
Traditional Native Healing: An Integral Part of Community And Cultural Revitalization

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Abstract: Today, many Native people are reaching back into their cultural pasts and recapturing traditional knowledge. This process is part of the movement toward Native self-determination and self-government. Part of the process of cultural and community revitalization and self-determination involves renewing traditional healing practices. This paper draws the connection between traditional Native healing and community and cultural revitalization. How and why is traditional healing important for community and cultural revitalization? This question is explored by highlighting four areas where traditional healing practices could benefit the revitalization of community and culture: the enrichment of cultural values, beliefs and traditions, the establishment of self and cultural identity, the encouragement of traditional language, and the improvement of community relations. Knowledge, understanding and practice of traditional healing can enhance community and cultural strength by rooting people to a history, culture, and identity that has historically been denied.

Introduction

On the last day of Thanksgiving ceremonies, a healing rite was held for the release of problems and troubles that cause pain and disease. With songs and drums, Otherworld spiritual helpers, with duties just for healing, were called in to aid each one in looking within himself... the sick and those seeking cleansing were told to dance backward with eyes covered - an acknowledging of the turning back on the illness and not being able to see where the illness goes - Objiway Elder, Betty Laverdure (Wall 1993:95).

Over the span of hundreds of years, colonizing agents attempted to drive traditional Native knowledge into the periphery of Native culture throughout Canada. Though many Native communities resisted these efforts and refused to become assimilated into mainstream Canadian culture, a great deal of cultural knowledge was mislaid or 'lost'. Today, many Native individuals and communities are recap-

turing traditional knowledge and reversing the tide of colonization in all facets of social, political, ecological, physical and economic life. Part of this process of cultural awareness and renewal (on both an individual and community level) involves Native people taking control of their lives and futures. Native and non-Native writers and speakers suggest that one part of this process involves renewing traditional healing practices. Although there is an established link between healing and cultural identity, the connection between traditional Native healing and community and cultural revitalization has not been well developed in Native and non-Native literature. How and why is traditional healing important for community and cultural revitalization? This essay seeks to fill this gap in the literature, and provide a rationale for examining the role of traditional healing in Native health and cultural rebirth.

Before exploring the connection between traditional healing and community and cultural revitalization, it is necessary to qualify several points. The resuscitation of past cultural practices and beliefs is not implicit in the definition of cultural revitalization. Culture is recognized and appreciated as a dynamic process:

culture is something that is enduring, while constantly transforming and changing. It is no more reasonable to expect Aboriginal people to be constantly behaving in a traditional fashion, than it is to expect that whites should be using horse and buggies... (Warry 1998:35).

With specific reference to traditional healing, promoting traditional healing knowledge does not imply returning to the principles and practices of a hundred years ago, but incorporating these into a contemporary context.

The phrase "cultural revitalization" is recognized as having different levels of meanings depending on the individual or community (e.g., more versus less traditional individuals and/or communities). Not all Native individuals and communities hold the desire to revitalize cultural practices (Warry 1998:219). Some communities are comfortable with efforts to synthesize cultural knowledge into modern life, while other communities remain skeptical and find this synthesis unpalatable.

Assuming that all Native individuals and communities recognize traditional healing as a determinant of cultural revitalization or a valid alternative to Western biomedicine would be incorrect. Socialized medicine and Christianity have heavily influenced Native belief systems to the extent that some individuals are skeptical of the efficacy and contemporary relevance of traditional healing (O'Neil and Postl 1994:80). Lastly, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the association of cultural revitalization to Native self-government and the question of whether self-government will result in the revitalization of Native communities. Although critical to the issue of self-government, this area is too vast to discuss and has been addressed at length elsewhere (Warry 1998).

