

The Nature of Art and the Stle7esht Community

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The nature of art for the purpose of this article is natural or functional art. Our people gained control over their lives by strengthening their material tools and equipment with special and spiritual decorative art. Art was not a separate word in our language. Aboriginal peoples had and still have their own world view. The Stle7esht community has undergone many changes from the traditional cultures; however, we still have storytellers, carvers, and artists, respect for animals, land, language, and oral history.

Introduction

This article explores the concept of *the nature of art* as it relates to the experience of Aboriginal peoples, more specifically the Aboriginal peoples of the Ashcroft Indian Reserve (Stle7esht). Stle7esht is a member of the Nlaka'pamux Nation (Thompson) and has a membership of 250 people. The community itself consists of a population of only 85 resident band members. Thirty-seven of these are adults; the remainder are children and teenagers. The nature of art for the purpose of this article is natural or functional art.

Oral stories or legends are seen as functional art. Miller (1996) stated that traditionally stories were used to educate and discipline First Nations children. The stories were peopled by moral, mythological, transformative superbeings, and creation stories depicted our local surroundings and landscape. The stories taught the children how their world came into existence and where they fitted into it. Other forms of education included art, for example, masks, totem poles, and drawings. This form of art gave physical vision to the many mythical creatures, songs and dances, denoted oral history, ceremonial, ritual, rites of passage, and celebration. Children were being prepared to pass this information on to the next generation. Dissanayake (1995) illustrated that religious beliefs, rituals, and practices of the arts have been inseparable, and the ceremonies that have arisen in these practices are worldwide and deal with vital, emotionally significant, archetypal concerns. People gained better control of their lives by reinforcing their material technological tools with emotionally satisfying special decoration and art, most probably spiritually related.

Unfortunately, as a result of the residential schools, colonization, and Christianization Stle7esht members are apprehensive because of the impending loss of the remainder of their culture and traditions. Accompanying assimilation and adaptation, other results of colonization are

dependence on "the system," substance abuse, crime, child neglect, suicide, homicide, and indifference toward life in general. I review literature relating to prior educational and cultural experiences of Aboriginal peoples in British Columbia, as well as literature relating to art and its relationship to Aboriginal peoples. This is followed by the New Zealand Maori solution for social change.

Background and History

According to Smith (1999), a Maori scholar, we now have a utopian vision. One should be able to accept that although utopia may never be achieved in one's lifetime, there are small victories along the way to achieving the master goal. Aboriginal peoples have resisted complete assimilation and domination for many years against a powerful force. There have been and will continue to be resistance until utopia is achieved. This article presents a view of the overall big picture, which is the image of the European colonizers' attempt to assimilate the Aboriginal peoples of Canada into the Euro-Canadian system and how this attempt relates to the small picture: the attempt to conform the Stle7esht community.

Highwater (1981) stated that everybody observes their world by way of their cultural heritage and by way of their ability to deliver and to receive their predetermined cultural messages. Ethnocentric, politically dominant groups insist that all peoples are basically similar. They do not accept that other races and national groups evolve emotionally and physically in unique ways. Dominant groups presume that all people are similar because all people—they insist—need and want the same things. This attitude has had and still has a negative impact on all Aboriginal peoples. Of course, the dominant classes will not forfeit their economic interests, and so they continue to control and dominate the subordinate classes, including the Stle7esht community. Dissanayake (1995) noted that ethnocentrism claimed that *we, not you*, are the measure.

Bourdieu (Smith, 1999) paralleled "cultural capital" with "economic capital" (money). Bourdieu stated that not everyone possesses economic capital, but everyone owns cultural capital: language, meanings, thought and behavioral styles, values and dispositions. Education serves the cultural capital of the dominant society, thereby asserting, legitimizing, and reproducing the European culture of colonization. Individuals who lack the Euro-Canadian cultural capital are at a disadvantage because their language, thought, attitudes and behavior are not those of the governing society.

