Native American Nationalism and Nation Re-building

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Conclusion

*The Push for Change Continues*

Wanda Wuttunee

I am Cree from Red Pheasant Cree Nation, Saskatchewan in Canada and will introduce you to a glimpse of the Canadian context for the push to operationalizing nationhood. This is done in the shared context set out in this work with Indigenous communities across North America. Here, I will use the phrase “Indigenous peoples” to refer to Native Americans and Aboriginal Canadians.

In Canada, a Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) concluded their work in 1996 with 440 recommendations that focused on Aboriginal nations within Canada and the relationship with the government (Government of Canada 1996). This was an arm's length body mandated by the Canadian government to conduct research and investigate the relationship between Aboriginal people, the Canadian government and, generally, Canadian society. Beyond simply an “Aboriginal problem,” the Commission was called upon for solutions to the problems that have plagued these relationships for many years (Government of Canada 1996). What is interesting in this context is to see how a group of diverse commissioners concluded that the most meaningful way for Aboriginal communities in Canada to accomplish real change was through nations. The starting point for meaningful change is to recognize Aboriginal nationhood. The six volumes and numerous reports are filled with the words of the people who spoke at numerous hearings.
Traditionally, there were checks and balances that were functional and appropriate for the Anishnabek. The leaders were servants to the people and upheld the values that were inherent in the community. Accountability was not a goal or aim of the system; rather it was embedded in the very make-up of the system.

—Union of Ontario Indians, Brief to the Commission (1993)

We cannot become the independent people we want to be and that we have a right to be without access to the resources of this very affluent country.

—Sophie Pierre, Ktunaxa/Kinbasket Tribal Council, Cranbrook, British Columbia

We have to be allowed to make our own mistakes. We have to be allowed to fall down from time to time and pick ourselves up. That's part of the process of being able to govern yourselves as a people and as a nation.

—Gerald Morin, President, Métis National Council

The Commission concluded that Aboriginal peoples can claim their nationhood based on a history in which they were recognized as nations by the European powers through military and trade alliances and treaties that marked resource partnerships. This status can be claimed today as community ties remain coherent, distinct, and held by its members. While some communities—such as the Sechelt First Nation and West Bank First Nation of British Columbia, which both chose a legislative route—may choose other strategies for moving ahead, those Indigenous communities that want to operationalize and claim their inherent status as nations are numerous; a sample is highlighted in this volume.

The Commission went on to suggest an innovative approach in which groups of a certain size join together in new “nations,” thus conceptualizing their own nationality in a way that had never been done before. Following governmental policies, many communities are quite small due to relocation and disease, among other factors, and need to be reconstructed into larger groups in order to operate more effectively as nations. In the words of the Commissioners (Government of Canada 1996),
We believe strongly that membership in Aboriginal nations should not be defined by race. Aboriginal nations are political communities, often comprising people of mixed background and heritage. Their bonds are those of culture and identity, not blood. Their unity comes from their shared history and their strong sense of themselves as peoples. The work of reconstructing their nations poses great challenges for Aboriginal people. They will need to:

• reconnect communities split apart by years of band or settlement administration;
• develop constitutions, design structures, and train personnel to make laws and administer decisions;
• negotiate new relations with the other two orders of government in Canada.

Paraphrasing the Commissioners’ words, healing from the discouraging past must continue so that attitudes promoting self-government can be adopted. Community members would need to develop skills to support this community administration through an Aboriginal public service (Government of Canada 1996).

While this approach of pushing the boundaries and creating new nations did not go further than the Commission findings, I believe it is important to test the waters with possible strategies that have not been tried before. The recommendations for operationalizing nationhood stand the test of time. Our people have been challenged at all levels for hundreds of years. What has changed is the recording of these lived experiences by people who might not have any personal ties to the experiences but are touched in their hearts by the stories. They are now taking an interest in analyzing and promoting the importance of Indigenous nationhood to new, broader audiences. Change is set to happen under these new circumstances. Understanding tenacity, history, and personal perspectives can have untold impacts on these new audiences.

