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RIGHTS OF PASSAGE – THE COMING OF THE ‘WILD WEST’: CONSTRUCTS OF IDENTITY AND THEIR EFFECTS UPON INDIGENOUS PEOPLE ©

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Introduction

“We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and winding streams with tangled growth, as ‘wild.’ Only to the white man was nature a ‘wilderness’ and only to him was the land ‘infested’ with ‘wild’ animals and ‘savage’ people. To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery. Not until the hairy man from the east came and with brutal frenzy heaped injustices upon us and the families we loved was it ‘wild’ for us. When the very animals of the forest began fleeing from his approach, then it was that for us the ‘Wild West’ began.” - Luther Standing Bear, Lakota, 1933.

It was the decade of the 1860s, the time of birth of one of my ancestors Luther Standing Bear who grew to manhood during years of crisis for the Lakota and other nations of the Great Plains. At last the process of colonisation begun in 1492, when we were labeled ‘Indian’, had reached the West. While he was still a young boy the traditional way of life of the Lakota was undergoing dramatic change. Already we had been renamed by the French fur traders and were called the Sioux. The controversial Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 had been legislated and the great Sioux Reservation had been firmly incorporated. In the years that followed virtually every important aspect and institution of Lakota life was subject to change. The annihilation of the buffalo and other natural food sources, plus confinement to the reservation caused the erosion of old traditions and forced our people to depend upon the government for the necessities of life. Our societies of

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autonomy were weakened and normal avenues of social and political advancement were closed. Opposition to government programs by traditional leaders caused dramatic confrontations which led to efforts to destroy positions of leadership and to create rival headmen more sympathetic to the will of agents and Washington officials. Agency police were recruited through coercion and made responsible to the already entrenched Bureau of Indian Affairs. This provided another onslaught upon Lakota traditions and further strengthened the position of the appointed Indian Agent. Government support of missionaries and their efforts to convert the ‘heathen’ undermined our religion and spiritual beliefs and practices. The prohibition of sacred ceremonies including the Sun Dance, our most important annual religious and social event, was devastating. Last but not least, education programs were developed to hasten acculturation and prepare the Lakota and other Indigenous Americans for assimilation into the dominant white society (Ellis, 1975).

For tens of thousands of years we had known who we were and our place in the great Cycle of Life. Now that was being taken away. Native Americans were to become strangers in our own land. We would be deprived of all dignity, reconstructed, reclassified and made to carry the burdens of assigned identities. Through social and political discourse we would be objectified and become ‘other’. It was not a new story to divergent peoples of the Earth, but it was new to us. How little we realised just where it would take us both externally in the outside realm and internally within our own communities.

Through this dissertation I will endeavor to present a picture of the world that continues to exist for Indigenous people, one controlled by a dominant society that persists in grinding out old injustices under new guises. There will be a review of some of the complex actions created via political ontology and social influences that offend morality and common sense; actions explained away routinely by a system of administration relying upon obscurity and intricacy to insulate itself from scrutiny and criticism (Cahn and Hearne, 1969). A comparison of Native American and Australian Aboriginal experiences will be used examining some of the issues that brought conflict into Indigenous communities and centering on constructs of identity. This will include imposed caste systems and blood-quantum measurements used to determine and define a person as being ‘real’ in a culture. How these separate and divide individuals, families and whole communities will be of primary concern.

To better understand the effects of re-identifying people we must step back in historical time to see how the theory and system of ‘other’ came into being. In 15th century Europe use of the term race generally referred to differences between groups within a community based upon rank or social station. When countries such as England and Spain began full-scale colonisation during the 16th and 17th centuries the vanquished became regarded as being of a different race because they were unlike their vanquishers. Then the mass movement of people came around the globe by the colonisers and their subjects, especially through the slave trade. The shift in the meaning of race then became crucial as capitalism and nationalism in Europe arose, with the success of these systems

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dependent upon the accumulation of new resources and military power. These factors and the use of subdued non-European labour led to the belief that Europeans were both culturally and racially superior. By the 18th century racial hierarchies were fixed based on physical differences and a modus operandi for the classification of all natural life as objects, including human beings was established (Hollinsworth, 1998. 35-43). A new worldview had emerged and was readily adopted by most European nations, especially those embroiled in the race for colonial riches to advance their needs for economic and social dominance. By having ‘scientific proof’ through the theory of evolution espoused by Darwin, the dialogue for the identification of humans seen to be inferior and the labeling of them as savages, heathens, deviants or sub-humans became an acceptable tool for exploitation. All non-whites were now categorised as ‘colored’ and put into a place of being ‘other’ to the rest of the world (Blumenbach, 1806). It became legal terminology and thus justified the dehumanisation of all Indigenous people and treatment of them, most notably the Africans, the Native Americans and the Australian Aborigines.