Everything is Art

Highwater (1981) suggested,

Among the languages of Aboriginal peoples there is no such word for Art; everything is art ... therefore, art does not need a name. Art puts us in touch with the other. Without art we are alone.... Artists know that art is a way of seeing. It is a reality, an existence that is

within all of us even though it seems to exist in the imaginary world. Artists are the few people in Western civilizations, who have been allowed to dispense with this visionary reality as something genuine and consequential. The creations by artists are not intended to be original, however, they do achieve something almost impossible: they provide their personal visions to and for us, the viewer. (pp. 13-14)

Cardinal (Kenny, 1997) stated, "We can use science in different ways, but also the Elders said, make it from the heart, make it beautiful. We always did things beautifully, even our clothes, everything. Art was not a separate world in our language. It was the way we lived" (p. 77). Aboriginal peoples did have their own world view. This world view interconnected to the land, air, water, wildlife, human beings, and spirituality into one entity. Kenny (1997) commented that in our sense of art as First peoples, our traditional cultures are abundant with storytellers, dancers, singers, drummers, carvers, imagemakers: artists of all types who reflect the lands we inhabit, our experiences in them, and the knowledge we gain because of our respect for place. The Stle7esht community has undergone many changes from the traditional cultures, we still have storytellers, carvers, and artists, respect for land, language, and oral history.

The Stle7esht have the holistic world view that land, air, water, wildlife, human beings, and spirituality are interconnected. We are located amid beautiful mountains, dry desert, and the beautiful Fraser Canyon area, of the southern interior of BC, Canada. The nation's territory borders from Ashcroft to Lillooet to Spuzzum and over to Merritt. The rivers that run through the Nlaka'pamux Nation are the Thompson, Fraser, and Nicola.

The Nlaka'pamux Nation in prehistoric years and today produces fine art work including moral and creation stories about the knowledge and respect that we have for our territory. These legends, traditions, and culture have been passed from one generation to the next. The following story is an example.

My mother Sarah Kirkpatrick often told me this story. Her grandmother Qouquiltoqo, born in the 1800s, told her the story. My mother spoke Nlaka'pamux and translated the story into English for me. She told me the names of the bird, pigs, and the old man with the stick. I don't remember the Nlaka'pamux words for these creatures.

She always started the story by saying, "I'm gonna tell you this story, it's no lie, it's the real truth, it reaaaally happened, a loooong, loooong time ago."

The Old Man with the Crooked Old Stick

There used to be an old woman
Oh, she wasn't really old ...
But she wasn't young
She had so many children
But no man....
She didn't have a husband

Her husband abandoned her
He left her....
With all those children
She had to get food
For her children....
Ooooh, she huunted, she fiished
She picked berries
Aaall kinds of berries....
She did this aaaall by herself
She gathered wild potatos and roots
And onions too....
Out in the bush
That's where she lived
You know....
Out in the bush
Up there in the bush
Up in Twaal Valley....
Oooh, she was sooo pooor
She lived in a log house
You know?
Mud kept out the cold
The roof was mud and grass
She had a dirt floor....
She was sooo poooor
Ooooh, her children, the older ones....
They tried to help her....
You know?
But they weren't much help
They were too little....
She was sooo stingy
Soooo stingy
She hated to share her food....
She worked toooo hard
She made her youngest
The little boy....
Stand by the trail to her house
If he saw someone coming
He was to warn her
By singing
Chic a dee dee dee dee
Chic a dee dee dee dee
Chic a dee dee dee dee
Chic a dee dee dee dee
When she heard this
It was a warning!!!!
Someone was coming
She would hide all her kids
In a back room....
Covered with a weed blanket

