

The Second French-MFU Seminar

Theme: "Comparative analysis of cultural minorities and indigenous people"

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PLEASE NOTE that this is not a paper to be published and edited. It is merely a text to be shared and discussed within our workshop for the 2nd French-MFU seminar at Mae Fah Luang University, Chiang Rai. Most of the materials for this work-draft have been published in several papers in French and English (see the bibliographical references at the end of the draft text).

FIELDWORKS AMONG NORTH AMERICAN NATIVE PEOPLE.

I am a social and cultural anthropologist who has been doing research with, and about the North American Indians of the High Plains of North America, especially the Lakota Sioux people who live in the states of South Dakota and North Dakota in the USA. Other Sioux people live in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, two Canadian states.

I wanted to understand how come North American Indian people were still living following so many of their old customs and traditional religious beliefs.

I spend two years – 1969-71 – on the Cheyenne River Sioux Indian Reservation in South Dakota as a teacher at the local Indian high school. I was teaching American and English literatures, Social Anthropology and basic French. Why French? A third of the Plains Indians are descendants of French Canadian trappers, or French traders coming from St Louis on the Missouri River during the first part of the 19th century. Some of them are easy to recognize their last names being French.

For those two years, and many summers ever since, I have shared the Indian way of life as much as I could to better understand them and to find out the interrelations and connections between the Indian people and the non Indian people.

North American Indians yesterday

I cannot here explain everything about North American Indians. I will speak about the Plains Indians, whose ancestors were living for some as nomadic people following the American buffaloes, the bisons (*Bison bison*) in their migrations across the central plains and high prairie (i.e. grasslands) of North America. Other Plains Indians were agricultural people living in villages of tents - tipis- made of hides or houses made of stone, wood and covered with earth.

The Indians and the World

I will speak about Plains Indian people as an anthropologist, but I will also try to use their own words to better translate their conception of the world as a global, holistic ecosystem where « *everything* », i.e. human beings, animals, plants, « *natural things* » (mountains, rivers...) and « *sky things* », (rainbow, stars, moon, sun) are all connected and interdependent. Most of the « *things of the universe* » are thought to be of a spiritual nature and are organized in « *nations* » (*oyate*): « *winged nation* », « *four-legged nation* », « *two legged nation* » (which by the way includes human beings and bears), or « *people* »: « *star people* », « *buffalo people* »... As it is, the separation between nature and culture is almost non-existent « *we are all related* », *Mitakuye Oyasin* in the Lakota language. For the Sioux Lakota, this saying is a most powerful one; it always ends traditional shamanistic rituals.

Nowaday, a lot of Indian people are christian. Most traditional Indians believe in a mysterious universal power called wakan by the Lakotas, orenda by the Iroquois, manitou by the Algonkians, Agudar by the Aleutes... Their religious beliefs are strongly animistic and shamanistic They are integrated into everyday life and manifest themselves through natural symbols. Seers, healers, medicine men and shamans.....

Indians today

The Indians today are still more or less organized in two groups of people: the *full-bloods* and the *mixed-bloods* or *halfbreeds*. A third to more than half of the Indian people in North America are children of mixed couples (White & Indian, Black & Indian mostly). But some of the so-called and self-called, full-bloods are the children of White trappers and traders that have been officialy and ritually adopted into the tribe during the 19th century.

Nowadays, for most of the US Indian tribes, in order to be recognized as a North American Indian by the Indian people and the US government, one has to have at least 1/4th of « *Indian blood* ». So it is important to know your quota of *Indian blood* if you want to be recognized as a member of the Indian tribe of your relatives.

To be recognized as a member of an Indian tribe is to be able to partake of the benefits given to the tribe according to the treaties signed with the Canadian (and the United Kingdom) and later the US governments.

Indian Reservations, lands in Trust status

Many treaties did set apart pieces of land to be held in Trust status for the Indian tribes by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Interior Department of the federal governments in Washington, or Ottawa. Some tribes are living today on what is left of the land on which they used to roam freely. Others have been quite brutally deported to western states, which for a few years were considered to be « *Indian lands* » (the Dakotas, Oklahoma).

Indian fights and problems

During the 20th century, Indian wars were no longer fought on battlefields on the western plains, but within the political, economical and law systems of the democratic governments of North America. The federal governments both in Washington and Ottawa proved many times they were rather pro-Indian, at least more so than the local state-governments. They helped the Indian people in their fights for lands and rights against the western states where most of the Indian Reservations are to be found.

Treaties, Agreements....

Between 1607 and 1776, 175 treaties were signed between « *Indian Nations* » and the UK and Canada's governments; and later 370 with the US federal government. In The US, the first treaty was in 1778 with the Delaware Indians, the last one in 1868 with Nez Pierced Indians. After that treaty, according to the US federal government, the « *Indian nations* » became « *domestic dependent nations* ».

Since 1871, the US federal government deals with Indian people through alliances, agreements and conventions.

