

‘Indigenous Knowledge and its Intertribal Transmission: sources of contemporary Mi’kmaq traditional practices’

by Suzanne Owen, 18th April 2005 (2,500 words)

Introduction:

The focus of my research addresses the issues raised by the ‘Declaration of War Against Exploiters of Lakota Spirituality’ document from 1993, which primarily attacks the appropriation and commodification of Lakota spirituality by so-called ‘new age wannabes’ and ‘pseudo-Indian charlatans’.¹ Along with other influential Native American activists and scholars, they have made the problem of appropriation one of ethnicity between the ‘colonised’ Indians and the ‘colonising’ Euro-Americans. However, when pressed, Lakota spiritual leaders deny such exclusivity and when asked for reasons why non-Indians should cease from participating in or conducting ceremonies, they often speak of protocols – the way things are done. Lakota and other Plains Indian ceremonial practices have also spread to other tribes and indigenous peoples, from Canada to South America, and even to other continents, but these appropriations have escaped criticism, perhaps supporting Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s notion of a commonality between all ‘colonized peoples’.²

Interested to see to what extent Lakota or Pan-Indian culture is informing the current revival of the Mi’kmaq of Newfoundland, I visited

¹ ‘War Against the Exploiters of Lakota Spirituality’ was endorsed by 500 representatives from the Lakota, Nakota and Dakota Nations at the Lakota Summit V, June 1993. It has since been published by Ward Churchill (1994) and posted on several websites run by Native Americans urging others to adopt the declaration. I first came across the original document on the website of anthropologist Raymond Bucko (<http://puffin.creighton.edu/lakota/war.html>).

² ‘Indigenous’ peoples are the ‘colonised’, Linda Tuhiwai Smith wrote in her *Decolonizing Methodologies*. ‘The term has enabled the collective voices of colonized people to be expressed strategically in the international arena,’ she says. ‘It has also been an umbrella enabling communities and peoples to come together, transcending their own colonized contexts and experiences, in order to learn, share, plan, organize and struggle collectively for self-determination on the global and local stage.’ She places the origin of this use of the term ‘indigenous’ to the 1970s American Indian Movement and Canadian Indian Brotherhood (Smith 1999:7).

the only band that had Reserve Status – the Conne River Mi’kmaq – at the time of their annual powwow in the summer of 2003.³ Initially, I sought to compare Mi’kmaq borrowings of Lakota and other Plains Indian ceremonies with so-called New Age appropriations.⁴ After a few conversations with participants at the powwow, it was clear that the Mi’kmaq were also learning ceremonies from other First Nations.

Before presenting examples of the inter-tribal transmission of traditional knowledge and its integration with Mi’kmaq identity, I will discuss briefly the Lakota debate on the appropriation of Native American ceremonies, the sources of Pan-Indianism, and the centrality of ‘protocols’ in Native American and First Nations discourses about ceremonies.

The Declaration of War Against Exploiters of Lakota Spirituality:

The Lakota declaration makes a number of presumptions: that Lakota ceremonies are owned by the tribe rather than individual ‘keepers’. Typically, Lakota undergo training with a spiritual leader for many years until they are given permission to conduct the ritual themselves, especially if it is a communal one like the sweat lodge ceremony. Non-native sweat lodge keepers also claim they learned the ceremony from a spiritual leader who gave them permission to conduct it elsewhere. The Lakota document implies that the ceremonies belong to the Lakota collectively. In practice, there are no set criteria for who may or may not conduct a sweat lodge ceremony (Bucko 1998: 102, 240), although, in general, anyone, including non-Lakotas, may participate if they follow

³ The Miawpukek, or Conne River Mi’kmaq, have had Reserve Status since 1984 and began conducting their annual powwow July the following year. In 2003, there were 777 members living on the Reserve and 1538 living elsewhere (Community Newsletter 4, September 2003). There are many more Mi’kmaq communities without reserve status mainly in central and western parts of Newfoundland.

⁴ I have also participated in Lakota sweat lodge ceremonies in Wanblee on Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota.

certain protocols (such as abstention from drugs and alcohol for a certain period, or exclusion of women who are menstruating), therefore the claim of a collective ownership of ceremonies is problematic in this context.

