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COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS AMERICAN INDIAN STUDIES

Dear Friends,
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I am writing this letter to all of you for two reasons. First, I want to begin to repay the debt I owe the eastern Cherokee people for their kindness and help when I lived at Cherokee in 1956-7. In those years I was doing a study at Cherokee for the University of North Carolina, helping them finish up a project which had begun around 1950. I wrote several reports of my research to the director of this project, Dr. John Gulick. Dr. Gulick wrote up the results of the project in a book called, "Cherokees at the Crossroads". I was not completely satisfied with Dr. Gulick's volume and I suppose I will have to report to you my own views in a book sometime in the near future. In the meantime, I hope this letter will be the beginning repayment of my debt to all of you.

The second reason for this letter is that I feel an obligation, as a scientist, to report the results of our research to concerned people. Since I am a Cherokee Indian I feel I have a special responsibility to my own people. So I will report to you about something in which I am sure you will be interested.

For some years now a number of scholars, myself among them, have been interested in how small nationalities survive when they are part of large nations and are surrounded by large, very different majority groups. Of course, the eastern Cherokees are a prime example of this kind of small nationality.

At this stage of research it appears that those minority peoples who have survived over a long period of time have at least four things in common. These four things are

1. Their own language

Examples are the Coptic Christians of Egypt, the Basques of Spain, the Welch of the British Isles, the Ainu of Japan, and the Maya of Yucatan in Mexico. In some cases, a people's own language may only be used in religious activities. Jews in Europe and America speak the legal language of the country in which they live, but use Hebrew in the synagogue. The Seneca Indians of New York use English as a daily language, but their own language in religious ceremonies. The Germans of central North Carolina stopped using German daily by 1850, but kept on using German in church until World War I. The same is true generally of the Scots near Fayetteville, N.C. When these groups stopped using German and Gaelic in their churches their ability to hold together dissolved and they are no longer distinct communities.

In a few instances, a people's own language may be a special variety of a more widespread language, such as the French of the Cajuns in Louisiana or the English of the Lumbee of eastern North Carolina.

In some cases a language may work for a peoples' survival as more than just a symbol. A language can be a good boundary marker for a group. The use of a language can tell you

who is "in" and who is not a member of that people. Further, a language can hide important parts of a peoples' life from the eyes of powerful and prying outsiders. And, of course, a language contains and expresses the unique culture and view of the world of a people.

2. Their own religion

Examples are the Jews, the Gypsies, the Mapuche Indians of Chile, the Hopi of Arizona, the Kickapoo of Oklahoma and Mexico, the Sontal of India and the Lapps of Norway and Sweden.

Many times a peoples own religion may be their version of a world wide religion. Examples are the Yaqui and Pueblo Indian brand of Catholic worship, the Creek Indian version of the Baptist religion, Welsh methodism, the Fulani of Nigeria brand of Islam, the Kalmuck variety of Buddhism in the Soviet Union, and the Toda style of Hinduism in India.

3. A tie to a particular piece of land

A homeland which is often a Holy Land as well. The Jews' relation to Palestine is, of course, the best known example of a people's tie to a particular piece of land. Other examples are the Papago tie to southern Arizona, the Choctaw tie to central Mississippi, the Irish feeling for the island of Eire, the Zapotec Indian relation to the land in southern Mexico, the Kurd's love for western Iran, and the Oglala Sioux tie to the Black Hills.

4. A sacred history

It spells out a people's relationship to God, to a land, to history, to destiny, and to other nationalities. The Jewish Torah (the first five books of the Bible, plus oral accounts) is just such a sacred history. Other groups, like the Irish and Welch, have complete written sacred histories, but most sacred histories are passed on by word of mouth. Some Indian peoples like the Papago and Yaqui are right now recording their sacred histories in written form. Andrew Dreadfulwater of Tahlequah is presently writing down the Cherokee sacred history as it is known in Oklahoma.

To some peoples one of these above four features may be a more important symbol of their people hood than the other three. For instance, it is hard to imagine Cherokees continuing as a people without a large portion of their population speaking Cherokee by preference and with at least a few people being able to read in Sequoya's writing system. The Cherokee language is the important symbol of Cherokee identity. In that same vein, the Jews have made their religion the focus of their people hood. And it seems that Indian tribes like the Yaqui and the Hopi are as much religious congregations as they are groups of relatives.

Edward H. Spicer, a prominent student of Indian life in the Southwest, has in recent years turned his attention toward the small nationalities of western Europe--Irish, Welsh, Basques, Jews, etc. On the basis of that research he feels that the Mast important of these four important "survival" features is a sacred history. He thinks that such a sacred history is essential if a group is to feel itself to be a special, unique, and permanent people.

There are other symbols of people hood which may be important-music, song, dance, heroes, dress--but the above four seem to be the most important. It is unclear at this stage of research how important an independent economic base is to the survival of the enclaved small nationalities. We do know that both the Gypsies and Jews have held special occupations within

European and American society at various times, but we are not sure what that means for their survival as peoples.