There are 515 officially recognized or scheduled tribes, and some 200 communities recognized by Indians and anthropologists. Some 26 of the later are recognized at the state level. Many of them are still waiting to be recognized as official tribes in order to benefit from the cultural, social and political rights given to North American Indigenous people according to the treaties.

In the United States today, « Native Americans », including Inuit and Aleutes from Alaska, are 2 786 600 (they constitute about 1.5% of the 2003 US Census figures). Are Hawaiians « Native Americans » ?

Some of the most pertinent Acts and agreements

1924, the Indian Citizenship Act gave to the US Indigenous people the American citizenship.

1934, Indian Reorganisation Act (IRA) allowed the last allotments with Indian Reservations. More important it gave back to the Indian people the right of political organizations they used to have. Some tribes and reservations shared several tribes organized their tribal government according to old tribal customs others choose to write their constitution in agreement with the US federal constitution. This was the choice of the Sioux people.

Termination policy

Around 1950, President Eisenhower (a democrat) wanted to drastically terminate the Indian Reservations. A policy which went on less openly under the

govnment of President Kennedy. In consequence, the Indians had to organize themselves into radically oriented associations.

1975, Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act

Since 1972, the BIA take care of mot of the Indian Schools and several university colleges on the Reservations. Those « community colleges » located on the reservations propose, along with a regular university cursus, courses in North American Indian ways of life, about the spirituel knowledge of the Interdependance between human beings, animals and plants ; they explain the Life Powers and their connections with the Four Directions of the World. The Indian people believe this traditional sacred knowledge is supposed to teach to their young people and the non Indians how to live in Harmony with Nature... In the community colleges, a great emphasis is made on technical and scientific innovations, and artistical activities.

1976, Health Care Improvement Act takes care of all Indian Health Centers and Hospitals on Indian Reservations through the Indian Health Service (I.H.S.).

1978, Indian Child Welfare Act stopped the adoption of Indian orphans by non Indian people, which used to be a well développée « custom » for a so called faster assimilation policy of the North American Indians in mainstream America.

1978, American Indian Religious Freedom Act . This public law re-enacted the religious freedom of American Indians in the USA. Actually, the coming back of the Indians to their traditional religious beliefs took place soon after the 2sd Worl War. For example, the Lakota Sioux held in 1950 their first officially announced Sundance. The Sundance is the most important célébration of the Plains Indians. In 1991 ; annoter public law had to be passed to regularize the use of peyote, an hallucinegeous cactus by the members of the Native American Church.

1988, Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (I.G.R.A.)

1990, Indian Arts and Craft Act (IACA)

The revival of cultural and artistical activities can be observed during Indian traditional Celebrations (powwows) and « all Indian rodeos », which show the dynamical capacities of the Indian cultural heritage and the importance of their sipirituality. Turing these celebrations, many traditional rituals (gives-aways, Indian name giving...) take place on the Reservations and in urban centers.

Situation today

Life on an Indian reservation is still precarious. Almost 40% of the Reservation Indians still live under the poverty level. And it is the same way for 25% of urban Indians. In Indian Reservations, the rate of unemployment range from 48% to 80%. (versus 7 to 9% for the general US population).

Some Indian people are wealthy, for example : many Indian Corporations of Alaska, the Mescalero Apaches of New Mexico, the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma... Thanks to their casinos, the Pequot of New England are among the richest Indians in North America.

Many Indian Reservations are doing better than 15 years ago. The reason might be that some of them have understood that the betterment of their ways of life depend upon their own involvement in « Indian Affairs ». That is, they should accept the many cultural and economical risks which might happen if they involve themselves in policies of self-determination.

The risks might be less if they involve themselves with federal public programs of self-development, especially the programs involving conservation and restoration of the bio-diversity on Indian lands. And in fact, their traditional beliefs and practices rely heavily on the knowledge that the world will go on only if everyone will participate to its harmonious development and functioning. Each religious ritual is a new affirmation of this interdependence of all animated « people » living on Mother Earth (that is, human beings, animals and plants).

It took a long time for the 20th century Indians to adopt this political and religious way of thinking. And this is kind of amazing as it is so close to the beliefs and practices of their ancestors.

For the Plains Indians, this revival might have started in the years 85-90 when they understood that a lot of non Indian farmers and ranchers were leaving the Great Plains areas. From the Badlands of South Dakota to the tall-grass fields of Oklahoma, 60% of the counties in the great plains lost population during the last 15 years.

This clearly suggests that European agricultural settlement of big parts of the American prairie have been failures. The European settlers and the engineers never acknowledged the land knowledge of the Indigenous people and, at the same time, failed to study this vast ecosystem, the North American prairie. Today, biologists understand that the indigenous prairie was the home of a great bio-diversity which the first scientists failed to understand. And wanting to transform it into a European grassyland in order to feed European cattle, they destroyed its natural productivity.