The rhetoric of the Lakota declaration and similar statements polarises the ‘Native American’ against a colonising Other that is imagined homogenously as ‘whites’ or ‘Euroamericans’. This polarisation, of course, was already established by European explorers and settlers, and, in part, the Lakota are employing the language of the oppressors in order to attain recognition. The question of who is Lakota or Native American tends to be determined by the blood quantum requirement set by government rather than by residence on a reservation or other connection. One Mi’kmaq from Nova Scotia I spoke to accepts or at least recognises this polarisation between Native and non-Native, yet the Conne River Mi’kmaq made an effort to include *all* people in the powwow, even employing a Newfoundland Irish-folk band for the opening night concert, followed by karaoke for the young people.

Pan-Indianism:

The source of Pan-Indianism comes largely from three directions: political associations such as the American Indian Movement, cultural gatherings such as powwows, and ‘spiritual’ sources largely through biographies beginning with the Black Elk books, an inspiration for non-Indians and young urban Indians alike, according to Vine Deloria Jr., followed by the emergence of Native American teachers in New Age circles conducting largely Plains Indian derived ceremonies, such as the sweat lodge and pipe ceremonies, using Lakota terms.⁵ That pan-

⁵ *Black Elk Speaks* (1932) by John G. Neihardt and *The Sacred Pipe* (1971) by Joseph Epes Brown have become source books for those living off the reservations wanting to practice Lakota spirituality. After a talk he gave in Scotland, an Apache told me he used Lakota terms because one of his teachers

Indianism should follow Lakota paradigms is due to various factors, not only through the Black Elk books, but also through other media portraying the archetypal noble Indian in Plains Indian garb, and, for other Native Americans, legendary figures such as Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse have played a large part in instilling into the imagination a model of what it means to be 'Indian', compounded, perhaps, with the 1973 Wounded Knee stand-off between the Lakota, supported by the American Indian Movement, and government agents on Pine Ridge Reservation.

Protocols:

With the lack of a recognised absolute 'authority' in many indigenous traditions, when pressed, Lakota spiritual leaders such as Arvol Looking Horse, refer to 'protocols', which can be problematic as they can be cited to exclude or favour certain individuals or practices over another, but as there is much disagreement in this debate no-one can prevent a spiritual leader from teaching whom they wish. The sharing of ceremonial knowledge to other indigenous people is far less controversial. Is this because it is understood that there is a common colonial experience linking all indigenous peoples together, spoken of by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, or because other tribes are following agreed protocols? It is difficult to obtain a clear answer to these questions, but many would be unhappy with any form of centralised control of the practice of Lakota ceremonies.⁶

was Lakota. On another occasion, an Ojibwe told me he used Lakota terms because non-Indians were more familiar with them.

⁶ These issues were discussed at a special 'Protection of Ceremonies Meeting' at St. Francis, South Dakota, June 6th, 2003, ten years after the Lakota Declaration was issued. Letters and reports about this meeting were published in Indian Country Today: 'Statements from elders regarding the protection of ceremonies' by Tom Kanatakeniate Cook, and 'Further thoughts on the protection of ceremonies' by Arvol Looking Horse, denying any form of racism in his call for exclusion of non-Natives at Lakota ceremonies, both posted on www.indiancountry.com July 7th, 2003. See also the website of the Dakota-Lakota-Nakota Human Rights Advocacy Coalition for a fuller report of the proceedings of the meeting (and that no resolution was made): http://www.dlncoalition.org/dln_issues/2003june6.htm

Newfoundland Mi'kmaq:

Newfoundland Mi'kmaq are particularly interesting as a group because they were not given aboriginal status when the province became part of Canada in 1949. The Miawpukek band at Conne River gained status in 1984, while other Newfoundland Mi'kmaq are still fighting for recognition. The Conne River powwow in 2003 had participants from at least two non-status bands, but none from St. Alban's, their immediate neighbours. It is inevitable that there would be tension between them owing to their differing status. Language is a concern, too, as many Newfoundland Mi'kmaq do not speak their own language, but it is now being taught at school in the Conne River. Language is part of what it means 'to be Mi'kmaq' and, as one Mi'kmaw spiritual leader from New Brunswick implied, after apologising for not speaking Mi'kmaq during the sweat lodge ceremony, the native language links them spiritually to this part of Mother Earth.

