

POWER FROM THE PEOPLE

Indigenous Initiatives in Education and Development

by

Ray Barnhardt

Indigenous people in Fourth World settings have been seeking an increasingly active role in shaping their own future through a variety of initiatives capitalizing on the unique political status and cultural traits that distinguish them from other groups in the national societies within which they are situated. This paper uses New Zealand Maori and Alaska Native examples to illustrate how indigenous people have taken the initiative to pursue their own agendas in the areas of education and economic development.

Maori Development Initiatives

I will begin by describing an event that occurred on a Maori marae in New Zealand a few years ago. A marae is a small piece of Maori land maintained by a tribe, subtribe or extended family for communal gatherings (known as "hui"), including weddings, funerals, cultural events, conferences, etc.. On this land is a meeting house (in which the spirits of the ancestors reside, and which provides sleeping accommodations for guests), a dining hall, a washing/toilet facility, and occasionally other buildings, all surrounded by a fenced enclosure. Protocol for entering a marae and participating in marae events is steeped in Maori tradition and generally relies heavily on the Maori language. Maraes are unquestionably Maori turf and have been an important factor in the maintenance of Maori cultural traditions in the midst of a national society dominated by traditions of European origin, specifically those of Great Britain.

The event I will describe was a hui, or conference called by members of an influential marae to examine the potential impact on Maori people in the region of a large-scale coal-fired power station proposed by the national government. This particular marae community happened to be the home of two very powerful Maori's, the Maori Queen and her brother, who was the Director of the Centre for Maori Studies and Research at the University of Waikato (where I was on sabbatical leave at the time). The government was sensitive to Maori views on the new power station, because they had encountered opposition ten years earlier when their plan to build a similar plant only a few hundred yards across the lagoon from this marae was delayed nearly two years through widespread Maori demonstrations and legal actions by the community. The original power station was eventually built after much negotiations, but its massive physical dominance in the area was a constant reminder of the struggle this small rural community went through, and of the unfulfilled promises resulting from their settlement with the government. This time they intended to play an active role in all aspects of planning related to the new power station, and if there was to be a new plant they wanted to share in the economic benefits and minimize the disruption to their community and culture.

Their first action when they heard that another power station was under consideration for their region was to secure funds from the government to conduct a Maori Impact Assessment through the Centre for Maori Studies and Research to supplement the required Environmental Impact Assessment to be conducted by the government. When their assessment report and recommendations were ready, they invited top officials from thirteen government agencies to come to their marae for a two-day hui to review their findings. On the appointed day, agency officials, with their highest ranking Maori employee at their side, arrived at the entrance to the marae and waited in nervous anticipation to be invited onto the marae grounds. Many of the officials had not been on a marae before, but they were all aware that it was Maori turf and that Maori customs prevailed, which is why they brought their resident Maori expert along.

All of the preparations for the hui had been completed on the marae when the appointed time arrived, but the hosts were in no hurry to begin. They sat around and chatted for nearly an hour while the high-ranking officials stood in the parking lot glancing nervously at their watches. Finally the call went out and the officials were slowly welcomed on to the marae through a long series of reciprocal welcoming speeches, songs and exchanges, mostly in Maori on the host side and in translated English on the guest side. By the time the officials made it through the receiving line and entered the meeting hall, they were quite aware that this was going to be a Maori event conducted on Maori terms, and they exhibited much of the same unease in the situation that Maori people feel when they attend meetings in the parliamentary halls in Wellington. At the same time, the officials were overwhelmed with the graciousness of their hosts and felt a sense of privilege for having the opportunity to participate in the hui.

Their sense of discomfort was heightened a bit, however, when they entered the meeting hall and found that their name tags were all on tables set up in a recessed area in the center of the floor, which was normally used for cultural performances. The Maori hosts, on the other hand, were all seated at tables above and around the recessed area looking down at officials. In addition, video cameras were set up to record the whole event, so the officials would have to stand by whatever they said or did.

The first day of the hui was devoted to presentations by Maori elders, youth, mine workers, social welfare and health care providers, educators, and various officials from the host marae and other Maori communities in the region that would be impacted by the new power station. They reported on the employment, noise, health and various social and environmental problems they had encountered with the existing plant across the lagoon, and they reviewed the findings of the Maori Impact Assessment they had completed with regard to the proposed plant. At one point, just as an official was responding to complaints about the frequently disturbing noises from the nearby power station, the plant popped a steam pressure release valve that drowned out the proceedings for nearly three minutes and dramatically punctuated the point of the Maori testimony.

That evening the officials were given royal treatment (literally) by their hosts with an elaborate dinner, including special foods, songs, speeches and entertainment. Though they attempted to reciprocate with speeches and songs of their own, the officials were clearly out-classed by their Maori hosts and by the end of the evening they had developed a bit more appreciation of the strength and meaning of Maori culture. Most, however, were not yet comfortable enough to

accept the invitation to join the other visiting Maoris and sleep in the meeting house on the marae, but instead retreated to their motel rooms in a nearby town.

