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The Ivory Wiigiwaam: Aboriginals and the Academy

by D'Arcy Ishpeming'enzaabid Rheault (Lynx Clan Ojibwe)

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Let me begin with a formal Anishinaabe greeting. Boozhoo, Ishpemingenzaabid n'dizhnikaaaz, Bizhiw n'dodem. Ojibwe-Anishinaabe n'dow, Timmins n'donjiba.

Greetings, my name is Ishpemingenzaabid (my name translates as He-Who-Sees-From-A-High-Place). I am a Lynx Clan Ojibwe from Timmins, Ontario.

I will preface what follows with a few words of caution. Even though I will refer to Aboriginal Peoples in general, I am not saying that all the Indigenous cultures of North and Central America are the same or that a pan-Indian culture exists. I speak of all Indigenous peoples of what we call Turtle Island (North and Central America).

As an apprentice of Anishinaabe¹ philosophy, spirituality and tradition I wish to discuss my impressions of an academic method based on Traditional Aboriginal knowledge systems leading into an examination of the place of Aboriginals and

Traditional knowledge in the development of a culturally sensitive educational system.

My paper deals with a rather new phenomenon in universities today: Aboriginal peoples entering into and completing undergraduate and graduate programs other than Native Studies. In The Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University, for example, more than a dozen Aboriginal students are currently completing their undergraduate and Master's level work. As well, there are six Aboriginal students (Fall, 2000) pursuing doctoral level studies, three of which, including myself, began in 1998. Moreover, this is all happening at a University that has only one Aboriginal faculty and no Native Studies program. Since 1969, when Trent University began the first Native Studies Program in North America, there has been a vast expansion of Native, Aboriginal, and Indigenous Studies programs throughout this land. However, this has lead, in many academic circles, to the conclusion that Aboriginal Students will only or can only pursue Native Studies. This is beginning to change, and with this change comes a new awareness of the particular methodological needs of Aboriginal students.

Many issues must be examined when we speak of Aboriginals in University. Particularly when many of those students base their lives on the Traditions of their respective Nations; that is, people fluent in Native language, traditions and ceremonies. It is here that we will begin to explore the special issues that Aboriginal students face in a western academic tradition.



Talking About Aboriginal Knowledge

Let me begin by saying that I have come to realize, through my involvement in Ceremonies and with Elders and Traditional Teachers, that Aboriginal conceptions of reality still remain true to the Original Instructions given by the Creator and the traditions that have been passed down through countless

generations. Many Aboriginals continue to share their knowledge and explore the complexity of Creation in a traditional way. However, it is also, I believe, appropriate to suggest that we live in a time when new generations are gradually beginning to discuss their traditions in new ways.

There has been a long-standing conversation, perhaps even argument, amongst Aboriginal peoples concerning the writing of philosophy for instance. Some are of the opinion that we should begin to share our various traditions and Teachings with others, while some are of the firm belief that any written discussion of philosophy or worldview amounts to a desecration of sacred oral Teachings. I wish to be clear: I find myself somewhere between these opposing groups. It is my firm belief that the time has come for the sharing of various Aboriginal philosophies, and I thank my Teachers for their encouragement in this matter. However, my Teachers also have taught me that sacred oral Teachings, because of their dynamic nature, must continue in an oral fashion in Ceremony so that their unique quality can be preserved.

As I completed my Master's thesis on the examination of Traditional methodology and Anishinaabe philosophy, I found that it was necessary to make clear the serious limitations there are to revealing 'sacred' knowledge and even the personal learning I have done with regard to this Knowledge. The Teachings upon which I base my work are not made available to the opinions and analysis of non-Aboriginals. It is taught that these people, unfamiliar with the ceremonial and cultural environment, cannot possibly 'feel' the power of these Teachings from pages written in English. It is essential that these Teachings be experienced through the context and the protocol of Traditional Ceremonies in the original language. This context and protocol includes, for instance, the place and time that the Teachings are given, who gives the Teaching, as well as the

ceremonial presence of the Spirit of these Teachings. Without these aspects, the Teachings become static in presentation and meaning.

Nevertheless, I have found encouragement for this work from Cree Elder Louis Crier. In the early 1970's, summing up on behalf of Elders from Seven First Nations of Alberta in assembly, he stated:

We would like to say that in order to survive in the 20th century we must really come to grips with the White man's culture and with White ways. We must stop lamenting the past. The White man has many good things. Borrow. Master and use his technology.

Discover and define the harmonies between the two general Cultures, between the basic values of the Indian way and those of Western civilization — and thereby forge a new and stronger sense of identity.

