RACIALISING TRIBAL IDENTITY AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR POLITICAL AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Colonisers have always considered tribal and indigenous peoples as a race to be conquered. Amongst tribal peoples in the United States there is an increasing tendency to characterise tribes, First Nations 1 and other indigenous peoples, as an Indigenous race in opposition to the White race. Such racial views are evident in tribal governance and in the work of some of our foremost activists, writers, and scholars who reinforce the idea, constructed by Whites, that there is such a thing as an Indian race and that there is an ideal and authentic Indian.2 The ideal is described in superficial personality and physical descriptions, in holding political and spiritual beliefs that do not convey the diversity and complexity of actual tribal beliefs, and/or in counting degrees of blood. Individuals and groups who do not meet the racialised standard have their political and cultural rights questioned and sometimes violated. International indigenous organising activities increasingly rely on similar beliefs about there being a global indigenous race that is monolithically in opposition to technology and globalisation. At risk is respect for the political authority and distinct cultural practices of indigenous peoples. This racialisation of tribal and indigenous peoples inhibits decolonisation and political self-determination.

Biology versus Ideology

Recently, while watching CNN International in a New Zealand hotel room, I saw American broadcaster, Larry King, interview African-American comedian Chris Rock. King asked Rock how he felt about recent developments related to mapping the human genome. When Chris Rock appeared puzzled and responded more or less that he didn’t feel qualified to address the topic, King elaborated that such scientific inquiry might be used to make Black people White and didn’t Mr. Rock have an opinion about this? As I read it, Chris Rock’s internal musings about race—the meaning of Blackness and the meaning of Whiteness—passed over his eyes in two seconds. Recognising King’s unfamiliarity in grappling with the psychology of racism, Chris Rock seemed

1 While there is some opposition to the term, “First Nation,” it is the official and most commonly used term in Canada. “Tribe” is generally held to be less acceptable.

2 While there is criticism of the term “Indian” to denote tribal peoples in the United States and Canada, in my experience, this is a pervasive and acceptable term in predominantly Indian communities—whether they be reservation or urban.

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to see that this was one battle in which he didn’t want to engage on international television. He responded graciously and with a smile: “It isn’t like that.” Larry King would be one of the most well-known and longstanding commentators on U.S. American political life. And race is perhaps the most divisive political issue in my country. Yet, King’s comments illustrate that despite the progressive work of activists and scholars to deconstruct the ideology of race, there is widespread societal unfamiliarity with how race is constructed as ideology. It is thought to be biological fact.

Seeking Culture and Political Authority in DNA

Integral to the belief that race is rooted in biology, there is an ideology that culture, the identity derived from culture, and legitimate political authority, are rooted in biology. This can be seen as genetic testing is used, proposed, or speculated for use to detect a biological basis for such authorities, whether in living people or in human remains.

To my knowledge, genetic manipulation has not been seriously proposed in the quest to make a Black person White. However, there has been a proposal in the General Assembly of the State of Vermont that DNA testing be used to determine if someone is actually “Native American.” A State Representative sponsored the bill to establish standards and procedures for DNA testing to determine the identity of an individual as a Native American (at the request and expense of the individual.) The Western Mohegan Tribe had already contracted for analysis of their DNA. With magnanimous intent, they initiated the legislation to help other Indian people who lacked adequate genealogical and historical documentation to prove tribal ancestry to the satisfaction of the U.S. government (Roberts and Fredericks; Maslack). The legislation indicates acceptance by its backers of racial criteria to determine who deserves cultural and political authority. In personal interviews, the chief of the Western Mohegan and the Vermont state representative who sponsored the legislation both referred to “identity” as being a matter of having either the appropriate paperwork or having done conclusive DNA testing. While the bill was killed in the last legislative session and while it was sincerely intended to benefit Indian people, there are adverse implications to be considered. The acceptance of racial ideology that resulted in this legislation may be an indication of future overtly racist laws and policies that will also assume that political and cultural rights are and should be biologically determined.

