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Introductory Essay: Traditional Knowledge, Spirituality and Lands

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Abstract
In times like ours, when people are inundated with notions of consumerist identities, culture is often seen mainly as a resource to be tapped into for economic development. This certainly is true of blatant consumerist culture produced by such economic behemoths as Hollywood, but it is a narrow view on the importance and functions of culture. The objective of this issue of the *International Indigenous Policy Journal* is to demonstrate the radical importance of culture and spirituality in not only defining a people and their society but also in affecting their well-being and how these things are all interrelated.

Keywords
traditional knowledge, spirituality, lands

LETTER FROM THE GUEST EDITOR - *Marc Fonda*

Introductory Essay

Traditional Knowledge, Spirituality and Lands

In times like ours, when people are inundated with notions of consumerist identities, culture is often seen mainly as a resource to be tapped into for economic development. This certainly is true of blatant consumerist culture produced by such economic behemoths as Hollywood, but it is a narrow view on the importance and functions of culture. The objective of this issue of the *International Indigenous Policy Journal* is to demonstrate the radical importance of culture and spirituality in not only defining a people and their society but also in affecting their well-being and how these things are all interrelated.

The impacts of culture on wellbeing is demonstrated by Chandler and colleagues (2004; 2006; 2007) whose work on suicide among First Nations communities in British Columbia, Canada, shows that those communities engaging in activities relating to 'cultural continuity' had lower suicide rates than those communities not so engaging. What was interesting is the 2004 addendum to their work where they looked at these communities' relative retention and use of traditional languages. What was found was astonishing: those communities with higher retention and use of traditional language who were also engaged in any one of the eight self-governance activities (e.g., engaged in land-claims, some control over policing, fire and health services, some control over education, a degree of self-governance, institutions for cultural preservation, on reserve child protection services) had near to zero suicides; and those communities further afield from such activities often had dramatically higher instances of suicide, in some instances many times higher than the national average (Chandler and Lalonde 2004). In many cases, those communities able to retain traditional languages have also been able to maintain traditional spiritualities. Could the impacts of so doing also lead to improved well-being?

Similar impacts at the individual level have also been observed. The work of James Waldram (2008; 1994; 1993) and others (cf., Brass 2008) detail how 'pan-Indian' spirituality has brought about significant healing among incarcerated Aboriginals in North America. In addition, pan-Aboriginal spirituality has been found to be a protective factor with respect to substance abuse and not only among Indigenous prison populations (cf., McIvor 2009). And, traditional (often revitalized) spiritualities that remain closely tied to specific places demonstrate similar well-being effects (Tanner, 2008; Adelson, 2008).

In most contexts, culture/spirituality and well-being are clearly interrelated. In the Indigenous context, however, land must be included as part of this nexus, since a great deal of identity and well-being comes from that sense of relationship to land and to the creatures and objects within the environment. As Kirkmayer, Fletcher and Watt (2008) point out, the Inuit concept of person has been called the ecocentric self in that it gives a central role to connections among individuals to place in the health and well-being of the person. One is in constant transaction with the environment via subsistence activities and through the act of eating. This is

to say that the land is a constant reminder of cultural history. In addition, there is broad agreement that being out of the community and on the land has a rejuvenating effect on mind and body. People use hunting, camping and fishing as ways to regain a sense of well-being. Lack of access to the land may cause feelings of distress, disorientation and anxiety. To the Inuit of Canada's north, the environment is not an impersonal, inanimate landscape. Rather, it is alive and closely linked to personal memories.

What was said above about the interrelationship of culture and spirituality, identity and relationship to the land also applies to many Indigenous peoples and communities the world over. These considerations were at the roots of the decision to propose this special issue of the *International Indigenous Policy Journal*. I am very pleased to report that the call for papers resulted in a number of solid papers and one editorial, helping to show how complex and varied such relationships are. In what follows you will find a series of articles that mainly deal with North America but also one article each on the Indigenous people of Ghana and India. An additional happy coincidence is that several of the following articles compliment one another, allowing them to be organized according to two general theme areas:

1) issues impacting on or relating to religious freedom and healing as access to land (Robbins & Dewar; Shrubsole; and, Fonda); and,
2) resource management as intimately tied to traditional spirituality and practices (King; Ornelas; Propser, McMillian & Davis; Reo; Sarfo-Mensah & Awuah-Nyamekye; and, Sarma and Barpujari);

The first group of articles, on issues impacting on or relating to religious freedom and healing as access to land, starts with Robbins and Dewar's article "Traditional Indigenous Approaches to Healing and the modern welfare of Traditional Knowledge, Spirituality and Lands". Robbins and Dewar discuss that, in Canada at least, the spiritual revitalization of Indigenous communities and individuals often involves the use of traditional healing. Such elements are reflected most clearly at the grassroots level, yet, programs currently delivered by Indigenous and governmental agencies have made some accommodating efforts. Perhaps most importantly, Indigenous land bases and the environment as a whole remain vitally important to the practice of traditional healing. With respect to policy, there appears to be a historical progression towards an increasingly more favourable perception of Indigenous traditional healing in Canada. There are, nevertheless, continuing challenges for traditional healing. Mainstream perceptions and subsequent policy implementation sometimes reflect attitudes that were formulated during colonization processes. As a consequence the ability for particular communities to maintain and use their specific understandings of Indigenous knowledge continues to be problematic. The authors conclude that future policy development and implementation should aim to support Indigenous peoples and communities, when they decide to learn about, maintain and build upon the knowledge amassed by their ancestors.

