Living with the Land: The Indians of Southwest Oregon

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Persistent Peoples: Mechanisms of Cultural Survival in Southern Oregon and Northwestern California

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Introduction: Transformations of Tribe

In a symposium focusing on the prehistory of southwest Oregon and northwest California, it is essential not to lose sight of the fact that the Indian peoples of the region exist in the present, and not merely the past. The Karuk, the Coos, the Klamath, the Umpqua, the Tolowa—names such as these reflect living communities, not merely the data of excavated villages, museum collections, or ethnographic field notes. While the experience of the past century and a half has changed Indian ways of life beyond recall, it has not obliterated a continuity of understanding and experience. How—and under what conditions—such continuity has been preserved is the theme of this paper.

From the outset I should make clear that I am not speaking "for" any Indian group. The Native American peoples of the region have no lack of articulate spokesmen, several of whom will be addressing this conference. What I can offer, instead, is the viewpoint of a sympathetic outsider, a cultural anthropologist by training, who has a strong interest in the processes of cultural stability and change.

Native American groups of southwest Oregon—as in almost all of native North America—were utterly transformed by Anglo-American conquest. This is clear from the very concept of tribe as it occurs in anthropology. In Aidan Southall's definition a tribe in its ethnologically classical sense is

a whole society, with a high degree of self-sufficiency at a near subsistence level, based on a relatively simple technology without writing or literature, politically autonomous and with its own distinctive language, culture, and sense of identity, tribal religion being also conterminous with tribal society. (Southall 1970:28)

Today, in contrast, Indian groups are not economically self-sufficient, for they are largely integrated into a regional or national economy. This has meant the demise of those distinctive environmental adaptations—that particular balance of hunting, gathering, fishing, and the like—which formed the ethos and way of life of a particular people. Indian peoples are not politically autonomous, although many exercise a partial sovereignty established through treaties and federal case law (F. Cohen et al. 1982). Language, too, has become problematic. For most—though not all—Indian communities knowledge of aboriginal languages has largely vanished, remaining primarily (when it survives at all) the domain of the elders.

Nor of course are these changes merely the accidental byproducts of the intrusion of Anglo-Americans into the Pacific Northwest. Rather, it was the deliberate policy of the United States government to displace Indian peoples from their territories, thus removing the material basis for their traditional way of life. It was likewise federal action that stripped tribes of their political autonomy, rendering them wards of government, kept in subordinate status through meretricious treaties, an indifferent bureaucracy, and when necessary, military force. Finally, federal policy also sought the destruction of Indian cultures, actively suppressing both native languages and traditional religion and ritual (see Cornell 1988:33-35).

What is so striking, given this history, is the tenacity of Indian identity, or to use a term rather in vogue since the 1970s, Indian ethnicity. Studies of ethnicity proliferated in the post-War period as anthropologists turned their attention from the few remaining tribal isolates to complex, multi-cultural societies. However, the understanding of cultural continuity provided by what have been the major anthropological approaches to ethnicity has been meager.

In what follows, I outline the two perspectives on ethnicity which have dominated theoretical debate over the past two decades, and discuss certain alternatives which offer the possibility of a more satisfactory account of the relation
between cultural persistence and ethnic identity. I then offer some examples of Indian ethnicity drawn from my experience or that of my associates in a number of anthropological studies over the past seven years, projects which have involved Shasta and Klamath peoples, Tchinouk communities of southern Oregon, and slightly further afield, the Cidituklad band of Northern Paiutes. Finally, I consider briefly what theoretical approaches can best illuminate the endurance of culture and identity found among the Native American peoples of southern Oregon and northwestern California.

Theories of Cultural Persistence

The problem of ethnicity.

Ethnicity implies the existence of social markers, recognized means for differentiating between groups coexisting within a wider field of social interaction. Distinctions are made on various grounds, including physical appearance, geographic origins, economic specialization, religion, language, and such expressive patterns as clothing and diet. Regardless, however, of the particular criteria utilized, ethnicity entails distinctions that are cultural as well as social, asserting both a distinctive tradition and an ideology of separate origin and cultural independence (De Vos 1975:9).