The Conne River powwow:

During the powwow, sweat lodge and sunrise ceremonies were offered to all participants regardless of ethnicity. The powwow organisers gave a tobacco pouch to different spiritual leaders to conduct the sunrise ceremony each morning. Some Mi'kmaq maintained various protocols more strictly than others, such as whether or not to allow a menstruating woman to smoke the pipe. The powwow gives the Mi'kmaq a "much needed opportunity to become comfortable with their identity as indigenous people" (according to a member of Conne River). At the opening address, Saqamaw ('chief') Mise'l Joe announced that the

powwow is for *everyone* in Newfoundland, possibly reaching out to the non-status Mi'kmaq as well as white Newfoundlanders. By far the most commonly referred to aims of the powwow were for revitalising the community and for introducing 'Mi'kmaw traditions' to the children so that they can grow up to be proud to be Mi'kmaq. One woman spoke about how important it was that the local Catholic priest, an African American, should attend, as the powwow was such a major community event. He finally appeared on the last day, speaking at length with the saqamaw.

Learning traditions:

Mi'kmaq I spoke to said they learned their ceremonies from other First Nations such as the Cree, Mohawk and Ojibwe. Jim Augustine of Quebec, the emcee for the powwow, explained that the Mi'kmaq nearly lost everything in their culture so have had to borrow. Several participants spoke of how they learned ceremonies from members of other tribes. Joe Paul from the Red Bank Reserve in New Brunswick, who gave me permission to name him, said his spiritual teacher was a Cree from Alberta and was one of the first to conduct sweat lodges in the Maritime area, as well as the first to bring the drum.⁷ Whereas, the pipe was thought to have come to the Mi'kmaq from a Cree woman 'around 700 years ago,' according to a spiritual leader from Newfoundland.

There is evidence that the Mi'kmaq once had a sweat lodge ceremony of a sort, but the form that is conducted under the name 'sweat lodge' by Natives and non-Natives alike usually follows the Lakota model.⁸ Most telling in the sweat lodge ceremony I attended was the

⁷ Joe Paul speaks of 'pouring a sweat' rather than 'conducting', 'running' or 'leading a sweat lodge ceremony'.

⁸ 'The sweat lodge was and has reemerged as a pan-Indian ceremony, one that today has taken on a Lakota form in many ways. It has moved beyond its original practitioners and examination by

naming of the direction north 'White Buffalo', a Plains Indian symbol. Saqamaw Mise'l Joe wrote recently in a children's story that north was the direction of the 'Great White Bear' (Joe 2003: 9). A Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq told me he ran a beginners' sweat lodge in Halifax for young people from difficult backgrounds. When I asked him how he got permission or knew it was time to run a sweat, he said he felt it inside, but also 'his elder' gave him the nod. He added that the sweat is not a Mi'kmaw tradition, but 'you pick up pebbles from different places'. An older relative of Mise'l Joe confirmed that the sweat only came recently to the Mi'kmaq.

At one of the sunrise ceremonies led by a spiritual leader from Nova Scotia, the pipe was filled six times and passed around the circle with everyone saying 'all my relations' before handing the pipe to the next person. 'All my relations' was spoken at all sweat lodge ceremonies I have attended, often in Lakota (*mitakuye oyasin*). In the sweat lodge ceremony in Conne River they spoke the same phrase but in Mi'kmaw (*emset nogamag*). The leader said to the group after the ceremony that he had learned first from the Lakota, then the Cree, Ojibwe and Mohawk. 'It's the same. All the same,' he said, and tried to articulate what he meant. 'The circle is found everywhere. Unity.' Similarly, Joe Paul, the spiritual leader from New Brunswick, said that he, with a handful of others, went out to learn the traditions, sometimes invited, from Mohawk, Ojibwe, and others. He says he was one of the first to bring the sweat lodge to the Maritime area. 'Now they don't need to learn the [sweat lodge] songs of others,' he said. 'Songs come through from the spirit world.' This would apply to all aspects of traditional knowledge, as the next example attests:

anthropologists and missionaries to examination by and utilization for individuals outside of the Lakota people who seek spiritual enlightenment and ecological integrity through Native American rituals' (Bucko 1998: 252-253).