Shrubsole's interesting piece on "The Sun Dance and the Gustafsen Lake Standoff", discusses how the revitalization and renewal of traditional indigenous spiritual practices have produced new forms of indigenous religiosity rooted in experience, contact and combination. Shrubsole examines the contemporary Sun Dance, a traditional Native American or First Nations healing ritual, which seeks to address pain and sickness in Indigenous communities. However, when a

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highly politicized form of the ritual emerged in the non-traditional region of Gustafsen Lake in British Columbia, it led the media, the state and locally elected First Nations leadership to dismiss the ritual as fraudulent. As the paper demonstrates, failure to protect sacred sites and ceremonies and to understand the embodied spiritualities that accompany them can lead to violence between religious communities and the state.

Fonda's submission, "Are they like us, yet? Some thoughts on why religious freedom remains elusive for Aboriginals in North America", proposes that despite the fact that both Aboriginal and European worldviews regarding the relationship to land are tied to spiritual or religious trajectories and relative jurisprudence, historically the state-indigenous legal dialogue in this area has been mostly one sided, favouring the interests of the state over those of Aboriginal peoples. This paper reviews some of the religious freedom challenges facing Indigenous communities in North America in their attempts to access and use off reserve lands for spiritual purposes.

Sarah King leads off on the section group of articles that generally addresses how resource management is intimately tied to traditional spirituality and practices. Her article, "Conservation Controversy: Sparrow, Marshall, and the Mi'kmaq of Esgenoôpetitj", explores the interplay between the *Sparrow* and *Marshall* decisions of the Supreme Court of Canada, and the sovereigntist and traditionalist convictions of the Mi'kmaq of the Esgenoôpetitj/Burnt Church First Nation, as expressed in the conservationist language of the *Draft for the Esgenoopotitj First Nations (EFN) Fishery Act (Fisheries Policy)*. The *EFN Fishery Act* demonstrates that, for the Mi'kmaq, scientific management, traditional knowledge, sovereignty and spirituality are understood in a holistic philosophy. The focus placed on conservation by the courts, and the management-focused approach taken by the government at Esgenoôpetitj, have led to government policy that treats conservation simply as a resource access and management problem. Conservation, which the Court deems "uncontroversial" in *Sparrow*, is a politically loaded ideal in post-*Marshall* Burnt Church.

Ornelas' "Managing the Sacred Lands of Native America", reviews ten years of sacred lands management and policy in the United States. The author reports from the unique position of having been involved in national and international meetings with communities of Indigenous peoples and intergovernmental stakeholders during this time. Discussion includes an historical overview of such topics as environmental justice and the 2001 Native American Sacred Lands Forum, one of the first national meetings in the United States to specifically address the sacred lands of Native Americans. Further discussion draws attention to the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007 as a gateway to better sacred lands management and policy for Native Americans in the future.

Propser, MacMillian and Davis consider a second conservation approach among the Mi'kmaq. Their "Returning to Netukulimk: Mi'kmaq cultural and spiritual connections with resource stewardship and self-governance" shows how the Mi'kmaq, of Maritime Canada, capture and express their holistic understanding through the concept of *Netukulimk*. This essay reviews core attributes of *Netukulimk and* key moments in the colonialization assault on *Netukulimk* as a primary means for subordinating and marginalizing the Mi'kmaq. The essay closes with an overview and discussion of recent developments wherein the Mi'kmaq are working to revitalize

the place of *Netukulimk* in treaty-based rights and Mi'kmaq law-ways, particularly within self-governance and resource stewardship initiatives.

Reo's editorial "The Importance of Belief Systems in Traditional Ecological Knowledge Initiatives" looks at how resource managers are increasingly engaging with tribes and first nations in developing methods to incorporate their perspectives, priorities and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) into public land and resource management. Many initiatives that engage tribes and their TEK holders only seek tribal input, such as biological data, that is most easily integrated into existing management structures. Increasing attention on tribal belief systems would provide a more holistic understanding that could benefit TEK-related initiatives. Such a shift could reduce misunderstandings about tribal natural resource perspectives and may lead to insights valuable for society at large.

Leaving North America for Africa, Sarfo-Mensah and Awuah-Nyamekye's "Ensuring equitable distribution of land in Ghana: Spirituality or Policy? A case study from the Forest-Savanna Agroecological Zone of Ghana" explores the question of equitable distribution of land in Sub-Sahara Africa using Ghana as a case study. This article focuses on the dichotomy of policy versus indigenous spirituality in contemporary distribution of land in Ghana. After Ghana's independence, there were several attempts to restructure land title holding by way of land registration. The paper concludes that Ghana needs pragmatic steps to confront the challenges of land distribution and that the religio-cultural underpinnings of land issues in Ghana should be factored into the resulting policy. Anything short of this will make the implementation of any land policy in Ghana ineffective.

Finally, Sarma and Barpujari's "Eco-Cosmologies and Biodiversity Conservation: Continuity and Change among the Karbis of Assam" examines how the culture, particularly the cosmologies and religious beliefs of a indigenous tribal group-the Karbis living near Kaziranga National Park, Assam, India have implications for the conservation of natural resources. The paper is on fieldwork conducted in two Karbi villages, one still adhering to the traditional religion with a deep seated reverence for nature and all life forms and a second that has converted to a new religion. The paper throws light on the changes and challenges to the indigenous ecological ethos in the context of contemporary India.

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