

Our youth are losing their language and their culture.

By Micheal Patrick

Micheals' Indian family name was Shekapwetum. The missionaries gave him the name Patrick because they couldn't pronounce it or spell it. This was done to many families in the North.

I will talk what life was like in the north, long ago, when I was living in the bush. Up north, we never heard about the things you see today. There were no policies, social assistance, and medicine from the Whiteman. Looking back on my childhood, while growing up, it was very important to have an understanding of the teachings regarding survival. These teachings, preparing the youth for the future, were not only given to the male youth, but also to the young women as well. They were advised so that they would understand what life will be like and what to do to survive. These youths were told not to be lazy, but to try to help themselves in every way. The males, especially, were taught in a certain way so that they would understand exactly what to do to survive. No one ever hurried when speaking to the youth. People made sure that the youth understood what was being taught.

Now I will say something about the Native language. When teaching, it is very important to understand precisely what a person meant. Many things have happened since my childhood. It is not enough just to be able to speak a language. Where will a person get information about what the weather will be, what the water level of the river will be, how thick the ice on the river will be, or how much snowfall will be expected? All these different things, as part of preparing us for life, were taught when I was young.

Although there were two different languages up north, Ojibway and Cree, before the English language came along, we understood each other. The people from the Bay would travel inland and live with the Ojibways. Today's youth does not even understand their own language. Even the Cree people of today, living along the Bay, do not understand the people from the inland area. That is the way language is today. When I made my living from the bush, I heard and understood people who spoke Ojibway. Still today, I understand and speak a little Ojibway. I speak enough for them to know that we are from the same culture. I am able to answer when a youth asks me questions: about the way life was on the Bay, and about the behaviour of animals that live on the Bay such as walrus, polar bears, seals or whales, and waterfowl. I use their language to explain the things they want to know and if I speak it slowly, they understand everything I say.

Another thing, it has been 25 years now since they first introduced the school education system to our area. Other communities, south of us, have

had this system since the arrival of the Whiteman. Since that first year, 25 years ago, people who once made their living from the bush, are staying in the education system longer and longer. They are staying even up to the point where they leave their communities to further their schooling. Because of this, they are losing their language. Some cannot talk to their parents anymore and they do not even understand their parents when they are told something. The things they learn in the other culture are blocking the teachings of their parents. They will not survive in their culture because they were not taught about their own culture in the Whiteman's education system. Only if they know about their own culture or use what they learned in the school system will they be able to survive.

It happens sometimes, up north, that people who go south for an education and then return have no use for what they have learned. This is true when it comes to making a living from the land. There is no financial help for them if they cannot find employment. If their parents are still living, these people are looked after by them. This is what education does to the people and to the language. People lose their culture. A long time ago, when the Whiteman started living here the Hudson's Bay Company managers lived with the Natives long enough to learn how to speak in the Native language. They did not use all the words we used in the language. They spoke broken Cree, yet we understood what they were trying to say because we have the language.

Something else is happening regarding today's youth and the education system. These youths are losing their language and their culture. When they want to speak Cree, they speak broken Cree, but they are still understood by their parents. In the schools, they are not taught in their language. Even where I am from, up north, you hear children speaking English and these children are gradually losing their language completely. When they talk to each other, they sound just like the Whiteman. Everywhere I go there are Native children that I do not understand. They are my people, yet I do not understand them because they are speaking English.

Another thing I want to talk about is the people who try to help their fellow Native people. The translators and the people who do research on what life was like long ago. These people want to find out how we made our living. Today's youth does not understand most of these things because everything is adopted from the Whiteman and accepted. Take for instance drinking where there is nothing mentioned anywhere, for anyone to know beforehand, about the effects of alcohol. There are also other things that bring ill effect on the youth that are never mentioned.

I will talk about these people, a little bit. Native people who are working for

other Native people must understand what they are told by the elders. They must understand what a person is talking about, and translate it correctly into the English language and transcribe it into the Cree language exactly. In research on culture, they must know about the things a person is talking about to understand what they are being told. As for other services for the people in the north, they need money to get services and information regarding welfare assistance and medication for hospitalization when needed. We say that our children should be educated in these fields, but I have a concern about language in this matter. We know that the youths are losing their language. How then do we educate the youth in these fields, yet have them keep their language intact? Sometimes it happens that a young person does not understand who he is translating for or the things that he is told. People should make sure that a person fluently understands Cree before he is asked to translate. These are the things we should be concerned about.