While the issues faced by the Africans are not a focus of this paper, mention must be made of the circumstances and hardships they experienced, for this is pertinent to what follows. The slave trade, or ‘black-birding’ as it came to be known, played a vital role in the colonisation of the Americas and Australia. It was the foundation of the labour force that was to change the face of those continents forever. All attributions of worth, racial attitudes, and violence enforced upon the Africans were transported globally by the economic powers that supported this heinous trade. These were to become firmly entrenched in the policies of governments, social institutions and the psyches of the colonists. That they were enforced against the first Americans was made evident in the assignment of a lesser identity to Native Americans using the terminology and methodology perpetrated upon the Africans (Forbes, 1993. Ch.9). This format was also employed with the Aborigines of Australia. Invasion, warfare, destruction, deceit, slavery and suppression all led to the same conclusion – the ultimate success of the invaders at enormous cost to the people whose lands and way of life were taken.

So what was this cost to the Indigenous Americans and Australians? Humankind needs a worldview to survive and all cultures have a solid basis of ontology. Elimination of this ontology can destroy a nation or its individuals and fracturing of identities occurs when two world ideas overlap with the dominant one effectively changing the other. The beliefs and existence of Aboriginal people are aligned to and inherent with the land. When their traditional lands and resources are taken away the structure of kinship and relationship to all things in creation is disrupted. Social chaos occurs and disintegration of the culture ensues with its members falling victim to manipulation through removal and new constructs of identity by their oppressors to promote assimilation.

Removal was one of the deciding factors in the disenfranchisement of indigenous people and had a dual role to play. The first was the establishment of reserves or missions to restrain and control them under the authority of appointed government officials or missionaries from various church groups. This led to further corruption on all levels and miscegenation occurred. Incidences of miscegenation were already in evidence as it was part and parcel of contact with outsiders, be it consensual or forced. However, it seemed

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to escalate with reservation life and more children of mixed ancestry were born into these communities, which led to the second role of removal. Taking children from families and placing them in specially created residential institutions provided the means to civilize, acculturate and assimilate them into the dominant society. It was here that one of the most insidious elements of fragmentation was to occur, the division of nations by blood-quantum and a caste system of identification. Children were separated and identified according to physical appearance and complexion. Those of fairer skin were seen to be less savage, more worthy of saving and easier to blend into white society, while those of darker skin were labeled as less desirable. Already alienated from parents, families, land and cultural knowledge, they were now alienated from each other (Read, 1981). It mattered not if it was the Kinchela Girls Home in New South Wales or the Carlisle Residential School in Pennsylvania; the story was the same and the attitudes of the caretakers similar. Richard Pratt, the Superintendent at Carlisle stated “*I am a Baptist, because I believe in immersing the Indians in our civilisation and when we get them under holding them there until they are thoroughly soaked.*” All evidence of ancestral culture was to be eliminated and replaced through the processes already legislated (Utley, 1964). Yet another construct of identity and one that has served governments well right into contemporary times.

By the first half of the 20th century most Native Americans and Australian Aborigines had experienced a deprivation of autonomy through aggression, suppression and institutionalisation. However, it was the caste barrier of color prejudice and discrimination that separated them from mainstream society and made them outcasts in their own lands. Already there was demarcation of identity using terms such as, fullblood, half-breed or half-caste, quarter-blood or just plain ‘breed’, all measured on appearance. Kinship and membership in nations, tribes or clan groups, cultural knowledge and rights to them had been disregarded. Only those seen as full-blooded were acknowledged as being the ‘real’ Indians or Aborigines. This was based on the ‘Rule of Recognition’ established by the British and adapted in the Americas in 1825, which holds that only a person whose non-white ancestry is visible is of that ancestry. While originally formatted to refer to persons of African heritage, this was also applied to Native Americans (Gotanda, 1995. 258). It is also evident in Australia where Aborigines no longer controlled by reserve conditions were controlled by a color bar and caste system that created two distinct social environments of black and white. In this system people can be either assigned or denied opportunities depending on provisos outside their control, regardless of any abilities they might have. One extreme and officially sanctioned example of this existed until 1949 whereby the Education Department of New South Wales could exclude identifiable Aboriginal children from state schools if Anglo/European parents objected to their presence. Racism was entrenched and prejudice rampant. Identity was used as a political tool to enact power over others by putting them in a place of being ‘other’ and this process goes through all the cognitive structures of society. Economically and socially this created a multi-faceted cycle of impoverishment that entrapped Aboriginal communities on every level. Then they were blamed for it, while the real cause of economic deprivation and political powerlessness was overt and covert racial discrimination (Broome, 1994. Ch.9).

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For many Aborigines there was a total collapse of morale and self-hate developed from myriad probable sources. After being told for generations that they were inferior many came to believe it. Others, who could, tried to escape by assimilating into the European-based society. This resulted in some denying their ancestry and constructing new identities for themselves leading to further alienation and self-destruction. It also fostered a new dichotomy within a number of communities based on jealousy, mistrust and the perceived status of individuals or groups.