Anthropological studies of ethnicity have been characterized by two broad approaches, one which derives ethnic identity from enduring cultural affinities existing sui generis, the other from the rational calculation of social advantage. These theories are usually termed primordialist and instrumentalist, respectively. The underlying debate concerns whether an ethnic group “is to be conceived of as a primordially constituted entity based on ancestry and racial descent; or as a situationally constituted entity, an organizational design for the pursuit of collective goals” (Casino 1985:23). The primordialist position has been argued by Clifford Geertz:

The congruities of blood, speech, custom, and so on, are seen to have an ineffable, and at times overpowering, coherency in and of themselves. One is bound to one’s kinsman, one’s neighbor, one’s fellow believer, ipso facto; as the result not merely of personal affection, practical necessity, common interest, or incurred obligation, but at least in great part by virtue of some unaccountable absolute import attributed to the very tie itself (Geertz 1973:259).

This view led Geertz to considerable pessimism regarding the political stability of the post-colonial states, fearing that the allegiances binding individuals to a newly independent India or Nigeria would be considerably weaker than those dividing Tamils from Bengalis, Yorubas from Ibos. He commented, speaking of modernization in independent Sri Lanka, that “the search for a common cultural tradition to serve as the content of the country’s identity as a nation ... led only to the revivification of ancient, and better forgotten, Tamil-Sinhalese treacheries, atrocities, insults, and wars” (Geertz 1973:272). In short, from the primordialist perspective “people disoriented by change seek refuge in those aspects of their shared lives that most fundamentally define for them who they are” (Bentley 1987:26).

This position involves a type of cultural realism. Cultures (or ethnic orientations) are assumed to have an objective existence; one speaks of the culture of the Navaho, of the Ashanti, of the Kachin (e.g., Naroll 1964). However, the phenomenon of ethnicity throws this view into question, for ethnic identity is commonly ambiguous, subjective, and situational (Southall 1970; R. Cohen 1978). As Fredrik Barth has argued, in the emergence of ethnic categories, “the features that are taken into account are not the sum of ‘objective’ differences, but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant” (Barth 1969a:14).

In the study of ethnicity the key problems do not involve describing and classifying ethnic groups, as much as understanding the processes by which ethnic identities and boundaries are created, modified, and maintained. From the instrumentalist perspective, ethnic identities serve as strategic alternatives. Barth has illustrated this through his analysis of Pathan and Baluch identities in Afghanistan. While poorer and less powerful individuals face difficulty among the Pathans, whose egalitarian political structure excludes those in subordinate status, they can find an acceptable role by adopting a Baluchi identity, whose more centralized political order incorporates clientship without stigma (Barth 1969b:123-25; see also Skinner 1975).

The instrumentalist position also has major weaknesses. As Gary Cohen has asked, “If the persistence or strengthening of ethnic identity derives simply from the pursuit of social or economic interests, why do individuals articulate an ethnic identity rather than merely a class or interest-group identity, and why does ethnic identity have a different value content from other group identities?” (G. Cohen 1984:1037). More generally, primordialist and instrumentalist views share a broader flaw: an inability to explain “how people recognize the commonalities (of interest or sentiment) underlying claims to common identity” (Bentley 1987:26).

Theoretical alternatives in the study of ethnicity.

While the views of both Geertz and Barth contain significant insights regarding ethnicity, the primordialist/instrumentalist dichotomy has become theoretically sterile. However, a number of works in more recent culture theory suggest alternative perspectives which may better illuminate the facts of ethnicity and cultural persistence, particularly as these occur in Native American communities. For clarity I first summarize these under five points, and then consider the arguments in more detail.

1. From the anthropological perspective ethnicity should be seen primarily as a social and cultural, rather than a psychological, phenomenon.

2. Ethnic survival depends upon both the perpetuation of symbolically resonant distinctions between groups, and the transmission of a salient cultural content. Ethnicity theory has emphasized the first, with comparatively little attention to the second.