Cultural and Community Revitalization

What is meant by “cultural revitalization”? What do these phrases mean to Native people? Though these phrases are frequently used, their meanings, like the meanings of phrases such as “self-government” and “self-determination”, often become generalized and misunderstood in non-Native and Native literature. Detecting a clear explanation of community and cultural revitalization is often difficult. An understanding of community and cultural revitalization appears to be woven into discussions of community healing, self-government and self-determination. Cultural revitalization concerns the need for Native people to return and reconnect to their language, values, spirituality and traditions, a process sometimes referred to by the Ojibwa as “rebuilding our lodge” (RCAP 1993b:24). During the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) hearings, several presenters expressed that the process of cultural revitalization involves re-examining history, “it is really important for us to look into our history and really find out what was there and to try to envision how this would have naturally evolved into today’s society. Whatever we bring forward has to be adapted to fit today” (RCAP [Chief Jeannie Naponse] 1993a:228). David Newhouse, an Associate Professor at Trent University and an Onondaga from Six Nations, agrees with this approach but argues against the use of the word “revitalization”, as it implies giving something a “new energy” (RCAP [David Newhouse] 1993a:139). Newhouse advocates the use of the term “retraditionalization”. Re-establishing positive Native identities based on the process of relearning and reinterpreting traditional ways is at the heart of Newhouse’s conception of retraditionalization.

Community revitalization involves reanimating community members. Community members are seen as the main resource in the process of cultural revitalization (RCAP [Colleen Nadjiwon-Johnson] 1993a:223; Clayton 1990:42). Community revitalization is a process through which individuals and communities become responsible for, and in control of, all aspects of their lives and futures. This process begins with the self-determination and health of the individual which in turn extends outward to the community level. It is difficult to separate community revitalization from cultural revitalization, as they are mutually interdependent. Cultural revitalization is reliant upon the renewal of community spirit, while community revitalization is reliant upon linguistic and cultural restoration.

The following is a list of four potential areas where traditional healing practices could benefit the revitalization of community and culture. The discussion of each area is organized by a process beginning with a historical review, followed by a brief description and then an analysis of the connection between each area and cultural revitalization. This brief list should not be considered exhaustive, as there are countless other areas (e.g., traditional, environmental, political and judicial initiatives) which could promote revitalization.

Enrich Cultural Values, Beliefs and Traditions

Years of formalized cultural and institutional assimilation such as the organization of residential schools and the banning of traditional ceremonies, economic dependence, and social and physical isolation has served to erode traditional Native culture. Many Native cultures are viewed as being in a state of "crisis" (Boldt 1993:167). Although Native traditions and value systems continue to exist, they have become diluted as a result of the legacy of dominant belief systems. Similarly, the traditions and values associated with traditional Native healing systems have suffered from the domination of Western biomedical science, often erroneously referred to as "traditional" medicine. Launching into a great diatribe on the evils of Western biomedicine is not necessary, except to mention that traditional Native healing practices and beliefs have suffered greatly from the powerful and dominating influence of biomedicine. Before examining how the renewal of traditional healing systems can benefit cultural revitalization efforts, it is necessary to sketch briefly the general structure of these systems.

It is not appropriate to view traditional Native healing systems as detached from Native philosophy, religion and spirituality, as healing philosophies and practices are intrinsically linked to larger belief systems. Native healing systems involve not only having faith in the physical healing properties (e.g., herbal medications), but believing and exercising the values and traditions that shape and guide the system. Although all Native healing systems are appreciated for their distinctiveness, many traditions appear to share some similar attributes (with, perhaps, the exception of Inuit healing systems). Many Native cultures embrace the four dimensions, or directions, of the self (e.g., mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional). These directions are most commonly represented in the teachings of the medicine wheel. Basic traditional values are found in all Native cultures (e.g., wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility, and truth). Among the Ojibwa, these values are referred to as the "Seven Gifts of the Seven Grandfathers" (Benton-Banai 1988:64). Values such as these are situated at the core of traditional Native culture.

