

Mother Tongue

Aboriginal Cultures and Languages

BY JOY ASHAM FEDORICK

The following two articles were first published in Native Women (Vol. 10, No. 2 & 3, 1989). They both deal with the importance of language and education in reclaiming the Native cultures that dominant white society has attempted to malign and colonize. Native Women brought together Indian, Inuit and Métis women to look at their past, present and future; to record their life experiences, teachings and wisdom in their own words/voices. It's through collaborations like Native Women that the women's movement can move beyond its legacy of exclusion and elitism to map out, with other oppressed groups, a vital, inclusive feminist future.

“**C**ulture... reveals itself as a fabric woven of personal histories and through the eyes of its individuals; nor are the lives of the ‘Great Men’ more culturally significant than those of the lesser known.”

It has only been in the last three hundred years that change has come to the Cree and Ojibway. We must peek through the window to yesterday to glimpse a society at peace with the environment, in harmony with the elements, content with hunting and gathering, and with very advanced political and educational structures that were based on oral tradition. No written language form existed, other than scattered pictographs, and counts. For this reason, truth was held in very high regard: as no other recording of events or happenings existed, truth was essential, and to deal in falsehood was a very serious perversion, one that was societally unacceptable. And the sto-

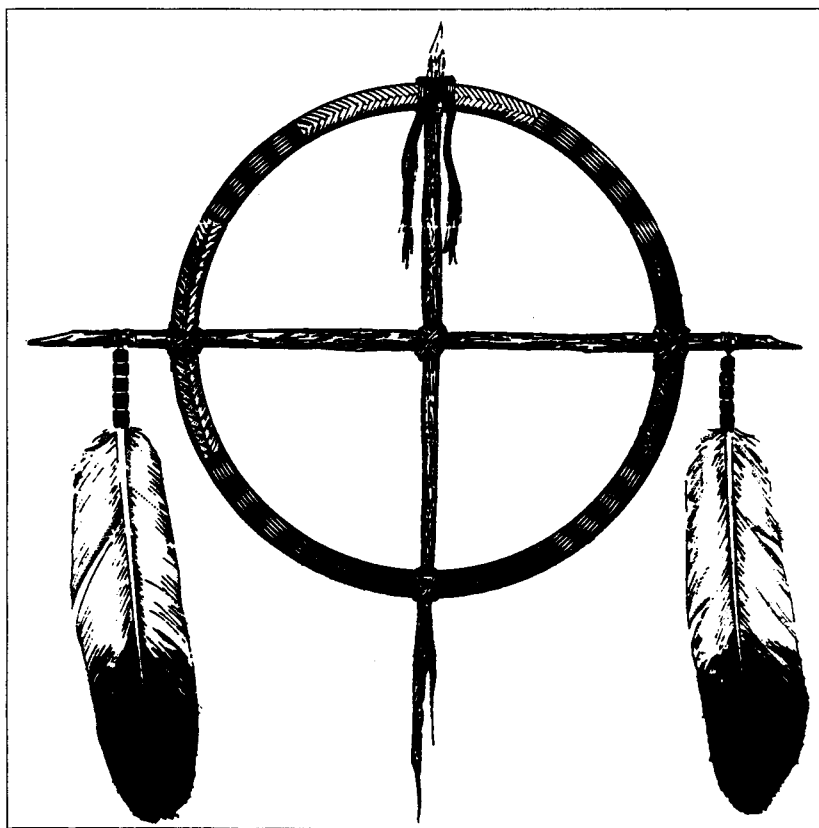
ries and legends that developed guarded very closely the collective moral and spiritual understandings according to the Original Teachings, ensuring that new generations would have the tools necessary to minimize the disruption that man can make on the serenity of Mother Earth.

We do not romanticize. But we clearly do say, as we gaze around at the Super Stack in Sudbury, at the Churchill River Diversion, at the drowning of over a thousand caribou, at the English-Wabigoon River system, at the St. Clair River, at the barren wastes that were once great forests in Northern Canada, that our way of life and the cultural structures that maintained it, had and have value. The wisdom still exists with our Elders and within our languages. Respect for the environment and all living things is demonstrated in grammatical structures and usages that do not let us lose track of the continuum: the relationship that we, as living beings, have with the trees, the air, the water, the land and our brothers and sisters, the animals. The conceptual relationship and respect for

all living things is shown when we say “wood” in a tree differently than we say “wood” in a table. The tree is living, and must be named, while wood in the table is dead. Therefore, we acknowledge the spirit of life within living wood matter, and the transition into the no-longer-animated.

Our legends tell of Tricksters and Giants, and mirror the follies of man. Continuous reflection on the nature of human beings. Our taboo-systems, if you will, are characterized in the scrapes, scuffles, scabs and scatology of little shadows and mega-imps.