3. Tradition (the perpetuation of a cultural content) reflects a dynamic system. That is, cultural stability must be explained, just as much as change.

4. Tradition depends upon a largely tacit process of cultural learning and transmission.

5. Ethnic survival is dependent on the preservation of a shared life-world, a context for tacit cultural learning.

These propositions suggest a number of models and theories relevant to the study of ethnic persistence. The arguments can be expanded as follows.

(1) Ethnicity should be seen primarily as a cultural rather than psychological phenomenon. As noted, most theories of ethnicity have been broadly psychological in character, taking as their focus “problems of the individual and his retention or loss of identification with a group” (Castile 1981:xvi). In contrast, Edward Spicer’s theory of the “persistent people” —
phrase I have appropriated for the title of this paper—takes a strongly sociocultural approach to ethnic endurance (Spicer 1971; see also Gorman 1981). As George Castile has said, "the defining characteristic of a persistent people is a continuity of common identity based on," and here he quotes Spicer, "common understandings concerning the meaning of a set of symbols" (Castile 1981:xvii). As Castile has argued,

The thing that survives and must survive is the identity system itself, and this system must maintain a minimal structure and a minimal membership. The enclave may lose many, even most, of its members, but as long as the core endures to preserve continuity the people remains (Castile 1981:xxi).

(2) Ethnic survival requires continuity in both social distinctions and cultural transmission. Continuity in ethnic experience has two aspects, interrelated yet distinct. First, there is a social aspect: the on-going identification of individuals with a particular group, which can be manifested in a variety of ways. To take the Native American example, this could involve participation in the politics of a particular tribe, an effort to distinguish oneself in values and behavior from other groups (be these Euro-American or Indian), or simply subjective self-understanding. This social dimension of continuity can more or less adequately be described as ethnicity (if we emphasize the process of identification), or as community (if we emphasize the resulting social unit).

Second, there is a cultural aspect: the perpetuation of particular patterns of thought and action deriving or believed to derive from ancient times, though often with considerable modification in the face of changing circumstances. In the native American context, these might include basketry patterns, diet preferences, myths and tales, the cultivation of medicinal plants, religious complexes such as the vision quest or shamanic healing, or simply a distinctive understanding of nature. This cultural dimension of continuity is perhaps best referred to by that much-used word, tradition.

In any case, the social and cultural dimensions of continuity—community and tradition—reflect distinct processes. Forces which encourage group distinctiveness can be rather different from those which foster the transmission of particular beliefs and practices. Thus it becomes important to try to understand how these forces interact. Phrasing this somewhat differently, what conditions foster the convergence of a group identity with a continuity of tradition?

3) Tradition is a dynamic process. There has been a convention in anthropology that cultural (or social) change is problematic, necessitating explanation, while cultural stability is not (cf. Barth 1967). Nonetheless, this assumption is theoretically difficult to justify. Roy Wagner has developed this argument in greater detail:

The contexts of culture are perpetuated and carried forth by acts of objectification, by being invented out of each other and through each other. This means that we cannot appeal to the force of something called "tradition," or "education," or spiritual guidance to account for cultural continuity, or for that matter cultural change. The symbolic associations that people share in common, their "morality," "culture," "grammar," or "customs," their "traditions," are as much dependent upon continual re-invention as the individual idiosyncracies, details, and quirks that they perceive in themselves or in the world around them. (Wagner 1981:50-51)

In this view culture constitutes a system of meanings through which social life is motivated and interpreted, a system which is, as Wagner argues, continually renewed. In the context of American Indian ethnicity, we need to understand the manifold processes by which ethnically salient culture patterns are communicated and adapted from generation to generation.

(4) Tradition rests on tacit knowledge. Cultural knowledge is largely tacit. It is learned—or better, absorbed—by experience. Consider this analogy, which I draw from the work of Michael Polanyi (1969:144). The techniques needed to ride a bicycle successfully reflect the laws of physics, but no study of a physics textbook will impart the necessary skills. The knowledge needed is not theoretical but tacit, literally embodied in the learned coordination of the muscles, eyes, and vestibular nerves; it is gained not by study but by practice.