Health is viewed as a "gift" from the Creator and is concerned with maintaining a balance in life (balancing the four directions) and observing the cultural values listed above:

The goal of the individual in the community was to live a life of harmony...and peace with all creation.... The underlying premise upon which all else was based was to recognize and fulfil the spirit of life within oneself and with all others in the circle of individuals, relationships, community and the land. This was achieved through concerted efforts of developing the spirit through prayer, meditation, vision quests, fasting, and ceremony... (RCAP [Dave Courchene] 1995:79).

Imbalances may occur in the physical, mental and spiritual realm. In the past, healthy lifestyles and peace of mind were achieved by adhering to strict moral and

social norms. Ill-health was seen to be caused by some imbalance in one or more spheres of life (e.g., spiritual). The following passages emphasize the importance of moral adherence: “[S]ince the cause of [illness] often involved a breach of the normative order, repairs to the moral fabric of society became central to healing activities” (Waldram *et al.* 1995:103); “By attributing disease to moral transgression, the Ojibwa were able to impose conformity with culturally approved values” (Young 1988:99). Although the social circumstances have changed, the importance of these healing principles to cultural renewal remains strong.

Accepting the belief system of traditional healing and participating in its philosophies and rituals can create opportunities for cultural revitalization. The ways in which traditional healing can encourage cultural revitalization can be examined from two perspectives: from the perspective of an apprentice seeking to learn the healing traditions, or from the perspective of a participant who turns to the healing system for guidance and help. An apprentice of traditional healing helps directly in transferring valuable healing knowledge (e.g., herbal properties, diagnostic skills or ritual behaviour) from one generation to the next, and to promote traditional healing as a culturally-valuable alternative to Western biomedicine.

From the perspective of a “consumer” of traditional healing, the philosophies and practices of traditional healing give individuals a framework for behaviour and understanding which exists within culturally-acceptable and culturally-defined boundaries. The values imbedded in traditional healing such as respect, truth and love, can serve as a guideline for human interaction and can encourage culturally-valued behaviours. The preclusion of committing moral transgressions (based on the culture’s value system) can become central to individual behaviour. Following traditional cultural values permits not only the continuation of healing traditions, but a shared sense of community and cultural pride.

Participation in ceremonial events can promote the resurrection and continuation of healing traditions. Ceremonial activities such as sweat lodges, healing circles, medicine dances, and pipe ceremonies allow individuals and communities to become active members in cultural events which are grounded in rich histories. The participation in these events can effect a transformation or purification of an individual:

We purify ourselves by going into the sweat lodge and letting that [negative thoughts] all go. Dropping it. Then we are strong again. When we come out, we are reborn. We don't have any of those thoughts with us after we've done that. It's one of the most wonderful feelings that you could ever have (RCAP [Roger Jones] 1993a:371).

Participants are able to connect with the symbolic and spiritual meaning of the events while gaining ritual or ceremonial knowledge. This process can become a learning experience where individuals and communities begin to engage themselves in relearning and adapting traditional healing knowledge to fit their lives.

Individuals and communities can forge a link between cultural events and current social and spiritual conditions, while maintaining the integrity and transference of healing rituals.

Establish Self and Cultural Identity

Since pre-confederation, the social construction, and deconstruction, of Native identities has precipitated immeasurable harm to Native individuals and communities. The Canadian (and British) government seized control over the definition and identity of Native people in order set up a criterion against which "indianness" could be measured and managed. In all spheres of life, Native cultures across Canada have been denied the fundamental right to self-definition and self-identity, while at the same time, being subjected to an evolution of imposed identities (see Francis 1992). Native identities have been compromised by belittling and negative images found in all forums, the misrepresentation of Native history in mainstream knowledge, and the domination of Western values, norms and codes of behaviour. The outcome of this history has left many Native people struggling to place themselves and their cultures in the world at large. Native communities argue that feelings of loss and detachment from both cultural worlds (Native and Western) are prevalent in their communities. This theme of loss of self and cultural identity was peppered throughout the RCAP hearings, as Native individuals and communities perceive themselves as having lost "faith" in their self and cultural identities (RCAP [David Newhouse] 1993a:139).