The next day it was the officials turn to respond to the Maori Impact Assessment and the testimony they had heard the day before. How would each of the thirteen agencies represented address the issues raised and the recommendations that had been presented? The Maori people had made it clear that their support for the new power station was contingent on a favorable response from the government. The first official called upon was the Minister of the Environment - the highest ranking official in attendance and the one most responsive to Maori concerns. His agency would accept all of the recommendations outlined in the Maori report. The next agency, not about to be outdone by the Ministry of the Environment, would accept all of the recommendations as well, and would even go beyond with some supportive recommendations of their own. One by one, the officials responded, each trying to outdo the other by demonstrating their support for the concerns raised by the Maori participants, and forgetting that their comments were being recorded on video tape and would have to be explained when they got back to Wellington. By the time the meeting had ended, the Maori's had extracted government commitments on issues that went far beyond the recommendations they had originally presented. This didn't insure that all of the commitments would be lived up to, but it did provide a firm basis from which they could argue their case as the debate over the new power station evolved. The Maori's had empowered themselves through the effective use of their own institution, the marae, and a Pakeha (non-Maori) institution, the university, to pursue an agenda that they had written.

Through actions such as these, Maori people have begun to effectively reassert themselves as major shareholders in the social, economic and political future of New Zealand, to the point where some refer to the current period of their existence as a "Maori Renaissance". Maori leadership, both within and outside the government, has embarked on an aggressive and progressive process of cultural revitalization and economic development, that is being felt in all corners of the country. Under a banner of "Two People, One Nation", and with the support of the ruling political party which they helped bring into power, they are redefining the role of the national government vis-a-vis Maori affairs and their relationship to New Zealand society as a whole. Government programs and resources previously administered centrally or regionally through the Department of Maori Affairs, are being redistributed to tribal organizations to be administered on a tribal basis, regardless of where members may be located in the country. In this way they hope to strengthen the traditional tribal bonds and make more effective use of the resources which they contend have historically served to keep Maori people in a state of dependency near the bottom of New Zealand society. Although Maori social and economic conditions are still a long way from being equitable to those of the non-Maori population, initiatives such as those surrounding the power station issue indicate a growing sophistication in the use of their unique cultural and political status as indigenous people to shape government policies and practices to their own ends. They are no longer content to be passive participants in Pakeha-defined institutions, but rather seek to restructure those institutions to fit Maori ways.

Alaska Native Educational Initiatives

The resurgence of Maori control over Maori affairs described above closely parallels the efforts of the Native people in Alaska and Canada, who have taken comparable initiatives over the past fifteen years or so to regain control over the land and way of life that was once their own. One of the areas in which Native people have been especially active has been in the area of education.

Alaska Native people have endured a long history of externally initiated educational programs and services, sometimes intended to bring them into the mainstream of Western society, other times intended to help them preserve their own cultural traditions. These well-intentioned programs and services have taken on many different forms over the years, but , for the most part, have operated well within the framework of what we would call "schooling". As such, they have generally reflected the characteristics of external control and design that are inherent in the functioning of schools as government-sponsored institutions directed toward a population of indigenous people.

One of the consequences of this educational benevolence has been that "education" in rural Alaska has been often seen as synonymous with schooling. Over the past dozen or so years, however, various Native individuals, groups and organizations throughout Alaska have looked beyond schools and taken the initiative to develop their own educational programs and institutions intended to address specific social, cultural and economic needs of Native people. These endeavors have ranged from small-scale, one-time, non-formal programs, to large-scale, on-going formal institutions. Some of these have survived - others have not. Some have been Native in design and origin, while others have been modeled after non-Native institutions. All have been initiated and controlled by Native people with Native interests in mind.

In an effort to identify some of the qualities that distinguish Native initiated and controlled educational programs or institutions from their non-Native counterpart, the Alaska Native Graduate Fellowship Program and the Department of Rural Development at the University of Alaska Fairbanks sponsored a symposium in May, 1987 that brought together some of the people who have been responsible for nearly 30 Native educational initiatives in Alaska and Western Canada over the past 10-15 years. Included in the symposium were initiatives ranging from Spirit Camps to Native versions of schools and universities to international advocacy organizations. Representatives of the various programs and institutions were asked to present reports describing their efforts and outlining the issues encountered as they have pursued their respective educational initiative. Following is a list of the initiatives represented and a brief summary of some of the issues that were addressed during the symposium.