The anthropologists' ethnographies are in this regard analogous to the physics textbooks: they teach us about the traditions of other peoples, but they cannot in any true sense impart these traditions themselves. In short, a tradition cannot be learned theoretically, by the contemplation of abstract rules or objective description. Rather, it must be communicated through participation in the life of a community.

This understanding is expressed more formally in Pierre Bourdieu's "theory of practice," which postulates that particular life-environments produce structures of tacit dispositions (which he terms habitus) through which culturally appropriate practices and representations are generated (Bourdieu 1977:72). What Bourdieu offers is a theory of learning which seeks to account for both the consistency and creativity characteristic of cultural practice (see also Bentley 1987). Regarding this tacit character of cultural learning, Bourdieu notes that where:

it is a whole group and a whole symbolically structured environment, without specialized agents or specific moments, which exerts an anonymous, pervasive pedagogic action, the essential part of the modus operandi which defines practical mastery is transmitted in practice, in its practical state, without attaining the level of discourse. (Bourdieu 1977:87)

Such a seemingly simple matter as the imitation of body movements implies the learning of significant—yet tacit—cultural understandings. Thus,

The child imitates not "models" but other people's actions. Body hexis speaks directly to the motor function, in the form of a pattern of postures that is both individual and systematic, because linked to a whole system of techniques involving the body and tools, and charged with a host of social meanings and values... (Bourdieu 1977:87)

5. Ethnic survival is dependent on the preservation of a shared life-world. As Bourdieu's notion of practice suggests, seemingly casual activities of the common life-world are essential to tacit cultural learning. Furthermore, from this perspective, each element of cultural communication—demonstrating a pattern of basket making, recounting a story, demonstrating an herbal remedy—involves more than itself. Each communicates a tempo, an ethos, a web of symbolism reflecting a far broader cultural experience. I suggest that here is one key to the surprising strength of traditions, even those which (as in native North America) have faced deliberate efforts at suppression by a dominant society.

Thus it is not so much major institutional change which shatters a tradition, but disruption of day-to-day social life. In the Indian context, while genocidal warfare and the destruction of an aboriginal economy had tragic consequences, cultural continuity could remain to the extent that community life, a world of shared social intimacy, was preserved. When this chain of enculturation is disrupted, when one cannot learn
a tradition by growing up within it, then major changes result. 
As Vine Deloria and Clifford Lytle have aptly said, in 
discussing the limitations of formal education in preserving 
Indian cultures,

A living culture is so much a part of a people that it is virtually 
incapable of recognition and formal academic transmission.
Expecting schools to do the task formerly assumed spontaneously 
by parents, friends, relatives, and the community in concert is 
only to reduce tribal culture to a textbook phenomenon (Deloria 

Though in a very different milieu, I have demonstrated the 
same point in studies of the transmission of tradition in 
Catholic monasticism, noting the radical departures in cultural 
understanding which resulted when events intervened to 
prevent the normal experiential learning of a monastic way of 
life (Winthrop 1985b).

Cultural Persistence In 
Native Southwest Oregon

Having indicated some approaches which could contribute to a 
more satisfactory theory of cultural persistence, I offer 
some evidence against which these arguments can be judged, 
drawing on examples of Indian ethnicity in southern Oregon 
and northwestern California. Specifically, I consider briefly a 
few examples drawn from three aspects of this complex matter: 
first, the varying forms of post-contact community life; second, 
patterns of deliberate cultural transmission in the post-contact 
period; and third, the significance of a key symbolic domain: 
the culturally appropriate use of land.

Preserving Indian Communities.

The political status of the tribes of southern Oregon and 
northwestern California varies considerably. Few groups in the 
region possess a tribal land base, which is to say, a reservation. 
Most incorporate a formal political organization, in some cases 
federally recognized through a government-to-government 
relationship, in other cases lacking such recognition. But in any 
event, from an anthropological point of view, the significance and 
influence of any formal political body may as well be 
a tribal council can only derive from the strength of more basic 
ties of community. No legal apparatus or federal recognition 
can call a community into being, though the fact of recognition, 
funding, federal oversight, and a land base can of course 
significantly influence the institutional history of a given 
group. It is therefore essential to understand the character of 
day-to-day social relationships within Indian groups if one is 
to have any understanding of their strengths and limitations as 
post-contact communities.

