who recognize that capitalistic endeavors are essential to their band's existence, only provide reluctant support to the

idea. In communities where capitalistic endeavors *are* lauded, those individuals who have been successful in related sectors of the workplace—logging, mining, ranching, or trucking are being encouraged in their achievements.

Most First Nations leaders seem to concur that economic development is necessary to the maintenance of Aboriginal culture. Native historian Olive Dickason (2006) holds hope that elements of the traditional Indigenous way of life will endure even though the road to Indian economic self-reliance comprises a political and economic morass. Dickason refers to the Canadian federal government's abandonment of its expectation that First Nations would assimilate and adopt mainline cultural practices.

One example of a First Nations move toward economic self-reliance is exemplified in the philosophy of Chief Clarence Louie of the Osoyoos Band in British Columbia. Chief Louie promotes the philosophy that First Nations communities should pursue every opportunity for economic and technological development that comes their way. His band is currently involved in a variety of businesses including a golf-hotel-residential complex, a vineyard, a campground, a construction company, a ready-mix concrete enterprise, and a gas bar and convenience store. In 2006 the band opened an eight million dollar interpretive center. Over the last decade the total band revenue has been seven times that received in grants from the federal government. Although the issue has not been specifically addressed by Chief Louie, it appears to be assumed that a semblance of traditional values will remain in place as the band endorses a capitalistic philosophy of development (Friesen & Friesen, 2008).

A similar approach to economic development has been adopted by the Peguis (Ojibway) band in Manitoba. A decade ago the band was operating 50 profit-making businesses including a cabinet-making plant, a hotel in downtown Winnipeg, a publishing house, and various retail outlets. Chief Louis Stevenson insisted that labor for commercial development should come from the community, and great effort was made to provide training for the needed trades. At the same time, the band revived a series of forgotten tribal rituals and ceremonies as a means of fostering the underlying spiritual identity of the community.

Capitalistic development in Native communities has been spurred on by the publication of Calvin Helin's (2006) book, *Dances with dependency: Indigenous success through self-reliance*. A descendant of a long line of Tsimshian chiefs, Helin posits that the only way for Canada's First Nations to get out from under the colonial structures of federal government domination is through economic self-reliance. Helin castigates band governance structures that allow leaders to operate without transparency or accountability to their people. He suggests the appointment of an ombudsman to assist in replacing authoritarian reserve governance systems with more democratic forms (Helin, 2006). It remains to be seen how the historical, cultural, and spiritual bases of the Tsimshian way of life will be transferred to the new mode of governance.

Skills

The close connection between the Blackfeet Nation and Alberta Plains First Nations is quite evident in the maintenance of their cultural and artistic skills. Ancient skills like dancing, drumming, and singing are quite evident in western Canadian First Nations celebrations such as pow-wows. Decorative art forms, as well as those with special spiritual significance, also reveal the effect of cultural influence and exchange, particularly in the use of silver and turquoise (Friesen & Friesen, 2006). Certain arts and crafts such as beading, basket making and leatherwork were traditionally considered expressions of cultural identity, and their renaissance

has strengthened the resolve for cultural renewal. Many Indigenous artists from every cultural area in Canada have attained worldwide recognition.

Wisdom

Precontact western Canadian Aboriginal cultures had in place a differentiated form of leadership practiced through the offices of chiefs and band councils. They also sponsored a series of temporary leadership forms; the Plains First Peoples, for example, appointed war chiefs or hunting chiefs as needed. Some Plateau First Nations appointed an individual to the office of salmon chief when fishing season came around.

There is a reemerging phenomenon among western Canadian First Nations that might be called "a return to the elders." This role is made up of men and women, some of whom will have been apprenticed to carry out certain responsibilities in the healing arts or with respect to having authority to conduct certain ceremonies. Others, like storytellers or individuals who are sought out for counsel, will have "emerged over time" (Medicine, 1987; Steigelbauer, 1996). The cultural renaissance of the past decades has given new impetus to the practice of consulting elders, and their place of honor and respect among their people is being reinstituted.