DNA analysis has also been undertaken by the U.S. Department of Interior in an unsuccessful effort to prove “cultural affiliation” of ancient human remains (Montana; Stockes). Since the unearthing of the 9,000 year-old “Kennewick Man,” several tribes that claim the site of his remains as falling within their historical lands have opposed study of the remains. They have sought jurisdiction over the bones for immediate reburial as consistent with their spiritual beliefs. The press widely misinterpreted scientists’ comments and reported that the Kennewick Man was of “European descent” rather than accurately reporting scientists’ observations that his features were dissimilar to those of American Indians, were “European-like,” but might very well be linked to populations from Polynesia and southern Asia (Lee, 1999).

Based on the European descent theory, a group of anthropologists filed a lawsuit for the right to study the remains. Consistent with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, Interior conducted studies to determine the cultural affiliation of the bones and tribal authority over the remains. Geographical, archaeological, anthropological, linguistic, oral and other historical information were examined. However, DNA analysis was subsequently ordered because physical examination failed to produce evidence of cultural affiliation with tribes living today. The Secretary of Interior explained that, “when dealing with human remains of [the antiquity of the Kennewick Man], concrete evidence is often scanty, and the analysis of the data
can yield ambiguous, inconclusive or even contradictory results.” While scientists were unable to extract DNA due to the age and mineralisation of the Kennewick Man’s bones, it is alarming that Interior was willing to use genetics to concede cultural and political authority.

The Racial Politics of Blood Quantum

Just as the use of DNA analysis to determine cultural affiliation is troubling because of racial implications, so is the continued use of blood quantum by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and by tribal governments to determine eligibility for tribal citizenship. The use of blood quantum shows us that DNA analysis to determine political and cultural rights is not a new concept. It simply reinforces a historical practice of the U.S. government. Although tribes possess the authority to abolish such policies, most federally-recognized tribes still retain a requirement that a certain level of blood quantum (ranging from ½ Indian blood to 1/32 Indian blood) must be demonstrated by potential members. This common practice reflects the belief that the key to being a legitimate member of the tribe lies in the amount of Indian blood one possesses.

In recent bitter political battles within the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma, Seminole tribal members who are also African-American have been stripped of tribal membership. Through intermarriage, years of living within the community, and occupying positions of political authority, Black Seminoles have established their status as tribal citizens. Yet, they are now seen as having insufficient “Seminole blood” to be considered eligible for tribal enrolment. While racial requirements are unofficial factors in the citizenship policies of many nations, non-racial requirements are more often officially held to determine citizenship. Tribes in my country had such requirements before European and American colonisation. Some of these persisted officially into the 20th century and many persist unofficially. They include being born within the tribal community, marrying into the community, long-term residence within the tribal community, and the assumption of cultural norms such as language, religion and other practices.

TRADITIONALISTS VERSUS ASSIMILATIONISTS, TECHNOLOGY, AND GLOBALISATION

Racialising Tribal Identity

While tribal governance today measures degrees of blood, the work of some of our foremost activists, writers, and scholars uses another mechanism to racialise tribal peoples. Tribal identity is often characterised in that rely on simplistic, traditionalist rhetoric. Legitimate tribal governance and cultural authority is then conditioned on restrictive definitions. “Native American” literary anthologies show that nativist and mythologized images also abound in our creative works. Indian authenticity is often depicted as rooted in vague spiritual connections to nature (Hedge-Coke; Niatum; Swann and Krupat)

3 “Federally recognised” tribes are recognised by the U.S. government as being political entities with whom the U.S. has a government-to-government relationship. Historically, such tribes have signed treaties with the U.S. government and/or went through recognition processes in which they proved to the satisfaction of the U.S. Department of Interior and the U.S. Congress cultural and political continuity. For some, federal recognition is a controversial designation. Some tribes have not proved to the satisfaction of the U.S. government their legitimacy and so do not receive federal funding and benefits. Other tribes refuse to go through the recognition process on the grounds that they would compromise their sovereignty by submitting to U.S. government recognition.