The exploration of how Indigenous communities of North America can thrive in today’s world has been the thrust of much internal effort, political focus, and heartache for hundreds of years. As Braun notes in Chapter 1, “Sovereignty has been a point of contention for Indigenous peoples in North America for as long as political groups existed on the continent, just as it has been elsewhere. Societies merged, split, traded,
built alliances, sought help, and engaged in many other relations that defined and redefined the nature of their sovereignties.” Government policies combined with outside forces were at odds, and continue to be at odds on the whole, with meaningful achievement in many of our communities. That has put some Indigenous communities on their heels while others have moved forward. As Satsan Herb George has noted, many similar struggles, challenges, and victories bind Canadian Aboriginal peoples and Native Americans (see Jorgensen 2007, 321). The readings presented in this book inject academic vigor to support positive movement, intellectual discourse, and an impetus to understanding meaningful change for students, life learners, policymakers, Indigenous leaders, and community members who want stronger Indigenous nations.

The contributors of this volume creatively address many of the issues surrounding Indigenous nations and nation building. Braun’s essay invites communities to “reimagine[ ] realities outside of the boxes” and to work with a new system that accomplishes meaningful sovereignty and control of citizenship in a much more inclusive manner that matches the reality of diverse communities. Braun develops RCAP’s conclusion that membership should not be based on race. A case is made for assimilating Americans into reservations in a creative manner that increases the funds that can then be accessed for the good of the community’s push for sovereignty. It is an unusual strategy that communities might want to consider as leaders push the trying relationships that currently exist.

Our history is part of what we carry today, and it defines our future. Grey’s presentation of the historical battle over traditional lands of the Aquinnah Wampanoag nation of Noëpe is gripping. The vision of the community is clear, yet the legal barriers are huge. What remains is the heart of the people for their land and for their nation.

The Mi’kmaw people have inspiring attitudes, and Poliandri successfully tackles many of the ways that change is being sought. I once asked a senior member of the Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nations Chiefs (which includes the Mi’kmaw nation) what he thought of the Indian Act, and he replied, “What Indian Act?” A perfect response. Poliandri’s chapter captures the strategies of this nation to operationalize their vision within a less than ideal environment. He meticulously pulls at the threads that entwine community perspectives beginning at the reserve level and concluding with a national proclamation issued at the provincial level to allow the reader insight into a unique and continuing journey to First Nationhood.

Accounting for incredible efforts by governmental policies and colonization that have impacted greatly the Hualapai Nation, Shepherd casts a
lens back that captures a nation’s painful journey to maintain its identity and internal relationships in the face of forced separation. Despite the odds, common ties bind this nation together. The Potawatomi Nation has withstood incredible trials to its nationhood before the Indian Claims Commission. Often history is downplayed, and the intensity of an event’s importance is lost by ignoring the words spoken by those most affected. That is not the case here, as Wetzel employs direct testimonies in a holistic approach to analyze a thirty-year legal challenge involving treaties to a Potawatomi nationhood vision. The challenge was eventually defeated, and the vision was successfully protected. Wetzel notes that “contemporary discussions of treaties, as well as the treaties themselves, [are] critical sites of Indigenous intranational narratives and identity formation.”

In each chapter, the reader gains insight into community history and some of the current activities undertaken by a sample of Indigenous nations that most non-Indigenous North Americans simply do not know exist. Lack of awareness of where Indigenous peoples have been and want to go has created huge gaps between the original peoples of North America and generations of newcomers. It is very difficult to achieve the building of nations and meaningful nationhood if ignorance marks the relationship with generations of newcomers. Unnecessary roadblocks or invisible support are detrimental for difficult journeys undertaken by Indigenous communities, whereas help and support of members of the general population could strongly affect outcomes.

Traditional beliefs are part of this history and infuse the way many Indigenous communities of North America form relationships with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Often ceremony is part of the experience, with Elders councils guiding Chiefs and Councils, women taking strong leadership roles in their communities, connecting Elders and youth, listening to all opinions whether or not there is agreement, and marking the groundbreaking of new community developments with proper protocols. This volume has spirit infused in every chapter, as the spirits of these communities are honored with storytelling that reaches beyond their experience, something they could not do without the interest and care of each author. The stories require patience and reflection. Grey notes tellingly, “The narrative starts in the twilight years of the twentieth century, jumps back some three centuries, and then jettisons forward to moments of critical contemporaneity. . . . [The story] ends without finality, reflecting the ongoing, never-ending labor of tribal reaffirmation.”

