

Position Paper For the 1986 Tavertet Spain Colloquium On Cultural Resistance

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For most minority peoples in the world today, cultural resistance and cultural survival is dependent on their continuing social survival. Many minority peoples are modernly citizens of large nation-states, surrounded by numerous and very different majority groups. Their continued existence is tenuous, to say the least. This is particularly true of small tribal nationalities in some parts of the world.

Edward H. Spicer of the University of Arizona pioneered the research in what he called “enduring peoples.” During the last year and a half of his life, he and the author had endless discussions around this topic. We came to the conclusion that those minority peoples who had survived difficult circumstances over the long hauls had four features in common:

1. A unique language - sometimes the language of the household, but at least a holy
2. Language
3. A distinctive religion - even if it is a distinct version of a world religion
4. A tie to a particular geographic area - a homeland and often a holy land, as well
5. A sacred history, which defined the group as an enduring people, a chosen people, and often with a sacred destiny.

These four features function as symbols of a people’s identity, constant reminders of who they are, and that they live under perpetual social and cultural threat. Further these features as activities establish boundaries, define membership, set up standards of judgment about the commitment and behavior of one’s fellows, and so on. (Secondary symbols of people hood are music, songs, dance, dress, heroes, etc.) Spicer considered a sacred history the most important symbol of a group’s people hood; perhaps because a sacred history is the feature which is the most verbally explicate about identity and destiny, and because a sacred history most reflects a people’s determination to survive.

A prior question is – what was there in the historical experience of such enduring peoples that brought about this successful resistance? (There are, of course, many peoples who have been socially

and culturally absorbed by more powerful societies.) First, a minority people must perceive that they are socially and culturally threatened by a powerful foreign society. Such events as military conflict, invasion, forced assimilation programs, exploitation, etc. will certainly bring about a realization of social and cultural threat. However, this outside pressure must not be too strong, in its first phases that a minority people is completely disorganized or wiped out. Such minority peoples must have the time to develop a consciousness of their situation and erect symbols of their people hood, boundaries, and the like. (In his early writings on enduring peoples, Spicer referred to this as the “oppositional” process.) On the other side of the ledger, a people in these threatening circumstances must have some small degree of institutional complexity, particularly a native priesthood or intellectual class; and perhaps much historic contact with other peoples in an egalitarian relationship. “Simple,” isolated tribal groups in the Arctic or Australia do not seem to become enduring peoples, in Spicer’s sense of the term, when faced by a modern monolithic civilization.

Although the four features mentioned above appear in nearly all-enduring peoples, many such peoples focus on one of the four, express their identity in this one feature, and “dovetail” the other three features into this one. For instance, the Jewish identity is most expressed in the Jewish religion. Their tie to a homeland and holy land, Israel, and their sacred history is inseparable from their religion (in Jewish perceptions). Further, Hebrew is a holy language used extensively as the vehicle of Jewish worship. Many peoples (Jews, Yaquis, Hopis, Copts, etc.) have come to this adaptation; so much so, that some are as much religious congregations as they are kin based communities. A few (Hopis, Hassidic Jews, Pueblos, etc.) Have become so “ideologies” as to become extremely rigid and doctrinaire in their cultural and social resistance. For the Basque, Crow, Welsh, Hispanics of northern New Mexico, etc. their languages have become the major symbol of their people-hoods.

However, not all enduring peoples focus on one of these four symbols of their people hood nor are these symbols the sole mechanisms for preserving social existence for some enduring peoples. Some enduring peoples try to socially and culturally insulate themselves from intrusion by the majority society – by keeping a low social profile, secrecy, avoidance of contact with the majority society, unwillingness to let outsiders acquire information about their people (even deliberately lying about their people to outsiders), the use of native languages as a screen to hide their internal life from outsiders, etc. Gypsies are a classic example of such an adaptation, but many North American groups such as the

Five Civilized Tribes, Utes, Winnebagos, etc. show this same adaptation. In the last hundred years, the level of education and sophistication has declined sharply in these insulated people in North America, unfortunately. Some peoples in North America, like the Pueblos, both build their life around their religion and insulate themselves, as well. It is simply a matter of degree whether an enduring people preserves themselves by becoming 'ideologized' or by insulating themselves. Most enduring peoples show aspects of both adaptations and differences in adaptations are a matter of emphasis. Most importantly a people's language, religion, tie to a land, and sacred history carry much of the content of a people's culture, both in the particular (customs, rituals specific meanings, etc.) and the general (values, perceptions, ways of being, assumptions about the nature of the world, etc.). In a large sense, preservation of culture is preservation of self and being, as well as preservation of people hood.

An enduring people's language may well be the keystone in the arch of their culture. Besides the important social functions it serves – a symbol of people hood, defining of membership, boundary maintenance, an insulating cover, etc; a language is a summation and expression of a people's experience over time and their culture. It contains those conceptions most appropriate for a people to use in examining, talking about, and analyzing their own life and problems. In fact, groups in North America, which have undergone recent language loss, show wide disparity between their actual behavior and their verbalization in English of values and aspirations.

