

Native People Share A Cultural Heritage Which Is Incomprehensible To Most Non-Native People in Canada

Perhaps the key problem which exists in the relationship between Native people and other Canadians has been the inability of Native people to explain and the inability of Non-Native people to comprehend the nature, scope and importance of Native cultures. There is no easy way to articulate this problem, and the Members of the Special Committee are in no position to offer solutions, other than to say that a great gap in communication exists in the best of circumstances. It is important for Federal officials to keep this fact in mind in all dealings with Native communities and individuals. The gap in communication is the result of two totally different ways of looking at life, both of which are incredibly rich in unconscious values, customs, and patterns of sentiment, thought, language and action. Native and Non-Native people in Canada have lived for three centuries in an uneasy relationship based on two totally different ways of organizing and strengthening human relationships, two different ways in proving one's individual worth, two different ways of identifying and solving problems which affect a whole community, and two totally different ways of reaching group decisions.

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Native Cultures Survive And Thrive Despite Being Misunderstood And Exploited By Non-Native Canadians

The history of the encounters between Native cultures and the technologically-based consumer culture in Canada has been seen by the Non-Native people as essentially one of a superior civilization bringing enlightenment to an inferior one. The heritage and customs of Native people have been viewed as either barbaric or silly depending upon the era; but seldom have they been seen as integral parts of a unified approach to life which, despite strong outside pressure, makes considerable sense when judged by Native values. This attitude of superiority can be seen in an article from the book “CANADA IN THE GREAT WAR”, written by a senior official of the Indian Affairs department in 1919, but which expresses sentiments that many Non-Native Canadians hold today:

“The return of the Indian soldiers from the front will doubtless bring about great changes in the reserves. These men who have been broadened by contact with the outside world and its affairs, who have mingled with the men of other races, and who have witnessed the many wonders and advantages of civilization, will not be content to return to their old Indian mode of life. Each one of them will be a missionary of the spirit of progress, and their people cannot long fail to respond to their vigorous influence. Thus the war will have hastened that day, the millennium of those engaged in Indian work, when all the quaint old customs, the weird and picturesque ceremonies, the sun dance and the potlatch and even the musical and poetical native languages shall be as obsolete as the buffalo and the tomahawk, and the last teepee of the Northern wilds gives place to a model farm-house. In other words, the Indian shall become one with his neighbour in his speech, life and habits, thus conforming to that world-wide tendency towards universal standardization which would appear to be the essential underlying purport of all modern social evolution.”

It is interesting to speculate on what “wonders and advantages of civilization” the Indian soldiers were exposed to on the front lines of World War I battlefields. More interesting, however, is the fact that the “quaint old customs” have not disappeared. In many Indian and other Native communities throughout Canada, cultures are experiencing a period of renewal, especially among young people. A culture survives and grows because it meets the deepest needs of the people. If only for this reason, that Native cultures are renewing themselves in the face of three centuries of misunderstanding and, in some cases, exploitation by the Non-Native population, the customs and heritage of Native people are worthy of respect. Very few Non-Native people will ever experience or comprehend the essential power of Native culture, and the Special Committee is not recommending that there now be a massive