In 1978 the Bureau of Indian Affairs established a new 
process for Indian peoples currently without federal 
recognition as tribes to petition for acknowledgement (see 25 
CFR 83). The review process requires proof, among other 
things, that members of the group have had enduring ties to a 
specific territory or community, and that the petitioning group 
has "maintained tribal political influence or other authority 
over its members" [25 CFR 83.7(b) and (c)]. In 1989, a decade 
later, the acknowledgement program is widely criticized for its 
tortuous pace and overly legalistic approach. Nonetheless, one 
of the positive results has been to document the continuity of 
social life and the imaginative strategies for cultural survival 
pursued in the post-contact period. Out of such research, I 
offer two examples, regarding the role of Indian allotments and 
the place of informal social gatherings in maintaining tribal 
social ties.

The ideas of individual ownership of land, and the total 
transfer of rights in real property from one party to another 
(alienation), are foreign to Native American tradition. In the 
later nineteenth century the federal government—particularly 
through the General Allotment (Dawes) Act of 1887— 
undertook the division of tribal lands into personally held 
properties as an instrument of social policy, to destroy tribes as 
collective entities, and thus to encourage the acculturization of 
the Indians (E. Cohen et al. 1982:99-102, 128-34). In 1910 the 
federal Forest Allotment Act made it possible for Indians 
legally to homestead lands on the Forest Reserve, and a 
number of Shasta Indians in Siskiyou County received 
allotments on this basis (James Rock, personal communication).

Typically, such allotments were marginal, and 
productive farming almost impossible. Nonetheless, under the 
conditions of displacement, abuse, and hunger created by the 
onslaught of miners and settlers in the later nineteenth century, 
a number of these allotments served as a type of refuge for the 
Shasta. There is an irony here, in that by permitting an 
expression of tribal solidarity, the allotments served an aim 
entirely alien to the assimilist, "civilizing" philosophy 
behind the allotment acts. One such allotment (probably of 120 
acres) belonging to Teye Jim, one of the last Shasta chiefs, 
served as a gathering point for many otherwise homeless 
Shasta. As Mrs. Betty Hall, a historian of the Shasta tribe, has 
recounted,

Teye Jim was the last Shasta chief we had, and it was 
customary if other Shasta Indians were in the area [that] they 
could always go to the chief's lodge and stay there. A lot of the 
other old Indians who were living in the area at the time—such as 
Sissy [John] and Nora [Bateman] who had nowhere else to go, 
they lived there. Old Mary lived there, and Old Martha. Those are 
two old Indian women that had nowhere else to go. They 
probably lived in little lean-tos or little shackies, whatever they 
could get for shelter. [...] Lucy Jim was the last one. She died in 
1934. (In Winthrop 1986:52-3)

In our ethnographies we anthropologists have so 
emphasized the stylized and formal aspects of culture—the 
realm of ritual—that we often have failed to give sufficient 
attention to the subtle and undramatic aspects of social life. It 
is important, in examining the character of Indian communities 
in the post-contact period, not to make this error. Many 
informants have described a wide range of 
gatherings—cooperative work efforts, celebrations, visits to 
medicinal springs, political meetings, even gambling 
parties—dating in their accounts from the 1920s to the present. 
Such occasions not only reinforced community ties, but also 
they provided key opportunities for tacit as well as explicit 
cultural learning.