4 My own great-grandmother was born in 1906 to Metis parents (Ojibwe and French people) in Saskatchewan. When she married my great-grandfather in 1923, they moved to where his people were on the Flandreau Santee Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. My great-grandmother learned Dakota language in order to speak with her new mother-in-law. She was adopted into the tribe and with my great-grandfather brought four children who brought many more children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren into the tribe. She died there in 1995. By today’s blood-based enrolment standards she would not be considered a citizen of the tribe.
Romanticised and racial ideals about who constitutes “traditional” Indians\(^5\) have been promoted since the first century of U.S. nationhood. In the 19\(^{th}\) and 20\(^{th}\) century, boy scouts, hobbyists, and more recently, the environmental movement, have fallen victim to racialised standards of measurement for Indians. Hobbyists referred to blood quantum to determine who was most authentic and prided themselves on studying and emulating—as realistically as possible—the dance technique and regalia of authentic Indian people (Deloria).

Similarly, we see amongst Indians ourselves, the use of superficial personality and physical descriptions to denote who are the sole heirs to a traditional past.\(^6\) One of our foremost environmentalists has claimed that “traditionalists” reject every last assimilationist trapping of modern life—their cultural practices “undaunted by the white man’s laws and practices.” However, little substantive detail is offered about how a traditionalist life is undaunted by outside influences. Rather tribesmen and women who live such a life are characterised by superficial personality and physical descriptions (i.e. they are “soft-spoken,” drive “one-eyed cars,” wear traditional clothing, and judging by the emphasis on children “careening underfoot” and women as mothers, must also breed frequently (LaDuke).

**Racialising Tribal Governance**

Indicative of racialised beliefs about authenticity, there has much criticism of elected tribal governments in the U.S. as not being traditional. Therefore, they do not legitimately possess governing authority. They are accused of widespread corruption, of selling out to follow an American capitalist dream, of completely neglecting tribal cultural practices, and of not caring for the land (Goldtooth; LaDuke).

While there are indeed incidents of corruption, what often underlies instability and political controversy in tribal governance is the absence in leaders of solid governing and analytical skills and sufficient education to develop visions for community development. Tribal governments are often unable to rise to the challenge of applying cultural values and philosophies to contemporary governance, economic development, and institution building. Because skills are lacking, we rarely see a governance system that is revised from that thrust upon us by the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. Although we possess authorities to determine citizenship and to develop greater checks and balances that would make corruption more difficult, we have not seen many leaders with the skills to undertake governmental reform. “Traditional governance,” because it is perceived having greater morality, is offered as the answer. However, it is not clear at all that the individuals and groups who assert claims as traditional leaders possess greater

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\(^5\) While there is criticism of the term “Indian” to denote tribal peoples in the United States and Canada, in my experience, this is a pervasive and acceptable term in predominantly Indian communities—whether they be reservation or urban.

\(^6\) While it is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into a discussion about static versus dynamic tradition and the invention of tradition, we must consider in our yearning to maintain tribal traditions, tough questions about determining what is traditional and what is not. This distinction is not one to be made simplistically. For example: From what time period must legitimate traditions come? How do we account for traditional or past tribal practices that were not moral as we define it today? Are they to be ignored in our efforts to take the moral high ground? Do traditions change? Are traditions not created, adapted and sometimes improved as we confront the practices of other cultures? Is it possible for a member of one tribe to borrow traditions from a distinctly different tribe and still be considered a traditionalist? How do we decide one practice is traditional and another is not? These are compelling questions that should be at the centre of a substantive discussion about traditional tribal practice and morality. They are questions too often avoided.
skill in these areas than do elected tribal governments. More importantly, such a portrayal of elected and traditional leaders as mutually exclusive is too simplistic an analysis of contemporary tribal life. Sometimes, those people characterised as holding opposing world-views are one in the same as they vacillate through the years between limited opportunities to effect change and, sometimes, to simply access power.

The case of the Black Seminoles and other assertions that real Indians must meet stereotypical and/or racial requirements of cultural authenticity, illustrates our continuing psychological colonisation, how thoroughly we have adopted the White man’s ideas about who are the real Indians. Those who do not meet racialised standards are accused of not legitimately holding political rights or power and sometimes those rights are violated with the perverse logic that such actions actually serve to maintain our political and cultural integrity.