Similar to the situation among the Montana Blackfeet three decades ago, western Canadian First Nations have begun to place increasing value on mainstream forms of education. A shift in the way Aboriginal youth were being educated occurred in the 1960s, when these young people began attending postsecondary institutions. At that time there were only 200 Status Indians enrolled in Canadian colleges and universities, but as the 21st century began, there were more than 27,000. Since then the number has risen to more than 30,000, although limited government funding has curtailed this trend. Native students have majored in a variety of fields, at first primarily studying teacher preparation and social work and later gradually expanding to other areas of study. In order to accommodate this trend, many postsecondary institutions have expanded their curricula to include courses and programs in Aboriginal studies. Many First Nations graduates return to their home reserves after graduation to make valuable contributions to their communities. Others have preferred to remain in urban settings where career prospects are better.

Educational options for Native youth have steadily increased over the past three decades. Many Aboriginal communities operate college programs on-site, thereby affording greater flexibility for higher education. Hare (2003) notes that similar developments have occurred in relation to the education of Aboriginal children. Today, increased options are available for Indigenous children; their parents may choose which form of education they think will best suit their offspring. On-reserve families may choose to send their children to provincial or private schools, either on-reserve or off-reserve, or they may opt for a community-run school that is tailored to meet local needs. In these schools, administrators will hopefully recognize the value of including Aboriginal content in school curricula and include elder input in the teaching milieu.

Generosity

The proliferation of public institutions that provide health, education, and welfare services has directly contributed to the loss of such private and family values as taking in strangers, sharing with the needy, or caring for the aged in the family home. These services are available in both Native and non-Native communities, although it could be argued that the

quality of services in both communities are in need of being upgraded. Mercer (2001) notes that initiatives have recently been introduced to incorporate traditional Aboriginal medical practices in providing health care.

Traditionally, all societies, Native and non-Native, relied on family and kinship connections in times of emergency or general need. Evidence exists that the traditional Aboriginal habit of “taking what one needs from those with resources” is still practiced. Those with means are expected to share. An employed Stoney (Nakoda Sioux) elder in his 80s kept on working because his grown unemployed children relied on him to provide meat. As he put it, “If there is none, I disappoint them, and I simply cannot do that” (Friesen, 1999, p. 55). It would appear that in some First Nations communities, the biblical injunction, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35b KJV), so easily disregarded by contemporary society, still exists.

Values in Transition

The gradual shift of values orientation in Western First Nations communities is a reality. Increased industrialization and improved technology, combined with a strong capitalistic spirit, will undoubtedly cause cultural change of great magnitude. In this respect Aboriginal cultures will cope as other Canadian subcultures do, by adjusting to the reality of change. Many Indigenous leaders, like the late Chief John Snow of the Stoney (Nakoda Sioux) Nation believe that the underlying spiritual base of First Nations cultures will remain. This will constitute a form of biculturalism—comprising a lifestyle that combines the best of both worlds. First Nations will increasingly buy into the vicissitudes of the industrial, technological world, while maintaining a steadfast foundation in spirituality. According to Chief Snow, faith in the latter is in short supply in today’s world, and when society is ready to appreciate this, the Native people will be ready to deliver that knowledge. Snow refers to an ancient prophecy which

foretells the day when Indigenous people will teach other peoples and other nations the importance of life. Life in this prophecy means the sacredness of life in the whole creation, not only human life but that of other beings, the elements, forces of life in nature and in the cosmic world. This prophecy tells of a day when Indigenous people who have special knowledge of nature and Earth’s ecosystems will be respected and heard by all humankind (Snow, 2005, p. 243).

The changing ethos of Western Canada’s First Nations will incorporate an entity somewhat alien to their traditional way of life—the appropriation of capitalistic enterprises. This is already happening, but if their spiritual leaders are correct, the absorption of modern technology and industrialization does not have to replace their traditional outlook on life which includes these values: respect for the workings of the universe; belief in connectedness; the importance of being, not doing; the importance of family; the concept of sharing as “taking, without consequences”; respect for individuality; and government by consensus.

Only the future will tell if First Nations prophets are correct in their predictions. In the meanwhile, educators are faced with the challenge of trying to meet the needs of all of their educational charges, Native and non-Native. As with students of other minority backgrounds, educators must be ready to amend school curricula and methodologies to meet their needs. In this case, the challenge has to do with Canada’s fastest growing population sector.

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