Now I will talk about culture. Out west, the people speak the same Cree language that we speak. In Ontario, from the Manitoba border right up to Churchill, there are the Ojibways. The Ojibways settled in this area a long time ago, when the people wandered from place to place, for trapping or hunting, because another tribe was after them. They lived with the Crees because of this tribe. After a few years, the Ojibways moved inland and settled there permanently. I learned this from the elders. Some Crees moved to this area with the Ojibways.

One individual, the type that travels all over the country, told me a long time ago, 20 years ago, that the Cree we speak is also spoken all over Western Canada. I did not know that the people spoke Cree in that area. I thought that people living in this area were the only Cree speakers. When I went out west five years ago, I spoke with Cree speakers. Because they were speaking the same language, I felt right at home.

My father was born in the north. His father and his father-in-law's sons were from a place called Penayseewachewan. My father moved south to Old Post. Because he is from Penayseewachewan, he speaks a different dialect, but he never spoke his dialect when he was living in Winisk. He spoke the dialect of the people from Winisk. That is how language changes. People moved and settled in different places for survival reasons. People needed supplies like matches or gun powder and in those days people had to travel far to get them. That is why, today, people are scattered all over the place.

A long time ago, when people used bows and arrows to hunt, and spears to catch fish, everything was different. Everyone was always healthy. The water and the land were clean, and because the water and the land were

clean, the fish and the fowl were healthy. Everything went well before the arrival of the people from other cultures, but now, everything is changing. The water is just like poison; we cannot even drink it anymore. The animals who feed in the muskeg are no longer healthy. Everything is changing. Even the snow that we melted for drinking is no longer clean; you can see that the snow is not clean. These are some things that I wanted to mention. The Whiteman seems to be everywhere. It seems they are always on the rivers canoeing and flying in the air. This is how life is today.

It was not allowed for someone to marry a cousin because they were considered a close relation. This is what we learned from the priest. They talked a lot about family relations. The priest said only from the fourth generation on that relatives could marry each other. They said that if two people whose parents are siblings were to marry, the children they may have would have physical problems. That is what was considered.

Now I will repeat a story someone told. A long time ago, when people first started using guns, there was this old man who owned a gun. One day, he told this story: One day I went hunting by the Bay, where the short shrubs grow and there are small hills with trees and tall grass. Beyond the small hills were a few ponds. I saw two geese standing in the first pond. I crawled towards them, but I could not get up to shoot them. So, I shot them while lying down. My shot was very close to the ground. I killed both of them with one shot. I saw my pellets splash into the pond. I got up to go and get my geese. A few feet on the way, I came across two dead rabbits. I guess they were sitting right in my line of fire and I got them with my one shot. When I arrived at the pond where the geese were, I noticed four dead fish floating on the water. I guess I got them with my one shot when the pellets fell into the water.

This story is one that people laugh at every time they hear it. How true it is, we do not know, but just the idea of getting so much with one shot is funny. First, I want to talk about what this earth looked like when God made all the things that grow on the earth. People lived on this earth unrestricted. God created this earth for people on. He also made the other elements such as the four directions: south, west, north, and east. I will talk about those later. I will talk about important things first. Living on land was different before the arrival of the European survival methods that Natives are following nowadays. The waters of the lakes and rivers were clean for people to drink, and birds depended on the water. The plants that grew from the earth were clean. All these were good for the animals including the fish.

When a person contemplated survival, he began to think of what to do when he kills caribou or moose. Although he kills many caribou, he does

not waste anything. Every part of the caribou was used. Whenever he killed caribou or moose, nothing was wasted. Even the bones were boiled to make broth for drinking. If he had much meat, he would dry it and make jerky or pemmican that could be kept for a long time. From the hide, he would make mittens, moccasins, or babiche. People were advised not to waste food that they were fortunate to have. They knew to take care of everything created for them. People knew that they did not own these things, but that these things were placed on this earth for their survival.