Our stories reflect long-term planning. They do not necessarily have a



beginning, middle and end. We are told that when it is essential for us to understand the wisdom of the recounting, that piece of knowledge will be there. And it is.

Our cultural wealth provides wisdom and texture, insights and colour, a cornucopia of dimension necessary to the definition of true Canadian culture. Without such texture and dimension, which rest in the hands and hearts of our people and languages, the Canadian mosaic has no mortar, and, within time, will surely disintegrate.

I am talking language retention here and the horrific state and crumbling decay, with no support systems, of Aboriginal languages.

I am also talking about the fact that one doesn't need a degree to write: what emerging voices have to say is just as real and culturally beneficial as Rudyard Kipling and Claire Hoy. Perhaps more so.

I'm also talking metaphor, symbolism, the conjuring of three- (sometimes four-) dimensional images with words. Saul Williams, from Weagemow, spoke to me of "when I was fourteen or fifteen [*sic*] I saw my first T.V. — it looked like a suitcase with a window to nothing." I'm talking of the role of each one of the arts media in the transition between an oral heritage and written literature. I'm talking of the fact that the hundred-year rupture that has occurred to distance Aboriginal peoples from the land is marginal compared with the thousand years or so experienced by European cultures.

This is important. What it means is that wisdom still lurks within the languages and peoples: wisdom that will be essential to the rest of the world, should it ever come to the realization that the oil spills cannot continue, that the pcb-contaminated water supplies cannot support future life, that there is a pact of the generations that means stewardship of these things must occur for the sake of our grandchildren.

And the ways we have of saying these things are equally important: Aboriginal languages are not noun-based, but verb- and adjective-based; in other words, Aboriginal languages are relationship-oriented, instead of thing-oriented. This concept allows for the understanding of

the relevance of a strong Spiritual relationship, humanity, respect, real and honest-to-goodness ethics, and the humility of understanding the continuum.

I would like to offer this example to you:

A Navajo (and this is a true story) was working on his doctorate in a lab in the States. He peered through his microscope and saw a thing that moved (and here I must describe my hand signs, as English does not have the verb to do it) like this:

(My hands are swarming around each other, moving in all directions, pulsating rhythmically. Fingers curling, bending and flashing. Beating, shrinking and retreating. Alive.)

The Navajo scientist exclaimed to the others in the lab that the thing was moving. They looked and looked and could not see it.

Through testing and verifications and other scientific means, it was at last determined that the thing really was moving, pulsing, beating, shrinking, retreating, et cetera. Was alive.

The Navajo had been able to see this, because his language had a word for the movement, and thus the concept existed in his head.

Language is important.

Now you add the incredible visual wisdoms that Aboriginal peoples display, and you know we have stories and ideas and concepts and answers. My Earthtones project, described below, will attempt to create a means for these things to be heard.

That is what it's about.

The Earthtones North project is designed to address the needs of nomadic and isolated artists and to allow voice, through the use of electronic technology, to Native artists in remote regions of Northwestern Ontario. The project combines methodologies of professional development, networking, enhancement of public profile, and experimental group productions using as its foundation applications of computer technology and media communications.

Project objectives are: a) to provide a means for the development of Aboriginal literary arts in remote communities using new applications of micro-technology and other media; b) to provide three profes-

sional development workshops to emerging Aboriginal artists in their own communities; c) to provide electronic support services for arts development in two Northwestern Ontario Aboriginal Communities; d) to provide editorial support, publications information and the fruits of networking to two remote northern communities; and e) to enable Monitor North, as an artist-run centre, to demonstrate the effectiveness of the concepts of flex-space and new technological applications.

Community-based workshops will introduce innovative uses of technology and demonstrate how these uses can apply to bringing a literary voice to Northern Aboriginal Peoples. The workshops will be supplemented by human resources in editing and interpreting, electronic communications methods and access to professional resources. The production-base of the project will be Thunder Bay: support services will be provided by Monitor North and the Definitely Superior Art Gallery.

Earthtones North — Phase One will establish two technology-assisted literary resource stations equipped with a computer, modem, shoe-box audio recorder and printer. The outlets will have telephones. The hardware has been chosen for its portability and hardiness, the software for its user-friendly nature. At the main station in Thunder Bay, additional software will allow for the creation of syllabic fonts for writing in Aboriginal languages. Additional technical resources will include faxing, audio transcription and chat-boards.

In future phases, Earthtones North will explore graphical and visual interfaces, and move towards the instantaneous natural sense of feed-back essential to cultural and artistic production.

¹*The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* (vol. .2, no. 2), p. 222.

²Although this author tends to believe that our beadwork, use of colours on lances, et cetera for identification and naming purposes, told stories, readable by others, and hence has often stated that we did have a written language which, after all, is just a series of mutually recognizable characters.