A Shasta informant, Mr. Carraway George, reported 
attending numerous ceremonies in the 1930s, many at the 
Sacramento River headwaters, in Mt. Shasta City:

They would give thanks to the Great Spirit...before they eat. 
Then when the families got together they would have someone 
being the elder at that time...give what...the Christian people 
would call a prayer. [In the prayer] he would be glad that he had 
lived this many years, that he had lived through another year— 
as far as the fact that so many of the people [were there]—he was 
glad that they had came... [In the rest of the meeting] they sat 
rund around and talked, talked about the families... where certain 
people lived at, and all these different things that pertained to the 
Shasta people. This is how that their knowledge was passed 
down, from one generation to the other (in Winthrop 1986:58-9).
In a similar fashion, Mrs. Delphine Masquat, a member of the Tchino'uk group dispersed to southern Oregon, described the on-going social ties within the Tchino'uk community in the Sutherlin area:

[We were] at each other's houses all the time. You knew we helped each other in any way we could. . . . picking fruit, and we shared, and we had the togetherness—picnics, celebrating somebody's birth or birthday, whichever, and weddings.

(Interview, 11/12/84)

Patterns of Cultural Transmission

Because cultural learning is largely a tacit process, it is particularly important in seeking the factors responsible for "persistent peoples" that we understand the myriad subtle ways in which "the community in concert" (to quote Deloria and Lytle) conveys its knowledge in the post-contact era.

An obvious domain of cultural transmission lies in the inheritance of crafts and techniques. One Shasta informant spoke vividly of learning basketry from her maternal grandmother, stressing that what was transmitted consisted not only of basketry techniques, but also a general attitude toward learning, which could perhaps be characterized as a mixture of patience and deference. Shasta traditions were also perpetuated through many undramatic (and often deliberately unobtrusive) patterns of behavior. For example, a Shasta woman's traditional clothing (e.g., buckskin skirts) was decorated with patterns of pine-nuts, beads, shell pendants, and the like (Dixon 1907:409). Yet as Betty Hall has pointed out, after conquest and resettlement on reservations these designs were perpetuated in Western modes of dress, working out the traditional patterns in lace and ribbon on their cotton dresses (Winthrop 1986:4655).

Another quite significant domain involves knowledge of a cultural landscape, the environment of a given people seen in terms of the culturally significant plants, animals, and terrain. Mr. Dobbins Cook, a Klamath informant now in his late eighties, has spoken of accompanying his aunt on gathering expeditions. He acquired in this fashion an extremely detailed knowledge of the geographic availability and growing cycle of key plants in the Klamath aboriginal diet, including wocus, ipas, wild celery, and wild plums (Winthrop Associates 1989: App. 4). Knowledge of medicinal plants offers another important field of traditional knowledge. Among the Fort Bidwell Northern Paiutes, for example, a number of older women with whom I have worked continue to collect and preserve both edible and medicinal plants, and possess detailed knowledge of their traditional uses, though it is not clear to me to what extent such knowledge is being passed to a younger generation (Winthrop 1985a:29-33).

Matters of diet choice offer manifold ties to native ways: as a body of traditional knowledge, as concrete symbols of connection to a landscape, and as ethnic markers differentiating through their customs Indians and Euro-Americans. Nonetheless, such preferences are not static. The aboriginal Klamath diet, for example, appears to have strongly emphasized fish and the marsh-growing wocus, with a secondary dependence on a wide range of roots, seeds, fruit, and shellfish (Spier 1930:145). Today, however, a strong preference appears to be expressed for hunting. In a survey conducted in 1985 by the Klamath Tribe, respondents were asked to rank "all wildlife resources, including animals, plants, fish and birds that are important to you." The species most frequently included were elk, deer, duck, geese, and fish, in that order (Winthrop Associates 1989:17-18). Such shifting diet preferences may reflect, not a declining tradition, but an evolving one.

The Appropriate Use of Land

In few areas does the predominant perspective of Native Americans differ so strikingly from that of Euro-Americans as in the question of the culturally appropriate use of land. Disagreements over land use serve both to constellate Indian ideas and attitudes regarding the spiritual significance of nature, and to reinforce the ethnic distinctiveness of an Indian people within a dominant Euro-American society.