A question that might be asked to put a current context to the nationhood movement is: What kind of communities are we working to
build? This is a question for Canadian and American governments and all Indigenous communities to give attention to today, because the answers will determine our futures. Is there space for Indigenous nations and the building of nationhood? When I ask my students about their ideal kinds of community, they readily suggest wondrous, Utopian ideas. An unjaded, thoughtful, and caring vision for tomorrow is needed. Pimatsawin is a Cree word that means “the good life.” What exactly constitutes the good life varies by individual and community, and that is what makes it wonderful. The Indigenous nations portrayed in this volume are a portion of the many Indigenous communities across North America linking meaning to nationhood. They do not forget their past but use it to fuel their journeys in a modern world that often leaves them to their own devices to sculpt a future for their children.

As outlined in this volume, the drive to nationhood has long historical roots and has not yet been achieved to the satisfaction of many communities. The struggles narrated in the community stories presented in Jorgensen’s landmark 2007 collection entitled Rebuilding Native Nations: Strategies for Governance and Development resonate with the history, challenges, and hope thoroughly explored by the authors of this book. The reason this work is so relevant and, at the same time, humbling can be found in the words of Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper of the Onondaga Indian Nation (in Jorgensen 2007, vii):

The Peacemaker told us, “When you sit and you counsel for the welfare of the people, think not of yourself, nor of your family, nor even your generation.” He instructed us to make our decisions on behalf of seven generations coming—those faces are looking up from the earth, each layer waiting its time, coming, coming, coming. We have a responsibility to them, to hold fast to our cultures, to hang on to our land, to follow the instructions, and to rebuild our nations.

The authors of this volume agree with a nation-rebuilding process based on long-term strategies to implement sovereignty in ways that are meaningful and hold close to the visions of Indigenous communities. Part of the renaissance that has been illustrated and discussed here is economic. The concept of “tribal economics” is used in the introduction to this volume and notes the benefits of tribal economic activities going to the tribe itself. A related concept presented by a Prince Albert Grand Council in northern Saskatchewan is “community capitalism” (Loizides and Wut-
tunee 2005, 2). For the twelve-member Council, stopping at the calculation of return on investment for projects was meaningless until the final step where the needs and vision of the community were taken into consideration. In this inclusive model, entrepreneurs and band-owned businesses are equally supported. True sovereignty means that different approaches, even within the same vision, can be expected. For example, Braun’s concept of citizenship takes a perspective that has the power to stir the imagination and influence tribes that might have been waiting for such a push.

Much like the concepts of “community capitalism” and “tribal economics,” community economic development focuses on members before profits. Fairbairn noted that, historically, “Aboriginal communities in Canada practiced many forms of shared or mutual economic activity” in the context of a discussion on social economy (2008, 8). It is clear that what is now recognized as social economy rests on values that Aboriginal people have held in the past and continue to hold today in modern contexts, as strategies of nation building continue to reflect values and visions held tightly by Indigenous communities. Fairbairn (2008, 10) noted that not all Aboriginal communities grab hold of ideas like co-ops, while others do. In line with much of the discussion offered here by Poliandri and his coauthors, sovereignty means the ability to make choices, make mistakes, and adjust by making new choices. Indigenous communities thrive when they are not slotted into categories or must meet expectations of outsiders. Generally speaking, Canadians are quite ignorant of Aboriginal history and current claims for nationhood. I was reminded of this when an educated and otherwise compassionate man said to me, “I am a Canadian and have no ties to Europe. So how can a group of people (Aboriginal) claim stronger ties to being Canadian than mine just because they were here first?” He also recommended that people accept that what worked in the past does not work anymore, so they should just move on. This conversation demonstrated several things to me. The first comment underlines our responsibility as Aboriginal people to work hard at building understanding in the general population as to who we are, what we hold important, and why. The task is tiring, taxing, and unending, but the need is great, and the cost of doing nothing is even greater. It is the general population who can sway politicians to make decisions that support our efforts. It is also the parents who can teach their children tolerance and understanding in meaningful ways that will support our efforts, and those of our youth, in the long run.

The second comment is directed at traditional pursuits notwithstanding lasting economic and personal value to people and their communities.
For some, traditional pursuits have been dropped as values have shifted to other interests or by circumstance and not by choice, such as when hunting areas are flooded by dams, as in the case of the James Bay Cree in Quebec and the Misipawistik Cree Nation in Manitoba. With land at the heart of nations and nationhood, it makes sense to examine the continuing role of traditional activities such as hunting, fishing, and trapping as well as food security initiatives that revitalize sovereignty claims over what is to be harvested for community needs.