Sivunniigvik (NANA Spirit Camp)
Institute of Alaska Native Arts
Fairbanks Native Association
ANHRDP Spirit Program
ANF Ak. Native Leadership Prog.
TCC Land Claims College
Inupiat University of the Arctic
Inuit "Quargi"

Yupit School District
Institute of Alaska Native Science
FNA Traditional School
Inuit Circumpolar Conference
Center for Ak. Nat. Lead. Enh. & Dev.
TCC Survival School
North Slope Higher Education Center
Howard Luke Elders Hall

Alaska Native Education Assoc.
Maniilaq Association
FNA Womens Education Program
"Make Prayers to the Raven"
Four Worlds Development Project
Alexander Reserve School, BC

Alaska Native Caucus/NEA-Alaska
Kawerak, Inc.
FNSBSD Native Education Program
"The Honour of All" (Alkali Lake, BC)
The Gabriel Dumont Institute, Sask.
Council for Yukon Indians, YT

Purposes served by Native educational initiatives: The programs and institutions represented at the symposium have been intended to serve a variety of purposes beyond those usually associated with schooling. These include cultural revitalization, spiritual and emotional regeneration and healing, personal and social transformation, community and economic development, and empowerment of people and communities. Along with this range in functions, there has been an equally diverse set of organizational structures, operating styles, funding patterns, and affiliations with other institutions, though all, by definition, have been grounded in some form of Native tradition and practice.

Characteristics of Native institutions: One of the concerns that was expressed repeatedly throughout the symposium was the need to find more appropriate ways to respond to the range of educational needs that exist in Native communities. The kinds of institutional alternatives that have been developed to do this reflect a variety of characteristics that distinguish them from more conventional educational programs and institutions. Some of these characteristics are a loosely coupled organizational structure that tends to be adaptive and flexible, a highly participatory decision-making process, a distributive communication network with extensive use of informal channels of communication, a decentralized authority structure, an integration of diverse functions in a wholistic framework, a clear sense of purpose, and a commitment to community over institution. Not all Native institutions reflect all of these characteristics, but the variety of approaches reflected in the institutions represented in the symposium indicates that conventional Western institutions can learn a great deal from their Native counterparts.

Empowering processes and Native initiatives: Implicit in nearly all of the Native educational initiatives are processes whereby Native people seek to gain greater control over the forces that shape their lives. This empowering element is sometimes exercised through political action, sometimes through the strengthening of cultural bonds, but nearly always with some kind of educational component that enhances Native peoples understanding and control of their own lives. The very act of taking initiative is an empowering act in itself, recognizing that power is not something that is given to people, but rather something that people must assume for themselves. In some cases, power is gained through the creation of an institutional structure whereby Native people gain access to resources that are otherwise in the hands of non-Natives. In addition to competing for limited resources, these institutions also serve to strengthen Native views and actions by providing a legitimating structure to represent Native interests. In the latter case, Native institutions serve as a vehicle for accessing non-Native systems to bring them more in line with Native goals.

These initiatives have not been without their problems. Some of the problems faced by Native educational undertakings include shortages in suitable staff, limited and unstable funding, conflicting pressures from both within and outside the Native community, difficulty in gaining

understanding and acceptance of the purposes of the initiative, reconciling differences in generational perspectives on issues, and difficulty in sustaining the level of commitment and focus required to maintain the initiative. Despite these and many other problems, most of the initiatives have survived and continue to provide a vital service to Native people.

The participants in the symposium represented only a small portion of the many initiatives that Native people have taken over the years to provide more culturally appropriate educational opportunities for themselves. If this sample is any indication, however, we can expect a great deal more such initiatives in the future, and as a result we will all gain a better understanding of the range of options that are available to us as we seek to improve the quality of our lives. For Native people, these initiatives have been an act of necessity. For others, they are an act of choice.

Conclusion

How is it that Maori people, who represent less than a quarter of the population of New Zealand, and Alaska Natives representing a similar proportion of the Alaska population, can bring such influence to bear on the national and regional policies in their respective countries? To understand this, one must first understand and appreciate the relationship and commitment indigenous people everywhere have to their land. Even though the land may have been occupied by immigrants for hundreds of years, the spiritual and cultural relationship of indigenous people to the land lives on and binds them together across generations, through adversity and despite odd notions of title and ownership. Whatever latent power indigenous people have available to them, it derives from this special and intense relationship to the land. Whenever indigenous people move to empower themselves, they are drawing upon and representing all of their ancestors who still reside in that land. This gives them identity, strength and perseverance as a people which will not be stifled by seemingly hopeless causes and overwhelming odds.

Maori people and Alaska Natives were once thought to be dying races, yet their numbers continue to grow as they learn to adapt and survive in a sometimes harsh and alien social environment. Their kinship with other Fourth World people, such as the Ainu in Japan, the Sami in Scandinavia, and the Aborigines in Australia, and the support of organizations such as the World Council of Indigenous People, has created an awareness that they are not alone in their struggle to regain some control over their land and their lives. The political and economic initiatives of the Maori in New Zealand and the educational initiatives of the Natives in Alaska indicate that indigenous people are quite capable of creating the means to exercise power of the people, by the people, for the people, and that is the essence of empowerment.

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