For, to be fully Indian today, we must become bilingual and bicultural. We have never had to do this before. In so doing we will survive as Indians, true to our past. We have always survived. Our history tells us so...²

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Traditional Methods

I feel that a method based on Traditional knowledge is the beginning of an active incorporation, recognition and use of one's own perspective as a critical source of inquiry and means of knowing. The sensing of the 'self' and one's cultural intuition are what necessitate a different approach because in various Aboriginal cultures this method is a fundamental way of knowing; a fundamental epistemology, the absence of which would render one's study invalid. This method is about coming to objective truths through a subjective method of inquiry and analysis not explicitly characteristic of any Western systems, but of various Aboriginal cultures. Like many Traditional Aboriginals, I have learned that it is not possible to separate myself from the world; I am a spirit walking in this world. 'Others' guide me in this world, but it is, ultimately, an individual journey. Thus, this method

must be a qualitative inquiry built on a blending of participant observation and participant participation³ incorporating one's thoughts, reflections, emotions, spirituality and actions in one's personal learning. Traditional knowledge also recognizes that there are given assumptions or beliefs that must be acknowledged. Assumptions and beliefs are thorny issues in academia; nevertheless, they exist as a foundational structure within this traditional method. Assumptions and beliefs are generally defined, in the West, as suppositions or opinions, something not immediately susceptible to rigorous proof. This definition can be misleading, potentially bringing one to the conclusion that there is no rigorous system implied in a Traditional method. It is here that we have the first instance of confusion based in language. When English terms like 'assumption' and 'belief' are defined there invariably is a lexicological reference to their Greek and Latin roots, and as such, their meaning is directed by those traditions⁴. In Ojibwe the term for 'belief', and by association 'assumption' (as it would be categorized in English), is *n'de-be-we-ta-win*⁵. *N'de-be-we-ta-win*, on the surface, is translated as "My belief," but literally means "the truth that is evident in the way of the action." "In the way of the action" refers to the Traditional knowledge one gains when using a process-oriented method. Moreover, it is 'truth' that is evident, not 'opinion' or 'conjecture'. This understanding of the Ojibwe meaning of 'belief' reveals some of the philosophical structures that underlie a Traditional method.

Traditional Aboriginal Thought and the Academy

The recognition of Aboriginal worldviews as philosophical systems is a very recent progress in the academic environment. There is a slow but gradual movement within academic circles to include Traditional knowledge systems and worldviews of Aboriginal peoples in conversations; particularly concerning the environment. Nevertheless, we must

also remember that there are currently only two Native Studies Ph.D. programs in North America (U. Arizona (1996) Trent University (1999)).⁶ Even though there is an increasing inclusion and recognition of Aboriginal philosophies in academic circles, this alone does not characterize these systems as distinctly or predominantly philosophical. Philosophical thought has been at the heart of Aboriginal societies since time immemorial. There have always been philosophers amongst the people. The Anishinaabeg have a tradition of intellectuals called the *Chinshinabe*. They are the Elders and Traditional Teachers who are the caretakers of cultural and sacred Knowledge. They take on the responsibility of maintaining the flow of wisdom that passes from generation to generation. As Dr. Joseph Couture, a Cree Medicine-man, Pipe-carrier and psychologist states:

I'm of the opinion that Elders are superb embodiments of highly developed human potential. They exemplify the kind of person which a Traditional, culturally based learning environment can and does form and mould. Elders are evidence that Indians know a way to high human development, to a degree greater than generally observable in prevailing Western society. Their qualities of mind (intuition, intellect, memory, imagination), and emotion, their profound and refined moral sense, together with a high level of spiritual/psychic attainment, are perceived as clear behavioral indicators, deserving careful attention and possible emulation.⁷

Various Aboriginal traditions already have an educational method as part of their cultures. In Traditional and contemporary times, the Elders and the Traditional Teachers are the ones who guide the apprentice on his or her path of learning since the education of an Aboriginal person happens throughout the lived-experience of that person. The Elders and Traditional Teachers are the embodiment

of the Traditional education system. They are the teachers in the school of life.

When reflecting on these aspects of Traditional education and learning I am aware that a possible difficulty with a method of Traditional knowledge within the framework of a Western academic system is, as has been remarked on by Vine Deloria, Jr. a Lakota scholar that:

Regardless of what Indians have said concerning their origins, their migrations, their experiences with birds, animals, lands, water, mountains, and other peoples, [Western academics] have maintained a stranglehold on the definitions of what respectable and reliable human experiences are. The Indian explanation is always cast aside as a superstition ...⁸

I believe that it all comes down to a misunderstanding of the Aboriginal conception of the inter-subjective nature of Creation. In the West, it is generally taught that there must be a detachment from the research in order that the work be objective. Understandably, this caution is based on a general fear of research becoming relativistic and purely subjective.