The same thing was done when many fish were caught, or when they purposely caught many fish for the winter. These fish would be dried or smoked and made into pemmican or fish oil. People stored food for the coming winter or for the trapping season. Planning was of great importance. In preparation for the winter, people got their equipment ready such as snowshoes, sleds, and other equipment, so that nothing hindered their trapping. This way whatever they needed would be on hand until the arrival of the spring hunt. Just before spring, they would get their deadfall traps ready or make a wooden shovel that they would use to clear the snow from where they would place their deadfall traps. These things were always readily available. The traps used for otters or beavers could be used for two years if they were maintained properly. The only traps that were available long ago were the deadfall traps. At first, a bow was used for hunting, but later a gun was used. There were no matches. A stone was used to make a fire. When struck, it created sparks. The flint, as it was called, came from a rock. There is such a rock 15 miles (24 km) up the Winisk River. That was where they found the flint to make a fire. That rock can be found anywhere. They kept their fire in a shelf mushroom taken from a birch tree. When the container made from a mushroom was dry, burning embers could be kept in it.

The living area was also kept clean. Nothing was thrown into the water, especially things like bones and broth or anything that would make the waters oily. This was done so the animals could remain in a clean area. People used to be mindful of everything because they never forgot that God created everything. They knew there was a natural law that they were given long ago. They never misused the things they were fortunate enough to have. People used them properly.

There were lakes where fishing could be done by angling or by setting nets. Some of these lakes where gill netting was done in deep water occurred in calm weather. These many lakes were long which was suitable for fishing. Fishing was not done in the same spot. In the winter, fishing was done through the ice. Fish behave differently in the winter. They go to different

areas. Fish like sturgeon, white fish, pike, suckers, and trout spawn in different areas. People knew the different habits of these fish. Also, different fish spawn in different areas towards the fall. Sturgeon spawn during late spring around June 20. After spawning in shallow waters, they swim to the deeper water of bigger rivers. Fish swim to different areas. Natives have to know these behavior patterns because their livelihood depends on it.

It is the same with trapping. People would stay in a certain area during the fall. They knew when it was time to move to a new location. Otters, mink, and other animals also have different habits. They go deeper into the ground during the cold season. Natives knew about this. These animals surfaced in the early spring, as it gets warmer. That is why traps were set early at spots where the animals would likely surface when the rivers started to run.

Native people also knew where to hunt fowl. People who lived by the Bay knew where to hunt waxies and Canada geese in the spring time. They knew where these birds would feed during the fall. People were mindful of these birds so that they would not scare them off. They did not go into an area where these birds were feeding. For a while, they would hunt them from the south side. When these geese were ready to migrate, the people went to their feeding grounds. That would be the last time they hunted geese. The people knew all of these things. People knew when to hunt caribou, moose, fowl, and fish. Natives planned their hunting for survival, but now it is different. Methods of survival are changing.

Now I will talk about the directions: east, west, north, and south. The west wind faces the east wind. The north wind faces the south wind. All these winds are important. The east is important because it brings another day that we are given. The west is important because that is where the sun sets. The warmth comes from the south and it also brings the geese that flew south before the cold season. The Natives respected the north wind because when it was warm and the snow was soft, they could not travel. That is why they needed the north wind. Sometimes it would happen for a week that the ground would be very hard which makes it easier to travel. They knew all these things that happened on the land.

Today, all the things made for man, are being ruined. In northern areas, the water and grasses that the birds depend on are polluted. The birds that are feeding in those areas look as if they are ready to die. The Native way of life is changing drastically. Natives are constantly reminded that the good land they depended on is gradually being ruined. Their survival skills came from the land. They were advised about what to do to survive. A young

person was cautioned not to misuse a gun.

A person was instructed, once he knew the location of caribou, moose, or any other animal that uses its smell sense, to hunt them downwind. He learned everything from nature. By studying the sky, the northern lights, and the stars, he knew what kind of weather tomorrow would bring. They forever watched for signs of the kind of day they would have. Take for example, the people who lived by the Bay, they waited for a calm day or wind blowing from the sea so that they could go where they wanted to go. When a person is hunting for birds, he has to know how strong the wind is. To hunt waterfowl on a calm day is not good hunting. That is the importance of the winds. That is all I have to say for now.

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National Archives of Canada PA 103464 Old Post in the 1940s