ABORIGINAL TRADITIONAL CULTURE

Niyo Aski

A Basic Insight of the Lateral - Linear Processes within Modern Society

Personal Communications - Elder Marius Catarat, Elder Mary Cook, Elder Billy Emine, Elder C. Papequash, and Medicine Man Henry Ross
Prepared by: Larry J Laliberte, B.H.J.
Box 1767, La Ronge, SK
S0L 1L0
1997
Elder Mary Cook, La Ronge resident has stated - for years Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people have hypothesized around the concept of Aboriginal traditional culture and its representation within the lifestyles of Aboriginal groups in Canada. Some have referred to it as, viewed from a linear or Western perspective, that Aboriginal culture is what exists now in our communities within the context and means of Western norms.

When one examines current Aboriginal culture as it exists today, we empirically come to terms of a lifestyle consisting of individualism, competitiveness, idealism and conceptualization - to name a few of the conventional measures that make up linear thought and the influences of Western peoples. We tend to be unnecessarily concerned or preoccupied with our own individual needs and aspirations subconsciously neglecting the collective needs of our families and community members.

Elder Mary Cook says, growing up as young child along the Churchill River many years ago, she would listen and observe as her immediate and extended family members went about their daily activities. They would talk about their ancestors, how they were heart broken from the intrusion of their way of life subsequent the arrival of the Europeans and missionaries. One story in particular seems to haunt her journey: it is about her great-great grandmother's loss of traditional culture when the missionaries and government bodies threatened to do away with her medicine bundles and her ceremonial pipe.

Elder Mary's grandmother reiterated a story told to her by her great-great grandmother, who in that particular time, her great-great grandmother had witnessed, while spending time out in the land, a particular group of intruders encroaching upon their encampment at a haste pace. Her grandmother watched sadly, as her great-great grandmother gathered her ceremonial bundles, tears flowing down her cheeks, gradually disappeared into the woods, only she guessed, to rid of her sacred possessions. In that period, the demands of the foreign governments and church bodies were over-powering - as the foreign intruders had made it law that Indians could not at any time participate in an Indian way of life. She assumed then her spirit was broken, as she appeared disheartened when she returned to camp. Her bundles were buried - but she knew, a traditional and sacred way life as she knew it, would change for generations to come negatively affecting her grandchildren and their children.

Elder Campbell Papequash says the purpose of that horrendous act was quite simple. To have social control of the masses, Western civilization needed to eradicate any power or relationship that holds a specific culture together. It was the Aboriginal people of North America that stood in the way of capitalization and industrialization of this inimitable period. To proceed as planned, the foreigners arranged and imposed the notorious "conquer and divide ideology" that has worked successfully for them for many centuries in other parts of the world. Historically speaking, the Aboriginal peoples of Turtle Island were at no account conquered at war by the British or by other foreign powers as a Nation, therefore Aboriginal people never gave up their status as a sovereign people, nor did they give up their traditional territories. However, that did not appear to be the case in terms of their relationship with the foreign powers as they continued to force their outlandish lifestyle on Indian people. Assimilation was the motto then, and it is still present, only it has taken on a more subtle form.
Western civilization has a history of destructively exploiting the natural resources all over the world. To have control of these resources, a foreign country must act with brute force to superimpose their culture, governments, laws and religious ideologies upon those countries that have held inherent rights to the “new” lands of interest since time immemorial. When a peculiar culture is force upon another culture group, than the latter group inevitably relinquishes its power to the foreign one, thereby deliberately creating a stratified system of dominant and subordinate classes of people. In the event of the Aboriginal peoples’ experiences, the outcome is devastating. Elder Mary says as the newcomers multiplied, and the Indians dying from foreign diseases, the Indian population began to dwindle quite drastically, and eventually the foreigners made up the larger numbers in North America.