These conceptual differences are most apparent when we examine the structures of universities. Dr. Joseph Couture characterizes universities as places where people strive for success in the eyes of their peers. Couture concludes that this process is understandable due to the “mechanistic rationalism”⁹ that prevails in universities.

Conversely, a Traditional knowledge method entails a personal inter-subjective exploration of the physical-spiritual world. “It is difficult,” Couture states, “for many intellectuals, so encased in their academic egos to perceive what is extraordinary reality [that is, the physical-spiritual world] — in this case, that “what” which Traditional Indians see, and that “how” whereby they arrive at seeing the “what.”[i.e., extraordinary reality.]¹⁰ The “how” is often not so disturbing to “academic intellectuals” as is the “what.” It is the “what” which always seems so completely impossible

and illogical because it is outside the realm of the quantifiable.

As we begin a new century, it is becoming evident that a purely rational or analytic approach itself is incomplete. The ongoing environmental, political and economic problems that plague the world point to an underlying malaise of the spirit. The framework chosen for a life (academic and personal) based on Traditional knowledge asserts that it is essential that the pursuit of knowledge happen from the perspective of a whole person. As such, “[the analytic approach] needs to be complemented by the intuitive faculty.”¹¹ This is what Joseph Couture calls “full-mindedness”¹²; i.e., the union of mind and heart, of intellect and intuition.

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Traditional Education

The Traditional system of education for many Aboriginals has always been one of apprenticeship (with human and non-human beings). The knowledge that is received through apprenticeship is not relative to the opinions and tastes of the receiver, but is verified and acknowledged by a system of Elders, Traditional Teachers and *Enadizewin* (Natural Law). However, this is not a repudiation of the place of individual perspective. The Anishinaabe system of Knowledge, for instance, is a vastly complex system; with built-in protocols and processes, that one must follow in order that one places oneself within an appropriate and valid epistemic context.

This is, essentially, scientific knowledge and research. Pam Colorado, an Oneida scholar, explains that:

For a Western-educated audience the notion of a tree with spirit is a difficult concept to grasp. Therefore, to see a Native speaking with a tree does not carry the message of mental instability; on the contrary, this is a scientist engaged in research!¹³

This Traditional knowledge method strives to achieve exactly this kind of research: metaphysical certainty

through already existing structures of Aboriginal metaphysics, ontology, axiology and epistemology. The 'ground' or foundation of Traditional knowledge can be better appreciated when certain key assumption are presented and explained. First, that "it is believed that Traditional Knowledge, because of its roots in Aboriginal world view, can and does present a philosophy that unifies learning..."¹⁴; i.e., that it is meta-disciplinary. Corollary to this is the fact that Traditional knowledge seeks to "demonstrate the inherent validity and usefulness of a heritage and philosophy ... which images visions, and voices "And all our relations, ...""¹⁵ Second it "can and does bring an ancient understanding that learning leads to development of mind and attitude, and adaptation in conduct."¹⁶ Thus, Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge, "seeks to express a deep, comprehensive perception of all reality as sacred, and hence sacralized, ..." ¹⁷ This culture-based method is producing a new breed of Aboriginal intellectuals and the development of what I like to call "the Ivory Wiigiwaam:" a fusion of Aboriginal and Western academic traditions Because of this, the academic world is seeing the emergence of what some are calling the "Indigenist"¹⁸. Paul Bourgeois, a Traditional Anishinaabe Teacher explains that:

An Indigenist is an Indigenous person who combines the abstract and theoretical thinking involved in the creation and transmission of Indigenous Knowledge. However, the conceptual and sometimes ethereal qualities of Indigenous thought for the Indigenist does not remain in the mind, but is lived on a daily basis. The Indigenist is clearly a thinker and practitioner of Indigenous Knowledge. This tradition of intellectual/spiritual activity has not easily transferred itself into the current way of doing things in western society. Learning by doing, in many Indigenous societies is the basic tenet of learning. Discovering what was already known as true is an essential principle for acquiring knowledge in [Aboriginal] life.

Therefore, we learn by doing and discovering what we have come to know to be true for ourselves.¹⁹

Bourgeois goes on to explain that:

Indigenists are needed to review and analyze what has been written about us, to clear the mind of inaccurate representations made in [dominant] texts.