A dramatic example of such conflict occurred in Lake County in the mid-1980s, when the U.S. Department of Energy proposed to relocate in permanent burial some 600,000 cubic yards of radioactive waste, at the time stored within the town of Lakeview, the by-product of uranium mining and milling operations in the region during the late 1950s and early 1960s. The Northern Paiutes of Fort Bidwell, whose ancestral lands included the two proposed alternative disposal sites, responded vigorously, objecting in particular to one of the sites, located three miles from a mountain peak which the tribe considered sacred.

The following comment, excerpted from a letter from the tribe to the Department of Energy, is indicative:

It was at these sites (Drake Peak, Hart Mountain and Steens Mountain) that members of the aboriginal Northern Paiute Bands sought communion with the Ancient Power. And it is at these same sites, like the Drake Peak area, that now, centuries later, Gidutikad people continue to seek spiritual help. These mountains for the Gidutikad people are comparable to other shrines in other religions, such as Mecca to Islam or the Vatican to Catholic Christians (in Winthrop 1985a:9).

The group also raised a broader range of concerns, expressing fear regarding the effects of the project upon "cultural resources, plants, animals, soils, water and the scenic beauty of the areas recommended as new disposal sites," as well as the obvious danger of radioactive contamination.

Mr. Jimmy Washoe, a Paiute informant then about eighty, had the following exchange with me, in the course of a study to clarify the Fort Bidwell community's concerns and preferences regarding the project:

Mr. Washoe: Where is that God? Up there?

RW: I don't know.

Mr. Washoe: I don't either. But we pray to the mountain. We pray when we drink the water that comes off the mountain. That's our God. Everything on the mountain....

RW: . . . you said that Drake Peak was sacred. Is that right . . . there's spirits there?

Mr. Washoe: Yeah, that's the old Indians. They never leave. They're over there now. All the dead Indians. Their spirits are still there (in Winthrop 1985a:35).

Views such as these, regarding the sacred character of a landscape and the dependence of a community upon the powers residing there, exemplify what I referred to earlier—quoting Spicer—as "common understandings concerning the meaning of a set of symbols." Such understandings are essential for the survival of a tradition and a community, which is to say, for the persistence of a people.

This encounter of two cultures (and two economies) had a reasonably successful outcome, with the Department of Energy ultimately choosing to avoid the disposal plan in the vicinity of Drake Peak. A number of other controversial projects in the region have not had (from the Indian perspective) an equally
positive outcome. The Salt Caves Dam project—proposed for the upper Klamath River by the City of Klamath Falls—struggles forward, despite opposition from the Klamath and Shasta peoples (and the State of Oregon) because of its environmental consequences and the potential destruction of past village sites along the banks. Interestingly, in 1984 the Shasta held a public “vision quest” ceremony in the area of the proposed dam, attended by officials from the City of Klamath Falls, federal land management personnel, and managers of the project, to dramatize their concern for the sacred character of the area, and the threat posed by the dam project.

Further to the southwest, the Forest Service’s highly controversial Gasquet-Oreilles logging road (the G-O Road project) was approved in 1986 by the U.S. Supreme Court, overturning the decisions of district and appellate courts, which had ruled for Indian plaintiffs in finding the project incompatible with traditional use of the area for vision quest activities. Both projects have served to catalyze cultural and political assertiveness by Indian groups in the region, a factor likely to have a bearing on the outcome of future controversies.

Conclusions

John Wesley Powell, the first director of the Bureau of American Ethnology, stated in 1881:

The great boon to the savage tribes of this country... has been the presence of civilization, which, under the laws of acculturation, has irresistibly improved their culture by substituting new and civilized for old and savage arts, new for old customs—in short, transforming savages into civilized life. (in De Laguna 1960: 787-88)

Somewhat over a century later, Powell’s prediction seems not only morally but scientifically dubious. What Powell—like so many of his twentieth century successors—viewed as the inevitable replacement of Native American cultures by Euro-American civilization has not come to pass. Side by side with a vast transformation in technology and the political order, a great many Native Americans continue to hold strongly both to an ethnic distinctiveness and a continuity of tradition. There are several reasons for anthropology’s misreading of contemporary Indian experience.