Among some enduring peoples the very absence of, or the losing of, one of these important four symbols can, in itself, become a strong symbol of people hood. The Jewish Holy Land became very important to Jews just because they were driven from it. A strong part of the Gypsy self image is that they are a people without a homeland and destined to wander among foreigners. North Carolina Cherokees, in their own eyes, are those Cherokees who faithfully cling to the Cherokee Homeland. The Gaelic language became a strong symbol of people hood to the Irish at the very time Gaelic had almost disappeared.

The situation of Indian peoples in North America is not very clear. Most Indian peoples have only been enclaved for 100 or 200 years now, a short time in any people's history. However, there are already many Indian peoples in the U. S. which seem on the verge of disappearance. In such tribes the native language is almost extinct. The original native religion is no longer practiced and they have developed no native Christianity. Their land is no longer a Holy Land and hardly even a Homeland. And their sacred history has become stories told simply to entertain.

There are some Indian tribes which are consciously preserving all of these four cornerstones of their life--their language, their religion, their Holy Land, and their sacred history. These are the Yaqui, Hopi, and Pueblos of the Southwest; the Creek and Kickapoo of Oklahoma; and the Miccosukkee of Florida. If they are not wiped out by war or disease, these tribes will no doubt survive. Some other tribes might be included in this same category--the Choctaw of Mississippi, the Crow of Montana, the Ute of Utah, the Papago of Arizona, the Oglala Sioux of South Dakota, and perhaps the Oklahoma Choctaw and Cherokee. (There are some tribes about which I am not sure--the Apaches of the Southwest, the Yakima of Washington, the Warm springs of Oregon, the Potawatomie of Kansas and Wisconsin, and the Shawnee of Oklahoma, etc. I just do not have current information about their situations, but they were very traditional peoples twenty years ago. Further, the situation of other tribes like the Navajo, Winnebago, Iroquois, Coushatta, Seminole, etc. seems to be in a state of flux. I cannot see a clear direction emerging for these peoples.) However, the majority of American Indian peoples seem on the point of disappearance as distinct peoples.

When a minority people loses their special characteristics they come more and more to look like the majority group which surrounds them. At that point, they will begin to see themselves simply as a variety of the national society; and usually as a low ranked and unworthy part of this larger society of which they now feel a part. Then such weakened peoples lose the strength to keep their youth "close to home". Marriage with outsiders becomes common and younger members move away, as individuals, in great numbers. Their community becomes like other communities in their area and their history as a people ends. California, northern Mexico, New Mexico, the coastal South, and extreme northeastern Oklahoma all contain Mexican, white, or black communities who were once distinct Indian peoples.

Fifty years ago the eastern Cherokees had retained all of these four characteristics which are important for the survival of an enclaved people. The Cherokee language was in daily use both in the home and in all public institutions. Cherokee churches practiced a truly Cherokee

Christianity and native ceremonies were still performed. Western North Carolina was both the Cherokee Homeland and the Cherokee Holy Land to almost every Cherokee. Word of mouth accounts of the Cherokee sacred history were still told in the home and on some public occasions.

However, Cherokee life in North Carolina has changed quite a bit in recent years. The Cherokee language is spoken in fewer homes every year and English is the public language even in Cherokee churches and in tribal government. (It is possible that there will be no more North Carolina Cherokees really fluent in the Cherokee language in sixty years') Cherokee churches are now simply standard American Protestant churches, and native ceremonies have disappeared. Cherokee attachment to the land is still fairly strong among some, but few view the land as a Holy Land in these times. And Cherokee sacred history is fast being forgotten.

The school system has been a major factor in this change. The school systems of all large nations not only teach "facts" to students, but also prepare the student to enter the national society as a standardized, individual citizen. Of course, certain values and attitudes are passed on to the student as part of his preparation to enter into national society. Such values and attitudes do not help small national groups survive, but serve the ends of the state. For instance, some Cherokees nowadays think the use of the Cherokee language is "old-fashioned" while English is "modern"; or that Cherokee religious ideas are "superstitions". Some minority peoples counter this feature of the school system by firm control of local schools, by special teaching in the home, or by extra instruction for children in their religious institutions.

If trends continue as they are it would be my prediction, as a social scientist, that the North Carolina Cherokee will not last more than seventy years longer as a distinct people. The same is true of many other North American groups. Some peoples of the world have been able to reverse such kinds of trends, but to do so takes a strong commitment among the whole people (it cannot be done by specialists alone) and a real attempt to revive important aspects of life. However, these trends cannot be reversed after a certain point. A people must act early in the decay of their people hood if they want to reverse such trends.

It is not my job, as a scientist, to tell individuals or communities what is good for them, how to live their lives, or what should be their destiny. (In this case, I have my own private opinion as a Cherokee). However, I do feel it is my duty as a scientist to inform lay-persons about scientific thinking which has a direct bearing on their lives.

I hope that this report will be of some value to all my friends in the Qualla area.

Sincerely,
Robert K. Thomas, Professor
American Indian Studies