The Indigenist also needs to write his or her own-stories regarding origins, migrations, and cosmological understandings of the universe.²⁰

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Absolutes and Reality

When I explain the role of insights and knowledge from a spiritual source, I am, of course, assuming that that spiritual realm is real and approachable. My understanding of Creation and *Creator* is one that speaks of the absolute oneness of reality. Indeed, I am speaking of absolute truths and an absolute reality. Traditional Teachings and Traditional Teachers have been quite clear on this point, and through the development and growth of my Traditional Knowledge, I not only believe, but *know* with certainty that the truth, as evident in the way of the action of Creation, is absolute. I share this same view with other Traditional Aboriginals who follow Traditional protocols. Not exactly the usual words and sentiments of an old academic philosophy major, but this does bring us to one of the fundamental problems of discussing the appropriateness and validity of the inclusion of traditional Aboriginal knowledge into universities: academia's apprehension of absolutes.

According to Couture:

Universities are apprehensive of absolutes, and become very nervous about the intellectual vice of absolutism, for its experience, in the sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences, is with the ambiguous, the tentativeness of theory, the shortcomings of method and inquiry.

Universities are wary of assumptions. Their task is to question all. Because of this, Aboriginals and the university relate to each other with some tension.

Universities are inclined towards verbal articulation, debate and questioning, while Aboriginal worldviews are silent, energetic and generous ³/₄ they experience all reality as sacralizing, they prize metaphor, intuitive imaging, together with higher order mental prowess. In a sense therefore, universities must strive for an ecumenical approach, a willingness to find in traditions other than their own, other subsets of learning, other understandings, other valid interpretive systems.²¹

This apprehension is beginning to give way in the western academic tradition. This shift is necessary, particularly when it comes to the inclusion of Aboriginal Thought in universities. If there is no inclusion of Aboriginal Thought and methods, then we risk reinforcing the assumption that Aboriginal worldviews can be adequately explained by a totally alien western worldview; essentially an imperialist sentiment. There are still Elders and Traditional Teachers out there who are well learned in Traditional knowledge systems. In order that this method, or any Aboriginal method of learning and teaching, is comprehensive and rigorous, it is imperative that we seek out and learn from the Elders and Traditional Teachers. It is with their guidance that all people will be able to retrace those steps necessary to find what was left by past generations on the side of the trail; that is, learning about, and actualizing Traditional education, identity, knowledge and ultimately, cultural revitalization.

Using such a traditional method, Aboriginal peoples are then able to examine and base their lives on the Traditional Teachings of their respective cultures, rather than only the teachings of the dominant society. There is no doubt that Aboriginal peoples will continue to share this land with Euro-Americans and other immigrants, but we know that we do not have to base our lives on the values and structures of that dominant society. Moreover, this is also an

opportunity for non-Natives to learn from and explore ancient philosophical traditions.

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A Meeting of Traditions and Some Issues

I am in agreement with Dr. Joseph Couture's opinion that we can find a balance between academic methods and Traditional methods, thus developing a system of education that is equitable and valuable to all. I believe that this approach is appropriate in relation to research in Native Studies since it expands on the initial aim of Native Studies: the study of Aboriginal peoples. In addition, Native Studies is not limited to an objective study of Aboriginal peoples as separate objects of study. Native Studies also includes Aboriginal people as active researchers. Moreover, I believe that this method can and must be used in all academic disciplines so that a broader investigation of the world can take place. Research for many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people includes more than an investigation of the external world. It can, and many times is, a personal journey of self-discovery of what it means to be human.

I am a strong proponent for the inclusion of Aboriginals in western universities, as students and particularly as faculty. Since there are so few Aboriginal professors teaching outside Native Studies, Aboriginal students often find themselves in the difficult position of being both student and teacher. It is not an unfamiliar experience for an Aboriginal student to have to take the time to teach a professor the fundamentals of their particular Aboriginal worldview; particularly concerning methods of research that recognize various traditional protocols. It is also common for Aboriginal students to be asked to give lectures on various Aboriginal philosophies and Teachings. Because of traditions that recognize and honour Elders as the living libraries and librarians of cultural knowledge, it is generally very uncomfortable for a young person to be labelled an expert in their traditional knowledge.²²

Nevertheless, Indigenists are beginning to speak publicly about very old ways of understanding the world and a few of us are pursuing Ph.D.'s so that we may be the new Aboriginal professors that so many universities lack. This is how we can ensure that our respective traditions will continue. Moreover, it is the way that we will gradually change an academic system's difficulty in recognizing the value and validity of Traditional Aboriginal knowledge systems.