The role self-definition, and having a positive sense of self and cultural identity, plays in one's overall mental, spiritual and cultural health cannot be underestimated. Traditional healing provides *one* avenue through which individuals and communities can ground their identities using traditional knowledge, belief, and action. Traditional healing allows individuals and communities to identify themselves in relation to healing traditions (e.g., a member of a *Midewiwin* society or healing circle) and/or a traditional value system ("I am an Ojibwa because I follow the tenets of maintaining a healthy body and spirit"). Some healing rituals emphasize the identity of the participants. During the singing of the "seven songs of healing" in the Ojibwa Medicine Dance, individuals identify themselves according to their Anishnawbe name and their *dodem* (Dumont 1989:2). Participating in traditional healing events can restore faith in self and cultural identity by allowing Native people to reclaim and determine what it is to be Native. This sense of pride in self and culture is a necessary component of cultural and community revitalization.

Rediscovering and reconstructing a positive self-identity (through observing traditional healing beliefs) and finding security within this identity, would hopefully increase the desire to explore one's heritage further. This process would, ideally, begin a positive cycle of self, community and cultural awareness. Hughes and Sasson (1990), outline the importance of recovering traditional belief systems in developing a positive self-identity in a case study of a fifteen year old Ojibwa male. "E" (identification made by authors) was able to overcome a long list of dysfunc-

tional characteristics (e.g., paranoid schizophrenia and self-abusive behaviour) to establish a personally valuable identity by reconnecting to his spiritual and cultural heritage (Hughes and Sasson 1990). E actively reclaimed his heritage and his sense of self by attending pow wows, speaking with his grandmother and exploring his culture through art, literature and mythology. E took his enthusiasm in his identity to the community level by writing articles for school newspapers and writing a book. In this manner, rediscovering cultural identity can have an immense affect on the individual, as well as being felt at the community level.

Self-identity is not only a matter of defining oneself in relation to the world, but reflects the level of control that one has over her/his quality of life. Part of developing one's self and cultural identity entails gaining a sense of control over life issues. When the option for traditional healing is available, community members have a measure of control over the direction of their health and spiritual well-being. Individuals are able to actively *choose* a healing system that fits their needs. This, in turn, promotes community empowerment, thereby facilitating community and cultural revitalization.

Traditional healing systems help Native people to re-establish their self and cultural identity by negotiating their private ethnicity (people's self-identification via their own criteria) and their public identity (criteria established by public domain). The reestablishment of self and cultural identity through the appropriation of traditional healing knowledge will further the growth of cultural traditions.

Encourage Traditional Language Development

Once traditional language has been replaced, the transmission of culture becomes exceedingly difficult. Past government policies reflected this idea and accepted that language is more than just a collection of words, as language expresses spiritual, cultural, social and economic identity. Native people today realize the devastating impact these government policies have had on their languages, as "the elimination of language was the prime target for the government and the missionaries, knowing full well that without a language we would no longer be a distinct people as language is culture and culture is language" (RCAP [Dawna LeBlanche] 1993a:369). With this awareness, Native communities have become very concerned about the future of their languages. Although the retention of language varies between cultural groups (e.g., Inuit populations have retained a strong hold over Inuktitut, while other linguistic groups have lost a great deal of their language), its role in cultural and community revitalization cannot be underestimated.

There are several ways that traditional healing systems can influence language development, which in turn can promote cultural revitalization. Traditional healing systems are equipped with their own set of indigenous terminologies that identify specific *materia medica* such as different herbs or natural medications. Therefore, by using traditional medicines, one can become familiar with the native terminology for various remedies. On a ceremonial level, Native people can become better acquainted with their original language when it is used in a ritual context such as

through the recitation of prayers. Admittedly, becoming familiar with an original language through traditional healing is just one small aspect of restoring a language.