Technology Versus Tradition

There is a pervasive stereotype that to entertain ideas about science and technology is to be anti-traditional. Russell Means, a prominent founding member of the American Indian Movement (AIM), has eschewed any value in Western science, insisting that “[Tribes] still have respect for the earth [and] traditional knowledge and values that are superior to anything in Western, “scientific,” industrialized culture” (Means). He is not alone in expressing this opinion. In her influential writing and speeches, leading Anishanaabeg environmental activist and Green Party Vice Presidential candidate, Winona LaDuke, has depicted Whites as inventive, technological, and modern while depicting Indian people as traditional, spiritual, and anti-modern. LaDuke notes that it is important to evaluate which technologies might be useful for accomplishing the goals of tribal communities. However, she simultaneously affirms wisdom such as you did it; you fix it and more lengthy rationalisations for not evaluating technologies according to tribal needs and values:

[there is] the road to technology and the other road to Spiritualism. They [elders] feel that the road of technology represents a continuation of headlong rush to technological development. This is the road . . .that has led to modern society, to a damaged and seared earth. . . The [other] road represents the slower path that the Traditional Native people have traveled and are now seeking again.? Anti-technology scaremongering is also indicative of indigenous activism more broadly that seems to equate wholesale rejection of technology with caring for future generations (Amazanga Institute, Beijing Declaration, First International Conference on the Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights of Indigenous Peoples, North American Indigenous Peoples Summit). This view of the appropriate indigenous response to technology is inconsistent with actual developments among tribes (at least in the U.S). Tribes are increasingly undertaking projects that evaluate specific technologies and forms of scientific inquiry. They are evaluating science and technology

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7 LaDuke, p. 198. This quote comes from a speaker who should know better. Edward Benton Banai was the longtime Director of The Red School House, a Minnesota urban Indian survival school founded by the American Indian Movement. His wholesale rejection of technology here is contradictory to the educational philosophy of that school as it was under his leadership. Red School House taught students such as myself not to fear technology and systems of a non-Indian world but to understand how they might be used within the perspectives of our tribal cultures. The school integrated affirming and healing cultural and spiritual activities into a computerized curriculum in the early 1980s when most public schools were not similarly equipped.
based on their consistency with specific cultural and spiritual values, their risks and benefits, and how useful they might be for accomplishing tribal goals.\(^8\)

**The New Global Traditionalism**

Along with condemning technology, it has become politically de rigueur to rhetorically reject globalisation in its entirety. It is said that globalisation, along with assimilation and colonisation, destroys cultures. However, pervasive representations of indigenous traditionalists as a monolithic environmentally minded group, result from an increasing flexibility in identity made possible by globalisation. And tribal peoples are often described in terms of being *indigenous* in an international context as much as in terms of tribal affiliations. Again, AIM activist, Russell Means, has given advice since the 1970s that is instructive in understanding this contradictory philosophy about how globalisation is antithetical to traditionalism. He has written defiantly that he doesn’t care what industrialised society does, that *we* will survive, even if there is only one tribe left in the Amazon or one tribe left in the Arctic.\(^9\) Means used the word *we* to signify indigenous people from around the globe as one race of people—as if two surviving tribes in the Amazon and the Arctic could carry forth the cultural practices and histories of thousands of tribes and indigenous peoples. While Means asserts that globalisation, like modern industrial society, is the antithesis of traditional cultures, he also generalises about the environmental values of North American tribal peoples. He places these within a global understanding of indigenous environmental values that is indicative of and supports the globalisation he finds so harmful.

Globalisation may indeed be harmful to tribal cultures. However, where detractors of globalisation refer almost exclusively to non-indigenous influence on tribal cultures and political rights, we should also note that espousing a global indigenous identity says much less about *tradition*, than about the common politics of colonialism. If we try to link environmental, spiritual, and other traditions of indigenous peoples globally (rather than discussing such connection at the level of parallel colonial experience), there are opportunities for the neglect and erosion of tribal cultures and the loss of tribal histories. Cultural practices are in particular danger if viewed as contradictory to the emerging definition of a morally superior indigenous environmental consciousness that is at the core of the global indigenous identity.