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Conclusion

Inclusion and cooperation always lead to an increase in tolerance and understanding. There is a unique opportunity at hand, one that will allow us to strive beyond the limitations of old ways and assumptions. If we continue to pursue a narrow vision of the future and persist in expecting that the status quo will continue without further degradation of the environment and our personal lives, then we are doomed to the same fate that befell Rome and other great civilizations. North America, the home of Indigenous and immigrant peoples, has an ancient history. Perhaps the time has come to listen to this primordial voice since it speaks of a way of life that has many millennia of experience and knowledge. The fact that so many Aboriginal peoples are pursuing an academic life, combined with a deep connection to their respective traditions, points to the beginning of a new paradigm; an Indigenous paradigm that incorporates intellectual and spiritual matters as tools in the exploration of life and the world. Why is this important? Because a wholistic knowledge approach allows for a much broader conversation. It also ensures that diverse tribal ways continue to examine and explain the mystery of creation. Above all, it is we, a new generation of open-minded thinkers that will ensure that natural epistemologies continue to inform the world. We are, after all, giving this gift to future generations.

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Notes

1. The Anishinaabe Peoples reach from the Atlantic coast in the East to the Rockies in the West and from what is now known as Northern Ontario and Quebec to North Carolina in the South and Northern California and Mexico in the South-west, with exception of the Hodenosaunee (Iroquois) territories south of the Great Lakes. The Anishinaabe language family is the largest in North America. It includes many Nations with a common history who speak a similar language with linguistic roots which can be traced back to the Atlantic Coast. "Anishinaabe" means "the good being, male of the species that came from nothing and was lowered down to the Earth". In central North America (Ontario, Manitoba, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota) the Anishinaabe are generally referred to as Ojibwe (variations: Ojibwa, Ojibway, Chippewa).
2. Joseph Couture, "Native Studies and the Academy", in *Indigenous Knowledge in Global Context: Multiple Readings of Our World*, ed. George Dei, Bud Hall and Dorothy Goldin Rosenberg (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1998) TMs [photocopy], 3. (used with author's permission)
3. "Participant participation": term coined by Brian McInnis, conversation with author, 1998.
4. For instance, the Greek philosopher Plato, in his attempt to explain the structure of the world, posited a "two world metaphysics" whereby there was a distinct division of sensual and intellectual matters. He believed that there was a hierarchy of **knowledge** with conjecture and belief in the realm of the sensual (physical) world and **knowledge** (what he called belief based in fact rather than opinion) and wisdom in the realm of intellect. This system clearly separates matter of the body (**the sensible**) and matters of the mind (**the intellectual**) into distinct categories. This categorization began a tradition in the West of distinguishing between the 'mind' and the 'body' as distinct and separate 'things'.
5. Related to this is *n-debwetaan*: "I believe it" Both of these

words have *debwe*: truth, correctness at their root.

6. There are no Philosophy Ph. D. programs in Aboriginal philosophies (although Lakehead University, Lakehead, Ontario, now offers a Master of Art degree in Native Philosophy). Aboriginal people interested in studying Aboriginal philosophies must still, essentially, develop their own methodologies and approaches within broad 'interdisciplinary' or 'multi-disciplinary' programs. Perhaps the day will arrive when a person like myself will be able to obtain a Ph. D. in one of the many varied Aboriginal Philosophies, rather than a Ph. D. in Environmental Studies or Native Studies.
7. Joseph Couture, "Next Time, Try an Elder!" 1979, TMs [photocopy], 7. (used with author's permission)
8. Vine Deloria Jr., *Red Earth White Lies* (New York: Skribner, 1995), 19.
9. Couture, "Next Time, Try an Elder!", 12.
10. Ibid., 12 - 13.
11. Ibid., 12 - 13.
12. Ibid.
13. Pam Colorado, quoted in *Words of Power, Voices from Indian America*, ed. Norbert S. Hill, Jr. (Oneida), (Colorado: Fulcrum, 1994), 26.
14. Couture, "Next Time, Try an Elder!", 12.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 5.
18. Paul Bourgeois and Dan Longboat, conversation with author, 1998.
19. Paul Bourgeois, "Odewegewin: An Ojibwe Epistemology" (Major Paper (draft), York University, March 31, 1998) TMs [photocopy], 10. (used with author's permission)
20. Ibid., 63.
21. Joseph Couture, "Native Studies, Some Comments", April 1, 1993, TMs [photocopy], (Native Studies, Trent University,

Peterborough, Ontario), 6 - 7. (used with author's permission)

22. In most cases, an Elder is somebody that carries a lifetime of experience, and is thus quite elderly (75 - 100 + years). In Aboriginal traditions, a person less than 70 is generally considered still young: experience and knowledge wise.

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