Localisations and innovations:

Joe Paul said he was once asked to do a particular type of sweat lodge ceremony – a Bear Sweat – that he did not know how to do and had been lost to the Mi'kmaq. Under the guidance of a female Mi'kmaq spiritual leader, he fasted in the woods until he received a message to perform the sweat, being told he would know what to do. When he returned, the house was full of people, including old people and children, waiting to participate in this sweat – all 'first-timers', he said.

Another example occurred at the powwow. Saqamaw Mise'l Joe asked Joe Paul for a healing sweat. Only the seven pipe-carriers were invited to take part and it lasted half the night. The next day at the dance arena, the chief invited all the pipe-carriers to come over, naming them individually, then asked if people knew what it was like to lose one's spirit, and announced, 'I had lost my spirit, but last night, thanks to these guys I found it again.' He said, 'For Conne River, from now on this is Forgiveness Day' and asked that everyone join hands in a huge circle. He waited for people from across the field to come and those from the stalls. The four drumming groups (called 'singers') formed a separate circle inside the dance arena. Mise'l Joe said he and the pipe-carriers will dance for everyone and asked the local drumming group to do a single drum beat, while the pipe-carriers, along with the two principal dancers, did a round. After that, a drumming group from Quebec offered to do a song called 'Calling the Spirit of the Bear' for healing, commenting that 'There's been a lot of talk about healing here. We'd like to dedicate this song to the people here.'

These examples show how the Plains Indian ceremonies such as the sweat lodge and the powwow are being incorporated and adapted by the Mi'kmaq as a service for the community, and, especially in the case of those in Newfoundland, for revitalisation, but also as an opportunity to

explore what it means to be 'Mi'kmaq'. However, the chief of a non-status band was more cynical, saying 'basically, all this [in the powwow] was imported from the Plains Indians' and he was trying to find what he regarded as real Mi'kmaw tradition. He would like to host a powwow with more Mi'kmaq traditions, such as the longhouse, but said, 'We have to have all the protocols, which are the same everywhere: the sunrise ceremony, sweat lodge, drumming and dancing. The arena as a circle is borrowed from the Plains.' When I asked him why this was so, he said, 'They were such a strong culture while the Eastern bands were considered a vanishing people. Hollywood supported the Plains [and] the Eastern cultures were downplayed. The Plains' original powwow is probably lost; the ones now are "Hollywoodised". They have borrowed the image, even though they were depicted as killers, bad guys, with John Wayne shooting at them, but the image was there: the horses, the paint, the feathers.' For the Mi'kmaq, he said, 'We needed to borrow... to bring interest,' and kick-start the revival.

The Mi'kmaq are not only receiving traditional knowledge, but passing it on, too. Attending the powwow were a group of Labrador Inuit living in St. John's, saying they were learning the 'Mi'kmaq way' – mainly drumming and powwow songs.

Conclusion:

Newfoundland and Mi'kmaq identities are being negotiated at the Conne River powwow with a presumed pan-Indian indigeneity along ethnic lines, but primarily focusing on the community. Many Mi'kmaq identify with Native Americans over that of national or provincial identities. I asked a spiritual leader from Nova Scotia if he felt Canadian. He grimaced and shook his head, saying, 'It doesn't matter. I fit in more with Native Americans in the States.'

The Mi'kmaq revival 'needed to be kick-started' with pan-Indian elements, providing (at least for Conne River) various benefits: political (through representation and recognition), cultural (especially for Mi'kmaq confidence) and spiritual (re-rooting themselves with the language and their past).⁹

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⁹ 'Traditional spirituality' is the category Mi'kmaq and other First Nations use to describe their way of life as opposed to 'Christianity' or other ways of life. 'Traditional' and 'spirituality', as constructed categories, I do not have the space to address in this paper.