The plan to assimilate and exterminate began to take shape as originally intended by the foreign powers. As indicated earlier, to have socio-economic and political control of a specific culture group, those who have inherently occupied a land from time immemorial, their sense of power needed to be weaken via superimposing a foreign ideology and philosophy on them. Therefore, the British and French mainly, took it upon themselves to force their government and laws on the Aboriginal people, making them second-class citizens in their own land while they enjoyed first class citizenship in the land of the Indian people. Upon accomplishing this procedure, the new suppose “owners” immediately outlawed for any Indian to participate in any Indian activity that was contrary to the wishes of the existing powers.

The Indians were stripped then of their Indianess in their image to recreate them into brown-white citizens. Elder Mary Cook and Elder Bill Ermine say, stories told to them by their ancestors - Governments made it law that Indians were to refrain from practicing in any traditional culture activities that may inevitably deter them from the divine plan. Elder Marius Catarat indicated his ancestors had shared horrendous stories of the missionaries burning their sacred bundles and ceremonial pipes in great quantity as they traveled north along the mighty Churchill River, on up to the Athabaska region of the Dene and Inuit peoples. The notorious residential school experience is a reliable source of the magnitude and impact that the government had on the Aboriginal peoples as they tyrannically and repressively imposed their culture on these particular peaceful groups of people.

Therefore, Elder Billy Ermine says - the fundamental purpose of the imposed genocidal act executed by the foreigners on Aboriginal people was for the purpose of socio-economic exploitation and political gain. The missionaries and the government deliberately told the Indians that a traditional Indian way of life was "bad", which gradually coerced Aboriginal people to believe that they were a lesser species of humanity, therefore they should be considered second-class citizens in their own land in comparison to the wanton European peoples of that period. Once convinced, it was not difficult for the foreign powers to impose and force their rules and laws on the target group: Mission accomplished. Elder Bill Ermine says many Indian political governments continue to give in to this type of subordination. One example being - relying heavily on the existing Indian Act in terms of the relationship with the federal government, ignoring the original intent of the treaties signed by our Ancestors.
and the British powers rightly acknowledged then at their respected level as international agreements.

Elder Campbell Papequash says the Indian Act is a damaging piece of legislation that erodes and abrogates the original intent and power of the treaties. It was not until in 1951 that the federal government amended the Indian Act. Subsequently, the prohibition on ceremonial activities was repealed Indians could now exercise their traditional Aboriginal rights legally. However, to the dismay of the Aboriginal people, they found that many of the Aboriginal groups had lost their traditional symbolic teachings through many years of oppressive legislative processes imposed by the governmental and religious institutions. They must now expend more valued time seeking the traditional Aboriginal Elders and traditional symbolic teachings/ceremonies in their attempt to reclaim their inherent Aboriginal identity and innate powers passed for centuries.

Therefore, in reference to the initial thesis statement for the purpose of this paper, Aboriginal traditional culture then is not a social condition or a learned behavior adopted from the existing dominant societal institutions of Western thought and linear processes, which manifests itself in abstract parts creating divisions and attaining control over the masses. Furthermore, the intended imposition of the stratification of dominant and subordinate cultural classifiers within contemporary society; deliberately deters the people from the disproportionate distribution of wealth and socio-economic and political activity within the state, whereby clearly the upper and middle class groups are the beneficiaries. Opportunities and privileges within mainstream society for the 'greater' culture groups becomes a sacred symbol skillfully practiced today in the state's conventional institutions.

But in contrast, as stated by the Elders, Aboriginal traditional culture is completely contrary to Western or linear thought, whereby traditional or natural ways are inherently connected to the land and its' laws, sometimes termed as lateral thought. Traditional Aboriginal culture is simple say the Elders, however very difficult to follow due to the imminent influences of modern culture which appears to render suggestive and instantaneous lifestyle processes.

Medicine Man Henry Ross states, prior to European contact, traditional Aboriginal culture was not viewed having separate parts of a socio-economic, political and spiritual entity as we know it today. Rather all things were interrelated as a whole from where the symbolic expression "holistic/wholistic" derived from traditional Aboriginal groups who lived collectively within immediate/extended family groups and communal societies and fundamentally entrenched by an innate clan system mostly based on a matriarchal lineage relationship. The aboriginal peoples value and belief system was based on caring, sharing, love, kindness, compassion, humility and respect to name a few that contributed to a balance and harmonious lifestyle of all living things.