In condemning globalisation without nuance, we fail to note that we also benefit from globalisation in some ways; it enables more extensive and effective international organization on behalf of indigenous causes. We may be in danger of occupying common ground with anti-tribal elements. In the U.S., there is conviction in some corners that American (read White) cultural and economic hegemony is threatened by other nations and cultures. States and states’ rights advocates who hold such fear, increasingly assert jurisdiction over the cultural, political, and economic authorities of tribes. They attempt to strip tribes of treaty rights and regulatory jurisdiction. Tribal and indigenous advocates who fear globalisation of culture and espouse racialised ideas of cultural and political authenticity, may unwittingly strengthen anti-tribal movements that may use the same stereotypes to attack tribal political and cultural authority.

**THE IMPLICATIONS OF RACIALISM FOR DECOLONISATION AND SELF-DETERMINATION**

Racialising tribal identity has a debilitating political cost. It undermines dynamic political and cultural traditions that signify surviving peoples and vibrant communities. It discourages

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\(^8\) See Leivas; Pacey and Featherman-Sam; TallBear; Tano.

\(^9\) See forward to Weaver.
innovative approaches and radical challenges by activists, artists, politicians, citizens, and scholars to imperialistic practices against indigenous peoples. The perpetuation by tribal peoples of racialised images contributes to the arsenal of the coloniser. There is a twin theme that has characterized U.S. relations with tribes: The coloniser has predicted either the annihilation or assimilation of tribes in American society and of indigenous peoples elsewhere. The U.S. has been successful in implementing neither of these goals. But, in using racialised images to assert authentic tribal identity we may be helping fulfil these assumptions. Adhering to a racial stereotype is a hard line to follow. In asking our peoples to do so, we aid the conviction (and subsequent policy development) that Indians have assimilated and have actually died out. Therefore, we deserve none of the “special” treatment we receive. Neither do we deserve the land we have retained that comprises over 3% of the U.S. land base.

Scientists, policy-makers, and others who propose that genetic testing be used to determine cultural and political authority also imply their acceptance of racial ideology. They equate culture with race and assume that the characteristics of both can be detected biologically. Likewise, if we tribal peoples seek to prove our political and cultural legitimacy through DNA analysis, we are complicit in racism and this further invests us, rather than disinvests us, in a colonial model. It will be a regressive turn of events if DNA analysis is sanctioned as a legitimate method for asserting cultural and legal authority. This is true, whether such authority would be asserted on behalf of scientists seeking freedom of scientific inquiry, or whether on behalf of tribes seeking to safeguard religious freedom and political and cultural rights.

The racialisation of tribes has been taken to new levels with international indigenous activism. I believe that international collaboration can indeed be educational, empowering, and can advance the political and cultural causes of indigenous peoples. Tribal peoples should actively engage in international conferences, educational forums and policy discussions regarding the direction and regulation of issues and policies that affect us. Such participation can inform tribal policy and helps build tribal capacity to take a politically effective stand against potential exploitation of our peoples and resources.

However, in organising internationally we must be careful not to violate our political and cultural integrity as peoples with distinct beliefs, histories, and cultural practices. If we racialise ourselves into one monolithic Indigenous race, we diminish understanding of the diversity among us and we present risks (in addition to those the coloniser thrusts upon us) to the specific knowledge and histories that we carry. We may also undermine the cause of tribal-specific political rights. Those are especially promising for tribes in the U.S., Canada, and elsewhere that possess degrees of regulatory authority and jurisdiction within their land-bases and who consistently claim greater authorities in relation to nation-states. Using racial stereotyping and DNA analysis to prove who does and does not possess political and cultural rights undermines the concept of tribal self-determination that is claimed as resulting from the inherent sovereignty of the tribal body politic. As we exercise governance and build social, cultural, and economic institutions, our resistance to racial ideology is imperative. We can see in war-torn nations all over the world, the horrific results of clinging to racial and essentialist views of who is an authentic member of the nation and who, therefore, deserves political, cultural, and human rights.

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10 See Deloria 1998, p. 103.
11 See Lègarè for an examination of how ethnic identities are constructed as categories of ethnic difference that both permit and deny inclusion. The article informs this paper’s discussion of how essentialist or racialised images are used to signal authenticity and inhibit assertions of identity that fall outside prescribed definitions.
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