Further, a language constrains culture change and integrates changes into the matrix of a people's culture; since a language acts as a perceptual "screen" through which new ideas must be understood and acted upon. This is not to say that language does not change, but that change comes about as a people accumulate new experience, not from the will of a dominant outside group. If one looked at North American Indians in 1970 one would see that language loss was pronounced in those Indian groups on the east and west coasts of North America, in the Great Lakes region, and in western Oklahoma. Some of the loss of these many languages was due to forced acculturation programs or to extensive cross tribal marriages. Most of this loss, however, seems to be due to the fact that Indian tribes in these areas were receptive to influences from the general American and Canadian societies. These groups could now well be called new ethnic groups rather than peoples. Most Indian nationalities in North America in 1970, however, were either purely tribal societies who had retained their original character because of social and physical isolation, or what the author has called enduring peoples.

Now, in 1985, a different picture emerges. Language loss is widespread in the vast majority of North American Indian tribes today. All but a few of the groups referred to as purely tribal societies, such as the Navaho of Arizona, the Dene tribes of northern Canada, and the Apache tribes, are showing massive language loss. The social demise of these tribes seems imminent. Of the enduring peoples, the majority of those the author has characterized as ideologized (those who have made their religion the central focus of their identity) show little language loss - the Hopis, Zuni, some Pueblos, Kickapoo, and Mlccosuki Seminole. But those the author has called insulated peoples - Cherokees, Oklahoma Choctaws, Teton Sioux, Utes - are, on the whole, showing severe language loss and will soon be ethnic Indian communities rather than peoples. For with the disappearance of these peoples' languages the other symbols of their people hoods are weakening fast - their religions, their ties to a land, and their sacred histories. It is doubtful that such very small Indian ethnic communities will be able to survive the pressure for social absorption by the general society. Insulated peoples, like the Cherokees, who show a 90% language loss for children under ten years old in the last few years are peoples whose children (ages 18-35) and grandchildren (under 10 years of age) have literally been "captured" and re-socialized by the general American society. Those fairly untouched tribal societies, such as the Navaho, who show such extensive and rapid language loss in the last ten years seem to have been simply overwhelmed, as a collectivity, by the general American society.

Since 1960 the nation-state apparatuses of the U.S. and Canada have had the power and resources to keep all children in school from age 4 or 5 until they are 18, and in large, centralized, racially integrated schools. Further, television, which promotes the values of white, middle-class children, speaks to Indian children right in the Indian home. As well, welfare programs, old age homes, subsidized nuclear family housing, and the like in the '60s and '70s have weakened the Indian family. Further, physical isolation is a thing of the past in the U.S. and Canada today. The massification and standardization of the U.S. and Canadian population now seems virtually assured. The Soviet Union may be approaching this same point in their development.

For a sixty-year-old Cherokee like me all this means that the Cherokee vision of the good life will end, no doubt, with the death of my generation. Since 1900 when our small republic was dissolved by the United States and we were legally and politically integrated into the general American society.

Cherokees have seen ourselves as living under the heel of the conqueror and governed by his harsh laws - a captive people. Our policy has been to simply endure and persevere until the time came, perhaps far into the future, when conditions were such that we could be a free people once again. Now Cherokees my age find that Cherokees under 35 do not share that vision with us, but have come to share in a foreign vision, the American Dream a vision which ignores freedom, but which promises material success at the cost of family ties and the spiritual life; and a vision which will probably bring about our disappearance as one of Gods' chosen peoples on this great island of North America. Although we are a large tribe by Indian standards, some 35-40 thousand, we are still a tiny people living in a sea of aliens. I doubt that we will survive for very many years longer if present trends continue. When I retire in five years I intend to go back to Oklahoma and try to set up community schools in the Cherokee language, have complete immersion workshops in the Cherokee language, try to shame young Cherokees parents into speaking Cherokee to their children again, encourage a religious revival, point out on every occasion possible and in pamphlets written in Cherokee, what is by Cherokee standards, the "foolishness" of the orientation of younger Cherokees and so forth.

At present, I live on the San Xavier Papago Indian reservation, just south of Tucson, Arizona, in my wife's village. The Papagos number some 20,000 and are a very "old-time" tribal people who, because of pronounced social and physical isolation, have only recently come into intensive contact with the general society. They, as yet, do not show very much language or cultural loss. I try to help the Papagos develop a consciousness of their situation and possible actions by talking to individuals, making speeches to groups, writing letters to the tribal newspaper, organizing a yearly intertribal pow-wow, and the like. Papagos are beginning to show signs of developing into an enduring people and are as well very concerned about the lives of their children. They may not fall into the trap that other Indian peoples have. At this point in history, I do not see any way possible for Indians to have a productive relationship with most of the rest of North American society. Quite the contrary! We would surely profit, however, from a relationship with other minority peoples in other parts of the world who are in a similar position, if for nothing more than needed mutual psychological and spiritual support.

I hate to sound so insular and parochial, but these are bad times for Indians and we do not have many options, nor do we have the luxury to take chance, as more secure peoples are able to do. I find

this unfortunate because I believe that North American Indians have something to contribute to the world, some wisdom to pass along to our fellow human beings. But, unfortunately, that will have to wait until our social and cultural continuation is assured. I can pass along a Cherokee prophecy, which bears on the theme of this paper. When I was a boy the old people told me that in my lifetime I would see four things come about. One, I would see slick roads running everywhere. Two, I would see many people who acted like they were deaf and blind, not able to hear or see anything. Three, I would see people become too smart, not paying attention to anybody or anything, throwing away their traditions and religions, thinking they knew more than God. Four, the time would come when neither love nor human wisdom would have any value, and at that time people, even some Indians, would put their old people away in “special homes.” Those old Cherokees told me that when I saw those four things come to pass that I would want my children close around me. And, so I do! And so I would recommend to most of us in these days!