She hid all her food there too
She did this all the time
You know?
People, other people
Quit visiting her
They quit trying to help her
She was alone
All alone.... all alone
With all those children
Well, one day when the
Trees were losing their leaves ...
Just before winter
It was getting around night
She prepared supper
A big meal
Her little boy
Her youngest son....
Began to sing
Chic a dee dee dee dee
Chic a dee dee dee dee
Chic a dee dee dee dee
Chic a dee dee dee dee
She got frightened....
She might have to share her food
With some stranger
She gathered all her children
And put them in the back room....
Shhhhh!!!! Shhhhh!!!!
She gathered all the food
She put it in the same
Room with her children
Shhhh! If you make a noise
We will have to share this food
Shhhhh!!!! Shhhhh!!!!
The children, poor children
Couldn't stay quiet....
They were too little

They giggled and laughed
She peeped her head in....
Shhhhh!!!! Shhhhh!!!!
She got to the door
And looked out
It was all dark now
She saw an old man
A reaaaally old man....
Walking down the path
His clothes were full of holes
He didn't have shoes on his feet....

Just bare feet
He was wearing an ooold crooked hat
His hair was white
White and messy
He was walking slow
Sooooo slow....
With that old crooked stick
The stick was aaaall crooked
Each time he took a step....
That stick made a tap tap tap noise
The old man
Looked at the woman
And back at the little boy....
The little boy
Her youngest son
Was still singing
Chic a dee dee dee dee
Chic a dee dee dee dee
Chic a dee dee dee dee
Chic a dee dee dee dee
When he reached the door
He walked in....
She was waiting for him
He asked
Do you have water to spare?
No! No! no water
The old man gazed at her
He squinted, his eyes....
Were black and cold
He could smell food
He saw the water
The water was on the floor
He asked her again
Do you have food or water to spare?
No! No! no food or water here
The old man
Could hear the children's noise....
He asked her
Do you have children here?
No! No! no children here
That noise is just animals
The old man
Eye squinting, cold
Glared at her for a looong time
He banged the dirt floor
Thump! Thump! Thump!
With that crooked old stick
He turned around and left
Her youngest son

Was still singing
Chic a dee dee dee dee
Chic a dee dee dee dee
Chic a dee dee dee dee
Chic a dee dee dee dee
He shut the door gently behind himself
She sighed relief....
Now she didn't have to share her food
She and her children
Could sit down and eat
Not be bothered
She opened the door
To see how far the man
Had gone
She wanted to call
Her youngest in to eat ...
He was still singing
Chic a dee dee dee dee
Chic a dee dee dee dee
Chic a dee dee dee dee
Chic a dee dee dee dee
The old man
The old man with that
Crooked stick was gone
She looked all around
But the old man
Had vanished!!!!
She looked for her son
Where her son had sat
A little bird was singing!!!!
Chic a dee dee dee dee
Chic a dee dee dee dee
Chic a dee dee dee dee
Chic a dee dee dee dee
Ooooooh! She was breathing heavy
Spit was running down her chin!!!!
Her breathing got heavier
She ran for the back room
She threw the weed blanket aside
And gaped!!!!
All she saw was
Pigs!!!!
Nothing but pigs!!!!
All her food turned into slop
Pig slop!!!!

This poem is both moral and creation in origin. Storytelling is one way our people express themselves in the arts for cultural transformative activity.

The Nlaka'pamux are well known for their basketmaking skills. Their baskets, quite artistic in appearance, are functional or utilitarian art. The baskets are still made for many purposes, for example, water baskets, babies' cradles, and food-gathering baskets. They are woven from bark, with cherry bark and other colorful materials to create beautiful geometric designs. Tools are another form of functional art.

Salmon and dried salmon were major trade items for soft soapstone and for nephrite, the hard translucent green stone used for adze blades and chisels used for woodworking. Copper, coastal shell, and turquoise were also trade items. These were used to create or beautify tools and war weapons, including spears, tomahawks, knives, war clubs, bows, and arrows, which were poisoned with rattlesnake venom or poison juice of a small yellow flower. These items were frequently decorated with geometric designs. Tobacco pipes were carved from antlers; stone bowls were carved from soapstone. Human figures carved from wood adorned cemeteries and the ends of some pithouse ladders (McMillan, 1988).