The United Nations has upheld rights to self-determination, to political, cultural, and economic freedom, and holds that communities “may not be deprived of their own means of sustenance,” as set out in Article 1 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations Human Rights 1976). As Poliandri notes, the extra time for four countries, including Canada, to sign this declaration demonstrates the hesitancy that exists to recognize and uphold a nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous nations. Further, the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples spelled out clear support for the place of traditional practices:

*Recognizing* that respect for indigenous knowledge, cultures and traditional practices contributes to sustainable and equitable development and proper management of the environment. (2007, 2; emphasis in original)

One example of an active Aboriginal organization in this regard, the Northern Saskatchewan Trappers Association Co-operative (NSTAC), demonstrates the depth of community commitment to this aspect of their nation (Pattison and Findlay 2010). NSTAC’s vision is to recapture Aboriginal territory and support trapping as a viable economic activity for today and the future. In line with Nancy Turner’s (2001) work on the harvesting and marketing of nontimber forest products, Pattison and Findlay have drawn attention to alternative opportunities that allow for an income that is in touch with the land and are complementary to a trapping lifestyle. They write,

Over two hundred nontimber forest products are harvested commercially in British Columbia, including wild greens, specialty wood products, wild mushrooms, and wild medicinal plants, with an estimated value of more than $80 million. Complementary activities are key. (Pattison and Findlay 2010, 14)
Pattison and Findlay employed Turner’s words (2001, ix) to illustrate this point:

Pickers, buyers, and marketers of all of these products, under a coordinated co-operative system encompassing a range of products harvested over a broad, diversified land base, could develop complementary harvesting and marketing plans that could yield a predictable, reasonably stable income for many people.

As times change, communities are strengthened when they consider a comprehensive vision of nationhood that includes sustainable economic activities supporting culture and tradition while acknowledging contemporary, nontraditional opportunities. This trappers’ co-op sees the multiplicity of benefits not only to the economy but radiating to “added value of positive cultural and socioeconomic benefits in education, employment, health, justice, and sustainability as products of the entrepreneurial activities and wisdom of trappers” (Pattison and Findlay 2010, 36). This is an effort conceived in partnership with all interested parties including communities, the private sector, and the public sector. Pattison and Findlay (2010, 36–37) concluded,

In the global context of resource depletion, environmental degradation, growing inequality, and concerns about food security, healthy living, and sustainability, the key roles of the NSTAC in the traditional as well as the social economy need to be broadly communicated. Trapping should be understood not as a residual cultural practice, a curious legacy of the past, but as an important player representing the values of both the ongoing and revitalizing traditional economy and the social economy. The social economy is associated with alternative development models and concerned with people before profits; with community economic development and multiple bottom lines; with autonomous management, inclusion, and democratic participation; and with sustainable environments and livelihoods.

Initiatives such as these require all the energy and focus of key community members to succeed in the process of achieving nationhood on both sides of the border. This continued economic and lifestyle choice is linked to and dependent upon nationhood to survive. Dedication and
commitment to what some might see as lost causes are indeed worth the effort on many levels, including the national level, as the authors of this volume illustrate. Each chapter highlights that Indigenous peoples demonstrate resilience in the face of huge obstacles and work to take control over the things that matter to them as they build their nations. Poliandri sets the stage with his comment, “. . . Native peoples are now pushing back in the ever-growing attempts to regain their rights to self-define, self-identify, and self-rule. First nationalism and nation re-building embody some of the strongest attempts to achieve these goals going through the second decade of the twenty-first century.”

It is these efforts, where no issue related to nationhood is too minor, that deserve attention and care. Those who strive for maintaining and, at the same time, building national Indigenous identity, finding ways to grow Indigenous nations, and promoting nation building in all aspects of Indigenous community, social, and economic life will be satisfied with the journey. A common thread throughout this volume, as articulated by Shepherd, is that nations are products of powerful internal and external historical forces that can turn and twist. Further, Grey recommends in anticipation of achieving the goal of nationhood to look backward and take lessons from our Elders’ wisdom in an environment that is still characterized by power and instability. Those who do not understand why these ideas are important have the opportunity to be educated through lived experience and thoughtful academic contemplation so the future of our nations can be safely passed to coming generations.

References