First, we have too often failed to recognize that cultural continuity is compatible with change. Far from requiring an unvarying replication of past ways of thought and behavior, the cultural persistence of a people simply requires (as Ed Spicer has pointed out) “the growth and development of a picture of themselves which arises out of their unique historical experience” (in Castile 1981: xviii). The values and ways of life of pre-contact times can continue to animate the cultural understandings of modern Klamath, Shasta, or Paiute, without relegating them to some museum display of static authenticity.

Second, we have failed to give sufficient attention—theoretically and ethnographically—to the significance of that social opposition between Indian and Anglo which lies at the heart of post-contact Indian experience. This type of stigmatizing relationship between groups—according to Ed Spicer’s analysis of the historical experience of ten such “persistent peoples”—constitutes “the essential factor” in forming a “persistent identity system” (Spicer 1971:797). Such conflict frequently functions (perhaps paradoxically) to strengthen the salience of those distinctive traditions underlying a sense of ethnic difference.

Third, studies of ethnicity have been weakened by considering ethnic identities (in Bentley’s phrase) as “empty vessels” anchored in “conventional but arbitrary oppositions between categories” (Bentley 1987:36). Ethnicity is more than social identity. Rather, it involves a convergence of a distinctive community with a distinctive set of traditions. In the groups with which I am familiar, characteristic patterns of thought and behavior are more than arbitrary social diacritics distinguishing Anglos from Indians. There is, for example, an intrinsic rather than accidental relationship between the social identity “Indian” and the cultural interpretation of land as a sacred system rather than as a commodity.

In the final analysis social and cultural processes in the formation of ethnicity are interdependent, for ethnic identity reflects both externally imposed social oppositions and an internally generated affinity based on shared (largely tacit) cultural knowledge.

Earlier I reviewed the two perspectives which have dominated studies of ethnicity, the instrumentalist and the primordialist, and indicated some of the developments in later culture theory which require us to transcend this now tired dichotomy. Some final comments on this issue seem appropriate.

Instrumentalists such as Fredrik Barth are of course correct in arguing that ethnic affiliation is used strategically, and that decisions by individuals and groups to take particular actions may well reflect a certain calculation of advantage. The post-contact political history of particular Indian peoples shows this clearly. Political mobilization by Indian groups may fluctuate dramatically over time, for there are many periods in the historical experience of stigmatized peoples when overt political action is obviously difficult, dangerous, or simply futile. It is certainly true, furthermore, that assertions of ethnic claims occur in part in response to threats to Indian cultural values posed by the wider society. Examples include the Shasta and Klamath reaction to the Salt Caves dam proposal, the Paiute reaction to radioactive waste disposal at Drake’s Peak, or the Tolowa and Yukon reaction to the G-O Road project. The instrumentalist view is correct to this extent. But such threats do not create identities, they merely mobilize them.

Primordialists such as Geertz are correct in assuming that ethnic identity rests on strong, and largely unconscious social ties; but fail, I believe, in ascribing such sentiments to a blind response to social dislocation. It is difficult from this perspective to account for change occurring within traditions and ethnic identities: the evolution of an ethnic diet, a decorative pattern, a style of leadership, an interpretation of “nature.”

I suggest that a deeper—and more respectful—interpretation of cultural persistence is needed than has been afforded by the major perspectives of modern ethnicity theory. We need better to account for the surprising durability of traditions and ethnic identities, a fact not predicted by anthropological theories of “acculturation” or “modernization.” The work bearing on cultural creativity and tacit learning by Spicer, Wagner, Polanyi, and Bourdieu, among others, offers a valuable point of departure. I have suggested that such tacit learning is a ubiquitous part of life within a culturally distinctive community, involved in even routine activities: learning the habitats of medicinal plants, protective chants against snakebite, the craft of basketry, or the proper deference toward elders. Each such skill or action is teaching more than itself: it is teaching how to be a particular type of person, a Shasta rather than a Klamath, an Indian rather than an Anglo. And this is—had we listened—what our informants had been asserting all along.

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