Of course, personal appearance was artistically enhanced with clothing. Tanned animal hide was the material used for both men's and women's clothing. The Stle7esht also used sagebrush bark for clothing. All the clothes were decorated with porcupine quills, bird quills, dentallium shell, or elk teeth. Headbands and some clothes were decorated with eagle feathers. The Nlaka'pamux tattooed their faces (McMillan, 1988).

Rock art sites, petroglyphs (carvings), and pictographs (paintings) adorn rocks throughout the nation. On the stretch of land where my father was born, Cheetsum, is a large rock that has a barely visible painting of a bear standing on its hind legs; and next to it is a painting of four human fingers. The rock has sat for years and is eroding from the weather, but the paintings are still visible. Rock art sites have been created for many reasons, for example, during spiritual quests or as representations of guardian spirits. The Nlaka'pamux traditions and cultural lifestyle disintegrated quickly with the arrival of the new settlers.

The Nlaka'pamux territory was exploited first for furs and then for gold. Missionaries poured into small native communities including Stle7esht. Soon after the gold rush ended, the British decided to colonize the province and exploit the land and natural resources (Tennant, 1990). The Aboriginal peoples, including Stle7esht, had become a hindrance to the government and assimilation was exercised to rid the province of Aboriginal people by "civilizing" the "savages." Thus it was that the residential schooling system was imposed on the Nlaka'pamux Nation, and this threatened the very existence of the culture of the peoples, as well as the population (Miller, 1996). Smaller bands such as Stle7sht were defenseless against the power of the new settlers.

According to Haig-Brown (1988), agents and missionaries saw that suppression of traditional culture would not promote assimilation.

Aboriginal peoples realize today that the federal Indian agents and missionaries at that time regarded education of Indian children as the key to assimilating the Aboriginal peoples. Assimilation and annihilation of all Aboriginal culture was impossible if the Native parents retained influence over their children. Therefore, beginning in the 1880s Aboriginal children were removed from their parents, families, and communities and placed in residential schools. "Their education must consist not merely of the training of the mind, but of a weaning from the habits and feelings of their ancestors, and the acquirements of the language, arts and customs of civilized life" (Haig-Brown, 1988, p. 29).

Freire (1997) stated that when the oppressor has gained total emotional independence from the oppressed person, it leads to necrophelic behavior in the oppressed: the destruction of life—their own, their family's, or their community's. The basic cultural link between traditional and future generations, the children, is inevitably shattered; then assimilation will have been successful. Stories, art, fishing and hunting techniques, food and medicinal plant-gathering skills normally handed down from one generation to the next would then be destroyed, and assimilation would have been successful.

Many former students of residential schools resisted domination and oppression and have been able to maintain their own language, tradition, and culture, as well as to learn the dominant society's lifestyle. Part of the transformation has been to consult with others who have similar experiences and similar ideas to maintain and create cultural and social change in their communities. These individuals have experienced conscientization, resistance, and transformation: these experiences are necessary for social change in all individuals and communities (Freire, 1997). Many Stle7esht members attended residential schools. Some of them have learned the European lifestyle and education, but they have maintained their own culture including language and traditions. These people have become politically active locally and provincially to transform and convince other people in the community to assist in the maintenance of traditions and language. Some are silent leaders who continue to hand down the Nlaka'pamux knowledge from one generation to the next.

Maori Solution

The continuation of formal education in art, music, dance, and story can provide a rich aesthetic and spiritual context for healthy development among the Stle7esht, and this development must begin with the children of the community. The New Zealand Maori situation and that of the Stle7esht are similar in that both have been colonized, Christianized, educated, dominated, and controlled by an outside force. The New Zealand solutions for social change could be adapted and used as a model for the Stle7esht solution. The Maori people started by taking control of pre-schools, the least threatening to the government for funding and control

purposes. As well, our language is threatened, and if it is to survive, some form of action must be taken as soon as possible. Many of our Nlaka'pamux-speaking Elders are passing away, and with them dies the chance for our language to survive. The language is our culture.