In terms of wellness, traditional Aboriginal people did not resort to a separate practitioner should they require one for their social or health needs. For example, in contemporary society one needs to see a psychiatrist or psychologists for a mental health problem, a general physician or specialist for a medical problem etc., severing the individual of concern into perplex and insidious parts. They did not isolate their people to the uncanny and designated
Institutions e.g. nursing homes for the elderly, daycare or group homes for the children, prisons for the criminally intent and police to enforce rigid and abstract laws, because these rigid mechanisms were not necessary due to their highly evolved traditions and cultural lifestyle. Everyone was look after and had a role to play, so there was little room for unnecessary behavior and unruly state of affairs.

In closing, in terms of traditional Aboriginal wellness processes, the Elders stress we cannot resort to the contemporary ways only and expect to get well, but we must look at our traditional Aboriginal culture first - which looks within the causes of the dysfunction, and then use the modern ways where necessary - but not to be used by it. Change of culture for a modern one is the cause of our dysfunction and problems and surely the Elders say that we cannot expect the contemporary ways to heal us. They say, we must turn to our traditional culture where nothing is broken into abstract and conceptual parts, but we begin within, in accordance to the traditional medicine wheel, in a circle and complete. We cannot expect to go back to a lifestyle of our ancestors of hunting, trapping and gathering and assume this type of subsistence will sustain our basic needs forever. Negating this fact is the subsequent historical inception of Western civilization having polluted our waters and air, exploitation of natural resources e.g., mining and deforestation, but surely - we can turn to the traditional knowledge, principles, wisdom and philosophies of our ancestors for peace of mind and goodwill that have effectively sustained them since time immemorial.

**Elders' recommendations and closing comments:**

To achieve liberation from the restraints of abstract and materialistic influences of modern society, we need to practice an open-mind approach so that our children and grandchildren will have the opportunity to learn and be proud of their true-identity.

Traditional Aboriginal culture is not a "religion" as in Western thought with abstract doctrines and orthodoxies; rather it is a natural way of life practiced by our ancestors since time immemorial. There is no mission or, intent to convert (push and pull factors), rather, an alternative cultural approach allows individuals and groups the liberty to choose the lifestyle of their choice constituting a "balancing act" between linear and lateral processes.

Incidentally, the traditional Aboriginal Elders say; historically speaking, in 1876 when Treaty 6 was signed between the Indian peoples and the European powers as sovereign nations, Indian culture was not excluded from the treaty process. Rather, a ceremonial pipe bonded traditional culture with the treaties, forever, with the emphasis in making a covenant with the Creator between two distinct nations at the international level. It is for this purpose, they say, to claim nationhood status from a world-view perspective we cannot simply adopt some country's culture and expect to be recognize by the International community as such. But we must, restore and entrench our traditional Aboriginal culture at the highest level possible, thereby ensuring that our children and grandchildren can enjoy the individual and collective rights that are entrenched and protected under the existing treaties signed by our Ancestors and European powers in 1876. To say the least: treaties are also limited, but Aboriginal rights and title are not. Nonetheless, we will discuss this process ki-tom-ma-ma-wu-pi-ya-ki.
End Notes:

1. The comments and discussions of this working paper gathered from various traditional Aboriginal Elders of Central and Northern Saskatchewan.

2. The many traditional Elders who attended the traditional culture camps and workshops that the Lac La Ronge Indian Band hosted from 1993 to 1997 shared this valuable source of information.

3. We would like to express our sincere appreciation and gratitude for the memorable stories and teachings the Elders shared with us. Their input has made this gathering information exercise very worthwhile and possible, thereby allowing for general and accessible information for those individuals/groups who wish to be familiar with the historical and contemporary relationships between the Aboriginal peoples and Western civilization.

Tineki

GLOSSARY: (in terms of lifestyles processes for the purpose of this paper).

Lateral – natural and spontaneous.

Linear – modern and abstract.