Traditional healing knowledge can introduce an individual to terminology in Ojibwa, Inuktitut, Gwich'in or any other Native tongues, as well as inform a different way of conceptualizing the world. Native languages describe conceptual and philosophical ideas that are not found in non-Native languages and are not easily translatable. Becoming familiar with an original language, as it is used in healing traditions, may open the individual to different ways of viewing and interpreting their world, specifically their cultural world. With a better understanding of the cultural world, comes better opportunity for preserving it.

There is a strong link between language and cultural identity. In a study that examines the relationship between language and self-definition and cultural identity among Inuit populations, Dorais suggests that the "importance of Inuktitut lies primarily in its power as an agent and symbol of identity" (Dorais 1995:297). This belief is held by Native communities themselves where it is believed that "cultural identity and values are continued from generation to generation through the use of language" (RCAP [Pauline Decontie] 1993:98). Therefore, maintaining traditional medical or healing language may contribute to preserving the Native community's deepest identity.

Improve Community Relations

Community relations can be defined as the relationships that exist between individuals, between individuals and their families, between family groups, or between individuals and their community at large. Because of past colonial oppression and current social conditions, community relations in many Native communities have become strained. Native communities are faced with social environments that see parents unable to cope with parental responsibilities, a lack of appropriate role models, a gap in understanding between youths and elders, and high rates of family violence. Communities perceived themselves as "sick" and not prepared to take on the responsibility of self-government. One woman during the hearings stated that "our people aren't healthy and ready to take that [self-government] responsibility on and so we have to start within our communities and we have to start healing our people" (RCAP [Rita Arey] 1993:121).

Healing traditions such as sweat lodges, healing circles, and pipe ceremonies require group interaction. As such, these traditions encourage the integration of community members from different backgrounds (e.g., age, sex, social position) Community members are drawn together by a shared goal of healing and reconnecting with tradition. Cheryle Partridge, a first degree *Midewiwin*, recalls a healing ceremony in which she participated. The participants of this ceremony included both men and women, Elders, spiritual helpers and a drummer. With the exception of the woman who was the focus of the ceremony, everyone sang in Ojibwa in order to call the spirits to heal the woman. The essence of the spirits as

well as an immense feeling of spirituality was what bonded all of the participants together (Personal Communication 1996). Traditional healing ceremonies foster a sense of community and interconnectedness that is not always present in day to day life.

The relationship between generations is often characterized by growing alienation, ambivalence, and a lack of trust and mutual respect. Engaging in traditional healing practices (e.g., sweat lodges, healing circles) may serve to bridge the gap that currently exists between today's Native youth and older generations or Elders. Part of cultural revitalization involves young people not only rediscovering traditions, but seeking out Elders in order to discover information on traditions such as healing ceremonies. Ideally, this relationship would grow to the extent that older generations would allow younger generations to begin taking responsibility for the future and the continuation of cultural practices.

Knowledge and understanding of traditional healing teachings, such as codes of healthy behaviour and individual balance, can help individuals and communities move toward enhancing community strength. They can allow the teachings of traditional knowledge to guide them in self and cultural discovery. The restoration of culture through healing traditions creates a sense of community. As mentioned, one of the tenets of traditional healing is balance within oneself and within the community. This individual balance can radiate out at the community level, resulting in a stronger sense of community, community pride and personal and community empowerment.

Community and cultural revitalization will be the product of a multitude of social, cultural, economic and political factors, on both the individual and collective level. The change that occurs will, however, be incremental. Over the past few decades, the Native community as a whole has grown into a very powerful and influential force within Canadian society (take, for example, Elijah Harper's role in the direction of the Meech Lake constitutional debate or the crisis at Oka). Native communities across Canada have demonstrated their determination and desire to revitalize their cultures and communities. Traditional healing should be acknowledged as an important ingredient in this process, as it has the ability to root Native people, in some way, to a history, culture and identity that has historically been denied. The utilization of traditional healing is one part of the process of Native empowerment through which cultural and community revitalization can be realized.

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