Maori scholar Smith (1999) stated,

Te Kohanga Reo: Control over Preschools; the Maori wisely chose their arena for their first challenge to state control over schooling, locating it in the area of early childhood education. The decision to work outside the formal school system had important consequences. For the first time, Maori were not in the position of negotiating concessions from the state: they were fully in control.

According to Smith, the following are some of the key points that enable New Zealand Maori to promote social transformation:

- Governance is the gatekeeper of success. The history of all minorities fit Bourdieu's concept of habitus—"Cultural Capital." The lesson is that governance should be interpreted to include the full range of "policy-making, objective setting, and exercise of authority."
- Language is a lever of change. Presumably any group seeking to challenge the habitus of the school system would benefit from a language of its own for this reason.
- Great schools from little day cares grow. Maori started with the least threatening to the established order. This situation was used as an example to obtain more control over other areas pertaining to education and secure a share in educational resources.

The members of the Stle7esht community are divided between future economic education and traditional and cultural education. Our language is in danger of becoming extinct. We have one Elder who speaks the language fluently, my mother. The younger Elders speak the language but not as fluently. These Elders are conquering their fear and shame of being able to speak the Nlaka'pamux language and are voicing their concerns. The Maori solution offers hope and could well be the solution for the Stle7esht community. As it is at present, children and grandchildren are learning bits of the language from grandparents. These Elders have offered to teach their language to children during off-school hours. Stle7esht has many traditional storytellers, musicians, painters, carvers, leather-workers making moccasins, buckskin jackets, vests, gloves, and so forth. They have become contemporary in the matter of materials used and language used. Stle7esht members hunt, fish, gather, and preserve foods in the traditional way using contemporary tools and equipment.

Conclusion

Cardinal (Kenny, 1997) commented in the land of the eagle that the Great Spirit has given us the power to create a new life. He says that Elders remind us to face the future with a computer in one hand and a drum in the other. In the land of the eagle,

There are only tremendous possibilities if you're willing to stand out there and leap off the edge. Because that's where true creativity exists; that's what we have to do to create a new life not only for ourselves, our children, our grandchildren, but to make a contribution to other people living in a small little world. (p. 79)

The above statement means a lot to me because it is what I hope to accomplish. Having been raised by my parents, I was educated at a young age in First Nations political issues. My father was the chief for several years followed by my eldest brother. The teaching style was *look, listen, and learn* handed down from generation to generation. Oral history played a large part in teaching me about the way we were, about the assimilation changes that we don't want, and about acculturating to the changes that we need to survive in the new world. After living in numerous towns and cities I returned to my home community permanently. I was elected councillor for one year, and then chief for the next six years. At the end of the six years I decided to attend university.

"The Old Man with the Crooked Old Stick" is but one of the many stories that my mother told me. She always chose an appropriate time to tell me a certain story, probably in preference to scolding me about inappropriate behavior. The story taught me about spirituality, sharing what I have, hard work, compassion, empathy, and to try to limit childbearing, and live within one's own means, as well as how some of our animals came to be. Among the many stories I heard from my mother, I retell this particular story to my own children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and other adults and they all love it and "get the drift."

This article explores how the arts can help in cultural revitalization to expand and elaborate our visions, hopes, and dreams for a better world for our children and ourselves. Conscientization, resistance, and transformation are the main factors in cultural revitalization. In the big picture more and more individuals are taking part in the transformation of their lifestyle and world view, as well as their own communities. We may need to be reminded that utopia may not be achieved in our lifetime, but the best place to start is with the little picture, Stle7esht. We must continue to use our own language where there is no word for art because "Everything is art."

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