

MULTICULTURALISM IN SASKATCHEWAN

A Native Perspective

**". . . and have always in view,
not only the present but the
coming generations."**

**Dekanawidah
c. 1800**

**Presented to the
TASK FORCE ON MULTICULTURALISM**

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The early European explorers and the later settlers would not and could not have probed into the heart of Kanota without the Indian birchbark canoe, Indian dogsled, Indian snowshoe, Indian medicine, Indian guides, Indian knowledge and Indian friendship. This historic contribution is recognized. As the prairie economic order underwent drastic change during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Metis of Manitoba and Saskatchewan became the economic lifeline of the new order. This historic contribution is recognized.

Then for a century, beginning around the time of Confederation, the Aboriginal contribution was ignored.

As the twentieth century proceeds inexorably toward the twenty-first, it is time to re-examine the contributions of the Native people. To do so in terms of teepees and eighteenth century romanticism would be to miss the essential point. The essential point and it is the focal point of this paper is that present day Native culture has something to offer to the people of Saskatchewan and ultimately to all of humanity.

Both The Saskatchewan Multicultural Act and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act delineate the two fundamental reasons for promoting multiculturalism. Firstly, the retention, for individual self-preservation reasons, of distinctive group identities. Secondly, a from the viewpoint of this paper, more significantly for Canada as a whole, the preservation of Canada's unique cultural mosaic tradition.

"Much of the misunderstanding and intransigence of government and of Canadians generally results from the fact that we do not take seriously (even if we say we do) the traditional cultural viewpoint as it is expressed today".¹

The Aboriginal tradition in Saskatchewan is forty centuries old. "He (the white man). . . seemed to have little appreciation of the fine tuning of the Indian with his environment".²

Unless this appreciation by mainstream Saskatchewan society is shortly forthcoming, all people will lose an understanding of life that is available in Native tradition.

Quite apart from the obvious historic contributions made by Aboriginal peoples to Saskatchewan's development is the eminently more significant realization that it is of paramount importance that all people understand those unique features of Aboriginal culture which, when incorporated into our mass psyche, will advance us as a people and as a province.

It is emphatically not the point of this paper to dwell upon past injustices, inaccurate statistics or present inequities. Rather, the paper seeks to state, in clear and definite terms the cultural realizations of Native people as a whole and further, to point out why these are essential for all of us. It then remains the responsibility of the Multiculturalism Task Force to move toward implementation of recommendations contained herein.

The central issue is the threat of the loss of the composite Indian identity in Saskatchewan. Language, the essential glue for preservation of any culture, is disappearing. ". . . he has learnt the lesson which the great mother Nature teaches to her sons through the voices of the night, the forest, and the solitude. This river, this mountain, this measureless meadow speak to him in a language of their own. Dwelling with them he learns their varied tongues, and his speech becomes the echo of the beauty that lies around him."³ Retention of the languages and thereby the cultural uniqueness and value must be a priority. However, assimilation, the worst possible occurrence is proceeding apace. What then is to be done? What is to be retained? Why should the Province of Saskatchewan be concerned?

The concern must be centered upon the realization that the Canadian identity has developed as a mosaic. Colorful, interactive and dynamic. The melting pot identity resultant from assimilation is bland, self-serving and static. By preserving Aboriginal language and culture, the people of Saskatchewan enhance their own identities.

The answer to the question of what is to be retained is two-pronged. It must be answered from the viewpoint of the Native individual and from the viewpoint of the entire population. For the purposes of this paper, retention for the entire population is emphasized.

"I worked for them all, day and night:
But with no distinction of race."⁴

However, in so doing, retention for the Native individual, as a means of self-identity will be obliquely addressed.

There is an inherent danger in categorizing all Saskatchewan Native people into a homogeneous group. The Cree, Dene, Saulteaux, Dakota, Assiniboine and Metis are linguistically and culturally distinct. However, there is an understanding of existence common to all and this is what must be saved.

Four distinctive aspects of the Native world view are comprised of valuable teachings and learnings for all of us. These are emphasized in this paper.

From a spiritual view of existence, the Creator is revered above all and in all.

A Declaration of The First Nations⁵

We the Original Peoples of this land know the Creator put us here.

The Creator gave us laws that govern all our relationships to live in harmony with nature and mankind.

The laws of the Creator defined our rights and responsibilities.

The Creator gave us our spiritual beliefs, our languages, our culture, and a place on Mother Earth which provided us with all our needs.

We have maintained our freedom, our languages, and our traditions from time immemorial.

We continue to exercise the rights and fulfill the responsibilities and obligations given to us by the Creator for the land upon which we were placed.

The Creator has given us the right to govern ourselves and the right to self-determination.

The rights and responsibilities given to us by the Creator cannot be altered or taken away by any other Nation.

The sanctity of Nature and the human being's oneness with it is a lesson to be always borne in mind as our environment is constantly threatened. "Every part of this country is sacred to my people."⁶

The extended family and the enduring closeness of family relationships has lent stability to Native people in times of severe external stress.

"At old Sun, the Blackfoot bus co-operative delivers students to the door at 9:00 a.m., approximately. But there's cushion time before classes start - a daily Oomoowap, which translates as a 'people get together'."⁷

Leadership, or more accurately, the division of the leadership function was and continues to be based upon recognized and demonstrated expertise. A leader, specific to a particular function, only remained as leader for so long as he demonstrated his capacity for leadership.

"Where do we stand today? The time has come now for all of us as leaders of our people to re-examine ourselves, our past deeds, and our future plans . . . Let us make haste and set our house in order before it is too late. We believe these to be truths, and from our hearts and for these reasons, we Hopi Chieftans, urge you to give these thoughts your most earnest considerations."8

These specific culturally unique features of the Native identity are of value to us all. The question remains, how can these be incorporated into mainstream society's frames of reference and thinking?

"Unless a child learns about the forces which shaped him; the history of his people, their values and customs, their language, he will never really know himself or his potential as a human being."9

The truth of this statement is not limited to Aboriginal children. It is true for all children. And the forces shaping Saskatchewan children today are the forces of our history. Forces rich in the culture that has existed and thrived for forty centuries.

The only viable means of ensuring the retention of and ensuring the application of Native thought is through the education system. They must be taught. Yet, in reality, it must be stated that this exact point has been made for many years and that, to date, they are not a part of the offerings of Saskatchewan Education. The days of coloring teepees and memorizing tribal migration routes are numbered. This may become part of texts and curricula and that is fine. But what remains to be done is the incorporation of current contributions into the common essential learnings of Saskatchewan Education.

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.10

Fortunately, for the province, the education system is already undergoing a general review and updating. The new core curriculum and the common essential learnings are ideally suited to the development of new ideas. New ideas which must be incorporated from the viewpoint of Aboriginal people.

If the Task Force on Multiculturalism firmly supported the inclusion of Native contributions being incorporated into the offerings of Saskatchewan Education, the result would be an education system from which all youth could secure a greater understanding of themselves, others and the wider world.

It remains to be done. The Gabriel Dumont Institute is offering its full and unconditional support to the Multicultural Council and to Saskatchewan Education in their efforts to advance the cause of multiculturalism and to create a better education system.

" . . . while I have before me, stretching far and wide, the vast solitudes which await in silence the footfall of the future."11

The footfall of cooperation shared learning and understanding a future of equality.