In the United States the government allows Native American nations to assess and determine the status of a member using the pre-determined method of blood-quantum. Once the quantum has satisfied the minimum requirements of the nation (usually 1/8th percentage) and this has been verified by a birth certificate or other documents of proof, an applicant receives a blood certificate from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The individual then is given a numbered enrollment card to prove that they are officially part of that nation. Michael Jennings, head of the Native Studies Department, University of Alaska, pointed out that only four times in world history has blood-quantum identification been required; ‘Black’ Koreans in Japan, Jewish people in Nazi Germany, South African Blacks and Native Americans including Alaska (Williams, 1999). This construct of classified identities within the Native American community at large has been causative of animosity between half-breed, full-blooded, light-skinned and dark-skinned members. The government has practiced for decades its divisiveness of Native American communities by instilling and perpetuating these ‘Indian vs. Indian’ tactics. In the old way of traditional life kinship was acknowledged not on appearance, blood measurement, or even in some instances by birthright, but on the commitment to the family, the band, the nation, its beliefs and practices. You followed the culture and it had nothing to do with status or an official piece of paper.

Re-evaluation by a system not unlike that used to determine a purebred animal, and persons of lighter skin seen to be advantaged as more acceptable, allowed envy, hostility and suspicion to creep in like a thief. This became very apparent during the interactions of the American Indian Movement and the U.S. government after the standoff at Wounded Knee, South Dakota in 1975. Members of the Lakota Nation at Pine Ridge were pitched against each other in violent conflict with the ‘Traditionals’ (full bloods) versus the ‘Breeds’ (mixed bloods). Most of this was caused by the politically motivated and corrupt Dick Wilson, head of the Tribal Police and his so-called ‘Goon Squad’ through their cooperation with State and Federal authorities using terrorist tactics against their own people. Wilson was not unlike any other petty dictator propped up with weapons supplied by the U.S. government. Most of the men employed by Wilson were of mixed ancestry from his own generation, who had grown up during the time the missions were most influential and traditional ways most despised (Mathieson, 1991. Ch.3. Individuals and families who had been friends were now aggressive towards or fearful of each other. Envy had already entrenched itself at Pine Ridge. This was caused by the policies of government bodies like the Bureau of Indian Affairs and social institutions to hire only those individuals of mixed blood for the few jobs available on the Reservation even if there were others who were equally qualified. Abject poverty,

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disenfranchisement, despair and now self-fragmentation of a nation based on constructed methods of identification: add guns and violence and the ‘Wild West’ rises again.

While violence and the conflict experienced by Indigenous people share many features with the broader community, it also has a face of its own that we need to recognise in searching for an understanding of causes and to identify solutions. It is distinct in that it has invaded whole communities and cannot be considered a problem of a singular family or individual. It can be traced in many cases to interventions of the state deliberately induced to disrupt or displace. The conflict within Indigenous communities is fostered and sustained by a racist social environment that promulgates demeaning stereotypes of its members and seeks to diminish their value as human beings and their right to be treated with dignity.

“When you are talking about oppression, there is a process that goes on. First there is a process that demeans us and makes us believe that we are not worthy, and the oppressed begin to develop what they call cultural self-shame and cultural self-hate, which results in a lot of frustration and anger. At the same time this is going on, because our ways are put down as Native people, because our cultural values and things are put down, we begin to adopt the values of our oppressors and, in a way, we become oppressors ourselves. Because of the resulting self-hate and self-shame we begin to start hurting our own people.” - Roy Fabian, Dene, 1993.

Conclusion

Steady interactions with non-indigenous society especially in the modern urban environment poses particular challenges to cultural identity. Both Native Americans and Australian Aborigines desire to achieve an adequate standard of living and to participate in the general life of the dominant society while honoring and protecting their own heritage, values and worldview. Sustaining a positive identity is of extreme importance because of the negative impacts of the dominant institutions. Maintaining a cultural identity for the majority of Native Americans and Aborigines is often difficult because many sources of their traditional culture such as contact with Elders, homeland, language and spiritual ceremonies are not easily accessible. Elders are essential to cultural identity as they are seen as forces in the lives of their people to endure beyond the pain and turmoil experienced in their communities, families or within themselves in regard to their identity. Identification with ancestral land is important because of the ceremonies and traditions associated with it, the sense of belonging it engenders, and the bond to family, community or Elders who remain there as custodians of place and knowledge. Land is one of the major keys to the renewal of cultural identity. Relationship with the land, occupation of it and use of its resources are all essential components of original identity.

Honor, respect, integrity, responsibility, sharing, strength and kindness are all values associated with cultural identity. These were values practiced in traditional communities reinforced by oral traditions, legends, cultural teachings, rituals and ceremonies. Children were instructed in the importance of maintaining these values in their relationship with all of creation. For most Indigenous people these values are as

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important to their cultural identity today as they were in the past. Only we can re-institute them into our way of being.

Cultural identity is not any one element. It is a complex of lineaments that together determine how a person thinks about himself or herself as a person. It is a contemporary knowing about oneself, a state of emotional and spiritual wellbeing, founded in experiences. Only we, as Indigenous people, can construct our own true identity and see ourselves as real.

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